

LESSON 10

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

BACKGROUND READING



Jesus performed many healing miracles as signs that He was the promised Messiah and that the Kingdom of God was at hand. In Matthew's Gospel, He answered John the Baptist's disciples' question this way: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Matthew 11:3-5).

But Jesus came to accomplish an even greater healing than physical healing alone. This greater healing He announced was "a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through his Passover. ...By his passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion" (CCC 1505).

Thus, our suffering now has a greater purpose. It is no longer something to be dreaded or feared because it now has redemptive value if we patiently endure it and join it with the suffering of Christ. That is why St. Paul could say, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake" (Colossians 1:24).

Healing the Sick in Obedience to Christ

Jesus gave his twelve Apostles the authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal disease and illness and charged them to make this proclamation: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give" (Matthew 10:7-8).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes how the Church continues this healing mission: "The Church has received this charge from the Lord and strives to carry it out by taking care of the sick as well as accompanying them with her prayer of intercession" (CCC 1509).

The Sacrament of Anointing

Anointing of the Sick is one of the seven Sacraments of the Church – all of which were instituted by Jesus. It is intended to strengthen those who suffer from illness (CCC 1511). As St. James put it:

Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church,

and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. (James 5:14-15)

Who Can Receive It?

The Sacrament can be received by any baptized Catholic (who has reached the age of reason) who is either seriously ill or faces a serious operation, is elderly, or is in danger of death from sickness. It can be received more than once – even for the same illness, if that illness gets worse (canons 998, 1004, 1002-1007). The person receiving it does not have to be conscious at the time of reception.

How Is It Celebrated?

The Anointing can take place in the person's home, in a hospital, or in a church. It can be celebrated for an individual or a group (CCC 1517). It is best celebrated when it includes the Eucharist and after the reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. The celebration is based on the elements found in the letter of St. James: "The 'priests of the Church' – in silence – lay hands on the sick; they pray over them in the faith of the Church. ...They then anoint them with oil blessed, if possible, by the bishop" (CCC 1519).

The Sacrament is administered by either a bishop or a priest, using the following prayer:

"Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up" (CCC 1513).

The Fruits of Anointing

Anointing of the Sick gives the grace of "strengthening, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age" (CCC 1520) and strengthens against discouragement and fear. It unites sick persons with the Passion of Jesus Christ and consecrates their suffering for participation in the saving work of Christ. If the person is too sick to receive the Sacrament of Penance, his sins are forgiven in the anointing. The anointing heals sick persons physically if that is best for their soul (CCC 1532) and is a preparation for their final journey home.

Viaticum

The Church also offers the dying person the Eucharist as Viaticum – "food for the journey." This is in response to Jesus' promise that "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" (John 6:54). It is called a celebration because, through it, Christ gives us all the grace necessary for us to join Him, the Father, and the Holy Spirit in the joy of eternal life. It is one of the greatest gifts of His mercy toward us.