

The History of the Anointing of the Sick

Early Practices

The sacrament took shape from the healings of Jesus and the practices of his first followers. It drew heavily from the passage from James 5:14-16:

“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, 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.” (NAB)

The elders had the specific role of praying over the sick and anointing them with oil, which they understood to be endowed with special power from the Holy Spirit. Believers should believe they would be saved, raised, forgiven and healed.

Early Third Century

Apostolic Tradition, written around 235 AD and traditionally attributed to Hippolytus, was one of the earliest liturgical manuals. It included a blessing for oil to be used for anointing the sick.

Fifth Century

The first document of the Magisterium that speaks explicitly of the Anointing of the Sick is a letter of Pope Innocent I to Decentius, Bishop of Gubbio (19 March 416). The Pope, in commenting on the words of the Letter of James, was reacting to an interpretation which held that only presbyters and not Bishops were the ministers of the sacrament; he rejects this limitation, writing that Bishops as well as presbyters are the ministers of the sacrament (cf. DS 216). (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith)

First Millennium

The sacrament became tied to the once-only policy for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Since it could only be administered once after Baptism, many waited until their deathbed for absolution. It became known as “Extreme Unction.”

Fifteenth Century

In 1439 AD, the **Council of Florence** described the sacrament as follows:

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- To use olive oil blessed by a priest.
- Only given to the sick if death is expected.
- Person is anointed on eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, hands, feet and loins.
- The minister of the sacrament is a priest.
- Effect is to cure the mind, body, and soul.

The practice at that time was for a priest to be accompanied by a procession of believers when he visited the dying. The dying received absolution, the Eucharist (as *viaticum*-food for the journey) and extreme unction.

Some or all of the penitential psalms were read, as was one of the Gospel accounts of Our Lord's passion and death.

During this time the church developed the rite to include a commendation for the dying person, prayers for the dead, and prayers for the bereaved after the person died.

Sixteenth Century

In 1551 AD, the **Council of Trent**, in response to protestant reformers who talked of the permanent efficacy of baptism throughout Christian life, insisted on the sacramental status of "Extreme Unction." They said that the sacrament is "to be administered to the sick, especially to those who are so seriously ill that they seem near to death; hence it is also called the sacrament of the dying." The effects of the sacrament are "it confers grace, remits sin, and comforts the sick." (Council of Trent)

Twentieth Century

In 1963, the **Vatican II Council** wanted the name of the sacrament be changed and wanted the rites to be revised to be more faithful to the ancient mind and tradition of the Church. They emphasized the following points:

- Change the name to Anointing of the Sick.
- *Viaticum* should be regarded as the true sacrament of the dying.
- The anointing of the sick was rather to be seen as an expression of God's presence in the midst of human illness and Christ's healing power and concern for all those who are seriously sick. (SC 73-75)

Anointing of the Sick

The Council of Florence (1439)

“The fifth sacrament is extreme unction. Its matter is olive oil blessed by a priest. This sacrament should not be given to the sick unless death is expected. The person is to be anointed on the following places: on the eyes for sight, on the ears for hearing, on the nostrils for smell, on the mouth for taste or speech, on the hands for touch, on the feet for walking, on the loins for the pleasure that abides there. The form of this sacrament is: Through this anointing and his most pious mercy may the Lord pardon you whatever you have done wrong by sight, and similarly for the other members. The minister of the sacrament is a priest. Its effect is to cure the mind and, in so far as it helps the soul, also the body.” (Council of Florence)

The Council of Trent (1560)

ON THE SACRAMENT OF EXTREME UNCTION

It hath also seemed good to the holy Synod, to subjoin, to the preceding doctrine on penance, the following on the sacrament of Extreme Unction, which by the Fathers was regarded as being the completion, not only of penance, but also of the whole Christian life, which ought to be a perpetual penance. First, therefore, as regards its institution, It declares and teaches, that our most gracious Redeemer, --who would have his servants at all times provided with salutary remedies against all the weapons of all their enemies, --as, in the other sacraments, He prepared the greatest aids, whereby, during life, Christians may preserve themselves whole from every more grievous spiritual evil, so did He guard the close of life, by the sacrament of Extreme Unction, as with a most firm defence. For though our adversary seeks and seizes opportunities, all our life long, to be able in any way to devour our souls; yet is there no time wherein he strains more vehemently all the powers of his craft to ruin us utterly, and, if he can possibly, to make us fall even from trust in the mercy of God, than when he perceives the end of our life to be at hand.

CHAPTER I.

On the Institution of the Sacrament of Extreme Unction.

Now, this sacred unction of the sick was instituted by Christ our Lord, as truly and properly a sacrament of the new law, insinuated indeed in Mark, but recommended and promulgated to the faithful by James the Apostle, and brother of the Lord. Is any man, he saith, sick among you? Let him bring in the priests of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of

faith shall save the sick man; and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him. In which words, as the Church has learned from apostolic tradition, received from hand to hand, he teaches the matter, the form, the proper minister, and the effect of this salutary sacrament. For the Church has understood the matter thereof to be oil blessed by a bishop. For the unction very aptly represents the grace of the Holy Ghost with which the soul of the sick person is invisibly anointed; and furthermore that whose words, "By this unction," &c. are the form.

CHAPTER II.

On the Effect of this Sacrament.

Moreover the thing signified and the effect of this sacrament are explained in those words; And the prayer of faith shall save the sick man, and the Lord shall raise him up, and if he be in sins they shall be forgiven him. For the thing here signified is the grace of the Holy Ghost; whose anointing cleanses away sins, if there be any still to be expiated, as also the remains of sins; and raises up and strengthens the soul of the sick person, by exciting in him a great confidence in the [Page 106] divine mercy; whereby the sick being supported, bears more easily the inconveniences and pains of his sickness; and more readily resists the temptations of the devil who lies in wait for his heel; and at times obtains bodily health, when expedient for the welfare of the soul.

CHAPTER III.

On the Minister of this Sacrament, and on the time when it ought to be administered.

And now as to prescribing who ought to receive, and who to administer this sacrament, this also was not obscurely delivered in the words above cited. For it is there also shown, that the proper ministers of this sacrament are the Presbyters of the Church; by which name are to be understood, in that place, not the elders by age, or the foremost in dignity amongst the people, but, either bishops, or priests by bishops rightly ordained by the imposition of the hands of the priesthood. It is also declared, that this unction is to be applied to the sick, but to those especially who lie in such danger as to seem to be about to depart this life: whence also it is called the sacrament of the departing. And if the sick should, after having received this unction, recover, they may again be aided by the succour of this sacrament, when they fall into another like danger of death. Wherefore, they are on no account to be hearkened to, who, against so manifest and clear a sentence of the apostle James, teach, either that this unction is a human figment or is a rite received from the Fathers which neither has a command from God, nor a promise of grace: nor those who assert that it has already ceased, as though it were only to be referred to the grace of healing in the primitive church; nor those who say that the rite and usage which the holy Roman Church observes in the administration of this sacrament is repugnant to the sentiment of the apostle James, and that it is therefore to be changed [Page 107] into some other: nor finally those who affirm that this Extreme Unction may without sin be contemned by the faithful: for all these things are most manifestly at variance with the perspicuous words of so great an apostle. Neither assuredly does the Roman

Church, the mother and mistress of all other churches, observe aught in administering this unction,--as regards those things which constitute the substance of this sacrament,--but what blessed James has prescribed. Nor indeed can there be contempt of so great a sacrament without a heinous sin, and an injury to the Holy Ghost himself. These are the things which this holy oecumenical Synod professes and teaches and proposes to all the faithful of Christ, to be believed and held, touching the sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction. And it delivers the following canons to be inviolably preserved; and condemns and anathematizes those who assert what is contrary thereto.

Second Vatican Council (1963) Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

73. "Extreme unction," which may also and more fittingly be called "anointing of the sick," is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.

74. In addition to the separate rites for anointing of the sick and for viaticum, a continuous rite shall be prepared according to which the sick man is anointed after he has made his confession and before he receives viaticum.

75. The number of the anointings is to be adapted to the occasion, and the prayers which belong to the rite of anointing are to be revised so as to correspond with the varying conditions of the sick who receive the sacrament.

The Code of Canon Law

TITLE V.

THE SACRAMENT OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK (Cann. 998 - 1007)

Can. 998 The anointing of the sick, by which the Church commends the faithful who are dangerously ill to the suffering and glorified Lord in order that he relieve and save them, is conferred by anointing them with oil and pronouncing the words prescribed in the liturgical books.

CHAPTER I.

THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT

Can. 999 In addition to a bishop, the following can bless the oil to be used in the anointing of the sick:

1/ those equivalent to a diocesan bishop by law;

2/ any presbyter in a case of necessity, but only in the actual celebration of the sacrament.

Can. 1000 §1. The anointings with the words, order, and manner prescribed in the liturgical books are to be performed carefully. In a case of necessity, however, a single anointing on the forehead or even on some other part of the body is sufficient, while the entire formula is said.

§2. The minister is to perform the anointings with his own hand, unless a grave reason warrants the use of an instrument.

Can. 1001 Pastors of souls and those close to the sick are to take care that the sick are consoled by this sacrament at the appropriate time.

Can. 1002 The communal celebration of the anointing of the sick for many of the sick at once, who have been suitably prepared and are properly disposed, can be performed according to the prescripts of the diocesan bishop.

CHAPTER II.

THE MINISTER OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Can. 1003 §1. Every priest and a priest alone validly administers the anointing of the sick.

§2. All priests to whom the care of souls has been entrusted have the duty and right of administering the anointing of the sick for the faithful entrusted to their pastoral office. For a reasonable cause, any other priest can administer this sacrament with at least the presumed consent of the priest mentioned above.

§3. Any priest is permitted to carry blessed oil with him so that he is able to administer the sacrament of the anointing of the sick in a case of necessity.

CHAPTER III.

THOSE ON WHOM THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK IS TO BE CONFERRED

Can. 1004 §1. 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 due to sickness or old age.

§2. This sacrament can be repeated if the sick person, having recovered, again becomes gravely ill or if the condition becomes more grave during the same illness.

Can. 1005 This sacrament is to be administered in a case of doubt whether the sick person has attained the use of reason, is dangerously ill, or is dead.

Can. 1006 This sacrament is to be conferred on the sick who at least implicitly requested it when they were in control of their faculties.

Can. 1007 The anointing of the sick is not to be conferred upon those who persevere obstinately in manifest grave sin.

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