

Last Things First

by Fr. Mark Pavlik

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I recently had a friend who died, after suffering for a few months from an illness. It seems after he had been in the hospital for a few weeks and was reaching the last hours of his life, his family thought it was time to call a priest so he could receive “last rites.” Sadly, they were not able to reach a priest and my friend died without being anointed.

The event prompted me to want to write a little educational article about the sacrament of anointing of the sick, since it seems people often mistake the timing of this sacrament. I have found many Catholics misunderstand the purpose of anointing. The problem with referring to it as “last rites” is that by doing so, it implies it should happen just prior to death. But in fact, the sacrament of anointing, along with the sacrament of reconciliation, is a sacrament of healing. The sacrament is meant to strengthen the recipient in an illness and to be a sign of Christ’s healing presence.

Because of this a person should not wait until death is imminent to receive the sacrament. By its very nature, anointing is meant to bring to the recipient the grace of Christ to give them strength. Throughout the scriptures, we read of Christ’s compassion toward the sick and those who are in need and about his healings of every kind. Jesus has the power not only to heal, but also to forgive sins; he came to heal the whole person, body and soul. So the fruit of the sacrament is not only physical healing, but also spiritual healing and strengthening.

We read about anointing also in the Epistle of St. James:

“Are there any among you who are sick? Let him call for the priests 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 him up; and if they have committed any sins, their sins will be forgiven” (Jas 5:14-15).

St. Olaf offers anointing of the sick following weekend Masses twice a year, once in the fall and again during Lent. However, this is not the only time one can receive the sacrament. A person may be anointed before a medical procedure, when they are recovering from illness or simply when they are advancing in age. The sacrament can be received more than once, if, after being anointed, health begins to decline again.

Many people think if they are anointed, it means they are going to die very soon; consequently, they don’t want to be anointed. You can imagine this sometimes puts priests in a difficult position when they visit someone in the hospital. “Why are you here to give me last rites? I’m not dying!” Remember that the sacrament is not just to prepare you for death, but can strengthen you to live! If you or someone you know, would like to be anointed, please contact the parish office.