Anointing: Scripture, Prayer and Ritual

Teacher Background

Sacraments of Healing

Penance and the Anointing of the Sick are known as Sacraments of Healing. The foundation of these two sacraments of healing is to be found in the life and ministry of Jesus. The Catechism of the Catholic Church in its introduction to the section on the Sacraments of Healing states: “The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health (cf. Mk 2:1-12), has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. This is the purpose of the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of Anointing if the Sick.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of the priests, the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord, that he may raise them up and save them. And indeed the Church exhorts them to contribute to the good of the People of God by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ (Lumen Gentium 11). Illness and suffering are part of human life. The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has as its purpose the giving of a special grace to support a person experiencing the difficulties of grave illness or old age. A foundational Scriptural text in relation to the sacrament is from the Letter of James:

“Is anyone among you sick? Let them call for the presbyters of the Church, and let them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise them up; and if they have committed sins, they will be forgiven.” (James 5: 14-15)

The Anointing of the Sick is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death, though it is certainly for people who are dying. All members of the faithful who are gravely ill, whether death is imminent or not, can receive the sacrament. If a sick person who received the sacrament recovers health, he or she may receive this sacrament again in the case of another grave illness. If during the same illness the person’s condition becomes more serious, the sacrament may be repeated.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is a liturgical and communal celebration. The sacrament may be celebrated in the family home, in a hospital or church, for a single sick person or for a whole group of sick people. The sacrament may be celebrated within the Eucharist. If circumstances suggest, the sacrament can be preceded by the sacrament of Penance and followed by the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Word, preceded by an act of repentance, opens the celebration of this sacrament. The celebration includes the following major elements: The priest in silence lays hands on the person who is sick and prays over them in the faith of the Church. The priest then anoints the sick person with oil, blessed, if possible, by the bishop.

In addition to the Anointing of the Sick, the Church offers those about to die the Eucharist as viaticum. Viaticum is communion received at the moment of “passing over” to God and has a particular significance and importance in the light of Jesus’ words “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (Jn 6:54)