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### **Anointing of the Sick Third Sunday of Easter**

Getting sick: It's one of the most common human experiences. Think about it for a second: no one you've ever met can say they've never had a cold or an allergy or something. This weakness is part of our human lives.

When we get sick, it is very inconvenient. Even a person who rarely gets sick always finds they get sick *at the most inconvenient time*. It can be difficult to work, to pray, to interact with others. Jesus' miracles in the Gospels were acts of mercy to those in need. It is a sign of the coming Reign of God, in which "there will be no more suffering, no more tears, no more sadness."

But the powers of healing did not cease with Jesus' death. After the Resurrection, the witnesses of the event begin to preach the Gospel. This preaching was accompanied by miracles. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter says to the crippled man on the steps of the Temple, "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, rise and walk" (Acts 3:6). This was a powerful sign that the renewal of creation which began with Jesus' Incarnation would continue through the ministry of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Even today, we learn of powerful miracles of healing through the intercession of saints.

But the early Church also recognized that God chooses not to give to everyone a miraculous healing. God does not always "cure" us the way we might want, but he *always* gives us the grace to persevere in whatever suffering we endure. This is why Jesus instituted the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The early Church saw the efficacy of this action which seeks not just a miraculous healing (for a few) but the grace to suffer with Christ (for all who receive the sacrament).

"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" (James 5:14-15). These words provide Biblical authentication that the practice of anointing the sick and elderly with oil goes back to the earliest days of the Church. The oil which is used for this today – the Oil of the Sick – is blessed by the bishop on Holy Thursday morning, at the same time as the Oil of the Catechumens and the Sacred Chrism. This symbolizes the solidarity of all the members of the Church with those who are sick and elderly. When one member suffers, all suffer. When one rejoices, all rejoice.

Traditionally, this sacrament was known as Extreme Unction, or "Last Rites." Until the Second Vatican Council, this sacrament was largely seen as "the death sacrament." The priest often did not come until a person was actively dying. For this reason, many today wait to call a priest until this time. After Vatican II, the Church rightly emphasized that this sacrament was for all those who are seriously ill or elderly, as well as those preparing for major surgery. Those

suffering from a long-term disease can receive it more than once during the illness – it is meant to strengthen the person through this experience.

And what do we hope for from this sacrament? Again, if we are looking for a quick healing, we might be disappointed. But what God offers is something better than that. Recall that even the people that Jesus healed got sick again. Even Lazarus, his friend who Jesus raised from the dead, would die again at a certain point. But in this joyful Season of Easter, Jesus promises us life that will never end. He gives us this through the forgiveness of sins, which has been associated with this sacrament since the letter of Saint James mentioned above.

Many in our own community are suffering with various illnesses. Others are struggling with growing older. And I know that some are caregivers for parents, spouses, even children who are in need. This is a beautiful work of mercy. We must always remember that this suffering is not meaningless. Rather, we take heart that God walks with us through it all. In the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, we receive the special grace to go forward trusting in God. He created us, sustains us always, and will lead us to the life of Resurrection which we celebrate in these days.  
~Rev. Eric J. Banecker