

by Viaticum – food for the journey – which is Holy Communion for the dying. The last stages of a journey can seem most hazardous. The Sacrament of the Sick is Christ encouraging and nourishing his tired followers to finally reach their goal of being with him. This does not rule out the possibility of physical healing. Many people close to death have made great recoveries after being anointed. During the rite it is always the first prayer of the priest that the sick person should be cured.

THE SIGNS

The signs used in the Sacrament of the sick are first, the laying on of hands over the head of the sick person. This is a symbol of healing, giving strength and power. Then there is the anointing with oil on the forehead and hands. Again, this oil symbolises the love and care of God. The service can include a number of prayers and readings, but if it is in an emergency situation most of these are missed out. It might also happen that the priest does not have the oils with him. If this should happen then he can use olive oil or whatever oil is available.

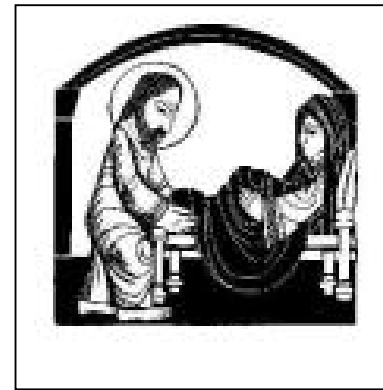
Have you ever received this Sacrament? If so how did you feel about it?
What is the worst thing, do you think, about sickness?
Are people afraid of death? Why?
Should a dying person be told the truth?
What should we be doing for those suffering from AIDS?



“When they had made an opening, they lowered the stretcher on which the paralytic lay”.

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

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*Father, in heaven,
through this holy anointing
grant N. comfort in his/her suffering.
When he/she is afraid, give him/her courage,
when afflicted, give him/her patience,
when dejected afford him/her hope,
and when alone, assure him/her of the
support of your holy people.
We ask this through Christ Our Lord.*

Amen.

Where Are We?

On a journey. At each turning point we encounter Christ who helps us on our way. We begin with Christ at Baptism. The next stage is when we can recognise our need for salvation because we sin and so our journey takes us to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Because it is a time when our conscience is developing, we are invited to be involved in the community to give of ourselves and also to be supported by that community in the Eucharist. The next big step is into adolescence and in every sense a wider world. It is at this point that we receive the Spirit of Christ in Confirmation.



In adulthood there could then be a major crossroads. Maybe marriage or the priesthood. If we should choose one of these, we are helped by the presence of Christ in a particular way. We may choose neither and of course God will still be with us. Marriage and priesthood though offer us the opportunity to respond to his call in ways of life that go back to Christ.

Many things can happen in our lives but undoubtedly the next most important step is when we leave it. For most people the most frightening aspect of old age is the possibility of sickness and the certainty of death. Let's look at sickness first.

“If you’ve got your health, you’ve got everything.”

It's hardly necessary to look at the disadvantages of being ill: boredom, pain, dependency, expense, inconvenience to others, stress... They are all obvious. And unless you are addicted to Lucozade and grapes there are no advantages. But perhaps the worst feeling when you are sick is the feeling of worthlessness. Today, most people are valued for what the **DO** in their job, as a parent, in the parish etc. In sickness we have no purpose, no fulfilment; we can't do anything. It very easily leads to depression. In the **sacrament of the sick**, Jesus tells us very clearly that we are not worthless. He loves and values us as highly as ever. In fact, it was for

people like the sick that God became man. There could be no greater testimony to their worth.

A second gift we can receive from the sacrament is a sense of purpose. The sick do have a calling and a mission.



The mission is the same as ours; to be like Christ. If Christ had not suffered, it might be hard for the sick to identify with him. But he did. In his suffering Jesus showed himself to be the perfect lover of mankind. Pain is the one thing that ensures that we will think only of ourselves. Yet in the midst of great pain Jesus thought firstly of others. “Weep not for me, weep for yourselves and your Children” spoke Jesus on the way to Calvary. It is when the sick, in a condition where we would expect them to be worrying about themselves, think and pray for other people that they achieve the ultimate as Christians.

Instead of just doing Christ-like things, they become like Christ. Like Christ, what seems our lowest moment can become our greatest victory.

It is at this most difficult stage of the journey that this encounter with Christ in the Sacrament of the Sick can be so uplifting. It is given to strengthen, heal and console in mind and body. Finally it prepares us to face what must be the ultimate step. Dying.

Death

The Sacrament of the Sick used to be called Extreme Unction or the Last Rites. It was only given to those in real danger of death. It is now much more widely used but understandably has a special significance for those who are dying. It firstly assures them of God's love and **forgiveness** no matter what they may have done in the past. For many Christians their fear of death is tied up with feelings of guilt and consequent judgement. It is a sacrament that gives hope, not a hope based on the sort of lives we may have led but on the love and mercy of God. It is often accompanied