

November 1967

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Recommended Citation

Rafferty, James F. (1967) "The Spiritual Care of the Seriously Ill," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 34 : No. 4 , Article 7.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol34/iss4/7>

The Spiritual Care of the Seriously Ill

Reverend James F. Rafferty

I would like to discuss the spiritual care of the seriously ill Catholic. In practice, this means the sacramental care of such patients. Although many hours are spent by the priest-chaplain in visiting and counseling the seriously ill, by far, his most important function is his sacramental apostolate to the sick.

All Catholics, as members of God's people, are to be solicitous for the preservation and growth of the life of grace in all the faithful throughout their lives. Therefore, those whom illness has brought to the probable danger of death are the object of our special concern. By probable danger of death I mean their condition is such that they could die, even though it may be more likely that they will recover.

Christ, our Lord, instituted a special sacrament of forgiveness, fortification, and healing for the seriously ill, and this sacrament is called *The Sacrament of The Anointing of The Sick*. This is the correct name of this sacrament. It can be said that the rush call, the emergency call, to the victim of an automobile accident or of a serious CVA or M.I., is the exception and not the rule when it comes to the administration of the sacrament of the sick.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy promulgated by Pope Paul VI and the Fathers of Vatican II states in paragraph #73 that "as soon as any one of the faithful begins

to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the appropriate time for him to receive the sacrament has certainly already arrived." The practical point in this matter is that the seriously ill patient or the so-called hopeless case, for instance, the terminal cancer patient, is to be anointed early in his sickness. I emphasize this point and the doctrinal truths about this sacrament of holy anointing because everything seems to be against this.

First of all our terminology is dreadful: Last Rites is common hospital parlance. D.L./L.R. is universal shorthand. The cardexes at many hospitals even have little blocks to be checked when Last Rites are given. Even red ink is used! Last Rites is most often theologically incorrect and very misleading.

When I am called by the hospital because some patient has been placed on the D.L. or if I come across some seriously sick or elderly person while making rounds, my sacramental ministrations to such persons are not the Last Rites of the Church. The Sacrament of The Anointing of The Sick is not the last rite from the collection of rites, (the Ritual), the Church puts in the hands of her priests. The Last Rite for the seriously sick could be either:

1. Holy Viaticum, which is Holy Communion for the dying, food for the journey, this is

the true last sacrament for the dying Catholic, or

2. The Rite for the Apostolic Blessing with a Plenary Indulgence for the hour of death, or
3. The dramatic and beautiful prayers for the dying, found in the Ritual under, "Selections From the Recommendation of the Departing Soul to God."

Holy anointing is the Last Rite of the Church in the case of the D.O.A. and cases of sudden death. People are anointed in these cases because of the prime effect of the sacrament which is the forgiveness of sin. The only accurate use of the term Last Rites is found in the secular press when it is used in a caption describing a picture of a priest at the scene of some fatality where he has administered Last Rites, which, by the way, consists of:

1. A shortened form of Absolution
2. A single anointing with Holy Oil and the accompanying formula: "May the Lord forgive you by this holy anointing whatever sins you have committed. Amen."
3. A shortened form of the Apostolic Blessing at the Hour of Death

The common use of the term Last Rites in the ordinary care of sick Catholics and those involved in what are called hopeless cases also presents us with a few other difficulties. Some physicians, who do not understand the nature of our sacramental care of the sick, are reluctant to place a patient on the

D.L. because they are afraid that Father will have to see them and scare them right to death. We also get some of this from upset families, who will go to great lengths to tell us how we should approach the patient with such subtleties as "I was just dropping by." Well, it is 3 A.M. and the poor patient is in congestive failure!

Let me assure you that with my knowledge I have never upset a seriously ill patient. I believe that a person has to be psychologically and spiritually ready to receive the Sacrament of The Anointing of The Sick fruitfully. Therefore, if I have time, I will build up rapport with the patient by constant visits which I hope will induce friendship and trust, so that when the time comes that I propose that it would be good to receive the sacraments for the sick, to pray to God for the forgiveness of his sins, for fortification in order to bear well the trial of this sickness, and for restoration to good health, the patient is delighted and the sacramental experience is a thing of joy. In the emergency rush calls to one suddenly stricken I make every effort to explain beforehand to the patient what I intend to do.

From what I have said you can see why I feel strongly that efforts must be made to change such designations as L.R. on medical records, nurses reports, and to root it out of our ordinary hospital vocabulary. There is the practical difficulty: L.R. is universal shorthand. The non-Catholic nurse is familiar with it; when nurses change hospitals they understand what these abbreviations mean. Yet, I believe, that if

some simple designation such as "anointed" was used it would be theologically correct, would sound better in everyone's ear than "Last Rite," and would cover all the possible difficulties: that is, the non-Catholic doctor or nurse would know that the priest had seen the patient for the essential sacrament of the sick.

Let us now examine what are the effects of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The prime effect is the forgiveness of sins. Just as confirmation is a complement to baptism, so too is the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick a complement to the sacrament of penance. This is clear from the only definite witness in the New Testament to an anointing of the infirm:

Is any man 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 will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he be in his sins, they shall be forgiven him. (Epistle of St. James 5: 14-15.)

The core of the sacrament is the anointing of the senses with the words, "May the Lord forgive you by this holy anointing and His most loving mercy whatever sins you have committed by the use of your sight, hearing, sense of smell, sense of taste and the power of speech, sense of touch, and power to walk."

Sacraments mean a lot to Catholics. They are signs of our faith; we are saved within a sacramental economy. We all looked forward to sacramental landmarks in our Christian lives: First Communion,

confirmation, meaningful penance, marriage or holy orders; certainly Catholics should have a similar desire for the Sacrament of the Sick. I have seen some marvelous manifestations of faith, devotion and joy when this sacrament is conferred well, that is, with the family present, in an atmosphere of faith and peace. You doctors see us in the most awkward and confusing circumstances in the O. R. or Emergency Ward. If you can, plan to be present when the full rite can be well carried out in ordinary circumstances. Remember, that is at the onset of a serious illness not three steps ahead of the undertaker!

The second effect of this sacrament is *fortification*. Anointing gives comfort and great confidence in the divine mercy. Encouraged by the grace of the Sacrament, the sick person more easily bears the inconvenience and the trials of his illness and more easily resists temptation. The following are excerpts from the Rite of Anointing of the Sick illustrating this point. In the introductory prayer the priest prays for the patient's family, by-standers, "save them from all fear and anxiety." For the patient, "drive away from him all pains of mind and body. Strengthen him by your power, protect him by your might."

A third effect is that of *healing*. This effect cannot be minimized. God is the author and preserver of life. Recall the witness of Scripture, "the prayer of faith will save the sick man (both spiritually and physically) and the Lord will raise him up."

Besides the prayers for forgiveness, the powerful prayers for healing are very much in evidence in the Rite of the Anointing of the Sick. For instance, a prayer that some theologians call the quasi-form of the Sacrament goes in part, "We implore you, our Redeemer, that by the grace of the Holy Spirit you cure the illness if this sick man (woman) and heal his (her) wounds . . . In your mercy give him (her) health, inward and outward, so that he (she) may once more be able to take up his (her) work, restored by your mercy." Another prayer:

Free your servant from sickness, restore his health, raise him up by your right hand, strengthen him by your power, protect him by your might and give him back to your holy Church with all that is needed for his welfare.

Now, this is not a magic cure; sacraments are for spiritual health. But the Church has taught, and

officially at the Council of Trent, "that this anointing occasionally restores health to the body if health would be of advantage to the salvation of the soul." We all need more time for repentance, for cramping for our finals!

In closing: this Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is a sacrament for this particular patient, in his particular circumstances, for all his individual needs. For this seriously ill Christian, this is the merciful and comforting healing presence of Christ. Whatever is to be the result — anointing for glory or for spiritual or physical health — it is God's work and therefore we are in the realm of profound mystery.

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