

The Anointing of the Sick

The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, formerly Extreme Unction, was declared a sacrament by the Council of Trent in 1551. The Council taught that the sacrament is alluded to in Mk 6:13: “They (apostles) drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them” and especially in James 5:14-15:

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the Church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned he will be forgiven.

The Council text further proclaims that it is “truly and properly a Sacrament instituted by Christ our Lord and promulgated by blessed James the Apostle”. While this statement may speak well about the way the sacraments were understood in the 16th century, if that definition had, in fact, been read to “James the Apostle” in 50 AD he would have been surprised, to say the least. The word “sacrament” itself was not used until sometime in the 2nd century AD and then only applied to Baptism. The first liturgical rite for what we now call the Sacrament of the Sick did not appear in the literature until the 9th century.

Furthermore, the Epistle of James was probably written sometime around the 80’s and James of Jerusalem died in 62. Therefore, the author of the Epistle of James is unknown. He was a man who knew Greek well and probably was one who had great respect for James and thus attributed the Epistle to him. Nevertheless, anointings for sickness did take place in the early Church, at least near the end of the 1st century and we do hear of them in the Epistle of James. In this lecture we will attempt to trace the history of the development of these anointings into the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, which we have today. First the New Testament setting.

The Greek word used in the text for sick (*astheneo*) refers to physical illness and only sometimes connotes a stage of illness near death.

The early Christian communities probably copied the organizational structure of the Jewish synagogues. The office of elder had a long history in Judaism and in the time of Jesus each synagogue had its council of elders. The early Christian elders (*presbyteroi*) were closely associated with the apostles in authority. However, in this passage they are not simply organizational, authority figures, but also seem to act as ministers - ministers of prayer and anointing of the sick.

Since James was probably written some 50-60 years after the death of Jesus, this passage may reflect the practice of the Christian community at the end of the first century, rather than the practice of the disciples during the lifetime of Jesus or of the infant Church. Furthermore, since Mk 6:13 is the only other place in the entire NT which mentions anointing as a religious rite for healing, the practice was probably not widespread in the early churches.

The oil used in the OT and the NT was olive oil. It was used for many things including cooking, lamp oil, as a component of perfumes, as a therapeutic agent for wounds or sores (story of the Good Samaritan), and in sacred anointing rituals, e.g. of the king.

The word messiah (*masiah*) comes from the Hebrew word “anointed” (with oil). The Greek transliteration of the Hebrew is *Christos*, whence our word Christ. Thus the Church uses oil in the sacraments to indicate our identification with Jesus the Christ. Therefore, using these combined meanings, oil is used in the early Church as a sign or symbol of the healing presence of Jesus.

How was Jesus connected to these anointings? The New Testament recounts that Jesus was known as a healer. He healed through touch and word. Jesus also made a close connection between faith, physical healing and spiritual healing, i.e., the forgiveness of sins. Physical healing was often a sign of faith and spiritual renewal. This connection is preserved in James and in the modern Sacrament of The Anointing of the Sick.

Development of the Sacrament -

First to the Ninth Century - While the evidence from James indicates that the early Church used oil and prayers for the sick, at least near the end of the 1st century, the first known formal liturgical rite for the anointing the sick does not appear until the 9th century. However, before that time there are a number of references that indicate oil was used as a “sacramental” substance through which God could cure, but there was no agreement on who should anoint - clergy or laity - and there was no established ritual. Perhaps we can say that in these early centuries anointing of the sick and dying was a “sacrament” in the broad sense. It was said to symbolize the healing power, both physical and spiritual, of Jesus and/or of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, just as the laity took the Eucharist home for communion during the week, so too they took the blessed oil home to use as needed. Therefore, it seems that for the first 8 centuries the laity were, for all practical purposes, the ordinary ministers of the “sacrament”.

In a text written by Hippolytus of Rome (215 AD), called *The Apostolic Tradition*, there was a prayer over oil which was blessed during the Eucharist. The Bishop prayed that “it may give strength to all who taste it and strength to all who use it”. The faithful then took the oil home to use as internal or external medicine.

Texts from the 4th century indicated that oil was blessed for anointing catechumens and for various kinds of exorcisms. In the Prayer Book of the bishop of Thmuis in Egypt we find a blessing for oil, bread and water so that through the power of God they might become “a means of removing every sickness and disease, of warding off every demon, of routing every unclean spirit, of keeping away every evil spirit, of banishing every fever, chill and fatigue,...a medicine of life and salvation bringing health and soundness of soul

and body and spirit, leading to perfect well being”.

Origen in the 3rd century and John Chrysostom in the 4th century had commented on the passage from James, but took it as a reference to spiritual rather than physical sickness. However, in the 5th century Pope Innocent I answered an inquiry from Decentius, bishop of Gubbio, about the passage from James. Innocent no doubt referred to a current custom in Rome in his answer: “there is no doubt that the passage (in James) speaks about the faithful who are sick and who can be anointed with the oil of chrism that is prepared by the bishop. Not only priests but all Christians may use this oil for anointing, when either they or members of their household have need of it.” This letter became a basic source text for later theological discussion of the sacrament.

Also in the 5th century there is evidence that the churches in Alexandria and Antioch had definitely adopted the practice of anointing the sick. Around 428 Cyril of Alexandria admonished Christians who went to pagan magicians and sorcerers to be healed. He advised them to call the priests of the church instead.

By the 6th century anointing of the sick was also practiced in France. Here too the anointing with consecrated oil could be administered by the people themselves. Caesarius of Arles exhorted his people to avoid the use of magic and sorcerers when they were sick. He said “How much better and more helpful it would be if they ran to the church and received the body and blood of Christ, and reverently anointed themselves and their family with holy oil! According to the words of the Apostle James they would receive not only health of body but also pardon of sins.”

Throughout the 7th and 8th centuries there were many stories, some obviously exaggerated, about healing through the anointing with oil by monks and saints. Sometimes these anointings were performed by priests, but not always. Sometimes they used oil consecrated by the bishop, but not always. As yet there was no set ritual.

The earliest existing commentary on the Epistle of James was written by Bede the Venerable. He comments that from apostolic times it had been the custom in the Church for presbyters to anoint the sick with consecrated oil and to pray for their healing.

It is important to note that, throughout these first eight centuries, people used anointing for every conceivable kind of illness, but *not as a preparation for death*. When they were dying they asked to receive the sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist. Throughout the first six centuries and in some places even into the 13th century the sacrament of Penance (reserved for serious sin) was often public and could be received only once in a lifetime. The penances were so severe - prohibiting business pursuits, marital relations, military service, marriage - that most people put off the reception of Penance until the moment of death. It developed that this final ritual of Penance and reception of the Eucharist, (called Viaticum - “food for the journey”) became streamlined because of the immanent approach of death. It further developed that this shortened ceremony was also often accompanied by an anointing with oil.

Since only a priest could administer the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist, this final anointing at the time of death also became restricted by default to the priest. This laid the groundwork for the Sacrament of Anointing to be administered only at the time of death, to include Penance and the Eucharist and to be administered only by the clergy. This process was often defended by theologians with reference to the passage in James which had mentioned calling the presbyters (now defined as priests) and mention was also made of the forgiveness of sins which was now interpreted as a reference to the sacrament of Penance. However, other kinds of lay anointing for healing did continue until the 9th century. Later, and to this day, Viaticum (communion) can be given for those already anointed by priests, deacons or lay persons.

Thus up until the 9th century, the anointing of the sick was just that - an anointing focused on restoring physical health. The ministers of the anointing of the sick were predominantly lay people. There were no certain actions or words prescribed for the anointing and the oil may or may not have been blessed by a bishop. And this anointing had not yet been labeled a sacrament as we understand sacrament today.

Ninth Century to the Council of Trent - The Church in 9th century began a period of organizational reform in what was now called the Holy Roman Empire under Charlemagne. His reign inaugurated the Carolingian Renaissance, a period of intellectual, cultural and political renewal. During this time, Councils passed regulations for more uniform church practices. Charlemagne ordered all his bishops to adopt the Gregorian sacramentary (attributed to but not written by Pope Gregory I) which he imported from Rome. This sacramentary included prayers and texts to be used for the celebration of the Mass. It was an important element in the later development of the Roman Missal. However, Charlemagne's court scholar, Alcuin of York, on his own accord, added a supplement to the sacramentary which placed the anointing of the sick in the section which also contained prayers for the dying and the rite for final reconciliation.

When the sacramentary was put into general use, the clergy assumed that the supplement had also come from Rome as part of the Gregorian sacramentary and many bishops began to restrict lay anointing and to delegate anointing to the clergy. While the directions for anointing allowed it to be repeated (for seven days if needed) and included prayers for healing and recovery, in practice it came to be reserved for and included in the rituals for the dying. By the end of the 9th century, the "last rites" of the Frankish church were penance, anointing and viaticum.

Up until this time the church of Rome had no official ritual for anointing the sick, although there was a ceremony for the blessing of oil by the bishop on Holy Thursday, which is retained today. However, in the 10th century the Gregorian sacramentary, with all the supplements, was brought back to Rome, revised and published anew for the entire Church. In this way, then, the last rites of the Frankish church became the last rites of the Roman church as well.

During this time another development was taking place in the monasteries. The rite for anointing was now a communal celebration, not conducted in the monk's cell, but in the chapel. This custom gradually spread out to the local communities outside the monasteries.

In the 11th century, the ritual still asked for physical recovery as well as forgiveness of sins, but in the 12th century this changed, because most anointings were for people at death's door. The actions also changed. Earlier when the emphasis was on healing, the oil had been applied to those parts of the body which were in need of healing. Now the oil was applied just to the senses, hands and feet along with prayers for the forgiveness of sins committed through these various parts of the body.

Also anointing, rather than penance and viaticum, became the final part of the rite. It was the last anointing they would receive from the Church and thus in the Middle Ages it came to be called in the words of Peter Lombard, *extreme unction - the last anointing*.

In the early Middle Ages when the theologians began to classify and list the *sacramenta* of the Church, extreme unction was sometimes listed. There was some confusion because theologians liked to define sacraments in terms of *matter* and *form*. They agreed that the matter was oil, but there was no set words for the rites and thus the form could not be identified. Furthermore, there was also confusion about the effects of the sacrament. Some ritual formulas still mentioned healing and, in fact, a few of the anointed did not die and experienced a physical cure.

They also argued about whether or not children, the unconscious or the insane should be anointed. Also, should it be given only on request, or as a matter of course in severe illness. On one thing they did agree: The sacrament had been instituted by the apostles. Some argued that Jesus had instituted the sacrament, but had left it to James to promulgate.

By the 13th century, a great deal concerning anointing had been resolved and simplified. The rite had been shortened and was performed by one priest. It was given only when death was near. All prayers for healing were excluded and the formula for the rite went something like this: "Through this holy anointing and his tender mercy, may the Lord forgive whatever sins you have committed by sight, hearing, etc." It was the theology behind this formula - forgiveness of sins at the time of death - that was the basis for doctrine of extreme unction developed in the late Middle Ages.

There were theological problems with this explanation, e.g., what was the difference between Penance and Extreme Unction? A difficult question when Penance was part of the final rites. Two answers were formulated: 1) Penance was for mortal sins, Extreme Unction for venial and 2) Extreme Unction blotted out the remnants of sin - the inclination to sin again. These two competing views existed side by side for many years.

By the 14th and 15th centuries Extreme Unction was seen to work *ex opere operato* (from

the work done) and thus it was effective if celebrated under the proper conditions. God was the chief agent and His agency was effective for humans if they had faith. Thus the unconscious could now receive anointing if their souls were disposed to receive God's grace. In 1439, the Council of Florence's *Decree for the Armenians* declared that the sacrament could "not be given except to a sick person whose life is feared for."

From the Council of Trent (1545 - 63) to the Present - As mentioned in the opening paragraph on page 1, Extreme Unction was declared one of the seven sacraments instituted by Christ in one of the sessions of the Council of Trent in 1551. The first draft of this declaration stated that the sacrament be given "only to those who are in their final struggle and who have come to grips with death and who are about to go forth to the Lord." This statement reflected the common practice of the time. However, the final draft of the declaration contained modified language that included hope for the health of the body "where expedient for the welfare of the soul." This left an opening for a later recovery of the ancient practice of anointing the sick and not just the dying.

Nevertheless, at this time, some twenty years after the Reformation, the sacrament of Extreme Unction was seldom celebrated because it had come to be strictly restricted to the dying, was tied to Penance and Eucharist (viaticum) and thus administered only by the clergy. Given the difficulties in getting a priest to come to the home and the fact that many died before the priest arrived, the reception of the sacrament was a rarity.

Therefore, Luther and Calvin could find no compelling reason to recognize it as a sacrament. Not only was it seldom used, it seemed clear that, contrary to Catholic teaching, the Bible does not mention Jesus instituting the sacrament and the anointing referred to in James was for healing, not as an immediate preparation for death. So both Luther and Calvin rejected it as a sacrament.

The Church of England did not deny that Extreme Unction was a sacrament, but in practice excluded it. The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion assigned it to a list of five "commonly called sacraments" which were not of divine institution. It was not until 1928 that a brief rite for anointing was added to the Book of Common Prayer and the most recent addition contains a rite for physical rather than spiritual healing.

In the centuries following the Council of Trent not much changed in the theology or the celebration of the sacrament. In 1614 a simplified rite was adopted, it was judged that children who had reached the "age of reason" could receive the sacrament, even people who appeared dead could receive the sacrament based on a controversial view that the soul could linger on after the heartbeat stopped, thus a safer course could be followed.

As to the effects of the sacrament, both competing views (mentioned above) were accepted: venial sins were forgiven and the remnants of sin were removed. The final resolution to this issue was a slick move by Pope Benedict XIV. He decided to grant a plenary indulgence to all those anointed with the proper disposition, thus assuring 1) the forgiveness of venial sins and 2) the remission of the remnants of sin.

Modern times - 1950-present -- By the 1950 Catholic theology, especially biblical theology was entering into a new phase. Older theological notions of such concepts as heaven, hell, purgatory, limbo and death itself were coming being reexamined. Historical research was also unfolding the ancient roots of the development of sacraments, which included the history and theology of the sacrament of Extreme Unction.

It was discovered that the ritual of Extreme Unction that had been with the Church since the Council of Trent (1545) bore little resemblance to the ritual and understanding of anointing the sick in the early and patristic Church. The current focus was on death, while the early focus was on physical health. The current ministers of the sacrament were priests, while the early ministers were laity. Therefore many theologians recommended a shift back to an understanding of and a celebration of the sacrament in terms of the seriously sick, not just the dying. Even the name “extreme unction” was felt to be inappropriate, because it masked the true meaning and purpose of the sacrament.

Thus, at the Second Vatican Council (1960’s) a general revision of all the sacraments, including extreme unction, was mandated. The result was a restoration of the sacrament now to be called the Anointing of the Sick. No longer a sacrament exclusively for those near death, priests were encouraged to extend their pastoral care of the sick to include anointing the chronically ill and those about to undergo surgery. The sacrament could be celebrated in an individual or group setting, either during or outside the Eucharistic celebration. And when death was immanent, anointing was to precede the reception of the Eucharist (viaticum).

The new rite instructed the oil to be placed only on the forehead and the hands. The oil could be that blessed by the bishop, or it could be blessed on the occasion by the administering priest. The rite was to include scripture readings and a reminder of God’s love and concern for a person’s physical as well as spiritual well-being. The message is also that sickness and even death are not the ultimate realities, Jesus promises that the love of God will eventually make us free from sin and death.

Thus the development of the sacrament has come full cycle. The ancient practice has been restored and enhanced. However, its restriction to the clergy remains except that viaticum can be administered by laypersons appointed to care for the sick. In truth, Jesus is the true minister of the sacrament as He reveals Himself as healer of the whole person - body and soul. It is Jesus who ministers to us in our sickness and in the shadow of death, calling us to believe in the Good News that suffering and even death are not the last words about human life. We were created by the hand of God and to Him we return saved from sin and death.