

The Administering of the Sacrament

The priest is the minister of the Sacrament of Anointing, but the priest most properly represents Christ and his Church, so **it is Christ** who is the bringer of peace and grace at this time of concern and, maybe, sorrow and distress, and the sick person is aided by **the whole Church** through the priest.



The sacrament proper is administered by the priest **laying his hands** on the sick person, **anointing** their forehead and palms with oil, and **saying** the words:

“Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up. Amen.”

The Laying on of Hands is the epiclesis of the sacrament, or the act whereby the Holy Spirit is called down onto the sick person.



It is important to remember, though, that this sacrament, like all sacraments, is not just one that involves the individual directly affected by it. There is always a community dimension to a sacrament because it is concerned with the distribution of God’s grace through the Mystical Body of his Son, which forms his Church. As such it is appropriate always, where time allows, to expand this liturgical celebration so that it includes:

- A relevant scripture reading to embrace the **Liturgy of the Word**
- The Sacrament of **Penance and Reconciliation**, if possible
- The Sacrament of Anointing proper
- The receiving of the **Eucharist** as the greatest source of grace and strength. This is obviously the most perfect means of assuring the sick/ elderly person that he/she is truly united with Our Lord Jesus, thereby providing the surest gift of peace and best protection possible against any final temptation. It simultaneously unites the sick person with the entire Church, thereby providing a clear example of the community dimension of our faith.

The Sacrament may be better understood by referring to it as a **Sacrament of Healing**, because it may help in the physical process of healing, if this is God’s will, whilst it certainly provides the gift of spiritual healing. For this reason it may also be described as a **Sacrament of Peace**. Whether or not it is given alongside the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, it is available at the end of life to give both sustenance and peace to a person on that final journey to God.

Our Catholic Faith

23. The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

- Not Just a Sacrament for the Dying



Questions for Reflection

1. What New Testament texts are essential to understanding the nature of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick?
2. What is the difference between the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick in the case of a person on the point of death?
3. Why is the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick also called a Sacrament of Healing?

What is the Basis for the Belief in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick?

Jesus' ministry included many acts of healing, as we all know. He did acts of physical healing of sicknesses and diseases primarily to make people reflect about who he might be. But his actions were also full of compassion and love for those who were ill and suffering or bedridden e.g. Jairus' daughter (Mk.5), the Centurion's servant (Mtt.8), Peter's mother-in-law (Mtt.8). Similarly, he undertook acts of spiritual healing because he knew that this was the most important type of healing, to alleviate mental suffering and anxiety and give real peace to those healed by re-establishing their relationship with God. This was the basis of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. However, where there was both sickness **and** sin, Jesus also healed both, as in the case of the cure of the Paralytic (Mtt.9 //Mk.2 //Lk.5) and the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda (Jn.5).



Jesus also gave the power to cure the sick and diseased to his apostles (Mtt.10 // Mk.6 // Lk.9) and to a wider group of disciples (Lk.10). After Jesus' death the apostles continued this practice (e.g. Acts 3 Peter's cure of a lame man, Acts 9, Peter's cure of a paralytic, and Acts 14, Paul's cure of a crippled man).

The Letter of St. James makes it clear that the healing of the sick became a rite practised by the early Church Community and not just by the apostles: **"If one of you is ill, he should send for the elders of the Church, and they must anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise him up again. If he has any sins they will be forgiven"** (James 5:14-15).

When Should the Sacrament of Anointing be Given?

The Sacrament of Anointing seeks to give special spiritual comfort to **those in danger of death from sickness or old age**.

It must **not** be thought that it can only be given just prior to death - how could that judgment be made without risking a failure to give the sacrament in time? It can be given at any time once the circumstances determine that a person has a **serious illness or condition** that **could result** in death e.g. prior to a serious operation, even if the success rate of that operation is high, or if an elderly person's general condition has so deteriorated that death is a reasonable possibility. But it is **not** appropriate to administer the sacrament if there is a likelihood of death but the

person is **not sick** at the time e.g. before an execution or before a soldier is about to go into battle. In these circumstances the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation should be used. It should also be noted that it is not appropriate to administer the Sacrament of Anointing to a person already dead, although if there is any doubt about whether someone is dead or not it should be given.

Similarly, the Sacrament of Anointing is not a substitute for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation where a sick or elderly person is capable of making a proper confession.

In the Middle ages, the practice developed whereby people who were seriously ill and in danger of death would delay their confession until the last possible moment. So, the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick which accompanied it became seen more as the sacrament of the dying, and was given the name Extreme Unction to reflect this shift in emphasis. However, Vatican II reversed this approach to return the sacrament more to its New Testament roots. Its proper role may be understood better by the fact that it is a sacrament that **can be repeated** as often as necessary, for example, if the sick person recovers from a particular serious illness but subsequent circumstances dictate it is appropriate for it to be administered again.

The Benefits of the Sacrament

1. The sick person is given a special **grace of the Holy Spirit** to **persevere** with their sufferings, to **accept** the nature of their affliction, and to **resist** any temptations to abandon their faith or loose spiritual hope. Just as Baptism gives the grace of entry into the Church, so the Sacrament of Anointing gives the grace to leave this life, if that is God's will. In this way the sacrament revitalises a person spiritually at their most vulnerable time of life, when their strength is at its lowest and their will might be fading.
2. It helps **unite** a person more fully and perfectly with the sufferings of Christ.
3. It gives the gift of **spiritual peace** so that a person can better experience Christ's victory over suffering and death.
4. The anointing may directly result in a sick person being **restored to health**, if this is the will of God
5. In the event that the person is unconscious or otherwise unable to benefit from the Sacrament of Penance, it also has the power to **forgive sins**, so that the sick or elderly person is granted the gift of full spiritual healing in the same way that people were spiritually healed by Jesus.

