

Looking at Church teaching on Sickness, Death, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and Viaticum

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As you can see from the title of this presentation I will be talking about four inter-related topics or experiences.

I will be asking what is the Church's teaching on:

1. Sickness
2. Death

And explaining and defining:

1. The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick
2. Viaticum

While it might seem that most of these topics are simple and we believe we understand them, especially in this modern world where information is so easily accessed; my hope is to challenge us all to new insights and understandings. Because, you see, as Christians we are called to see the world with different eyes. To paraphrase from the book of First Samuel (16:7) – to see as God sees and not how the world sees. In my presentation I have organized my thoughts and notes by coupling these four ideas. For the first part of my presentation I want to talk about the Church's teaching on Sickness and move from that into the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Then we will come back and look at the teachings of the church on death progressing to a brief conversation about Viaticum which will bring our evening to a close.



Sickness as Understood by God and the Catholic Church

When I was a small child (6 years old) I contracted a very serious illness, Gillian Barre Syndrome. This disease is a member of the Polio family and as such attacks the muscles of the body weakening them. Since the heart is a muscle and the lungs function by the muscles surrounding them pulling as we take in air and pushing to expel the bad air, if the disease progresses to its fullest horror, death is the outcome. Fortunate for me I had a lesser case and never reached that point. But even so, can you imagine being a parent struggling to care for four other children while worried about the one as you rush the one from doctor to hospital to doctor, to surgery to treatment only to repeat the cycle over again. As you can tell, since I am standing before today, that I did recover. But the one thing I never saw in this challenge my parents faced was them losing their faith. I am sure in the private moments, in the dark of their bedroom they wept their tears as they expressed their frustration, but they held on to the teachings of their faith. Just what are those teachings? First let's look at the bible:

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope... Romans 5:3-4

I am sure that everyone has heard the statement: "What does not kill us makes us stronger". St. Paul as he wrote to the community in Rome was challenging them to realize this. When we

suffer, whether it be from a physical illness or chronic condition it challenges us to new virtues such as patience, understanding, compassion for others. The stronger we are in our virtues the more we are in union with Jesus, Himself.

Illness, disabilities and chronic conditions are much more than a training ground for our faith. When we suffer we live in union with Christ. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church we read:

1373 *"Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us," is present in many ways to his Church: in his word, in his Church's prayer, "where two or three are gathered in my name," in the poor, **the sick**, and the imprisoned, in the sacraments of which he is the author, in the sacrifice of the Mass, and in the person of the minister. But "he is present . . . most especially in the Eucharistic species."*

Most people of faith can look back on the times of illness as times that they actually grew closer to God. As treatments were offered, as they experienced confusion and frustration the sick learned to trust God more and they learned how to truly value the life they were given. This can happen if we open ourselves to the spirit of God that is a part of each of us. But there is more to it. Christ completely understand our suffering because of His own suffering on the Cross. In fact when we suffer we are united with Christ's suffering. We hear from St. Paul:

"Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his suffering, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead"
(Philippians 3:8-11)

In our suffering it is up to us not to waste our suffering—by complaining and running away from the pain, humiliation and isolation. Rather, it is up to us to unite our suffering to the sufferings of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, especially in His most sorrowful passion.

618 *The cross is the unique sacrifice of Christ, the "one mediator between God and men". But because in his incarnate divine person he has in some way united himself to every man, "the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery" is offered to all men. He calls his disciples to "take up [their] cross and follow [him]", for "Christ also suffered for [us], leaving [us] an example so that [we] should follow in his steps." In fact Jesus desires to associate with his redeeming sacrifice those who were to be its first beneficiaries. This is achieved supremely in the case of his mother, who was associated more intimately than any other person in the mystery of his redemptive suffering.*

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There is a quote attached to this catechism from St. Rose of Lima: *Apart from the cross there is no other ladder by which we may get to heaven.*

For a while, right out of high school I thought I was being called to be a nurse. I worked in a Catholic hospital for the few years I was involved in my training. In every room was a crucifix and time and time again I would hear patients talk of how that crucifix gave them comfort because if Jesus could endure the pain of the passion then they could get through this treatment, this moment of physical pain, this challenge set before them. In sickness we can become more because Christ is united with us strengthening us for the journey and sharing the burden. We have all heard of the image of footprints in the sand where Jesus replies, *"Where you see one set of footprints, that is where I carried you."*

As the Church of faith, we do also believe and teach that Jesus can heal us of body. Did you know that there are 31 individual healings and eleven mass healings that Jesus performed during his three years of ministry? We have the Leper in Galilee (Mark 1:40-45), the two blind men in Capernaum (Matthew 9:27-31), and Peter's Mother in Law (Luke 4:38-39). We have several passages that speak of Jesus healing in large groups, especially after the community saw him heal an individual, (Mark 1:32-34; Matthew 9:35-38; Luke 5:15). And let us not forget Jesus healing the world for all eternity by His sacrifice on the Cross. As we read in Isaiah 53:4 *He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.* But there is always a reason for His healing:

1503 *Christ's compassion toward the sick and his many healings of every kind of infirmity are a resplendent sign that "God has visited his people" and that the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Jesus has the power not only to heal, but also to forgive sins; he has come to heal the whole man, soul and body; he is the physician the sick have need of.*

Jesus healed for many reasons but there are two main ones we must keep in mind:

1. *a resplendent sign that "God has visited his people" and that the Kingdom of God is close at hand.* During the time that Jesus walked the earth He called for repentance, a change of heart so that people might be able to enter into the kingdom of heaven. The physical healings that he was doing was (like sacraments) an outward sign of the grace that God wishes to offer all of humanity through salvation.
2. *...but also to forgive sins; he (Jesus) has come to heal the whole man, soul and body.* What did Jesus say to the paralytic who came to him for healing? Presented with the request for physical healing Jesus said: *"Friend, your sins are forgiven you."* (Luke 5:20) It was only later after being challenged by the Pharisees and Scribes that Jesus healed the man's physical body. Jesus dares us to understand *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?* (Mark 8:36)

Jesus healed as a sign of the Kingdom yet to come where there will be no illness, no disease, no pain. Jesus healed as an outward sign of His inward desire for us – to be free of sin which is the ultimate disease.

One final comment about illness, disabilities or accidents that cause chronic conditions. Does God cause illness? I have heard people say: “God gave me this burden to make me stronger.” While I understand the spirit that this is sad in, nothing could be further from the truth. The general belief of the Church is that God does not give anyone a disease or cause them to be in an accident or mean them to be born with a disability. If the Catholic Church believed that God caused disease we would have to close all those Catholic hospitals and stop trying to cure the sick. Lourdes, as well as other healing shrines would have to be closed as being the work of the devil. We Catholics believe in healing, both supernatural and natural. Not only does God heal through Jesus Christ, but through the hands of skilled surgeons, medical treatment and therapy. If God caused disease, curing the sick in any way would be resisting His perfect will. We believe that death and sickness entered the world because of the sin, the sin of Adam and Eve and our continuing sin in the world today by the choices we make each day. Think about it. All those families in Flint that are now struggling with the loss of a loved one due to cancer or children with learning disabilities which researchers are able to directly trace much of it back to the failure by the local government to replace those ancient water pipes.

The biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God states that God is almighty over all. He is in complete control of all things—past, present and future—and nothing happens that is out of His jurisdiction. Either He directly causes—or He passively allows—everything that happens. But allowing something to happen and causing something to happen are two different things. For example, God caused the creation of Adam and Eve; then He allowed them to rebel against Him. He did not cause them to sin, and He certainly could have stopped them, but He chose not to for His own purposes and to bring about His perfect plan.

Sickness is one manifestation of the two broad types of evil—moral and natural. Moral evil is man's inhumanity to man. Natural evil is composed of things like natural disasters and physical condition not explained by moral evil. Evil itself is a perversion or corruption of something that was originally good, but is now missing something. In the case of sickness, illness is a state where good health is missing. The Greek word for evil, *poneros*, actually implies a malignancy, something that is corrupting a good and healthy state of being.

God wishes for our fullness of life. While walking this earth Jesus healed. Throughout the past 2,000 years Saints have healed and we have been given places of healing hope such as Lourdes and hospitals. Jesus himself tells us to ask for what we desire:

- "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it. John 14:13-14

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- "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him." Luke 11:13
- "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you". John 15:16

In our asking we must remember that there are three possible answers: Yes, No, or Not at this time. As immature children we pray but when we don't immediately get what we want we throw a tantrum and turn our backs on God. Remember patience, understanding and acceptance are virtues.

Anointing of the Sick

With those last scripture verses (along with others), the Catholic Church builds its foundation for the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. As one of the seven of the Church, the intent of this sacrament is to bring about in the individual spiritual and even physical strength as one endures illness. Jesus is with his Church as members of his family face the difficulties inherent in being human.

1511 *The Church believes and confesses that among the seven sacraments there is one especially intended to strengthen those who are being tried by illness, the Anointing of the Sick:*

This sacred anointing of the sick was instituted by Christ our Lord as a true and proper sacrament of the New Testament. It is alluded to indeed by Mark, but is recommended to the faithful and promulgated by James the apostle and brother of the Lord. (Council of Trent)

We further read that those who receive this sacrament receive several graces and it imparts the gifts of strengthening by the Holy Spirit against anxiety, discouragement, temptation and transmits peace and fortitude:

1520 *The first grace of this sacrament is one of strengthening, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age. This grace is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who renews trust and faith in God and strengthens against the temptations of the evil one, the temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death. This assistance from the Lord by the power of his Spirit is meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God's will. Furthermore, "if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."*

1521 *By the grace of this sacrament the sick person receives the strength and the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ's Passion: in a certain way he is consecrated to bear*

fruit by configuration to the Savior's redemptive Passion. Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.

As with all our Church teachings, we look back into the scriptures and see the basis for this as a sacramental experience when we look at the gospel of Mark when he recounts how Jesus sent out the Apostles to preach, "and *they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them*" (Mark 6:13). We read later in the letter of James: "*Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders 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 has committed sins, he will be forgiven*" (Jas. 5:14–15).

What are the effects of this sacrament?

1532 *"The special grace of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has as its effects:*

- *the uniting of the sick person to the passion of Christ, for his own good and that of the whole Church;*
- *the strengthening, peace, and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age;*
- *the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of penance;*
- *the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of his soul;*
- *the preparation for passing over to eternal life.*

Does a person have to be dying to receive this sacrament? No. The *Catechism* says, "*The anointing of the sick is not a sacrament for those only 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*" (CCC 1514).

This sacrament, as an outward sign given to us by Jesus Christ to confer grace, is ideally celebrated within the context of the faith community or the patient's family and friends gathered around, because those gathered to pray for the sick act as an outside sign of the Church's and our Lord's concern for their wellbeing and health. That said if only the sick person is present the sacrament can still be administered by the priest.

If within the context of the larger faith community, such as when a parish offers the sacrament of anointing, it is best done within the context of the Mass. When the sacrament of Anointing of the sick is conferred, the ritual involves the laying on of hands by the priest and the anointing of the Oil of the Infirm. The oil is first placed on the forehead and then on the palms of the hands with the words: "*Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you*

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up.” It is through these simple words that the infirmed receive the promise of God’s healing presence and the forgiveness of sins.

One final comment, just as we can receive the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist multiple times and encouraged by the Church to do so; we can receive the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick multiple times. I encourage anyone preparing for surgery to ask for an Anointing. Newly diagnosed with a chronic condition? Ask. Survived a serious accident and dealing with the injuries in the aftermath? Ask. Struggling with depression? Ask. Get the idea? In our need God through the Catholic Church wants to respond.

1529 Each time a Christian fall seriously ill, he may receive the Anointing of the Sick, and also when, after he has received it, the illness worsens.

Church Teaching on Death and Viaticum

As we move into our final conversation of the night looking at the Church’s teaching on death and the gift of Viaticum. Through the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick the hope is for healing and life, but the reality is that death is also a part of every human experience. We know that at some point we are going to die. As Christians we are called to approach this reality with a different attitude than the secular world. We are to understand it not as a final end but as a transition into new eternal life.

1010 *Because of Christ, Christian death has a positive meaning: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21) "The saying is sure: if we have died with him, we will also live with him." (Timothy 2:11) What is essentially new about Christian death is this: through Baptism, the Christian has already "died with Christ" sacramentally, in order to live a new life; and if we die in Christ's grace, physical death completes this "dying with Christ" and so completes our incorporation into him in his redeeming act:*

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:1-4)

1011 *In death, God calls man to himself. Therefore the Christian can experience a desire for death like St. Paul's: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ. " (Philippians 1:23) He can transform his own death into an act of obedience and love towards the Father, after the example of Christ: (Luke 23:46)*

I am not dying; I am entering life. St. Therese of Lisieux

366 *The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God - it is not "produced" by the parents - and also that it is immortal: it does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection.*

To quote St. Paul: *Oh death where is your victory! Oh death where is your sting!* (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). But as Catholics we have known this teaching since childhood. How many of you remember the Baltimore Catechism? Do you remember the answer to the question: "Why did God make you?" Answer: "God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world and to be happy with him forever in the next." Hope of heaven is what gets many of us through those difficult times and moments. So, as Catholics we understand the physical act of dying not as something to fear but simply as a transition from one life into our eternal life.

I believe it was Norman Vincent Peale that was asked did he fear death. His response was to say that he feared death as an infant within the womb fears birth. It is the unknown that worries us. It is the journey through to what, that may keep us up at night. But he went on to say that that when the infant, once isolated and alone is held in the arms of love that he realizes that there was nothing to fear. In recognizing this fear, the Catholic Church encourages all to do two things: Seek the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick and to attend Mass receiving Christ in the Eucharist as often as you can.

When a Catholic friend or relative was in the process of actively dying, the family would call for a priest asking for "Last Rites". Does anyone remember what were the "rites" in Last Rites? The last rites were meant to prepare the dying person's soul for eminent death. The priest would absolve their sins through the sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation, offer Christ's healing from their fears through the Sacrament of Anointing, and finally the priest would give them Communion which is known as *Viaticum*.

Viaticum is Latin and translated means *food for the journey*. Ideally this gift of communion is meant to be given just before death.

1392 *What material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life. Communion with the flesh of the risen Christ, a flesh "given life and giving life through the Holy Spirit," preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism. This growth in Christian life needs the nourishment of Eucharistic Communion, the bread for our pilgrimage until the moment of death, when it will be given to us as viaticum.*

But timing is everything. The hope of the Church and each one of us is that, as we enter that active dying stage we will have the time and the wherewithal to ask for and be present to the moment. If such is the case then the Church encourages the reception of the Anointing of the Sick and Communion as Viaticum – food for the journey home. If the person is in the state of mortal sin then penance is recommended as well.

1523 *A preparation for the final journey. If the sacrament of anointing of the sick is given to all who suffer from serious illness and infirmity, even more rightly is it given to those at the point of departing this life; so it is also called sacramentum exeuntium (the sacrament of those departing). The Anointing of the Sick completes our conformity to the death and*

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Resurrection of Christ, just as Baptism began it. It completes the holy anointings that mark the whole Christian life: that of Baptism which sealed the new life in us, and that of Confirmation which strengthened us for the combat of this life. This last anointing fortifies the end of our earthly life like a solid rampart for the final struggles before entering the Father's house.

But all too often death happens quickly, unexpectedly or we are in a state of complete unawareness because of a coma, what is one to do? The challenge of our faith is to plan as if we had tomorrow but to live as if we only have today. That being the case staying close to all three of these sacraments:

- Going to the sacrament of penance often and especially when dealing with serious sin
- Participating in the Anointing of the Sick when seriously ill, injured or facing surgery

But mostly,

- Receiving communion as one participates in the Mass as often as we can draws us into a state of God's grace that we should have nothing to fear.

Further Reading:

- *In Times of Illness: Prayers of Hope and Strength* by Robert Hama
- *Finding the Heart of Jesus in Sickness and Infirmary* by Ronald Leinen
- *A Catholic Approach to Dying* by Fr. Neil McNicholas
- *Consoling Thoughts on Sickness and Death* by Pere Huguet