

21 Centuries of Catholic Doctrine: ANOINTING OF THE SICK

As taught in the Church's historical writings, from the time of the Apostles down to today

—*ca. 100 A.D., Death of Saint John, the last of the Apostles*

ca. 150—Saint Justin the Martyr, *First Apology*
—*Ministry to the sick a function of the clergy*—

67 Then we all rise together and offer prayers, and, as we said before, when our prayer is ended, bread is brought forward along with wine and water, and the president likewise gives thanks to the best of his ability, and the people call out their assent, saying the *Amen*. Then there is the distribution to each and the participation in the Eucharistic elements, which also are sent with the deacons to those who are absent. Those who are wealthy and who wish to do so, contribute whatever they themselves care to give; and the collection is placed with the president, who aids the orphans and the widows, and those who through sickness or any other cause are in need, and those who are imprisoned, and the strangers who are sojourning with us—and in short, he takes care of all who are in need.

ca. 200—Tertullian, *The Demurrer Against the Heretics*

—*Written during his Catholic period; ministry to the sick a function of the clergy*—

41:5 And the heretical women themselves, how shameless they are! They make bold to teach, to debate, to work exorcisms, to undertake cures, and perhaps even to baptize.

ca. 215—Saint Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop of Pontus, disciple of Irenaeus, *The Apostolic Tradition*

5:2 [The bishop blessing the oil shall pray thus, saying:] "O God who sanctifiest this oil, as Thou dost grant unto all who are anointed and receive of it the hallowing wherewith Thou didst anoint kings and priest and prophets, so grant that it may give strength to all that taste of it and health to all that use it. ...

26:14 The deacon in time of need [i.e., when the presbyter is not present] shall be diligent in giving the sealing to the sick.

ca. 245—Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*

2:4 [A final method of forgiveness], albeit hard and laborious [is] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner washes his pillow in tears, when his tears are day and night his nourishment, and when he does not shrink from declaring his sins to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who says, "I said, 'To the Lord I will accuse myself of my iniquity', and you forgave the disloyalty of my heart" (Ps. 31 [32]:5). In this way there is fulfilled that too, which the Apostle James says: "If, then, there is anyone sick, let him call the presbyters of the Church, and let them impose hands upon him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him" (Jas. 5:14-15).

250—Saint Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, *Letter to His Clergy*

18 [12]:1 Inasmuch as I find that there is not yet an opportunity of coming to you, and the Summer has already begun—a season disturbed by continual and grave illnesses—I think that we must deal with our brethren. Therefore, ... if they should be seized by some misfortune or dangerous illness at a time when my return is not expected, then, before whatever presbyter is present, or if a presbyter is not found and death begins to be imminent, even before a deacon they are permitted to make their confession of sin, so that a hand may be imposed upon them in penance and they may come to the Lord with ... peace.

255—Cyprian, *Letter to Magnus, on Baptizing the Novatians, and Those Who Obtain Grace on a Sick-bed*

25:12 In the sacraments of salvation, when necessity compels, and God bestows His mercy, the divine methods confer the whole benefit on believers; nor ought it to trouble any one that sick people seem to be sprinkled or affused, when they obtain the Lord's grace, when Holy Scripture speaks by the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel, and says, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit will I put within you" (Ezek. 36:25-26). Also in Numbers: "And the man that shall be unclean until the evening shall be purified on the third day, and on the seventh day shall be clean: but if he shall not be purified on the third day, on the seventh day he shall not be clean. And that soul shall be cut off from Israel: because the water of sprinkling hath not been sprinkled upon him" (19:8, 12, 13). And again: "And the Lord spake unto Moses saying, Take the Levites from among the children of Israel, and cleanse them. And thus shalt thou do unto them, to cleanse them: thou shalt sprinkle them with the water of purification" (8:5-7). And again: "The water of sprinkling is a purification" (19:9). Whence it appears that the sprinkling also of water prevails equally with the washing of salvation; and that when this is done in the Church, where the faith both of receiver and giver is sound, all things hold and may be consummated and perfected by the majesty of the Lord and by the truth of faith.

325—First Council of Nicaea, first ecumenical council, *Canons*

—*Viaticum ("Food for the Journey," Last Eucharist)*—

13 In regard to those who are dying, the ancient and canonical law is even now to be observed, so that if someone is dying, let him not be deprived of the last and most necessary Viaticum.

ca. 350—Serapion, Bishop of Thmuis, *The Sacramentary: Prayer Over the Oil of the Sick or Over Bread or Over Water*

29:1 We beseech You, Savior of all men, You that have all virtue and power, Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and we pray that You send from heaven the healing power of the Only-begotten upon this oil, so that for those (who are anointed *or* who partake of these creatures of Yours), it may be effective for

the casting out of every disease and every bodily infirmity (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 10:1), for an antidote against every demon, for escape from every unclean spirit, for the expulsion of every evil spirit, for the banishing of every fever and chill and every weakness, for good grace and remission of sins, for a remedy unto life and deliverance, for health and integrity of soul, of body, and of spirit, for perfect vigor.

374-377—Saint Epiphanius, Bishop of Constantia (Salamis), *Panárion or Panacea Against All Heresies*

79:3 It is true that in the Church there is an order of deaconesses, but not for being a priestess, nor for any kind of work of administration, but for the sake of the dignity of the female sex, either at the time of Baptism, or of examining the sick or suffering, so that the naked body of a female may not be seen by men administering sacred rites, but by the deaconess.

385—Pope Saint Siricius, 38th Bishop of Rome, *Letter to Bishop Himerius of Tarragona —Viaticum ("Food for the Journey," Last Eucharist)*—

Inasmuch as [habitual sinners] fell through frailty of the flesh, we bid you succor them with the gift of the viaticum, through the grace of communion, when they start on their way to the Lord.

387-390—Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Doctor of the Church, *Penance*
—*Anointing; Penance*—

1:8:36 Why, then, do you impose hands and believe it to be the effect of the blessing if perchance some sick person recovers? Why do you presume that any can be cleansed by you from the filth of the devil? Why do you baptize, if it is not allowed that sins be forgiven through men? In baptism too there is forgiveness of all sins; what is the difference whether priests claim this power is given them to be exercised in Penance or at the font? The mystery is the same in both.

387—Saint John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, Doctor of the Church, *The Priesthood*

3:6:190 The priests of Judaism had power to cleanse the body from leprosy—or rather, not to cleanse it at all, but to declare a person as having been cleansed (Lev. 14:2-3). . . . 195 Our priests have received the power not of treating with the leprosy of the body, but with spiritual uncleanness; not of declaring cleansed, but of actually cleansing [in the Sacrament of

Penance]. ... Our parents begot us to temporal existence; priests beget us to the eternal. The former are not able to ward off from their children the sting of death, nor prevent the attack of disease; yet the latter often save the sick and perishing soul—sometimes by imposing a lighter penance, sometimes by preventing the fall. ... 196 Not only at the time of our regeneration [in Baptism], but even afterward, they have the authority to forgive sins. “Is there anyone among you sick? Let him call in the priests of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick man, and the Lord shall raise him up, and if he have committed sins, he shall be forgiven” (Jas. 5:14-15).

416—Pope Saint Innocent, 40th Bishop of Rome, *Letter to Decentius, Bishop of Gubbio*

25:8:11 Truly, since Your Love has wished to take counsel in this matter just as in others, my son Celestine, the deacon, has also added in his letter that Your Love has raised a question concerning what was written in the Epistle of the Blessed Apostle James: “If there is anyone sick among you, let him call in the presbyters and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sufferer, and the Lord will raise him up, and if that man has committed sin, He will forgive him” (Jas. 5:14-15). There is no doubt that this is to be taken or understood in regard to the sick faithful, who are able to be anointed with the holy oil of chrism, which, having been confected by a bishop, is permitted not only to priests but also to all as Christians, for anointing in case of their own necessity or in that of their people. The other question submitted seems to be superfluous, as if to doubt that it is permissible for a bishop to do what there is no doubt the presbyters may do. For it is stated in respect to presbyters, because bishops, prevented by other occupations, are not able to go to all the sick. Otherwise, if the bishop either is able or thinks someone worthy to be visited by himself, he can without hesitation both bless and touch with the chrism, it being his task to confect it. But it cannot be administered to penitents, because it is a kind of Sacrament. For how should it be supposed that one kind of Sacrament could be granted to those, who are denied the other Sacraments?

419—Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo,

Doctor of the Church, *The City of God*

22:8 [T]he son of a man, Irenæus, one of our taxgatherers, took ill and died. And while his body was lying lifeless, and the last rites were being prepared, amidst the weeping and mourning of all, one of the friends who were consoling the father suggested that the body should be anointed with the oil of the same martyr [Stephen]. It was done, and he revived.

ca. 425—Saint Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria,

Doctor of the Church, *Worship and Adoration in Spirit and in Truth*

6 But you, if some part of your body is suffering, and you really believe that saying the words “Lord Sabaoth!” or some such appellation which divine Scripture attributes to God in respect to His nature has the power to drive that evil from you, go ahead and pronounce those words, making them a prayer for yourself. You will be going better than you would by just uttering those names, and you will be giving the glory to God and not to impure spirits. I recall also the saying in the divinely inspired Scripture: “Is anyone among you ill? Let him call in the presbyters of the Church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he be in sins they shall be forgiven him” (Jas. 5:14-15).

452—Pope Saint Leo the Great, 45th Bishop of

Rome, Doctor of the Church, *Letter to Theodore, Bishop of Forum Iulii*

108:5 It behooves each Christian to pass judgment on his own conscience, and not to defer his conversion to God from day to day, ... choosing the narrower limits of a period when there will scarcely be time for the confession of the penitent or for the reconciliation of the priest. But, as I said, even such must be assisted in their need, so that neither the action of Penance nor the grace of Communion may be denied them if, even when the faculty of speech has been lost, they ask for it by signs clearly understood. But if the violence of their illness has been so worsened that in the presence of the priest they cannot even signify what they had asked for only a little while before, then the testimonies of the faithful standing about must be of service to them, so that they may at the same time be accorded the benefit of both Penance and reconciliation.

ca. 540—**Saint Caesar, Bishop of Arles, *Sermons***
 13 [265]:3 As often as some infirmity overtakes a man, let him who is ill receive the Body and Blood of Christ; let him humbly and in faith ask the presbyters for blessed oil, to anoint his body, so that what was written may be fulfilled in him: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him bring in the presbyters, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he be in sins, they will be forgiven him" (Jas. 5:14-15). See to it, brethren, that whoever is ill hasten to the church, both that he may receive health of body and will merit to obtain the forgiveness of his sins.

ca.630—**Sonnatus, Bishop of Rheims, *Statutes***
 Extreme Unction is to be brought to the sufferer who asks for it, and the priest is in person to look after and visit him, thus animating and duly preparing him for future glory.

—636, Death of Saint Isidore of Seville, end of the patristic period in the West

735—**Pope Hadrian (Adrian), 96th Bishop of Rome, *Gelasian Sacramentary***
 [May God not only] heal all the sick person's ills, but to have mercy on all his iniquities—that he may feel Thy medicine not only in his body but also in his soul.

—ca. 749, *Death of Saint John Damascene, end of the patristic period in the East*

ca. 836—**Rudolf of Fulda, *The Life of Saint Leoba***
 —*Vaticum ("Food for the Journey," Last Eucharist)*—

When she saw that her ailment was growing worse and that the hour of her death was near she sent for a saintly English priest named Torhthat, who had always been at her side and ministered to her with respect and love, and received from him the viaticum of the body and blood of Christ. Then she put off this earthly garment and gave back her soul joyfully to her Creator, clean and undefiled as she had received it from Him.

ca. 975—**Roswitha of Gandersheim, Benedictine nun, earliest known female playwright, *Fall and Conversion of Theophilus, Vicar of His Bishop***

By the endeavor of the people the lifeless body [of Theophilus] was duly entombed amid the last rites ...

—1054, *Start of the Eastern Schism*

1081—**Pope Saint Gregory VII, 157th Bishop of Rome, *Letter to the Bishop of Metz***
 Furthermore, every Christian king, when he comes to die, seeks as a pitiful suppliant the aid of a priest, that he may escape hell's prison, may pass from the darkness into the light, and at the judgement of God may appear absolved from the bondage of his sins. Who, in his last hour (what layman, not to speak of priests), has ever implored the aid of an earthly king for the salvation of his soul? And what king or emperor is able, by reason of the office he holds, to rescue a Christian from the power of the devil through holy baptism, to number him among the sons of God, and to fortify him with the divine unction?

1179—**Third Lateran Council, eleventh ecumenical council, *Decree Concerning Papal Elections***

—*Vaticum ("Food for the Journey," Last Eucharist)*—

But if any one ... shall usurp for himself the name—the real authority he cannot—of a bishop: he himself, as well as those who shall have received him, shall be subject to excommunication, and shall be punished by the privation of all their holy orders; so that the holy Eucharist, except on their death-beds, shall be denied them.

1208—**Pope Innocent III, 176th Bishop of Rome, *The Profession of Faith Prescribed for Durandus of Osca and Followers***

We, with a sincere heart, firmly and unhesitatingly believe and loyally affirm that the Sacrifice, that is, the bread and the wine are the true body and the true blood of our Lord Jesus Christ after the consecration. ... [W]e firmly believe and confess that no matter how upright, religious, holy, and prudent someone may be, he cannot and should not consecrate the Eucharist nor perform the Sacrifice of the Altar, unless he is a priest rightly ordained by a bishop who can be seen and can be felt. ... [W]e firmly believe and profess that whoever believes and maintains that he can perform the Sacrifice of the Eucharist without previously being ordained by a bishop, as we have mentioned, is a heretic, and he shares in the destruction of Core and his accomplices (see Num. 16), and is to be excluded from the entire holy Roman Church. We believe that God grants pardon to all truly repentant sinners and we are most glad to join in communion with them. We consider that the anointing of the sick with the consecrated oil is a holy thing.

1266-1272—Saint Thomas Aquinas, Doctor of the Church, *Summa Theologica*

Supplement 29:1:3 [T]he sacraments are neither more nor less than spiritual remedies. Now Extreme Unction is a spiritual remedy, since it avails for the remission of sins, according to James v. 15. Therefore it is a sacrament.

I answer that, Among the visible operations of the Church, some are sacraments, as Baptism, some are sacramentals, as Exorcism. The difference between these is that a sacrament is an action of the Church that reaches to the principal effect intended in the administration of the sacraments, whereas a sacramental is an action which, though it does not reach to that effect, is nevertheless directed towards that principal action. Now the effect intended in the administration of the sacraments is the healing of the disease of sin: wherefore it is written: *This is all the fruit, that the sin ... should be taken away (Isa. 27:9)*. Since then Extreme Unction reaches to this effect, as is clear from the words of James, and is not ordained to any other sacrament as an accessory thereto, it is evident that Extreme Unction is not a sacramental but a sacrament.

1373—Blessed Julian of Norwich, *Showings or Revelations (short text)*

2 And when I was thirty and a half years old, God sent me a bodily sickness in which I lay for three days and three nights; and on the fourth night I received all the rites of Holy Church, and did not expect to live until day. ...

1439—Pope Eugene IV, 207th Bishop of Rome, *Exultate Deo*

The fifth sacrament is extreme unction. Its matter is olive oil blessed by a bishop. This sacrament should not be given except to the sick whose death is feared. The anointing should be done on these parts: on the eyes because of sight, on the ears because of hearing, on the nose because of smelling, on the mouth because of taste or speech, on the hands because of touch, on the feet because of walking, on the reins because of pleasure that prevails there. The form of this sacrament is: "May the Lord, through his loving mercy, forgive you for whatever you have been guilty of through sight" etc. The form is the same for anointing the other members. The minister of this sacrament is the priest. The effect of the sacrament is the healing of the soul, and also of the body, but only inasmuch as this is beneficial. St. James the Apostle says of this

sacrament: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him bring in the presbyters of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him" (Jas. 5:14 ff.).

—1517, *Start of the Protestant Revolt*

1565—Saint Teresa (of Jesus) of Ávila, founder of the Discalced Carmelites, Doctor of the Church, *Life*

5 That night I had an attack which left me insensible for almost four days. They gave me the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, and in every minute of every hour thought that I was dying.

1619—Saint Robert Cardinal Bellarmine, Doctor of the Church, *The Art of Dying Well*

1:16 There remains the last sacrament, which is called extreme unction. From it we derive a highly useful lesson, not only for the end of life, but for its whole course. In this sacrament, all the parts of the body are anointed, in which reside the five senses of the body, and it is said with reference to each, "May God pardon you whatever sins you may have committed through sight," and so of the rest of the senses. We gather from this that the five senses are the gates through which sins of all kinds enter into the soul. So if anyone carefully guards these gates, he will easily avoid a great number of sins, and thus he will live well and die happily.

1756—Benedict XIV, *Ex Quo Primum*

44 We come now to the third admonition [at the beginning of the *Euchologion*] which consists of two parts and is expressed as follows: "The priests should remember that the sacrament of holy oil, called *euchelaion*, was instituted by Christ as a heavenly medicine for the health of the body as well as that of the soul. Accordingly it is to be given only to the sick at the time they desire it and while they are still in possession of their faculties. So coming with faith and a devout will to be anointed with the holy oil, they will receive additional grace from the sacrament."

1897—Saint Thérèse (of the Child Jesus) of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church, *The Story of a Soul*

2 The moving ceremony of Extreme Unction impressed me very much; I remember just where I knelt, and I can still hear Father weeping.

1963—Second Vatican Council, 21st ecumenical council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

73 “Extreme unction,” which may also and more fittingly be called “Anointing of the Sick,” is not a sacrament intended only for those who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.

2012—Pope Benedict XVI, 265th Bishop of Rome, *Message for the World Day of the Sick*

3 From a reading of the Gospels it emerges clearly that Jesus always showed special concern for sick people. He not only sent his disciples to tend their wounds (cf. Matt. 10:8; Luke 9:2, 10:9) but also instituted for them a specific sacrament: the Anointing of the Sick. The *Letter of James* attests to the presence of this sacramental act already in the first Christian community (cf. 5:14-16): by the Anointing of the Sick, accompanied by the prayer of the elders, the whole of the Church commends the sick to the suffering and glorified Lord so that he may alleviate their sufferings and save them; indeed she exhorts them to unite themselves spiritually to the passion and death of Christ so as to contribute thereby to the good of the people of God. ...

This sacrament deserves greater consideration today both in theological reflection and in pastoral ministry among the sick. Through a proper appreciation of the content of the liturgical prayers that are adapted to the various human situations connected with illness, and not only when a person is at the end of his or her life (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1514), the Anointing of the Sick should not be held to be almost “a minor sacrament” when compared to the others. Attention to and pastoral care for sick people, while, on the one hand, a sign of God’s tenderness towards those who are suffering, on the other brings spiritual advantage to priests and the whole Christian community as well, in the awareness that what is done to the least, is done to Jesus himself (cf. Matt. 25:40).