

Anointing of the Sick

Comments by Pope Benedict XVI

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) was interviewed by Peter Seewald over the course of 3 days. Excerpts from this conversation on Anointing of the Sick and Dying follow. (Taken from: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. God and the World. Ignatius Press, 2002.)

Seewald: At the end of our lives, Mother Church provides us with a good exit from this world. She offers her children the holy sacrament of the dying. It used to be called “the last rites”

Pope Benedict XVI: And if you asked anyone whether he would like to receive it, he probably refused, because he didn't want to think he was already about to die.

The term “last rites”, which had come to hold such terrors for sick people, has long since been replaced, deliberately and quite rightly, with “anointing of the sick”, so that for the patient the arrival of the priest with this sacrament is no longer an announcement that he is finally about to die.

In fact, the anointing of the sick is meant to help with a spiritual process that in some circumstances can become a process of healing. This is the Church's sacramental help in the situation of illness. It's less a matter of the moment of death. The prayers for the dying...the supplementary absolution...these strengthen people for their difficult passage, over this terrible threshold into a dark that seems to have no light at all.

The anointing of the sick is more a help toward the acceptance of suffering. It is meant to help me, by lifting up my pain and suffering into Christ, to enter into sacramental fellowship with him. This is not necessarily a matter of physical healing. For illness can indeed heal me spiritually; I may even have a spiritual need of it. Christ, by teaching me how to suffer and by suffering with me, may truly become my doctor, who overcomes the deep spiritual sickness within my soul.

Seewald: It is said that in the hour of death people are inclined to have a radical change of mind. The most hardened atheists become at the very last minute, as it were, meek and pious lambs. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who made a study of dying, found that just before death,

“Most change completely. Their values are no longer so materialistic, no longer so aggressive and contentious. They become much more spiritual.” Does that mean that when it’s a matter of self-preservation, a man can suddenly recognize quite clearly what really counts in life?

Pope Benedict XVI: ... an extreme situation like this can help him to see that the material goods he has amassed or the honor, respect, and influence he has had are not, despite everything, what is finally real. It can lead to a rethinking of his values—but not necessarily.

The soul can become dulled or hardened, so that it no long sees clearly. In extreme situations like this, only something that is still there within a person can in fact break through and make its appearance. In that sense we ought not to rely on the last hour but should, as it were, not let the supply of goodness within us run out completely, so that there is still oil in our lamp, to recall the Lord’s parable, when the bridegroom knocks at the door.

If God has vanished from one’s life completely, there is nothing in reserve to make its sudden final appearance. Even if God’s grace is inexhaustible—I should still heed the warning not to let these quiet reserves within my soul run out, so that in the hour when I have need of them I may not find myself standing there quite empty.

Seewald: According to the belief of the Church, we ought actually to be glad to die: “Life is death, death is life.” After all, eternal life is waiting for us.

Pope Benedict XVI: Yes. But then, human temperaments are different. When Augustine was lying on his deathbed, all his sins came back before him. Augustine therefore had the penitential psalms fixed to the wall, so that he could constantly absorb them. He even excommunicated himself for a while, and placed himself in the state of a penitent. In doing this, he thought of his spiritual father, Ambrose, who died with great inner peace and resignation, and he said: He who had this great dignity received it as a gift: I am someone else; it has not been given to me; I need to be humbly penitent, in the hope that the Lord will accept me in spite of all.

But I would certainly say that one of the tasks of Christian education and preaching is to give people confidence that by way of death we are entering upon true life. This can help us to overcome our

fear of the unknown, or at least the purely physical fear that attacks us, and to grant us peace in dying.

Seewald: How is it with you? Are you afraid of dying?

Pope Benedict XVI: Well now, since I, too, know all about my insufficiencies, I have necessarily before my eyes the thought of the judgment. But at the same time the hope that God is then greater than my failures.

Seewald: Do you give time to preparing yourself?

Pope Benedict XVI: Of course, since the older you get, the closer it comes.

Seewald: Is it permissible to have dead bodies cremated, or is that just a heathen ritual?

Pope Benedict XVI: The Jews, distinct from other cultures, did not practice cremation. For them, the burial of the body was, so to speak, like sowing the seed in expectation of resurrection. And that became the Christian custom. In burial, there was a silent expression of faith in the resurrection and in hope, and there still is.

Right up to the second Vatican Council, cremation was subject to penalties. In view of all the circumstances of the modern world, the Church has abandoned this. Faith in the resurrection does not have to be proclaimed in that way, because God will in any case give us a new body, so that cremation is permissible in the meantime.

I have to say that I am old-fashioned enough to regard burial as still being the proper Christian expression of respect for the dead, for the human body, and of the hope that it will be given a future.

Seewald: You were saying that in the world to come God gives us a new body—does that mean that none of us will be exactly the same as he was?

Pope Benedict XVI: In one respect, the resurrection at the last day is a new creation, but it does preserve the identity of a man as composed of body and soul. Saint Thomas says on this point that it is the soul that gives shape to the body—it is the soul that forms a body for itself. Identity means, therefore, that the soul, which through its resurrection

has been given anew its power to shape, will build from within an identical body. But to speculate about just exactly what resurrection corporeality and substance might look like would, it seems to me, be quite useless anyway.

Seewald: My brother died at the age of just fourteen. Where is he now?

Pope Benedict XVI: He is with God. I think at this point we have to abandon our purely material categories of location. Just as we cannot think of God as residing on some particular cloud on high, likewise the dead person has a different relationship to material existence.

God's relationship to the material world is that of ruling it throughout. We have already talked about the degrees of closeness to God, which are not determined by the spatial location, and we also said that the soul, the spiritual principle within man, is not located in a specific place like a physical organ, but represents, a formative principle of the whole. In a similar way, the dead person shares in God's different kind of relationship to space, which cannot be determined within geographic categories.

A good many people have even said that the dead stay near their graves, which I would see as being rather frightening. No, they have left this sphere of material existence and have entered into a different kind of spatial relation... We sometimes experience the way, even though separated by an ocean, people can be intimately united in their thoughts. So we can sense something about this being above and beyond space, about this further stage in spatiality, which is spiritual proximity. We should in any case rid ourselves of the idea that the dead person has to be located at a certain geographical place. We ought rather to say he is with God—whereby he is inside the reality of the universe in a new way and is thus close to me, too.

Seewald: We humans are curious; we would like to know just a little bit about what paradise is like. Does Scripture tell us anything about what is awaiting us?

Pope Benedict XVI: Even the Scriptures can only talk about it in images. They try to suggest it, for instance, with the image of the heavenly liturgy. The new sphere of existence is thus this transcendence of the actual liturgy, and singing and flying also appear as images.

But all that can be seriously misunderstood. We know the story about the Bavarian who comes to Paradise and then cannot stand the eternal singing of Alleluias... If we imagine Paradise as an immeasurably long time, the idea arises that it will be too long. But being removed from our normal time sequence, away from hour after hour, day after day...and being in a new type of personal companionship, also means that this kind of eternal sequence of things disappears—and that it all becomes one great moment of joy. We should therefore imagine eternity rather in terms of the fulfilled moment, which is beyond all time.

Seewald: Can it be that you are an organ donor?

Pope Benedict XVI: Yes, even though I assume that my old organs will not see much further use.

Seewald asks about the question of whether we ought to prolong life artificially.

Pope Benedict XVI: Well there are ways of prolonging life, or trying to, that I, too, see as outrageous interference and that I would oppose. But cures are, of course, in themselves always a way of prolonging life. Illnesses are treated today that used to be incurable. And if medical science develops further, then I would not see that as an artificial prolonging of life.

The question is, then, to what extent organ donation may be one of those means that we would regard as a normal and logical extension of medical technique, of the means of healing. I think when it's a matter of transplanting one of a pair of organs, like kidneys or eyes, we see no great difficulty, although this does of course mean a great sacrifice for the donor. It is more difficult with something like a heart, which can only be taken from someone clinically dead but must be taken so soon that the organ itself is still "living". The question of when someone is dead—and the organ itself, on the other hand, must still be living—is already a critical question, which we have to argue out most responsibly. The criterion of brain death has been worked out with great care, but I think it still needs to be subject to critical examination from time to time. There is above all the temptation to apply the criterion too early. In that sense, heart transplants are in fact an extreme instance of healing. Nonetheless, I would not go so far as to exclude them entirely. I

think there are still legitimate instances when it may be regarded as falling within the sphere of proper healing.