

Anointing of the Sick

Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ~ James 5:14-15

THROUGHOUT JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY, he healed the sick both physically and spiritually (see Mt 4:24; Mk 1:32; Lk 4:40; Jn 6:2). For example, when Jesus healed the paralyzed man, he said, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.... Rise, take up your bed, and go home" (Mt 9:2, 6). Jesus commanded the Twelve to "[h]eal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, [and] cast out demons" (Mt 10:8; see also Lk 10:9), and he gave them the authority "to heal every disease and every infirmity" (Mt 10:1). The Twelve did as Jesus commanded and then passed on this authority to their successors, who are the bishops (see Mk 6:12-13; Acts 5:15-16). In this way, the Church received the mission and authority to heal every disease and every infirmity from Jesus himself, which she carries out primarily through the sacraments.

Now sickness, especially when it is prolonged or life-threatening, can give someone the reason to take time to pray and think about the meaning of life. Sickness, one of the consequences of the sin of our first parents, remains a part of our earthly existence even after Baptism. God sometimes even uses it as an instrument of love and mercy. Nevertheless, God's will is that finally all sickness will be healed. Most of the time, the body is able to heal (regain its strength and life) through various remedies, doctors, and preventive medicine. Like the body, the soul also is in need of healing. This healing is primarily accomplished through the sacraments.

In Baptism, we are restored to life by the washing away of sin and union with Christ. In Reconciliation, sins are forgiven and the effects of sin are healed. The Eucharist especially heals us because

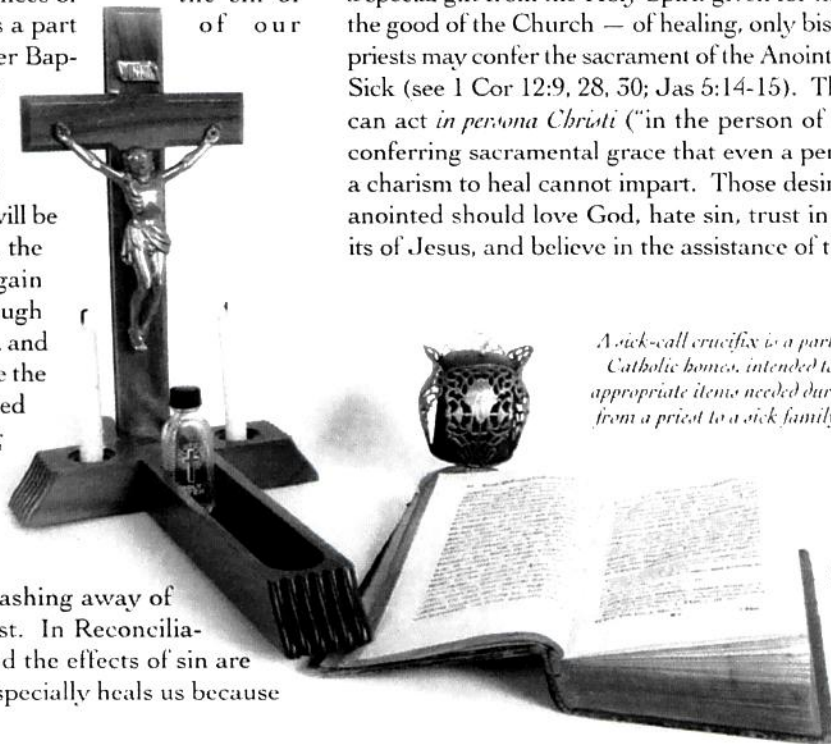
we receive Jesus himself, the Healer. In addition to these sacraments, Jesus also gave the Church the Anointing of the Sick (see Jas 5:14-15).

Who can receive the Anointing of the Sick?

This sacrament may be received by anyone who has a chronic, serious illness, by anyone preparing for a major surgery, or by anyone in danger of death. The sacrament may be repeated every time a person becomes seriously ill or when their condition worsens. Those experiencing the debilitations of old age also may receive it. Finally, Anointing of the Sick is intended for those who are "at the hour of their death," because, along with Reconciliation and Viaticum, Anointing of the Sick is one of the sacraments that prepare us for our Heavenly home.

Rite of Anointing of the Sick

Although some people have received the charism — a special gift from the Holy Spirit given for the sake of the good of the Church — of healing, only bishops and priests may confer the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick (see 1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30; Jas 5:14-15). They alone can act *in persona Christi* ("in the person of Christ"), conferring sacramental grace that even a person with a charism to heal cannot impart. Those desiring to be anointed should love God, hate sin, trust in the merits of Jesus, and believe in the assistance of the saints.



A sick-call crucifix is a part of many Catholic homes, intended to provide appropriate items needed during a visit from a priest to a sick family member

DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

This is called a good disposition. Even though the sacrament may be celebrated at bedsides in private homes, hospitals, or other institutions, efforts should be made to gather at least a small community, especially family members and close friends.

In cases where death is not imminent, the sacrament may be received in a ceremony in church on the occasion of a parish Mass. At times the sacrament of Reconciliation may precede reception of this anointing. However the sacrament is celebrated, the following three elements must be included: the prayer of faith, a laying on of hands, and an anointing with oil.

In the "prayer of faith," the priest asks those present to pray for the sick person. In the form of a litany, they ask God to give the sick person strength; freedom from all harm, sin, and temptation; relief from sufferings; and recovery of life and health.

Next, the priest lays hands on the head of the sick person and silently prays. The "laying on of hands" is the gesture that Jesus used to heal the sick: they brought "the sick with various diseases ... to him; and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them" (Lk 4:40; see also Mk 6:5; Lk 13:13). This same gesture is also used for calling upon the Holy Spirit (see Acts 8:14-17). Likewise, when the priest lays his hands on the sick person, he is healing, blessing, and calling on the Holy Spirit.

Last, the priest anoints the sick person with the "oil of the sick," blessed by the bishop at the Chrism Mass during Holy Week. Oil represents healing, strengthening, and the presence of the Holy Spirit, and again is an imitation of what Jesus did when he "anointed

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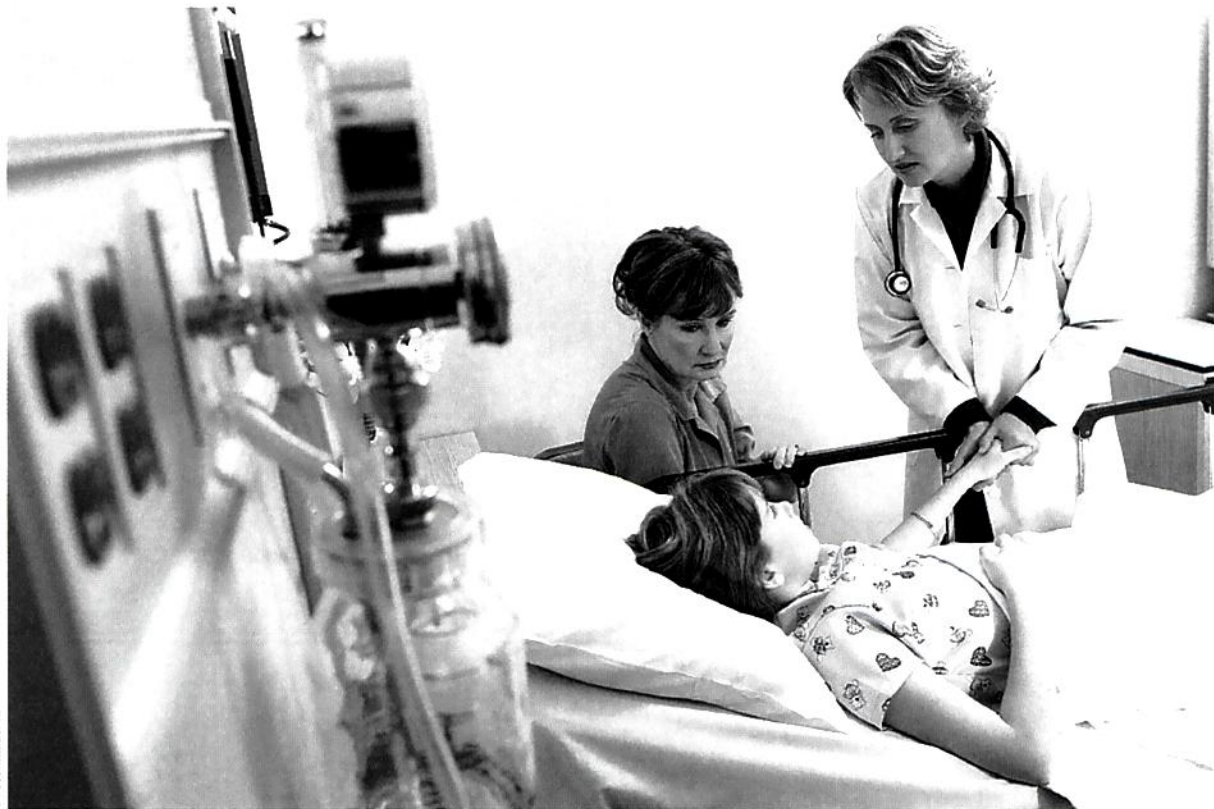
with oil many that were sick and healed them" (Mk 6:13). The priest anoints both the forehead and the hands of the sick person, but he may also anoint other parts according to the local custom and/or the area of pain or injury. First, the priest anoints the forehead, saying, "Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit" (*Pastoral Care of the Sick* 124). Then he anoints the hands, saying, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up" (*Pastoral Care of the Sick* 124). Other parts of the body may be anointed, and this is ordinarily done in silence.

What are the effects of the Anointing of the Sick?

The first effect of the Anointing of the Sick is

the grace, God's own life, which gives strength, comfort, peace, and courage to the sick person in order to overcome the difficulties and temptations of their illness or old age. Through the sacrament, the sick person is helped to trust Jesus more deeply, to know that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed" (Rom 8:18), and to be able to "take up his cross" and follow Jesus ever more closely (Lk 9:25). Furthermore, "if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (Jas 5:15). Forgiveness is a spiritual healing, a healing of the soul. If God so wills, the sick person may also experience a healing of the body. When this is the case, the healing of the body serves as a sign to all that God has visited his people and that a time will come when there will be no sickness.

Those who are anointed can be joined more close-



J.P. PEREIRA/AGES

“Sickness, especially when it is prolonged or life-threatening, can give someone the reason to take time to pray and think about the meaning of life.”

ly to the suffering and death of Christ. Sometimes the special mission or ministry given to the seriously ill or elderly is to suffer, just as Jesus suffered. Through the Anointing of the Sick, the anointed person is more easily able to “rejoice in [his] sufferings” (Col 1:24; see 1 Pt 4:13) and to willingly complete in their bodies “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col 1:24) both for their own sake and for the sake of his Body, the Church. Because of their union with Christ and his Body, when those who are anointed bear their suffering for the sake of Christ, they are able to help the Body of Christ greatly: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor 12:26). This ability to participate in the saving work of Jesus to help the Body of Christ grow in every good and holy way is called “redemptive suffering.”

Finally, the sacrament of Anointing, especially

when celebrated at the hour of death with Reconciliation and Viaticum, gives the sick person the grace they need to journey from earth to their Heavenly home.

Prayer after Anointing

Lord Jesus Christ, you chose to share our human nature, to redeem all people, and to heal the sick. Look with compassion upon your servant N, whom we have anointed in your name with this holy oil for the healing of his/her body and spirit. Support him/her with your power, comfort him/her with your protection, and give him/her the strength to fight against evil. Since you have given him/her a share in your own passion, help him/her to find hope in suffering, for you are Lord for ever and ever. Amen

*(Pastoral Care of the Sick 125).
(CCC 1420-1421, 1499-1525)*

The Christian Meaning of Suffering

Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but take your share of suffering for the gospel in the power of God. ~ 2 Timothy 1:8



Crucifix, by Peter Kelley

“The practice of self-denial is essential to mastering our flesh and growing in holiness.”

FEW THINGS AFFECT US SO DEEPLY as human suffering. This is the perennial and universal problem of all human history. Why, alongside of all the good things in life, is there so much evil, pain, and suffering? Why do we have to lose loved ones to death? Why do we have to die at all? What’s gone wrong with the world?

The answers to these questions are to be found at the very dawn of human history. Adam and Eve were created in complete friendship with God. There was no evil, no suffering, and no death. They were at peace with God, with each other, and within themselves.

So what went wrong? They disobeyed the Lord. They chose to follow the words of the serpent, rather than obey God. They rebelled against the very source of their own life and happiness. It was this rebellion that introduced sin, suffering and death into human history. God is not to blame for all the misery of the world; human beings are.

God’s Answer to Suffering

Ever since the sin of our first parents, the devil has delighted in the misery of humanity. This delight reached its climax with his role in the crucifixion of the Son of God. But what, at the moment, appeared to be the devil’s greatest victory, became his greatest defeat. On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. And in doing so, he conquered sin, the devil and death *forever*.

God the Father’s solution to the problem of suffering was to send his own Beloved Son to rescue us. The answer to the problem of suffering is Jesus Christ. Jesus takes up the most heart-wrenching reality of human history and turns it into the path to glory and salvation. In Christ, suffering suddenly has new meaning.

Certainly, God could have done it all differently. But there is a clear logic to it all. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep (see Jn 10:11). Why? Well, that’s what love does. God’s love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ: “*God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us*” (Rom 5:8). True love is sacrificial: “*By this we know love, that he laid down*

his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 Jn 3:16).

God didn't have to save us. God didn't have to give us his own Son. Jesus didn't have to die on the cross for us. All of this God did because he chose to. Out of his boundless love and mercy, God the Son became a man. He lived a truly human life. He revealed God the Father to us. He suffered and died on the cross for us. He rose from the dead for us. He opened the gates of Heaven for us. He will return in glory for us. This kind of love leaves us speechless.

No Glory Without the Cross

Suffering and trials are a necessary part of the Christian life. Some people seem to think that Jesus suffered on the cross so that we don't have to suffer. This is not true. He died on the cross so that the damage done by sin could be repaired, and so that we could live in friendship with God again. Holy Scripture says, we are "*fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him*" (Rom 8:17).

Spiritual Sacrifices

Central to the role of trials, temptations and sufferings in the Christian life is the idea of sacrifice. All the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ. Because of this, we are able to offer every aspect of our lives as "*spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*" (1 Pt 2:5). We do this especially during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, where we can unite our spiritual sacri-

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fices to the sacrifice of Christ being offered by the priest in the name of the whole Church.

In this way, through the power of the Holy Spirit, our whole lives can be offered to God the Father.

Suffering as Self-denial

To grow in Christian holiness, it is necessary that we practice self-denial. Denying ourselves does not come naturally to us. It can be painful. Why? We have a fallen human nature. Holy Scripture tells us to "*walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other*" (Gal 5:16-17).

The term "flesh" simply refers to our fallen human nature. In other words, that lower part of us that tends toward selfishness and is attracted to sin. The practice of self-denial is essential to mastering our flesh and growing in holiness. It is a key way in which we carry the cross. Jesus says, "*If any man*

would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). There are many forms of self-denial. We do not have to do anything complicated. Simple acts of self-denial done consistently can be quite effective. Fasting, prayer and almsgiving are traditional forms of self-denial.

We can also do other things. We can give up television for a day, or give up desserts on certain days. We can simply accept and perform our daily responsibilities without complaining and offer



Jesus meets his mother on the way of the Cross; 4th Station of the Cross in St. Teresa of Avila Church in Washington, DC

them to God as a form of self-denial. The particular form of self-denial is really not the point. The point is that we do simple acts of self-denial and penance out of love for God and the desire to grow in Christian holiness.

Through Christ, Suffering is Redemptive

The key to the Christian meaning of suffering is the cross of Christ. Through his Passion, Death, and Resurrection, Christ made suffering the path to glory. It brings about our redemption. Those who are in Christ are able, in some mysterious way, to unite their sufferings to his own. St. Paul writes, *"I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I*

complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24). This means that our human suffering can be redemptive. In other words, it has tremendous value both for our own spiritual lives and for the salvation of others. This is very important for us to be aware of, especially when our suffering is profoundly painful (physical, mental, emotional) or heartbreaking (such as the death of a child, a spouse, or any loved one).

It is why, in the New Testament, suffering and trials are seen as something to rejoice about — not for their own sake, but for what they can mean when united to the sufferings of Christ. St. Paul rejoiced that his



Mother of Sorrows, by Elizabeth Stefanick

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the cross. And beyond the cross, there awaits resurrection to *new, glorious, and everlasting life.*

Yet while we journey through this life on earth, let us always remember that God is in control. *"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength"* (1 Cor 10:13). We must resist any temptations to bitterness or to doubt God's love and faithfulness whenever suffering comes our way. Especially regarding our suffering and trials, Holy Scripture tells us to trust the goodness and wisdom of almighty God: *"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him"* (Rom 8:28).

(CCC 164-165, 309, 618, 1508, 1520-1521)

own afflictions and hardships could be united to Christ's and offered to the Father for the benefit of the Church (see Col 1:24). Holy Scripture tells us to rejoice in our trials and sufferings because they test and strengthen us and our moral character: *"Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness"* (Jas 1:2-3; see also Rom 5:3-5).

Conclusion

Through the cross of Christ, the problem of human suffering has been answered. In Christ, our suffering has profound, redemptive meaning. Jesus has gone before us and marked out the way to Heaven — the way of

Did Jesus Have to Suffer and Die?

But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. ~ Hebrews 2:9

AFTER THE SIN OF ADAM AND EVE and their loss of friendship with God, the Father could have left humanity without forgiveness. But God, love itself, did decide to forgive us. Yet God's justice made it necessary for humanity to make atonement (amends), and his perfect justice required *adequate* atonement. Nothing humans could do as finite creatures, however, was sufficient to redress the offenses against the infinite God. Humanity needed a Redeemer who could take upon himself the full punishment due for the sin of our first parents and all succeeding and future sins of all of us, their children. In God's saving plan, that Redeemer was God himself, the God-man Jesus Christ. The Son of God freely chose to become a man, and appeared on the earth as the Person we know as Jesus Christ, with a divine nature and a human nature to make reparation for us and restore our friendship with his Father.

But did our redemption have to be by Jesus' suffering and death? A single act of Christ's will as the God-man has infinite value, and

might therefore have been sufficient. Why, then, Calvary and all the suffering that preceded it? From the Gospel stories it is evident that *God willed that redemption be realized in the most perfect and fitting manner possible*. It was necessary, therefore, that the Son of God become man to redeem us through his own suffering as our atonement. The God-man Jesus is the only one who could offer to the Father fitting atonement.

"God willed that redemption be realized in the most perfect and fitting manner possible."



The Descent from the Cross, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

God wanted to clearly demonstrate the horror of sin. St. Paul tells us that sinners were responsible for the sufferings that the Redeemer endured (see Heb 12:3). None of us, those who lived before Christ and those who live today, is fully aware of the gravity of sin. *"In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood"* (Heb 12:4). Christ suffered and died to show us how awful sin is, so that even the shedding of blood alone is not sufficient atonement; our sins required the ghastly suffering and death of the God-man himself to satisfy the justice of God.

Calvary was also necessary to show the immensity of God's love for all of us. No

greater love can one show than that the lover surrender life itself for the beloved (see Jn 12:13). The Gospel story of Jesus' total sacrifice is a divinely heroic love story. Out of love for his Heavenly Father, and for love of all men and women whom his Father wanted to save, Jesus accepted, freely, all the suffering from the agony of anticipation at Gethsemane to the climax at Calvary. "[F]or this purpose I have come to this hour" (Jn 12:27), says Jesus. He knew and loved us all when he made this sacrifice of himself (see Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25).

Looking back over Jesus' whole life, it is true to say that his suffering and death for our salvation was the very reason for his Incarnation. Whatever he did do, was done because he wanted to do it. At the age of twelve, he stayed in the Temple because he wanted to. He walked on water because he wanted to. He gave us his flesh to eat because he wanted to. And he went to Jerusalem, knowing what would happen to him, because he wanted to. He suffered and died, not because he had to, but because he wanted to. His Passion was totally voluntary: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:18). In a sense, he had to suffer and die because he wanted to, and he wanted to because it was his Father's will.

In this sense,

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the Passion and death of Jesus became a necessary part of God's will for his Son. Christ had to suffer, for his Father willed that his human nature, the crown and unifying bond of

all creation, should receive its glory as a fruit of the cross (see Lk 24:26). Truly, as we acknowledge in the Nicene Creed, "for us men and for our salvation he came down from Heaven" to suffer and die for us (Lk 18:31-33).

Jesus, as the "new Adam," undid the evil of the sin of our first parents. His obedience to the will of his Father reversed Adam's disobedience to God's command. His resistance to temptation reversed Adam's faithlessness. His humiliating death on the cross — that of a common criminal or slave — reversed Adam's pride. And his death was the definitive victory

over the death brought upon all of us by Adam's sin.

When suffering and even death enters our own lives, we have the opportunity to join with Christ in acknowledging the grievousness of sins — our own especially — and sharing in the love our Savior bestows on us by offering our own sufferings lovingly to him as our participation in, and union with, the Passion of our God (see Col 1:24).

(CCC 539, 554-555, 557, 571-573, 598, 606-610, 612-618)



The body of Jesus carried to the stone of anointing, by James Tissot, 1856-1902