

ANOINTING OF THE SICK - YES!
"LAST RITES" - NO!

Well, I said last week that the series on the *New Roman Missal* would continue thru mid-September unless something more "timely or pressing" came up. And so it did at Wednesday Adult Formation the week before last as we reflected on the *Sacrament of the Sick*, commonly known as the *Anointing of the Sick*. Our discussion revealed how often this sacrament is misunderstood even today – more than fifty years after a Vatican II decree revised the rites surrounding this sacrament which was once known by the distressing name of *Extreme Unction*.

But the fact is that it wasn't Vatican II which inaugurated a new understanding of this sacrament but actually the Council of Trent four centuries earlier. That historic council taught that "the effect of the sacrament is not simply the forgiveness of sins in preparation for eternal life, but rather the gift of the Holy Spirit which has as its purpose the healing of the whole person – body, soul and mind." How in the world that clear teaching became lost over the centuries with the sacrament commonly being referred to as *last rites* even to our own day is beyond me. I know that I was taught in grammar school that *Extreme Unction* was the name of the sacrament and that it was known by the disturbing title of a "sacrament of the dead" because, like Penance, it was a sacrament that could be received even when one wasn't in the "state of grace" required by the other five sacraments. Perhaps we have the Baltimore Catechism to blame for that! But movies and TV shows can also share the blame by continuing to use the term "last rites" in their scripts. Is that really where we Catholics should get our sacramental theology?

Vatican II made it clear that **all** the sacraments are for the "living" and reaffirmed Trent's teaching about the *Pastoral Care of the Sick* of which the *Anointing of the Sick* is the most familiar form and the one that is most important for 21st century Catholics to understand clearly. And the first thing to emphasize, understand and shout from the rooftops is that there is no such thing as *last rites*; that expression died a long-overdue death in 1966 and I suppose that pastors might have to take at least part of the blame for not making that clear in the past 50+ years.

The second truth about this sacrament that needs to be emphasized is that it **can and should** be received regularly and for many reasons; that's why we have the *Communal Anointing of the Sick* twice a year during Mass. This sacrament is for anyone of "advanced age" and for anyone about to undergo surgery. It is for those recovering from surgery and for people living with chronic ailments such as arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, the effects of a stroke and any other physical ailment. It is for adults or for children in need of either physical, emotional or spiritual healing. When you come to be anointed at Mass, no one asks you to wear a badge identifying what your need is; you have the right to decide why and how often this sacrament is appropriate for you.

But what should Catholics expect from this sacrament? Is it only for the healing of the body? Is it only a preparation for death? The answer to both is “no.” The *Sacrament of the Sick* is given and received for whatever healing we need **in God’s eyes**. That might indeed be a physical healing but it can also be a spiritual or emotional healing. The sacrament is always meant to provide strength and the grace to persevere as we either recover from illness or face the prospect of living with “diminished” abilities. And sooner or later, we’re all destined to leave this world and a physical healing won’t be possible. But even at life’s end, the *Anointing of the Sick* can bring peace and comfort as we prepare to pass over into eternity.

The important thing to remember is that we or our loved ones shouldn’t wait until we’re at death’s door to request the sacrament; again, there is no such thing as *last rites*. And although one part of the *Pastoral Care of the Sick* is called the *Commendation of the Dying*, that does not include an anointing or the reception of the Eucharist—which should have been received long before death is imminent. And it’s also important to note that, since all the sacraments are for the “living”, those who are clearly deceased cannot be anointed—yet another reason to request or receive this sacrament long before we’re ready to take our last breath on earth.

So if you, a spouse, a parent or any other family member feel that you should receive this sacrament based on what I’ve described above, please don’t hesitate to call the rectory. But please **don’t** call to ask for *last rites* since that doesn’t exist, and please don’t wait until you or a loved one are at death’s door to request the *Sacrament of the Sick*—unless, of course, a heart attack, a stroke or an accident occurs and the need for the sacrament becomes unexpectedly urgent. I can’t promise that Fr. Dan or I will always be available but if we are, we’ll respond as quickly as possible. And since I have no miraculous way to disseminate this information beyond our bulletin and website, you could help to put “last rites” to rest by sharing this with others!

Fr. Bob