

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

What the Anointing of the Sick Is . . . and Isn't

"Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters [priests] of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint (him) with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven."

--James 5:14-15

This sacrament is one of healing. The Church community intercedes on behalf of the person who's seriously ill or frail due to old age with prayers that offer comfort and peace, strength to handle the pain and suffering, and courage to face the end of one's life. The recipient is anointed with oil and his or her sins are forgiven. This is the final preparation for one's death.

In years gone by, one of the last things a family would do for a dying loved one was notify the local priest. He would hurry to the house or hospital and administer the "last rites."

In general, the sacrament, then known as extreme unction (final anointing), was reserved for someone on his or her death bed. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), that's no longer the case.

Yes, sometimes a person does get well. But the purpose of the sacrament is to give the person grace and to forgive his or her sins.

Now known as the Anointing of the Sick or Sacrament of the Sick, it's commonly administered to anyone who has reached "the age of reason" (around seven years old) who's seriously ill. And it's also available for anyone who's elderly. In either case, *the recipient does not have to be near death.*

It's important to explain this to your care-receiver. "Calling the priest" does *not* mean he or she is dying. It does *not* mean your dad is in worse shape than he realizes or that you're keeping some information about your mom's medical condition from her.

It's also important to know the Anointing of the Sick isn't a "magical" sacrament designed to cure illness. Yes, sometimes a person does get well. But the purpose of the sacrament is to give the person grace and to forgive his or her sins.

In administering the sacrament, the priest will anoint your loved one's forehead and hands with blessed oil and say some prayers. You, and others, are welcome to be present.

It could be that sometime during the year your care-receiver's parish has a communal celebration at the church, perhaps at a Sunday Mass.

A person can receive this sacrament more than once. If you aren't sure if it would be appropriate for your loved one to be anointed, ask your local priest.

For more information see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1499-1532. □

Types of Healing

Jesus' command to "heal the sick" (Mt 10:8) is one that applies to the Church of the 21st century as well as the first. That's why it "strives to carry it out by taking care of the sick as well as by accompanying them with her prayer and intercession" (CCC 1509).

The Church believes in the life-giving presence of Christ who remains the physician of souls and bodies. It's through the sacraments, and in a special way in the Eucharist, that this presence is particularly active. It is always Christ who heals and that can happen on a spiritual, emotional, and physical level.

There can be emotional healing because an increase of trust, of faith, can free a person from anxiety. Then, too, sometimes that emotional healing involves a relationship that has been bruised or broken

Not infrequently physical healing takes place but that doesn't mean there is *always* a physical cure or that death is *always* delayed.

What the Church Teaches

Today, when teaching about this sacrament, the Church also stresses:

--If the sick person recovers his health, he can in the case of another grave illness receive it again.

--If during the same illness his condition becomes more serious, the sacrament can be repeated.

--It's fitting to receive the anointing just prior to a serious operation and the same holds true for the elderly whose frailty becomes more pronounced.

--Someone who is unconscious can be anointed if it's believed he would have desired the sacrament.