A Brief Introduction to the Anointing of the Sick and How to Prepare for a Sick Call

In years past the Anointing of the Sick was referred to as Extreme unction or last anointing and it carried with it a kind of ring of finality. While the sacrament is no longer reserved for those who are at the point of death, it is celebrated for those who are in danger of death due to illness or age. What constitutes “danger of death” is open to a fairly broad interpretation, but suffice it to say that the danger ought to be real and if it is a question of surgery the risk ought to be proportionate to any danger having the surgery may involve. The sacrament can only be administered once during the same illness, but may be repeated if the illness becomes more grave or after a recovery the same illness returns or a new one appears. The faithful, knowing the power and efficacy of this sacrament, cannot neglect to request it when it becomes necessary.

The sacrament is ordinarily administered to those who are able to participate in its celebration with devout intention after having made a prerequisite sacramental confession and having received the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. For this reason one cannot procrastinate in requesting an anointing and ought to be alert and of sound mind, emergency situations notwithstanding. It can be said that the anointing completes what a good confession cannot do. A good confession obtains pardon and absolution for personal sin but the wounds caused by those sins still remain on the soul. Anointing of the Sick heals the wounds of sin and restores the soul to its original baptismal grace. It is for this reason that a good sacramental confession cannot ordinarily be omitted, and as with the celebration of other sacraments, an individual who remains obstinate in sin and unrepentant cannot receive the anointing of the sick.

To prepare for a sick call if it is to take place at home, the following preparations ought to be made. Available on a small table near the bed of the sick person there ought to be: a crucifix, two candles blessed and lit, holy water, a cotton ball and a small bowl with warm soapy water and a towel. If you do not have one or some of the other items please advise the priest when arranging the visit. The rite when it is celebrated well and with reverence is a powerful encounter with Christ the Divine Physician and a source of great comfort and strength which will be necessary to defeat the Adversary who always tries to take advantage of our weakened state of illness to lure us away from God, suggesting that we cannot trust His love for us and His mercy. While the primary effect of the sacrament is the forgiveness of sin and the complete healing and restoration of the soul, at times when it is God’s will this healing grace overflows into the members of our body bringing us physical healing as well.