SILENT HOMILIES

The Oil They Bring to the Bed

The sacrament of Anointing of the Sick



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



The Oil They Bring to the Bed

The sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

Before You Begin

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This is not a book about how to die. It is about a sacrament many families still treat as a signal that the end has begun.

Over the centuries, in the West, the sacrament became more and more associated with the last hours of life. People called it Extreme Unction, the last anointing. By the time many older Catholics were growing up, calling the priest with the oils often meant that death was very near. The Second Vatican Council did not invent a new sacrament. It asked the Church to recover the fuller meaning: the oil is for the sick, not only for those already at the point of death.

Read it before anyone in the house is ill, if you can. The best time to learn this sacrament is while everyone can still walk to the door.

Contents

Before You Begin 4
1. They Used to Wait Too Long 6
2. What James Actually Wrote 8
3. Why Oil 10
4. Who May Receive It 12
5. What the Priest Does 14
6. Healing of Soul, Sometimes of Body 16
7. Confession, Viaticum, and the Three 18
8. When the Mind Has Gone Ahead 20
9. A Parish That Anoints 22
10. Living as One Who Has Been Signed 24
A last word 26
Sources and Further Reading 27
Keeping the Oil Ready 28

Chapter 1

They Used to Wait Too Long

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Ask an older Catholic when the priest used to come, and you will often hear a story that is half love and half fear. Someone was dying. A neighbour ran. Children were sent from the room. It was holy. It was also, very often, too late for the sick person to hear a word of it.

From the later Middle Ages the West commonly spoke of extrema unctio, the last anointing. The phrase was not meant to be cruel. It named the last of the anointings a Christian received. In practice it trained families to wait.

Vatican II said the fitting time has already arrived as soon as a member of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age. That is Sacrosanctum Concilium, not a slogan. The priest is not the man you call because medicine has failed. Medicine treats the illness. The sacrament meets the person who is ill.

In Mark, the Twelve anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. The Church did not invent that gesture in a hospital corridor. She received it.

Reflection

We wait because we do not want to frighten anyone. We wait because Anointing still sounds, in some families, like a death notice.

Christ sent the Twelve to the sick while they were still the sick, not only the dying. James later told the churches to call the presbyters. Neither scene is a last rite performed after hope has gone.

A doctor and a priest are not in competition. One works with the body as science knows it. The other stands there because this body belongs to Christ, and this person is still a member of the Church.
If you are unsure whether it is time, the pastoral rule is almost always the same. Call.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, who sent the Twelve to the sick, teach us not to wait until the room is already dark. Amen.

Chapter 2

What James Actually Wrote

†

The New Testament scene behind the oil is not a deathbed. St James writes to ordinary churches: Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Notice what James does not say. He does not tell the sick person to stay at home and pray privately. He says, Call. Illness has a way of shrinking a life to one room, and the sacrament answers that by bringing the Church in.

The word behind elders is presbyters. That is why a priest comes, and not only a kind neighbour. In 416 Pope Innocent I wrote to Decentius of Gubbio that this anointing is a sacrament performed by priests, with oil blessed by the bishop. The letter is old. The instinct is the same as James.

Trent later defined that this is a true sacrament instituted by Christ. The Church was not inventing a comfort. She was naming what she had already been doing.

Reflection

Call for the presbyters. That sentence still surprises people who think faith is a private feeling.

A sickbed can shrink the world to one person and one fear. James will not allow that. The Church has to be fetched, which in practice means somebody walking up the stairs, or along a hospital corridor, with oil.

Presbyter does not mean a visitor with a kind face. It means a man ordained to act for the Church. When he anoints, the parish is in the room, even if the parish is asleep.
That is why the telephone number of the priest belongs beside the doctor's number. Not as a last resort. As part of how Christians fall ill.

A Short Prayer

Lord, when illness makes us small, send us the Church, not only our own thoughts. Amen.

Chapter 3

Why Oil

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In Scripture oil is food, medicine, honour and consecration. The Good Samaritan pours oil and wine on wounds. Kings and priests are anointed. The very name Christ means the Anointed One, so when the Church brings oil to a bed she is not inventing a symbol. She is using a sign the Bible already knew.

Catholicism uses material things because God did not despise the body. Grace comes through water, bread, wine, oil, hands and spoken words. That is the Incarnation working its way into the sacraments.

The Oil of the Sick is ordinarily blessed by the bishop at the Chrism Mass. A priest may bless oil himself if necessity requires it. The small steel stock in a pocket is not a private remedy. It comes from the altar of the local Church.

Older Western rites often anointed the senses: eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, hands, feet. The present rite anoints the forehead and the hands. The meaning is the same. The whole person is being claimed, not only an idea of the soul.

Reflection

People sometimes ask why God needs oil. He does not need it. We do.

We are not souls temporarily trapped inside bodies. Our bodies are part of who we are. They become tired, frightened and ill, and one day God will raise them. That is one reason the Church does not come to a sick person with words alone. She brings something that can actually touch the body: oil.

Christ is the Anointed One. To be anointed in His name is to be marked again as someone who belongs to Him while the body is failing or afraid. If that seems too physical, look at the Gospel. Jesus spat, touched, took by the hand. The Church has not become more spiritual than her Lord.

A Short Prayer

Christ, the Anointed One, use what is ordinary to reach what is afraid. Amen.

Chapter 4

Who May Receive It

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The sacrament is for the baptised who begin to be in danger from sickness or old age. It is also for those facing serious surgery, and for people whose frailty is itself a danger. The Church does not ask the family to predict the hour of death.

Families still whisper, Is he sick enough? Is she dying enough? That question has kept the oil in the cupboard too long. Danger from illness is enough, and so is serious frailty. You do not have to wait until the doctor has said there is nothing more to be done.

The sacrament may be repeated if the person recovers and then falls seriously ill again, or if the condition becomes more serious. It is not a one-use ticket.

If you are ever the one who telephones, you do not need the right vocabulary. You need the number and a true sentence. He is very ill. She is frightened. We think it is time.

Reflection

Certainty is a luxury a hospital corridor does not give.

The Church would rather a priest come a little early than that a family wait for a moment they cannot recognise. Old age can be that moment even when there is no dramatic diagnosis.

Nobody is honoured by being denied the sacrament until they can no longer answer. Mercy here looks like a phone call that feels slightly too soon.
If you are unsure, say so to the priest. Let him decide. That is part of why he was ordained.

A Short Prayer

Lord of the sick, spare us from waiting for a certainty You have not asked us to have. Amen.

Chapter 5

What the Priest Does

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He may have driven through rain, found the ward, washed his hands, and pulled a stole from a pocket. Then the rite is quiet. There is a greeting. There may be a brief Scripture. If the person can confess, Confession comes first.

He lays his hands on the head in silence. That gesture is older than the oil stock. Jesus laid hands on the sick. The apostles did the same.

Then he anoints the forehead and the hands, saying the words of the sacrament: through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.

The visit is often shorter than the drive. The claim is not small.

Reflection

The silent laying on of hands can look like nothing. It is one of the oldest things the Church still does.

A corridor smells of disinfectant. A television is on in the next bay. And then a man in a stole puts his hands on a head and does not speak. The ancient Church is suddenly standing beside one bed.

You do not have to feel it working. Sacraments are not graded by atmosphere. They are acts of Christ through His Church.
If you are in the room, stay. Hold a hand and answer the prayers you know. The priest is not performing a private trick. He is doing something the Church sent him to do, and the family is part of the room, not an audience.

A Short Prayer

Lord, who laid hands on the sick, be in the hands that still do so. Amen.

Chapter 6

Healing of Soul, Sometimes of Body

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James says the Lord will raise the sick person up, and families often hear that as a temperature dropping. Sometimes that is what happens. The Church really does pray for bodily healing. She does not treat the body as a disposable shell. But sometimes the person dies, and that does not mean the sacrament failed. Raising up can also mean courage, peace, the power to forgive, and the strength to die as a Christian. A cure is a real gift. It is not the only one.

Christ healed bodies and He raised the dead. He also went to the Cross. A Catholic sickroom has to hold all of that without turning either hope or death into a slogan.

The sacrament is not wasted when the fever does not break. God gives grace through it. Whether the body heals is another gift, and that gift remains His to give.

Reflection

What do we say when the priest has been and the person still dies?

We do not say the oil was wasted. We do not say prayer is a failed experiment. We say that Christ met someone who was afraid, and that the meeting was real.

The Resurrection is the last word over every anointing. If the body is not healed in this room, it is still promised a future the illness does not own. Ask for healing. Ask plainly. Then leave room for the raising up you cannot measure with a chart.

A Short Prayer

Lord who raises the dead, raise us in the way we need, and do not leave us unheld. Amen.

Chapter 7

Confession, Viaticum, and the Three

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When death is near, the Church hopes to give three gifts: Confession if the person can make it, Anointing, and Viaticum. Viaticum is the Eucharist as food for the journey. The Latin word means provision for the road.

This is something many Catholics do not know. Anointing is the sacrament of the sick. The last sacrament, in the strict sense of the passage from this life, is Holy Communion given as Viaticum. Christ said, I am the living bread. The Church puts that bread into a dying Christian's mouth when she can.

If Confession is possible, it comes first. Anointing itself also brings forgiveness of sins when the person cannot confess but would have wanted to. The Church would rather a dying person receive Communion than that every detail of the rite be perfect.

Viaticum may be repeated if the dying person can still receive. Anointing is not a substitute for that last Communion. They belong together when they can.

Reflection

A journey needs food. That is all Viaticum means.

Elijah was given bread for a long walk. Israel was given manna. The Church does not force that parallel too hard. She simply remembers that God feeds people before they have to go where they cannot feed themselves.

Families sometimes think the oil is the whole of the last rites. Ask the priest, if there is time, about Communion as well. The person who has gone to Mass for sixty years should not be denied the same Lord at the end because nobody thought to ask.
If swallowing is impossible, the Church is not cruel. She does what she can. Grace is not limited to a perfect set of three.

A Short Prayer

Living Bread, be food for the last road. Amen.

Chapter 8

When the Mind Has Gone Ahead

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Dementia and unconsciousness frighten families for sacramental reasons as well as medical ones. They worry the sacrament cannot work if the person cannot answer. The Church does not think grace is a conversation that requires full sentences.

If the sick person would have wanted the sacrament while they could still say so, the priest anoints. A person may forget their own prayers. God has not forgotten them. They may no longer remember Baptism. Baptism has not ceased to have happened. They may not know the priest. Christ knows them.

The current rite puts oil on the hands as well as the forehead. There is a particular tenderness in anointing hands that no longer know what to do: a nurse's hands, a farmer's, a mother's.

Canon law is careful about those who persist in manifest grave sin. That is a different question from confusion or silence. A priest can tell the difference. Families should not try to settle it in the corridor.

Reflection

Memory is not the same thing as the soul.

A woman who no longer knows her children's names is still their mother. A man who cannot finish the Our Father is still baptised. The sacraments do not expire because speech has thinned.

Christ's knowledge of a person is not stored in that person's mind. It is held in His own. That is why the Church will anoint someone who cannot answer, when the earlier desire was clear enough.
Sit there. Say the Hail Mary slowly. Hold the hand that is being signed. You are not wasting the visit.

A Short Prayer

Lord, who know us when we no longer know ourselves, do not forget the names we have forgotten. Amen.

Chapter 9

A Parish That Anoints

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The rite may be celebrated in church for several of the sick together. That public form surprises Catholics who have only seen the oil in a bedroom. It is James's instruction lived at the scale of a community.

St Paul says that if one member suffers, all suffer together. A parish that never sees its sick except in a funeral list has already begun to forget that.

The sacrament is still not a general blessing for anyone who would like a little extra help. Serious sickness or frailty matters. Mercy does not require making the oil meaningless.

In the plague years of 1576 and 1577, Charles Borromeo stayed in Milan when many who could leave did leave. He had outdoor altars set up so people shut in their houses could still hear Mass from the windows, and he sent priests to the sick. The small oil stock in a priest's pocket tells the same story: the Church goes to the sick.

Reflection

A communal Anointing can teach a pew what a bedroom already knew: this sacrament has a face that is not only the face of the dying.

It can also go wrong if it becomes a queue for everyone. The Church is kind. She is not vague. Danger from illness or old age is the door.

When one member suffers, the body suffers. That is not poetry. It is why we pray names at Mass and why a priest keeps oil in a coat.
If your parish announces an Anointing Mass, do not stay away only because you are well. Come and see who is being signed. Then you will know whom to visit on Tuesday.

A Short Prayer

Christ, in whose Body we suffer together, keep our sick visible. Amen.

Chapter 10

Living as One Who Has Been Signed

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After the priest has gone, a small smell of oil may linger on the skin. Something was done, and it soaks in, even when it does not announce itself on the first evening.

To have been anointed is not to have been promised a timetable. The person may recover and return to ordinary days. They may not. Either way they have been told that their illness is not a waiting room outside the Church.

If there are months left, they are not leftover life. They are time in which gratitude, Confession, the Eucharist, a hard conversation, and prayer can still happen. The sacrament was not wasted on a recovery.

If death comes soon, the signing still stands. The person was not abandoned at the last bend of the road.

Reflection

People ask what they are supposed to do afterwards. There is no programme.

Live as someone who has been touched in weakness and not left there. Go to Mass if you can. Let people help you. Say the thing you have been postponing. Sleep when you can.

If you are the relative, do not treat the visit as a ceremony that is now over. The oil is for the days after the priest has driven home.
Having faced weakness without being abandoned by Christ is already a grace. The rest is walking.

A Short Prayer

Lord, who signed us in our weakness, stay after the door has closed. Amen.

A Last Word

†

The oil is small. The visit is often shorter than the drive.

Give this booklet to a family before they need it. If you are the one who telephones, you do not need the right vocabulary. You need the number and a true sentence.

May the priests still come. May the sick still be raised up. May no one be left waiting for a farewell that was meant to be help.

Sources and Further Reading

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Scripture: Mark 6:13; James 5:14-15; Luke 10:34; 1 Corinthians 12:26; John 6:51; 1 Kings 19:5-8. Paraphrases are not marked as quotations.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1499-1532. Code of Canon Law, 998-1007. Sacrosanctum Concilium 73-75. Paul VI, Sacram Unctionem Infirmorum (1972). Council of Trent, Doctrine on the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum.

Pope Innocent I, letter to Decentius of Gubbio (416). On St Charles Borromeo and the Milan plague of 1576-77: contemporary and standard biographical accounts of his ministry in the city.

Keeping the Oil Ready

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A priest sometimes carries very little into a hospital room: a stole, a small stock of oil, the Blessed Sacrament, and the prayers of the Church. A Little Treasure is small too. Making one takes more than its size suggests.

These booklets remain free to read. Behind them there is research, checking Scripture and the rite, reading the Catechism and Canon Law, writing, cutting and beginning again. A short book can take a long time to become short.

If this one has helped you know when to call, and if you are able to support the work, I would be truly grateful. A gift through the Silent Homilies website is not payment for these pages. They are already yours. It gives me time and resources to keep the next booklet ready.

If you cannot give financially, nothing is owed. Give this booklet to a family who may one day need to know when to call the priest.

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