

Anointing of the sick: Sacrament blesses the ill and dying

By **Elisa A. Kent**, *Feature Writer*

“Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.”

— *Jas 5:13-15.*

GREENSBURG — “As the Lord healed those who are sick and sent out his disciples, he calls us to do the same,” according to Father Michael P. Sikon.

Father Sikon, director of the Office for Worship, explains that many Catholics recall the sacrament of the anointing of the sick being offered to loved ones only when death was imminent.

Formerly known in Catholic Church teaching as extreme unction, the sacrament was given only to those in danger of death. However, specifics regarding its administration have changed in recent years.



Father Sikon

“It is appropriate to turn to the Lord and ask for his healing,” says Father Sikon. “One of the nice things about the general rite of the anointing of the sick is that it allows for adaptation to circumstances of the individual.”

The sacrament, he says, can be offered to those near death, prior to a serious surgical procedure or following a medical diagnosis that would cause fear for health or welfare.

The sacrament should not be offered to those with a common cold, he adds.

There are specific prayers for the dying, including last rites, and special prayers used in the moment when death appears imminent. Viaticum, or food for the journey, is another distinctive part of the celebration where the priest offers specific prayers for the last reception of Communion. Although viaticum is not celebrated often, it still remains a part of the sacrament.

Some individuals do recover following the sacramental anointing; in this instance, Father Sikon stresses that it is important to remember “if it is (God’s) will to bring them physical healing or recovery, sometimes he may do that.”

Father Robert T. Lubic, pastor of St. John the Baptist Parish, Perryopolis, recalls that there may be difficulties or misunderstandings about the sacrament when an individual dies before reception.

In this case, the priest will bless the body. Father Lubic says families should not fear that something bad will happen to their loved ones if they are not anointed.

“If someone falls ill or learns of a change in their health, then that is the opportune time to celebrate the sacrament,” notes Father Lubic. “God doesn’t work in magical ways; he knows our intentions and our desires.”

The minister of the sacrament must be a priest. The priest is not limited to the amount of sacraments he offers, nor are recipients limited to the amount of times they may receive the sacrament. However, the recipient must be a baptized Catholic.



Father Lubic

The oil of the infirm (derived from the Latin word for sick) must be oil of the olive. The oil of the infirm in the Diocese of Greensburg is blessed by the diocesan bishop on Holy Thursday during the annual Chrism Mass at Blessed Sacrament Cathedral, Greensburg, and used for special prayers and blessings during the administration of the sacrament throughout the year.

If a diocesan priest runs out of oil of the infirm, he has permission to bless more in an emergency, but it must still remain oil of the olive, notes Father Sikon.

“Like all sacraments, this sacrament is not just asking for Christ’s help and healing, but also bringing forgiveness and comfort that comes to family in the knowledge that their loved one is at peace and in the right relationship with the Lord,” says Father Sikon.

“Scripture reminds us that it has been the church’s custom since the very beginning to follow the practice of Jesus and his disciples to bring to the Lord those who are sick, those who are in need and trusting that he grants the grace and gift that is most needed.”

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