

“LET THEM SEND FOR THE PRIESTS”: ANOINTING OF THE SICK IN THE CHURCH

When the emergency line rings through to my cell phone, it is often a request from a hospital to anoint someone. Even 50+ years after Vatican II, this sacrament produces bewilderment among the faithful. After a recent hospital anointing, a family member inquired of me, “You did just give her the Last Rites, right?” The confusion commences with its very name— **Extreme Unction, Last Rites or Anointing of the Sick**—which is it? Great question. Following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, its bestowal was made more easily available. In the **Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy**, we read: “‘Extreme Unction,’ which may also and more fittingly be called ‘Anointing of the Sick,’ is not a sacrament intended only for those who are at the point of death... [A]s soon as any of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, this is already a suitable time for them to receive this sacrament.” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 73)

The revision of the Code of Canon Law, also called for by Vatican II, was promulgated only in 1983. Canon 1004 §1 states: “The anointing of the sick can be administered to a member of the faithful who, having reached the use of reason, begins to be in danger by reason of illness or old age.” Not surprisingly, much ink has been spilled over what constitutes **danger**. Notice, it does **not explicitly** say “danger of death.” This is intentional. It says *in periculo*. This slight discrepancy is not lost on me. While not treating the sacrament except in a cursory manner, Vatican II’s SC #73 maintains a more direct link between the sacrament and bodily death, even while stating it is **not only** for those at the **point** of death. This seems to reveal continuing development of doctrine. Any senior going in for surgery could face unknown complications, even for a routine surgery. The Church does not desire to withhold the sacrament in that situation just because there is no *imminent danger* of death. It is not to be administered indiscriminately.

Jesus sent out the twelve disciples to preach, and “they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them” (Mark 6:13). The Epistle of James is even more explicit: “Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters 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.” (Jas. 5:14–15). Early Church documents recognized this sacrament’s role in the life of the Church. In the early 3rd century, *The Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (215 A.D.) described how a **bishop blessed the oil of the sick** (olive or another plant oil) at Mass, praying that the oil would bring strength to all anointed with it. Now called the **Chrism Mass**, it is traditionally celebrated on Holy Thursday morning.

Around A.D. 250, Origen wrote that the penitent Christian “does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine.” He then immediately cites James 5:14 (*Homilies on Leviticus* 2:4). The sacrament was reserved to priests only. But in the 5th century, some who held that only priests could anoint were **also inferring** that this **excluded bishops!** Sorry Archbishop Hebda! Thus, the first document of the Magisterium that speaks explicitly of this sacrament was from **Pope Innocent I** (hey, it was gutsy to be the first to take that papal name!) on March 19, 416 A.D. He clarified that indeed bishops too can anoint. For goodness sakes, bishops are priests too, after all!

Centuries later, different questions arose. In a 2005 response to queries about whether **deacons** or **lay persons** could anoint, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger offered a definitive “No” citing the text from James 5:14-15: “In this text, under the action of the Holy Spirit, the Church has identified down the centuries the essential elements of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, which the Council of Trent (Sess. XIV, ch. 1-3, cann.1-4:) systematically proposes: a) *subject*: the seriously ill member of the faithful; b) *minister*: “omnis et solus sacerdos” (ed. note: “every priest and only a priest”); c) *substance*: the anointing with blessed oil; d) *form*: the minister’s prayer; e) *effects*: salvific grace, the forgiveness of sins, the relief of the sick person.” The Council of Trent dogmatically defined the sacrament to be “instituted by Christ and promulgated by blessed James the apostle.”

Many parishes hold an annual Anointing Mass in which the infirm and elderly receive the sacrament. Many years ago, several of us were enlisted for a communal anointing at a parish mission. People of all ages were present. Soon, my worst suspicions were realized as the visiting priest **invited everyone** to come forward. I

recall him saying, “even if you have a headache or had a very bad day.” **Wrong!** That was a terrible **misuse of the sacrament** and I was justifiably furious. “A prudent or reasonably sure judgment, without scruple, is sufficient for deciding on the seriousness of an illness; if necessary, a doctor may be consulted.” No, it is not only for those actively dying, but the illness ought to be serious or done preventatively before surgery due to possible complications, sometimes even for routine surgery. When someone enters hospice care, I respond immediately– I do not delay. Priests are permitted to carry the holy oils with them for emergencies–most keep them in their car for just such situations.

- Cheers! Kudos to the “**Catholic Beer Club,**” a group of young adults whose monthly gatherings of fellowship and faith have caught fire. Last week’s **Catholic Trivia Night** at Finnegan’s Brew Co. in Minneapolis was a blast. My team consisted of two priests, a deacon and two seminarians– we named ourselves “The Roman Collars.” While we held our own, **Fr. Pavlak’s team won.** Congratulations– but I’m jealous! Best of all, the evening’s proceeds were directed towards defraying our heating costs. The CBC **contributed \$1,692** to the Cathedral. Many thanks!
- The installation of security cameras in the Church and on the grounds is nearly complete. Thanks to your generosity, the bill is paid! It is highly labor intensive, and they did a great job burying conduit as discreetly as possible. The high-quality cameras also benefit our organists, who can observe movement in the sanctuary (e.g. incensation of the altar), coordinating their accompaniment.
- The USCCB has published a helpful one-page background on the “**Sinicization**” process in China, about which I have written with such grave concern. You would do well to read it ([here](#) online) for yourself. Please continue to pray for Catholics in China.
- I feel sorry for **Pluto**, my favorite diminutive planet–even smaller than the moon! Its “discovery” was formally announced on March 13, 1930, 90 years ago this Friday. Sporting a brisk surface temperature of -360 F°, it unceremoniously lost its status as a planet in 2006 because all planets must “clear the neighborhood around its orbit.” Not quite sure I understand, but I’ll always **root for the little guy!**
- While nothing is envisioned at this time, we are monitoring the **coronavirus** situation with respect to any protocols that could potentially be useful in preventing its spread. As a matter of principle, if you are ill, it is advisable to stay home from Sunday Mass.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector