

It is the task of the Church, and especially of the priest to minister to the sick, to help them see in their sufferings a loving Father; to see that through their sufferings, they are sharing in the sufferings of Christ (CCC 1521); to see beyond their suffering to the joy of the Resurrection (cf. Rom 6:5). This can happen only when the sick are reconciled to the divine will, relinquishing secular notions of happiness

Terence Cooke, in the last days of his life, spoke convincingly about the meaning of human existence and cautioned against a “and fulfillment.

The Holy Father’s apostolic letter *Salvifici doloris* makes a truly wonderful contribution to the Christian theology of the Cross and can be read by both the well and the sick to great personal profit. Cardinal quality of life” ethic that would devalue suffering: “Life is no less beautiful when it is accompanied by illness or weakness, hunger or poverty, physical or mental diseases, loneliness or old age.”

Adopting that philosophy of life enables a Christian to put his suffering to good use by uniting it with that of the Crucified One who thus redeemed the world (CCC 1505). As Catholic children growing up, we were told so often to “offer up” our little aches and pains. The Sisters were encouraging us to put our suffering to good use. How wise, they were!

Lumen Gentium says that the Church “extorts [the sick] to contribute to the good of the people of God by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ.”

In my own ministry to the sick, I have seen how valuable an awareness of redemptive suffering can be, spiritually, psychologically, and sometimes even physically.

I always ask the sick to “offer up” their suffering for religious vocations or for the intentions of the Holy Father. This forces them to focus on some reality outside themselves and to see themselves as making a contribution to the good of souls even on their sick beds. Illness, then, does not diminish their participation in the Mystical Body of Christ. Rather, it enhances it (CCC 1508).

Because the Church is a good mother, she is with her children both in joy and in sorrow. She is with her sons and daughters in the joy of Baptism or Matrimony or Holy Orders. She is with us to sustain us in Penance and the Eucharist. She is with us in our times of trouble and weakness and “at the hour of our death”.

By introducing us to Christ in the sacraments, she prepares us to meet the Lord in judgment. If we have learned well, we will not hesitate to say in our final moments, with eagerness and longing, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20). To which he will respond: “Yes, I am coming soon!”

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Anointing of the Sick

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By Our Own Suffering We Share in the Mission of Christ, a Mission that Redeems the World

Of all the sacraments, the Anointing of the Sick is probably the least understood. A good indication of this is the fact that its name has been changed so often: Extreme Unction, Anointing of the Sick. In common parlance it even took on “Last Rites”.

With each subsequent name change, the Church has tried to clarify the purpose of this sacrament. Most of us grew up with “Extreme Unction” (last anointing; CCC 1512), and surely this did not help produce a healthy understanding of the sacrament.

However, since Vatican II, fears and misunderstandings have persisted. Most people, for example, still regard this sacrament as intended only for those on their deathbed. But nothing could be further from the mind of the Church. Anyone who is seriously ill is eligible (CCC 1514-15). And in cases of old age, almost any illness takes on a serious nature. Moreover, the rite may be repeated, even in the course of the same sickness, if the patient suffers a relapse or the condition worsens. (The deceased should not be anointed, of course—since sacraments can be received only by the living—but the priest should recite prayers for the repose of the soul and be present to console the family.)

At the same time, it must be noted that the sacrament should not be administered for frivolous reasons.

The Sacrament's Purpose

What, then, is the purpose of the Anointing of the Sick? God is with his people, through the Church's sacraments, at every significant juncture of their lives. This sacrament is the Church's way of being present to a sick member, expressing the concern of the community and praying for this particular Christian's recovery. Since this person has been a faithful member of the Church throughout his life, the Church now comes to him with words of consolation, healing, and hope in imitation of the Lord Jesus during his earthly life and ministry.

The rite is very biblical in its theology and origins. In his work of healing, Jesus not only cured physical ills but also forgave men's sins (CCC 1503). In the prayer of anointing, this connection between physical and spiritual illness is clearly made: "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up" (CCC 1513).

In this way, the Church continues Christ's ministry of healing and forgiveness. Biblical theology has always linked sin and sickness in such a way that sickness was seen as an effect of sin, not necessarily personal, but surely the result of sin in the world. Because this sacrament is as concerned with spiritual wholeness as it is with physical, a priest is its minister (CCC 1516).

Biblical theology has also emphasized the unity of body and soul, so that the human person is seen as a whole person and

not compartmentalized or dissected as if for investigation under a microscope. Restoration to wholeness is the goal of this sacrament, beautifully symbolized by the anointing, the prayer of faith, and the laying on of hands—in fidelity to the rite described in James 5:14-16 (CCC 1519, 1531). Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* expresses the rationale for the sacrament in this way: "By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of the priests, the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord that he may raise them up and save them."

This idea of the activity of "the whole Church" represents the recovery of a wonderful notion that was gradually lost over the centuries. In the renewed sacrament, the sick person sees himself as part of the entire community of faith, who pray for him, and never as isolated from the Church (CCC 1517, 1522). This communal dimension is highlighted in two ways. First, the option now exists that allows the celebration of the sacrament for an entire group of sick people. Second, even when only one person receives the sacrament, the new rite stresses the fact that the care of the sick is the work not only of priests but of all Christians.

As the priest attends to the sacramental needs of the ailing, all the members of the Church need to be involved on their behalf by visiting the sick, helping them in any way possible, and praying with them and for them. Furthermore, the rite also emphasizes the communal dimension of this sacrament by inviting family, friends, and neighbors to participate.

Last Rites

Sometimes, the Anointing of the Sick is indeed part of a broader ceremony, correctly known as Last Rites (CCC 1524-25). Here the person is dying and is assisted in his last moments by the Church's sacramental system: confession, anointing, Viaticum (food for the journey), blessing. Again, family and friends should be encouraged to be present to stand in solidarity with the believer, who is preparing for that meeting with Christ for which he lived his whole life.

The Role of Suffering in the Christian's Life

No discussion of the Anointing of the Sick would be complete without some consideration of the question of suffering (CCC 1500-1501), which every human being must face. A person has only two choices in the face of suffering: to shrink from it and become bitter, or to embrace it and grow as a result. A Christian never looks for pain or sickness. In fact, he does everything possible to overcome such negative experiences, following the example of Christ himself, who could pray, "Father, if it be your will, take this cup from me" (Lk 22:42). But the believer will also continue to echo our Lord yet more, as he adds: "Yet not my will but yours be done."

Suffering has redemptive value for the individual, for the Church, and for the world (CCC 1505). The realization that God sends the biggest crosses to those he loves prompted Teresa of Avila to observe half-jokingly, half seriously, "If that is the way you treat your friends, Lord, it's no wonder you have so few of them."