
SACRAMENTS FOR THE SICK : A WONDERFUL POWER (2)



In last week's *Journal* entry on Sacraments for the sick I talked about the sacramental renewal that followed in the wake of the Second Vatican Council with the publication in 1972 of the *Ritual* for the sacraments for the sick. There is not only one sacrament for the sick but rather several, each one responding in its own way to the sick Christian's personal situation. Today I would like to expand on the sacrament of the anointing of the sick and viaticum.

PRESENCE OF JESUS

« The anointing of the sick is the sacrament where Jesus is made present to the believer who is confronted with the harsh trial of illness, » writes Father Paul Tremblay of Chicoutimi. *« The experience of illness and its entrance at the twilight of life can be a truly upsetting ordeal, a kind of global threat, first at the human level - "What is happening to me? What am I to become?" - then at the family level - the fact of separation from the loved one, hospitalisation, dependence, solitude - and finally at the social level - the sick or elderly person sometimes has the impression that it is that person's entire world that has come crashing down. All of this is a severe test of one's faith, and many questions arise: "I didn't deserve this... Is God still around? Has He abandoned me? Life isn't worth living any more." Anointing is the very sacrament to offer to those who are thus seriously troubled by illness or old age, to anyone who is in such a difficult situation that in order to carry on with life, additional strength is required. In this situation, Jesus makes himself present to the sick person as strength and as in times of trial, to help alleviate the burden of illness. »*

THE AFFLICTION OF ILLNESS

« Anointing is therefore linked to illness and not death, » adds Father Tremblay. *« It isn't necessary that the illness be life-threatening but only that it be the experience of grave illness which seriously interferes with that person's life and relationship with his or her family, world, and God. Take for example the upset brought about by an amputation, loss of sight or speech, depression, stroke or quadriplegia, or alcoholism. Anointing becomes the sign of Jesus coming to the sick person's bedside to touch, to "raise up" that person and help that person "stand up" in his or her illness. It is not the sacrament of healing: anointing is not a miracle treatment. We must understand how Jesus "raises up" the sick person. Jesus reinforces one's will to live and to be healed, just as he did regarding the sick who are mentioned in the gospels. »*

JESUS HELPS THE RECOVERY PROCESS

« Jesus helps the person recover, » Father Tremblay writes, *« by inspiring the sick not to give in to the temptation of withdrawing into oneself and not caring about one's needs. The sick person has a tendency to use those around him/her to satisfy his or her own needs. Jesus "raises up" this sick person by arousing that person's capacity for love in a situation where love of others is seriously threatened. He ensures that this disinterested love of others is still possible despite the illness. It is through this capacity to love that the sick becomes - like his/her healthy counterpart - a witness to the Gospel. Neither suffering nor health, but only the love we have for one another is by itself a witness to the God of Jesus. If the anointing of the sick is the sacrament of God making Himself present to those deeply*

perturbed by illness or age, in order to "raise them up," one must ask whether it is appropriate to offer this anointing indiscriminately to groups of elderly or handicapped persons, to entire chronic hospital departments and convalescent homes. Age as such is not an illness, and no two people experience it in the same way. Anointing is for those who are deeply troubled by illness, handicap, or age. »

SERENITY AND COURAGE

One could talk at length about the "graces" and "benefits" associated to the prayer made by the priest with the laying on of hands and the anointing with holy oil of the forehead and palms of the hands: a certain peace, serenity, comforting, courage, reconciliation with Christ. The sacrament teaches the sick that they are never alone in their suffering, that Christ is with them, and that the Church at prayer is also with them. Christ has wanted to be present to all our human situations, even the most painful ones. Anointing reminds us of his concern to free us from evil and lead us into the joy of encountering a Father's tenderness.

VIATICUM

"Viaticum" is the sacrament of the dying, the "sacrament of passage." It is a sacrament of the living: only the living can receive holy communion. Received at this time of passage to the Father, communion to the Body and Blood of Christ has a special meaning and importance. The *Ritual* reminds us of the obligation incumbent on us to receive communion before death. « All baptised Christians who are able to receive communion are bound to » [*The Roman Ritual... Pastoral Care of the Sick. Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 8 1983. p. 17, No. 27] do so. In fact, all faithful in danger of death are bound to receive viaticum by reason of the precept to receive communion when in danger of death from any cause. The *Ritual* specifies the order in which the sacraments should be given, in emergency situations. If there is danger of death and there is no time to give all the regular sacraments for the sick, possibility will first be given for the sick person to receive the sacrament of reconciliation, then viaticum, then anointing. [Ibid., p. 18, No. 30] The sick person who, because of the nature of the illness is unable to receive communion should be anointed. Ibid.] In normal situations it is viaticum that is the last sacrament (the "last rite"). At the time of one's crossing over into death, this sacrament takes on deep significance: it wells up into everlasting life and resurrection power.

CONTINUED STUDY

As the World Day of the Sick draws near, and following it, it would be good to take the time to further reflect on the profound meaning of the sacraments for the sick. We would likely discover the marvellous strength to be found in the presence of Jesus revealing his kindness and compassion and "raising up" our brothers and sisters who are afflicted by illness or the infirmities of age. Have a good week!

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