



A Forgotten Sacrament, a Grace Waiting to Be Rediscovered

In hospital corridors, in the quiet rooms of homes where pain is endured, and in the most vulnerable moments of human existence, the Catholic Church offers a sacrament that has often been called “the comfort of the dying”: the Anointing of the Sick. But is it really just that? A rite reserved for the last breaths of life? A sort of “final farewell”? Or have we misunderstood—and perhaps neglected—one of the Church’s most tender and powerful expressions of divine mercy?

This article aims to shed light on the true meaning, history, theological depth, and pastoral application of this sacrament. From a traditional Catholic perspective, we will rediscover the Anointing of the Sick for what it truly is: a sacrament of healing, strength, grace, and hope—not just for the doorstep of death, but for every moment of serious illness.

I. Biblical Foundation and Apostolic Origin

The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has a solid foundation in Sacred Scripture and apostolic practice from the earliest centuries. The most direct and significant reference comes from the Epistle 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.”

—James 5:14-15

This passage clearly reveals the sacramental origin of the Anointing. It is not a late invention, nor a symbolic ritual devoid of substance. It is a sacramental action instituted by Christ, lived by the apostles, and faithfully handed down by the Church. As early as the first centuries,



Church Fathers such as Origen, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Augustine spoke of the practice of anointing the sick as something common in Christian life.

II. What Is the Anointing of the Sick?

According to the **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, paragraph 1499:

“By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of the priests, the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord, that he may raise them up and save them. Indeed, she exhorts them to contribute to the good of the People of God by freely uniting themselves to the Passion and death of Christ.”

From a **theological** point of view, it is a sacrament of the living (like Confession and the Eucharist), although administered during serious illness. Its main purpose is not to prepare one for death—as the Viaticum does—but to confer upon the soul of the sick person:

- sanctifying grace,
- forgiveness of sins (if the person is unable to confess),
- spiritual relief (and sometimes physical healing),
- strength to avoid despair,
- and union with the Passion of Christ.

From a **pastoral** point of view, it is a gesture of divine tenderness: a sacramental balm that embraces bodily and spiritual fragility, offering consolation, meaning, and hope.

III. Is It Only for Those About to Die?

No. And this is the most common and tragic misconception.

The Anointing of the Sick has unjustly been reduced to a “sacrament of death,” to the point



where many Catholics associate it exclusively with the “Last Rites.” This confusion stems from the traditional use of the term “Extreme Unction” to refer to the final sacraments before death, which included Confession, Anointing, and Viaticum. But the Council of Trent made it clear that Anointing is not a sacrament “only for the dying.”

The Church teaches that this sacrament should be administered to **any baptized person in serious health danger**, without necessarily being on the brink of death. This includes:

- serious illnesses (cancer, severe infections, high-risk surgeries),
- advanced age with progressive frailty,
- relapses of chronic diseases,
- or even serious mental illnesses that significantly affect life.

The **Code of Canon Law**, canon 1004 §1, states:

“The anointing of the sick can be administered to a member of the faithful who, having reached the use of reason, begins to be in danger due to sickness or old age.”

Therefore, waiting until someone is unconscious or dying is not only a **pastoral mistake**, but a tragic loss of immense graces that God wishes to grant earlier.

IV. What Effects Does the Anointing Produce?

The sacrament of Anointing is not a “magic potion,” but it acts with the supernatural power proper to all sacraments. Among its traditional effects are:

1. Union of the sick person with the Passion of Christ

Perhaps the most ignored dimension. Illness, when united to the cross of Christ, becomes a path of salvation. It is not useless suffering, but redemptive. As St. Paul said:

“In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the



| *sake of his body, that is, the Church.”*
— *Colossians 1:24*

2. Strength, peace, and courage to endure illness

God does not always remove the cross, but He always gives the strength to carry it. This grace helps one avoid despair, overcome fear, and live the illness with faith.

3. Forgiveness of sins

If the sick person cannot confess, this sacrament—like all sacraments of the living—can forgive even mortal sins if there is contrition.

4. Restoration of health, if beneficial

Yes: physical healing can also occur. This is not the primary aim, but the Church does not exclude that, by God's will, the sacrament can restore health.

V. How Is It Administered and Who Can Do It?

Only **priests** (presbyters or, in exceptional cases, bishops) can administer the Anointing of the Sick. The ceremony includes:

- a proper liturgical prayer,
- the laying on of hands,
- anointing with the Oil of the Sick, consecrated by the bishop on Holy Thursday,
- usually on the forehead and palms.

It may be performed at home, in hospitals, nursing homes, or even in the church. **It should not be delayed until the final moment.** If the sick person is unconscious or has lost the use of reason, the priest may administer the sacrament **if it is presumed that the person would have wanted it.**



VI. From Tradition: The Classical Catholic Vision

The Church's tradition has always upheld the **centrality of redemptive suffering**, and Anointing is the sacrament par excellence that transforms pain into salvation. Saints such as St. Alphonsus Liguori, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. Camillus de Lellis strongly recommended receiving this sacrament as soon as a serious illness arose.

The **traditional ceremonies of the Rituale Romanum** emphasize the dignity and solemnity of this rite. These rites combine intercessory prayers for the soul and body, invocations to the saints, and a strong awareness that illness is a privileged occasion for encountering the suffering Christ.

VII. Practical Applications for Today

1. **Don't wait until the last minute.** If you or a loved one is seriously ill, ask for the Anointing as soon as possible.
 2. **Inform and educate.** Many priests do not insist on offering this sacrament because many of the faithful reject it out of fear. Help others understand its value.
 3. **Include Anointing in your spiritual preparation.** Don't wait until you're dying: integrate it into your Christian life journey.
 4. **Live suffering as a redemptive cross.** Illness is not punishment but a path that can be illuminated by grace when lived in union with Christ.
 5. **Seek the traditional form if possible.** Communities that offer the traditional form of the sacrament (according to the Rituale Romanum) maintain a liturgical and spiritual richness that enhances its pastoral value.
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VIII. Conclusion: Return to Sacramental Mercy

The Anointing of the Sick is not a sacrament for the "last hour," but for **every grave hour**. It is Christ, like the Good Samaritan, who approaches the wounded on the road, pours oil and wine, and takes him to a refuge where he can heal. Let us not despise it, postpone it, or abandon it.

In a culture that flees from suffering, the Church does not offer escapism, but **redemption**.



She does not offer pills, but **grace**. She does not eliminate pain, but transforms it into salvific love. Let the sick ask for it. Let priests offer it. Let us all trust again in sacramental mercy.

| *“And the Lord will raise him up.”*

| *— James 5:15*

Are you or a loved one going through a serious illness? You are not alone. The Church has an eternal medicine that never expires. Ask for the Anointing of the Sick today. Christ Himself wants to visit you.