

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick



“Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.” -James 5:13-15

Anointing of the Sick is a somewhat misunderstood Sacrament. Most people think of it as the Sacrament that someone receives when they are on the verge of death, and while that is true, you do not need to be in danger of death to be anointed. This is a Sacrament of Healing and the Rite of Anointing tells us there is no need to wait until a person is at the point of death to receive the Sacrament. Reasons to be anointed include serious or ongoing illness (physical or mental), upcoming surgery, or the burden of years.

As the US Bishops have explained: “When the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is given, the hoped-for effect is that, if it be God's will, the person be physically healed of illness. But even if there is no physical healing, the primary effect of the Sacrament is a spiritual healing by which the sick person receives the Holy Spirit's gift of peace and courage to deal with the difficulties that accompany serious illness or the frailty of old age.” -USCCB Website

We see Jesus and the Apostles performing many acts of healing in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles. We may be tempted to believe that God no longer heals since physical healings seem less frequent these days, but healings still take place in remarkable numbers. Today, they are often done through the mediation of the medical professions, but there are also large numbers of miraculous healings still happening in our time.

What Happens During This Sacrament?

If circumstances allow, the Sacrament of Reconciliation should be celebrated with the sick person prior to the Sacrament of Anointing. If not, there is a brief penitential rite within the introductory prayers.

The sacrament consists of readings from the Scriptures, the laying on of hands, the blessing of the oil and the anointing on the forehead and hands, the communal recitation of the Lord's Prayer, and the closing prayer. If the sick person is able to receive Communion, the Eucharist may be offered just after the Lord's Prayer.

The Sacrament in Scripture

Like all the sacraments, holy anointing was instituted by Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry. It is what Mark refers to when he recounts how Jesus sent out the twelve disciples to preach, and “they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them” (Mark 6:13). The graces of this Sacrament flow from the atoning death of Jesus Christ, for “this was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases’” (Matt. 8:17). And as mentioned earlier, we see this Sacrament being instructed and carried out in the Book of James.

The Effects of the Sacrament

“The special grace of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has as its effects: the uniting of the sick person to the passion of Christ, for his own good and that of the whole Church; the strengthening, peace, and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age; the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the Sacrament of Penance; the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of his soul; the preparation for passing over to eternal life” (CCC 1532).

Does God Always Heal?

Today there are some extremes in expectation of divine healing. On one hand, some say that if a Christian is not healed of all his diseases, this reflects his lack of faith. Others claim that divine healings were only for the apostolic age, when all diseases were healed instantly and automatically. Both extremes are wrong.

God does not always heal the physical infirmities that afflict us. Paul preached to the Galatians while he was afflicted by a “bodily ailment” (Gal. 4:13–14). He also mentions that he had to leave his companion Trophimus in the town of Miletus because he was too sick to travel (2 Tim. 4:20). In his first letter to Timothy, Paul urges his young protégé to “no longer drink only water, but to use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments” (1 Tim. 5:23).

The last passage is especially informative. Not only does it reveal that illnesses were not always healed in the apostolic age, but it also shows an apostle’s practical advice to a fellow Christian on how to deal with an illness. Notice that Paul does not tell Timothy to pray harder and have more faith that God will heal him from his stomach ailment. Rather, he tells him how to manage the illness through medicinal means.

Some argue that healings were always instantaneous and were only for those living during the apostolic age, but that afterward the gift of healing disappeared. The problem with that theory is that the Bible tells us otherwise. For example, when Jesus healed the blind man at Bethsaida, he laid his hands upon him twice before the man was fully healed (Mark 8:22–26).

Finally, we have a standing command of the New Testament in James 5:14–15, cited earlier. This command is never revoked anywhere in the Bible, and there are no statements anywhere that God will cease to heal. Thus the command is in effect to this very day. (credit: Catholic Answers)

