

# SO WHAT' THIS THING ABOUT THE LAST SACRAMENTS?

Consider the following.:

*Teacher: Can anyone tell me how many sacraments there are?*

*Student: None! Father gave the last sacraments to my grandmother last night!*

*The family has gathered around the hospital bed. The news is not good. Uncle Fred will not get better. He has only a few hours to live. The a daughter speaks up: "Has anyone called Father? Maybe Uncle Fred should get the last sacraments.*

*It is late at night. The phone rings. As the priest answers the phone he hears the gentleman from the funeral home say: "Father, the Smith family has been here. Their mother died. They have all gone home but they wanted me to call you and ask if you could come down and give their mother the last sacraments.*

To the long time Catholic these stories might be amusing (at least the first one!) and might otherwise evoke reactions of "Yes, so what's the problem?" To a younger Catholic or one not well vested in the many traditions of the church, these stories may evoke confusion and bewilderment.

So just what is this thing about the Last Sacraments? What do the Last Sacraments have to do with? It all begins with Jesus, especially in His desire to be with those who were hurting. Over and over again we read stories in the gospels about the people bringing the sick, the blinds, the crippled to Jesus so that He could lay hands upon them. They recognize in Jesus, a powerful healing presence.

In the letter of the Apostle James we read "if there is anyone sick among you, let the call upon the elders of the church. Let them pray for them and anoint them with oil. That pray, made in faith, will be heard by God.. (James 5: 13-16).



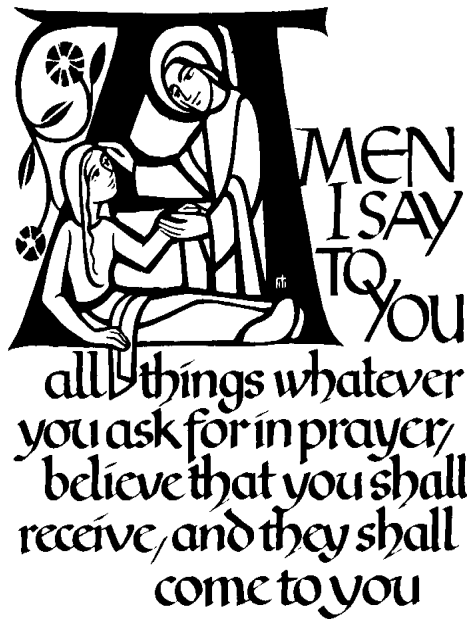
In our efforts to faithful to the teachings of Jesus, we celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick with those among us who are sick. Like all sacraments, the Sacrament of the Sick is a special, graced encounter. Through the simple gestures of human touch and anointing with oil, the healing presence of Jesus is made visible to us.

So where does the term "the Last sacrament" come from? In previous times, this sacrament was referred to as "Extreme Unction," from the Latin words meaning "the last anointing." The words "Extreme Unction" often led to a belief that this was the very last sacramental encounter for the person being anointed and, since it was often administered when death was immanent, it gave rise to the common term "the last sacrament."

Death bed scenes in which the priest is called "to give the last sacraments," can lead people, especially those unfamiliar with the intricacies of sacramental theology, to believe that "the last sacraments" are some kind of magical ceremony to insure the final salvation of the a loved one.

We no longer use the term “Extreme Unction” or even “the last sacrament” for that matter. Now we speak of the Sacrament of the Sick, a special time of prayer for those who are sick. Sacraments are meant to be celebrated with the living. We do not “give” the sacraments to or even celebrate the sacraments with those who have died.

The Sacrament of the Sick is meant to be celebrated with people who are facing health challenges: an approaching surgery, a diagnosis of cancer and even living with the aches and pains of growing old. Sometimes even when a person is facing emotional illness is a time to celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick.



Often the Sacrament of the Sick is celebrated with only the sick person's family and friends in attendance. Sometimes it is celebrated with the sick person alone. Sometimes this occurs before a person goes to the hospital to undergo surgery or diagnostic tests. Sometimes it is celebrated when the person is in the hospital when, for example, someone unexpectedly has a heart attack and is preparing for open heart surgery, or has been in a serious accident. Sometimes the Sacrament of the Sick is celebrated during Mass in the presence of the faith community. We often refer to these occasions as Communal Anointing Services. Here there is a powerful witness of the entire community praying for the sick and remembering the words “that prayer, made in faith, will be heard by God.”

In all these circumstances, both publicly and privately, this ritual of prayer involves two very simple gestures: the laying on of hands on the sick person and anointing that person with the blessed oil known as “the Oil of the Sick” or the “Oil of the Infirm.” This oil, is one of the three oils that is blessed each year by the Bishop at a special Mass celebrated during Holy Week, the week before Easter.

We know how important it is in the life of a person to be touched, held and caressed. When a person is facing a serious illness, the simple gesture of human touch and anointing with oil take on special significance. Through these gestures and the prayers of those gathered together, Jesus becomes the one who gently holds the sick person in His arms, calming their fears and anxieties.

And who is not anxious and afraid while facing the uncertainties of sickness? There is nothing that raises the level of anxiety more than being in the strange surroundings of a hospital where everything is new and all the people there seem to take control of your life away from you. Or what about facing the uncertainties of undergoing some diagnostic testing? Will it show that I have cancer? Will they be able to do anything for me?

What is it that we pray for when we celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick? Ultimately we pray as Jesus did the night before He died: If it be your will, let this cup pass from me, yet not my will but yours, O Lord, be done.” (Luke: 22:42). I say, ultimately, because more immediately our minds are

often filled with prayers like wanting the surgery to go well or wanting the doctors to find out what is wrong so that sick person might be cured. These are good things and, very often, are the things God wants to happen as well.

But sometimes people do not get better. In fact, sometimes we come face to face with the reality that, despite all that we know, there are still many things about medicine and the human body that we do not know. Sometimes there is nothing we can do medically for the person who is sick. And here we come face to face with the reality that all of us will die. That's the way it is and will be for all of us.

But from a faith perspective, this time is not one of dread or despair. Even more than caring for the sick, our Catholic tradition invites us think in terms of caring for people when they are dying. We have two great responsibilities in life. The first is to live well and help others do the same. The second is to die well and to help others so as well. To be with a loved one as they are dying means coming face to face with our own feelings about death and dying. These feelings can range from outright denial to anger to bewilderment to simply grieving the loss of a loved one.

At the same time these can be very difficult times, especially if there is a sense of brokenness in the relationship with the person who is dying. The unfinished business of relationships that have not been healed or where hurt has not even been acknowledged can make people want to run away from the whole experience of seeing their loved one dying. Feelings of estrangement in family relationships that may have occurred for any number of reasons can become heightened as well.

For those who have been away from church, there can also be additional feelings of guilt from “not doing what my parents wanted me to do.” There may even be a sense that God is punishing our loved one because of something I may have done or not done. As emotionally painful as these times often are, they can also be incredibly holy and graced moments as well. Helping others to die well can be a very holy time for us, a time of special closeness to God and to the other members of our family and friends.

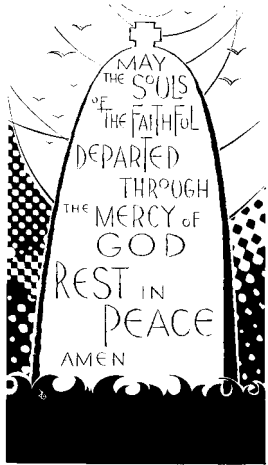
As a person moves to the final days of their life, the church invites the family and the indeed the whole faith community, to come together to pray special prayers for the dying. These prayers involve readings from the Bible and praying the Litany of the Saints in which we ask all those who have made this final journey to join us in praying for our loved one and to lead them to heaven. For some families, this is a time to pray the rosary together, for others it is a time to offer prayers from the heart.

If the dying person is able, they are given Holy Communion. In our Catholic tradition we refer to this reception of communion as “Viaticum,” meaning “food for the journey.” The Eucharist that is shared with the dying strengthens them as they make this last journey from life here on earth to eternal life with God. If there is any such thing as the “last Sacrament” it is not the anointing of the sick, but rather receiving Viaticum—this food for the journey.

And what are we praying for at this time? We pray that God will forgive any sins our loved one may have committed. We pray to remind ourselves and the person who is dying that God has

promised eternal life to those who believe in Him. We pray that our loved one may be given the rewards of a good and faithful life. Or we pray that the dying person may open their hearts to the life God wants to give to all of us.

When a person has died, we do not share with them the Sacrament of the Sick. Rather we pray the final prayers of commending them to the Lord. In one of these prayers, we pray that “the angels come to greet you, may the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the Holy City, the new and eternal Jerusalem. May you have eternal rest.”



Of course, life doesn't always happen in neat and simple ways. Sometimes people know when their loved one is dying and they are given the opportunity to be with them in the process. For some, death comes quickly, while others may linger on for days and weeks. During these times, it is not so much that we “do” something for our loved one, but rather we keep vigil with them until the Lord calls them home.

Sometimes we face those incredibly hard times when a call in the middle of the night alerts us to the fact that a loved one has been in a terrible accident. Will they live? Will they die? We do not know, but we can keep vigil in prayer. Sometimes, it is very appropriate to celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick with them. Other times, the family is faced with the reality of have to withdraw all life support systems from their loved one. In such cases, it is not the Sacrament of the Sick that is celebrated with them, but rather the special prayers for the dying.

In all cases, we remember the words of the psalmist:

*Cast your care upon the Lord,  
Who will give you support.  
God will never allow  
The righteous one to stumble. (Ps. 55: 23)*

And we remember as well St. Augustine's reflections on them:

*What will you worry about? What will you be anxious for? He who made you will take care of you. Will he who took care of you before you came into being not take care of you now, when you are what he wanted you to be?.....Abandon yourself to him; do not think that you are about to fall into the void; do not imagine such a thing. He has said: "I will fill the heavens and the earth." He will never fail you.*