

# Anointing of the Sick

Until recently this sacrament was called extreme unction (the last anointing) and it was given before death. For many it was part of the classic Catholic sacramental cycle (baptism, marriage, and extreme unction). Today this sacrament, besides being a preparation for death, is also widely used for healing, both spiritual and physical.

The anointing is a powerful sacramental symbol of the healing power of Jesus Christ, which is so often demonstrated in the many miracle stories of the Gospels. About 20 percent of the stories in the synoptic Gospels are miracle stories, and a significant portion of John is concerned with miraculous signs. Such incidents are unique to the Gospels. Nowhere else do we hear of so many miraculous cures attributed to one man. In Roman literature there are some accounts of cures by an emperor, and the Greeks went on pilgrimage to Epidaurus to receive cures from the god Asclepius. In the two thousand years of Jewish history covered by the Old Testament, there are only a handful of healings.

Unlike the magicians of his time, Jesus did not use formulas or lay claim to divinity. Rather, Jesus healed out of compassion and mercy to demonstrate that this is the kind of God Abba truly was. The Greek word for these actions is *dunemeis* or “acts of power,” acts that clearly demonstrate the Spirit of God and the Kingdom is present in the world, wanting people to be whole and blessed. So radical were these actions for the poor and outcast that the Gospels tell us they were one of the main reasons his enemies plotted to kill him.

The early Christian communities believed the Spirit of the risen Jesus was still in their midst, as he had promised, and continued to heal. Acts tells us that Peter healed a crippled beggar, a paralyzed man, and raised someone from the dead. The letter of James recounts how the elders anointed and prayed over the sick and brought them healing. This custom of anointing the sick and praying for healing lasted through the first eight centuries.

Then for a number of reasons—negative views about the body, devastating plagues, and a return to the notion that illness and disease were punishments for sin—interest in healing went into decline. The anointing became “extreme unction,” part of the “last rites.” Even the brilliant Aquinas avoided the topic of healing and viewed the gospel miracle stories as proof of Jesus’ divinity. For the first eight centuries, the people could anoint, but now only a priest could perform these rites.

By the twelfth century, extreme unction was recognized to be a sacrament and from then on was administered before death privately by a priest.

## Interest in Healing

There is a renewed interest in healing today. One of my graduate students, Teresa, is an expert on Healing Touch, a therapy that uses touch to influence the body’s energy system and heal all aspects of the person. She gives workshops on Healing Touch to many health care workers, who apply these techniques in hospitals. In addition, many support groups use prayer to bring healing from grief, addictions, chronic illness, and disabilities. Many have turned to yoga, the Tao Te Ching, Zen, and other Eastern practices for holistic health.

The renewal of the Christian sacrament of anointing has reclaimed treasured traditions about the healing power of Jesus. On a recent pilgrimage to Lourdes, I was amazed to see hundreds of thousands of Christians from all over the world, processing, singing, and praying for healing. Most touching is the dedication of the many health care workers who volunteer their time to attend to the thousands of disabled pilgrims who come there to pray for inner healing and physical wellness.

The Christian sacrament of the anointing is now approached with an expectant faith for healing of the heart, mind, and body through the power of Jesus. No longer a private ceremony, anointing is a communal



celebration, calling upon loved ones, families, even parish communities to pray with those seeking healing. The ritual includes songs, Scripture readings, prayers, and, of course, the anointing of those in need of healing.

Anyone whose health is seriously impaired may receive this sacrament now. This would include those who have a serious illness, the elderly, those about to undergo surgery, and those whose health is threatened by mental illness or addiction. There is a hope for healing on all levels: spiritual, psychological, and physical.

Now that this sacrament is celebrated widely, there is at the same time a scarcity of priests, who are the only ones allowed to administer it. In order that more people might benefit from the anointing, many suggest that lay hospital chaplains, Sisters, deacons, and even family members be permitted to administer the sacrament in the future.

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