

“Anointing of the Sick” - 4th Sunday (B)

One of the most important parts of our parish newsletter is the list of those who are unwell. And we don't just remember them; every Tuesday evening at St Monica's and every Wednesday morning at St Sabina's, during the usual prayer services, we pray for our sick. But as Catholics we can do even more than pray for them because we have among the Seven Sacraments, one which is specially for us at times of illness: the Anointing of the Sick.

In the New Testament Letter of St James, it is written: 'Are there any who are sick among you? Let them send for the priests of the Church, and let the priests pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick persons, and the Lord will raise them up; and if they have committed any sins, their sins will be forgiven them.'

So since the beginning of the Church we have celebrated the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick but over time rather than the Sacrament being celebrated with anyone who was seriously ill, it came to be administered only when the person was about to die. Many of us who are older will know the Sacrament by the name Extreme Unction, which seems to suggest that it is only turned to when the Catholic is *in extremis*. But, in fact, Extreme Unction simply refers to the fact that the Anointing of the Sick is the fourth and last Sacrament to use oil, the first three being Baptism, Confirmation, and Ordination to Priesthood.

However, since the Second Vatican Council in the early Sixties, the Church has encouraged us to once more celebrate the Sacrament in all the circumstances that was intended. Therefore, we should ask our priest for the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick before a serious operation, especially if it is under general anaesthetic; when we are experiencing the frailty of old age; at times of serious though not terminal illness; and, importantly, when we are about to die.

There are at least three benefits of the Sacrament. Sometimes the person is healed. When I was at St Antony's, Forest Gate, I was called out during the night by Newham Hospital to an old woman, who, the nurse said, was about to die. When I arrived in the ward, the unconscious woman was surrounded by her family, who were praying the rosary quite loudly, not to the joy of the other patients. I anointed the woman and a few days later she was at home, sitting up and chatting away. Such healings are not so usual but the common experience is that the Sacrament brings the second benefit of great peace and strength; two qualities that illness often strips from us. Finally, and wonderfully, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick includes forgiveness of our sins.

I want to share this teaching with you because I am concerned that I am not asked enough for the Sacrament. I suspect this is because those of us who are older think that it is only given when we are about to die and, therefore, the priest turning up to anoint you is seen as your death knell. And I presume that those of us who are younger just don't know or think about the Sacrament.

So let me remind you or teach you once more the four times that we should ask for the Sacrament: before an operation; when we are experiencing the on-going frailty of old age; during a serious but not terminal illness; and before we die.

The Sacrament is not just for when we are *in extremis*. Its benefits should be sought out at all those other times of illness. But when we are in danger of death, we must not put our heads in the sand; knowing that our souls are eternal and will be judged by God, we should ask our priest for the three Sacraments that prepare us for the journey to life everlasting: Confession, Anointing of the Sick and Holy Communion, which when it is our last time, is called *Viaticum* - food for the journey.

As your priest, I could not bear to hear of any of you having a big operation or being seriously ill and not turning to the Sacraments, including the Anointing of the Sick. Christ wishes to be close to us when we are suffering; we should let Him.