

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

When I was a kid, we learned that one of the seven sacraments was called “extreme unction.” I probably didn’t understand either word. We even pronounced the first word with the accent on the wrong syllable: “extreme unction.” “Unction” means anointing with oil, and “extreme”—well, today—would imply an extreme quantity of oil. But it actually meant an anointing at the extreme end of life, namely in the last moments before death.

In 1963 the Second Vatican Council reformed the sacrament with this statement: “‘Extreme unction,’ which may also and more fittingly be called ‘anointing of the sick,’ is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him [or her] to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.”

This reform has been a success and a failure. Many people do understand that the anointing is for the sick, not for the dying; but many others presume it is still linked to something they call “last rites” and fail to contact a priest until a person is dying. The expression “last rites” is broadly misunderstood both inside and outside the Catholic Church, but today’s gospel provides an opportunity to reflect on it in a meaningful way.

At this point in Mark’s gospel, Jesus sends out the Twelve in order to expand his mission. He gives them authority over unclean spirits and advises them to take nothing on the journey. Mark says they preached repentance, drove out demons, anointed the sick, and cured them. This is one of two passages in the bible that refer to early Christians anointing the sick; the other is in the Letter of James, where the writer instructs people to contact priests for this purpose. The Catholic Church regards this practice as a sacrament, a moment in which we especially encounter the presence of Jesus Christ. Only a priest may anoint, and he usually uses only the oil that his bishop has blessed.

Eligible are those who are seriously ill because of sickness or age, or due to an upcoming surgery that could threaten their lives. For those who are dying, the Church recommends a different sacrament: holy communion, given as viaticum, a word that means “food for the journey.” Catholics are to receive viaticum when they are aware that death is near, when they are conscious enough to renew their baptismal promises, and when they can swallow. The minister for viaticum is a priest, a deacon or an extraordinary minister of holy communion. You could call it one of the “last rites” that does not require the presence of a priest. Both anointing and viaticum may be repeated.

In general, the best time to request a priest is when the person is sick or elderly, and when the sacrament of anointing can accompany prayers that hope for recovery. When death draws near, the time for viaticum has come. However, many people fail to grasp these purposes: They wait to contact a priest until his prayers for healing are coming too late and the possibility of offering viaticum has passed. We priests anoint the sick today in the footsteps of the apostles who prayed for a cure; any minister offers holy communion as viaticum to those who are dying. All of us can work together to bring proper spiritual care to the sick.

Sunday, July 11, 2021