

# **Anointing a sick candidate**

**Paul Turner**

A candidate for reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church may be eligible to receive the sacrament of the anointing of the sick if certain conditions apply. Candidates who have some serious illness, and who have learned about the sacraments of the Catholic Church, may ask if they may participate in this ceremony of healing. If they qualify, they may.

## ***Catechumens***

Unbaptized individuals are not eligible for the anointing of the sick or for any other sacrament until they are baptized. Even if they marry, they enter a valid marriage, but not a sacramental one. If a catechumen is ill and requests the prayers of the church, the community may pray for the person, and a priest may even lead the prayer, but he may not administer the oil of the sick because the person has not been baptized.

However, a priest or a deacon could administer the oil of catechumens using texts from RCIA 98-103, a minor exorcism from RCIA 90-94, or a blessing from RCIA 95-97. The catechumen should understand that this is not the sacrament of the sick, but rather a prayer for deliverance and strength. The texts and the ceremonies may provide some comfort to the one undergoing all the struggles that come with illness. A sickness of the body generally afflicts the spirit, and a minor exorcism, a blessing, or an anointing with the oil of catechumens can address many of the struggles that the unbaptized undergo at a time of poor health.

The ceremony could follow the model for a celebration of the word of God as found in RCIA 85-89. The people gather. They sing an appropriate song. They hear readings and sing a responsorial psalm. These biblical texts could be drawn from the ritual Mass for the Anointing of the Sick, found in the Lectionary for Mass 790-795. The priest or deacon may give a homily. Then the concluding rites follow: a minor exorcism or a blessing. If the exorcism is chosen, rather than a blessing, it may be followed by an anointing with the oil of catechumens. In its history, the oil of catechumens was also known as the oil of exorcism, and it still accompanies an appropriate prayer for spiritual deliverance. Only a priest or a deacon may anoint with the oil of catechumens.

This anointing could take place during the Liturgy of the Word at a Sunday mass. Readers would then proclaim the readings of the day. Catechumens, as always, may be dismissed afterward.

## ***Candidates***

If the person is a validly baptized candidate, then the qualifications from the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism apply. These were published by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in

1993, and they remain in force. Paragraphs 129-131 explain the conditions under which a validly baptized person who is not a Catholic may receive the sacraments of eucharist, anointing and penance. These paragraphs pertain to all validly baptized Christians, not just to those who desire to become Catholics.

Two principles lay the foundation. The sacraments are sources of unity for the Christian community, and baptism draws other Christians “into a real, even if imperfect communion, with the Catholic Church.” Although the Catholic Church in general permits access to communion, penance and anointing only to its own members, “in certain circumstances, by way of exception, and under certain conditions, access to these sacraments may be permitted, or even commended, for Christians of other Churches and ecclesial Communities” (129).

There are several conditions: The person is unable to have recourse to the sacrament from his or her own Christian community, the person asks for the sacrament on his or her own initiative, the person manifests Catholic faith in the sacrament, and is properly disposed (131).

If these conditions are present, then two alternative circumstances are weighed. If the person is in danger of death, and the conditions are met, then he or she is eligible for any of these three sacraments. If the person is not in danger of death, then the diocesan norms should be consulted. These are to exist “for judging situations of grave and pressing need and for verifying the conditions” (130). However, if no diocesan norms exist, then a judgment is made based on the Vatican’s 1993 ecumenical directory.

Perhaps the most common celebration of one of these three sacraments with a non-Catholic Christian is the confession of sins preceding the Rite of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church. Even though baptized candidates are still not in full communion, they confess their sins and receive absolution before the rite of reception.

Just as they celebrate the rite of penance, so candidates may be eligible for the rite of anointing of the sick if the conditions apply. Many would not have ready access to a similar celebration in their own church either because it is not offered or because they are already deep onto the path of joining the Catholic Church. Then if they request the sacrament of their own initiation and have demonstrated to the catechumenate team that they share the Catholic understanding and faith in the sacrament, and feel ready for it, they may be eligible.

If these conditions apply, and if they are in danger of death, unquestionably they may receive an anointing. If they are not in danger of death, but a serious illness afflicts them, and if there are no diocesan norms to the contrary, then they are eligible for the anointing of the sick.

The same judgments for suitability that apply to Catholics apply to other Christians who seek this sacrament. The General Introduction to the Rite of Anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick says it applies to the faithful “whose health is seriously impaired by sickness or old age” (8). The sick may be anointed before a surgery due to a serious illness (10). The elderly who “have become

**notably weakened” may be anointed (11), and sick children if they have sufficient use of reason (12).**

**In practice, the celebration should look no different from the way a Catholic celebrates anointing of the sick. It may be done in common, even at a mass. It may be done more privately, even in a hospital room. The priest is the ordinary minister of this sacrament. Deacons and lay persons may not administer it.**

**A pastoral judgment should be made with every case. But circumstances exist in which a validly baptized non-Catholic may share in all the riches of the Church’s pastoral care of the sick.**

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