

EXTREME UNCTION: SACRAMENT OF THE SICK OR OF THE DYING?

The sacrament we call extreme unction, to which, during this discussion, we shall refer as the sacrament of anointing, is, in contemporary discussions, caught between the rich and vibrant obscurities of the early ages and the somewhat faulty and misleading emphases of the present in the *practice* of the Church. As a result, we have two distinct tendencies among theologians today: one, to look upon anointing as a sacrament of the sick, in any accepted sense of that term; two, to insist that anointing is still the sacrament of the critically ill, of those who are faced with the possibility of death. One aspect of the problem, then, is the character of the illness.

Another aspect is the character of the anointing. Here we have two certainties: one, anointing is a true sacrament of the Church; two, its institution by Our Lord is promulgated in the Epistle of St. James 5:14-15. These two certainties present us with the second aspect of our problem, one much more difficult to trace and solve in a satisfactory manner. This aspect can be suggested by the following questions: was the healing ministry of the Church, especially in the first 8 or 9 centuries, always linked explicitly or implicitly with the *sacramental* rite of anointing as promulgated by St. James? Was the *practice* of the Church in the ministry of healing progressively changed as awareness of the strict sacramentality of anointing developed? Did misunderstandings on the part of theologians and faithful of the doctrinal insight of the Church lead to unfortunate practices which were rectified by more precise understanding? Was the practice of the Church dictated by the speculations of the theologians or were the theologians guided by the practice of the Church?

While we are certain that the sacrament of anointing is promulgated in the text of St. James, we are, at the moment, questioning the interpretation of it. While we cannot engage in a detailed exegesis of this text, there are a few points to be noted.

Apparently, mere etymology will not solve the meaning of the

text. It has to be interpreted in the full context of the epistle written by St. James. Admittedly, he is thoroughly Hebraic in background and mentality. What is sickness to the Hebrew mind? Jacob writes:¹ "God is strength and his whole action tends only to give strength and life; sin, on the contrary, which assumes the aspect of a hostile force only in the latest O.T. texts, always produces a state of weakness which is a forerunner of death."

Would not St. James also share the strong Hebraic desire to escape death? Undoubtedly. Yet, the notion of a long life on earth as the only hope for happiness no longer dominated the Jewish mentality at the beginning of Christianity. Must we not, then, allow for the Christian view of death in this text? Cantinat, in his study of the epistle in *Introduction à la Bible*,² points out: "Assurément le résultat attendu semble à première vue n'être que le retour du malade à la santé physique. . . . Mais en réalité il doit être principalement le salut de l'âme, car les vues de l'épître, dans la domaine de la souffrance, s'orientent du côté surnaturel." We know that the key words, "save" and "raise up" are rich in meaning for the Christian and that St. James himself says in v. 20 of this same chapter that "he who causes a sinner to be brought back from his misguided ways, will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins."

In conclusion, Cantinat states: "Rien donc n'empêche d'admettre qu'en Jc 5:14-15 il soit question du sacrement de l'Extrême-Onction. On ne peut, au nom du texte lui-même, s'insurger contre le Tradition qui y discerne les divers éléments de ce sacrement."³

Turning now to the other side of our problem, we know that the ministry of healing was an intimate part of Christ's activity while here on earth and that it has played a more or less prominent part in the activity of his Church through the ages. The question is whether it has always been linked with the sacramental rite of

¹ *Theology of the Old Testament*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 281. Confer also: *A Companion to the Bible*. Ed. by Von Allmen. New York: Oxford University Press, 402, 405.

² *Introduction à la Bible*. Ed. by Robert and Feuillet. Tournai: Desclée, 576.

³ *Ibid.*

anointing as promulgated by St. James. In this regard, I think that the words of Evelyn Frost⁴ should be kept in mind (for they are still, in my opinion, completely valid): "From this it follows that one who seeks healing from man may know beforehand the general line his treatment will take, for he shares the knowledge common to man; but he who seeks healing from God cannot predict with certainty whether he will be sent to receive it through the physician, the psychologist, the spiritual director, the Sacraments of the Church, or through some immediate touch of God upon his life. Whichever be the mediating channel, however, he knows the source of his healing is God; and, although the outward manifestation of the healing may be the same in each instance, yet a fundamental difference remains between the two forms of healing, as may be seen from the instances of spiritual healing, i.e., healing by Christ in the Gospels."

In fact, the evidence is overwhelming that the healing ministry of the Church was *not* attached solely to the sacramental rite of anointing. Health of body and soul was looked for from all the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, as it still is. To quote Frost again:⁵ "To Christians, therefore, this Sacrament stood for the φάρμακον, which was the 'medicine of life' used by their contemporaries." There is the charismatic gift of healing (sometimes with oil); there is the power of exorcism (also sometimes with oil, especially when it has been exorcised during the rite of its consecration). Almost all the sacramentals (including oil for anointing the sick) are blessed with a formula that expresses the Church's

⁴ E. Frost, *Christian Healing*. London: A. R. Mowbray, 173-174.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 329. In this connection, note the following from Origen: "We assert that the whole habitable world contains evidence of the works of Jesus, in the existence of those Churches of God which have been founded through Him, by those who have been converted from the practice of innumerable sins. And the name of Jesus can still remove distractions from the minds of men, and expel demons, and also take away diseases; and produce a marvellous meekness of spirit and complete change of character, and a humanity, and goodness, and gentleness in those individuals who do not feign themselves to be Christians for the sake of subsistence in the supply of mortal wants, but who have honestly accepted the doctrine concerning God and Christ and the judgement to come." *Against Celsus*, I, lxvii (cited by Frost, *op. cit.*, 107).

desire for the bodily and spiritual welfare of those who use them. Even the handy *Benedictio ad omnia* concludes with: "ut per invocationem sanctissimi nominis tui, corporis sanitatem et animae tutelam, te auctore, percipiat."

Another point must be kept in mind. A concept of the sacrament of anointing which is recognizably similar to our own developed in the 12th and early 13th centuries, which for some reason seem to be the villains of the piece in the mind of some authors. Yet, this period also marks a considerable development in the doctrine of the sacraments in general, of sin and penance, of purgatory. There is even evidence of a change of attitude toward the sick person:⁶ from being mainly an object of intercession and charitable visitation on the part of the faithful, to being one who is urged to transform his sickness into a means of sanctification and triumph.

We now come to the most difficult part of this paper—the interpretation of what I have referred to as the "rich and vibrant obscurities" of the early ages, i.e. from the beginning to the twelve hundreds. You are acquainted with the excellent studies that have been made on the texts from this period. May I be permitted to present a theological bird's-eye view, which, admittedly, will be "biased" by the points I have already made in this paper.

Excluding the use of anointing by charismatics, we find that the Church in her healing ministry uses:

1. *oil*, known as the *oleum infirmorum* (though, at first, not clearly distinguished from chrism);
2. *blessed*: at anytime, at Mass, at the Mass of the consecration of the oils on Maundy Thursday;
3. *to be used*: by all, including the sick person himself, by priests, by bishops;⁷

⁶ Cf. Phillipeau, 53ff.

⁷ Such common usage is strongly suggested in *The Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus. (Cf. Palmer: *Sources of Christian Theology*, II, 227. N.B. All references to Palmer will be to this volume. References containing only the author's name will be to studies listed in the select bibliography at the end of this paper.) It is explicit in the Letter of Pope Innocent I. (Cf. Palmer, 283-284.) Chavasse finds a reason for this made explicit in Bede's *Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*; it was based on the idea that the healing power

4. *in various ways*: by touching, drinking, applying, anointing;⁸
5. *for bodily health* (never exclusively⁹)
 - (a) from any sickness
 - (b) from serious sickness;¹⁰
6. *for mental health*: in connection with exorcism;¹¹
7. *for spiritual health*
 - (a) by remitting mortal sin in certain circumstances
 - (b) by remitting venial sin
 - (c) by satisfying for the debt of temporal punishment
 - (d) by eradicating the remains of sin
 - (e) by strengthening the virtues
 - (f) by aiding in the combat with the devil;

was in the consecrated oil and not in the anointing as such (cf. Chavasse, 333 & n. 3). For further consideration of this practice, cf. *infra* n. 14.

⁸ Cf. the blessing of oil in the Gelasian Sacramentary (Palmer, 288).

⁹ Z. Alszegeh, S.J., 396: "Notiamo che il Concilio (Trent) non insegna solo la *verità teoretica* (l'unzione degli infermi ha un'efficacia sacramentale non solo per l'utilità del corpo, ma anche, e più ancora, per il bene dell'anima): essa inculca anche la *verità storica*, cioè che la sua dottrina è contenuta nel testo di Giacomo, e che l'interpretazione cattolica di Giac. 5: 14-15 è fondata su una tradizione apostolica; quindi, secondo l'interpretazione autentica della tradizione, l'unzione degli infermi non fu mai ordinata *soltanto* al beneficio della guarigione (quasi olim tantum fuerit gratia curationum. D. 927)."

¹⁰ There is hint of this in St. Athanasius' description of the predicament in which faithful Christians found themselves during the arian ascendancy: ". . . the people prefer to remain sick and to be in danger, rather than have arian hands laid on their head." *Encyclical Letter to Bishops*, 5; cf. Palmer, 279. St. John Chrysostom: "But priests have often saved a soul that was sick and on the verge of destruction, by administering to some a milder punishment and by preventing others from succumbing at all; . . ." *On the Priesthood*; Palmer, 281. The I Council of Mainz required a sincere confession "of the sick who are in danger." These are public penitents; yet the following words would not be confined to them alone: "And so, lest the door of mercy seem closed to them, after they have been encouraged by the prayers and consolations of the Church, together with God's healing anointing, let them be refreshed . . . with communion by way of Viaticum." Palmer, 292. The Council of Pavia expressly includes all the faithful: "But since it often happens that some sick person either may not know the force of the sacrament, or believing his illness to be less dangerous than it is, . . . or may be unaware of the virulence of the disease, the local presbyter ought to admonish him in a fitting manner. . . ." Palmer, 292.

¹¹ Palmer, 398; Porter, 225.

8. for bringing to a *culmination* the whole Christian life and preparing the Christian for glory;¹²
9. administered in danger of death even to the excommunicate, together with reconciliation and Viaticum.¹³

From the mass of evidence contained in the studies we are relying on, I wish to suggest, quite tentatively, that three distinct lines of development can be detected, which finally converge and form the concept of a sacramental rite of anointing the seriously ill bequeathed to us from the middle ages.

(1). A gradual solemnization of the consecration of the *oleum infirmorum*, until oil consecrated by the bishop on Holy Thursday is to be used exclusively.

(2). A gradual identification of the sacramental rite of anointing at times of serious illness with the administration of the anointing by a priest (or bishop).¹⁴

¹² The spirit of the Christian ministry of healing is well expressed by St. Irenaeus: "The struggle for immortality, that we may be crowned, and may deem the crown precious, namely, that which is acquired by our struggle, but which does not encircle us of its own accord. . . ." *Adv. Haer.* V, iii, 1. It seems that the key phrase is first found in Abelard's circle: "Quia hoc sacramentum ultimum est omnium et quasi consummatio, ideo praerogativa quadam, licit in aliis unctio contineatur, hoc unctionis sacramentum iure vocatur." *Epitome*, c. 30 *PL* 178, 1744; Weisweiler, 326, n. 25. The expression is used by St. Thomas and is consecrated by the Council of Trent.

¹³ To interpret the words of Pope St. Innocent I: "But he (the bishop) cannot pour it on penitents" as a complete prohibition, seems to me to be excessive (cf. Palmer, 283). Certainly the Pontiff was aware of the regulation of the Council of Nicaea in regard to reconciliation of penitents when they are in danger of death (Palmer, 71). At any rate, the attitude of the Church is clearly expressed at the Council of Pavia: "If a person, bound by public penance, be in danger of death, he cannot receive the remedy of this mystery, unless he has first received reconciliation and is worthy of the communion of the body and blood of Christ. For he to whom the other sacraments are forbidden, is in no way allowed to use this. . . ." Palmer, 292.

¹⁴ In his introduction to the text from the *Apostolic Constitution*, Fr. Palmer says: "And yet, it is not unlikely that some of the oil was reserved for the use of presbyters in their visitations of the sick" (277). This is a pure assumption. I'd like to add two more. C. 30 of the same *Constitution* is concerned with the office of deacon; he is to be wholly at the service of the bishop. Explicitly: "Qu'on lui indique aussi ceux qui sont malades, afin que, s'il plaît à l'évêque, il leur rende visite. Cela fait en effet grand plaisir au

(3). Finally, a gradual emphasis on the spiritual character of the healing.¹⁵

In connection with these developments, there is one point of interpretation that I should like to make. In the texts studied by Weisweiler, there is plenty of evidence that the scholastic theologians made constant reference to the practice of the church or the churches.¹⁶ As presented by some authors, it seems that whoever called our sacrament "Extreme Unction" is responsible for distorting it completely. Is it not rather true that it was called "Extreme Unction" (however unfortunate its connotation for us)

malade quand le grand-prêtre se souvient de lui" (*La Tradition Apostolique* Dom B. Botte *Sources Chrétiennes*, 11, pp. 65-66). My two assumptions are: first, that the deacon would be notified only in case of serious illness; second, that the bishop would on occasion of the visit anoint the sick person with the oil presumably kept in reserve for such visits. True the emphasis seems to be simply on the visit; yet this must have led to the practice of anointing. This explains one of the problems presented to Pope Innocent. While he makes it quite clear that any Christian can use the blessed oil, does he not also suggest that in special circumstances, a visit and anointing by the bishop or the priest is expected? For he says: "For mention is made of the presbyters simply because bishops, prevented by other occupations, cannot visit all who are languishing" (Palmer, 284). In the *Canons* of Hippolytus, we read: "Aegroti curationem habent si ecclesiam frequentant ut aquae orationis et oleo orationis participant, excepto eo qui morbo periculoso laborat; is debet a clero quotidie visitari, qui eum novit." Cf. Chavasse, 75, n. 2. Is not this the unction that is called "solemn," before it is called "extreme"? "Solemnis unctio, liquor excellens, quo sanitas redditur, peccatum diminuitur, immittitur timor Domini." St. Peter Damian, *Sermo 69 PL* 144, 899 (Alszegehy, 404). "Hic hoc solum notandum, quod cum penitentia et unctio infirmorum, solemnus dico, quae fit in oleo sanctificato . . ." Master Simon (cf. Weisweiler, 532, n. 28).

¹⁵ No one questions this point. It should be noted, however, that, as Weisweiler suggests, the transfer of emphasis from the corporal to the spiritual effect was connected with the discussion during the 12th century of the distinction between the "res" and the "efficacia" of this sacrament; in other words between the spiritual effect, which is always brought about, and the efficacy for healing corporally. (Cf. Weisweiler, 336ff.)

¹⁶ "Videtur enim, iuxta usam ecclesiae, quod oleum sanctificatum sit de substantia sacramenti." Peter Cantor (cf. Weisweiler, 541, n. 58). Appeal was made to the custom of the Church (or the Churches) in the question of the repetition of anointing (524, n. 3); of the necessity of using oil consecrated by a bishop (541, n. 58); against the custom of deferring reception (544ff, nn. 66, 67, 68, 69, 75), or of giving it only to those who can request it (547ff, nn. 76, 78, 80); in regard to its necessity (557, nn. 111, 115).

because in fact the Church was administering the sacramental rite of anointing to the faithful by a priest when they were seriously ill?

I'm sure it will come as no surprise to you if I now express my conviction that the doctrinal insight of the Church as witnessed to by St. Thomas in his teaching on the sacrament of anointing is a legitimate expression of the truth revealed in the text of St. James; certainly his teaching influenced later official statements of the Church, as witness, the Decree for the Armenians.

While it is not my intention to discuss St. Thomas' teaching, there is one statement of his to which I should like to call your attention: "plurimum valet devotio suscipientis et personale meritum conferentium et generale totius Ecclesiae."¹⁷ The use of the plural "conferentium" is explained by another statement of Thomas: "Quia tamen hoc sacramentum perfectae curationis effectum habet, et in eo requiritur copia gratiae; competit huic sacramento quod multi sacerdotes intersint, et quod oratio totius ecclesiae ad effectum huius sacramenti coadiuvet."¹⁸ In these words we get a sense of a rallying of all the forces of the sick man, of his relatives and friends, of the ministers of the Church and of the whole Church in the face of the great crisis—the passage of the Christian from this life to the next—his dissolution to be with Christ.

There is only one further problem that I'd like to refer to. What is the meaning of the carefulness of the declaration of Trent and some directions of more recent papal statements? The caution of Trent is significant, but equally significant is the fact that if its intention was to indicate that anointing was a sacrament of the sick simply, this in no way affected the attitude or the practice of the Church in the intervening centuries. Besides, there is the *Praesertim*, which is a clear indication of the mind of the Fathers of the Council that it is a sacrament to be used in danger of death. This mind is expressed again later in speaking of the repetition of the sacrament: "cum in aliud simile vitae discrimen inciderint."¹⁹

The papal documents sometimes cited in support of the position

¹⁷ *S.T.*, Suppl., 32, 3.

¹⁸ *C.G.*, IV, 73.

¹⁹ Sess. XIV, c. 3 (D 910).

that anointing is the sacrament of the sick are Apostolic Letters of Benedict XV and Pius XI to the *Bona Mors* Sodality.²⁰ Since the Sodality is devoted to preparing the faithful for death and since both Viaticum and Unction are mentioned, their weight is on the side of the other position. Yet Pius XI added a very sensible piece of advice: "For it is not necessary either for the validity or the liceity of the sacrament that death be feared as something proximate; rather, it is enough that there should be a prudent or probable judgement of danger." With this advice, a priest may run the risk of giving the sacrament to someone who is in fact not in danger of dying. We might add that the priest may also run the risk of administering the sacrament to someone who is actually dead. In fact, acts of the greatest personal heroism on the part of priests are of common occurrence because of the conviction that anointing is a sacrament that prepares for entrance into eternal life, i.e., of priests who are prison chaplains, especially in states where electrocution is the method of capital punishment, priests of a whole region in times of great disasters, army chaplains who are not satisfied with preparing soldiers entering battle with absolution and Viaticum, but follow them almost to the front lines in order to administer unction.

For a priest to use the words of Pius XI to give the sacrament of anointing to a person who is simply ill, he would have to be convinced that the principle behind the Pope's advice was: "The sacrament of anointing is a sacrament of the sick and not, or not only, of the seriously sick." But this is the very principle that is in question. In fact, it is almost certain that the principle used by the Pontiff was the very commonplace, but most useful, principle: "Sacramenta propter homines."

I wholeheartedly agree that the Church should take a careful look at her ministry of healing. Through her ministers, she should begin to emphasize the curative power of the entire sacramental system, its power to restore the whole human being, both here and hereafter. The manifestations of charismatic healing throughout the world should be incorporated explicitly into the same healing

²⁰ For texts, cf. Palmer, 319-320.

mission. The use of exorcism should be restored, especially in connection with modern therapeutic methods. And, finally, the richness of the ritual of prayers and sacramentals should be placed at the disposal of all the faithful.

May I conclude with the words I used earlier this year at the meeting of the Society of College Teachers of Sacred Doctrine:²¹ "Faced with the approach of death (because of an illness which doctors judge to be critical) the Christian may have two desires, expressed in a very apt phrase: to be lifted up to heaven, or out of his sick bed"²² Above all, though, he must prepare for death in such a way that he is truly sharing in the death of Christ himself, paying the last farthing, as it were, of the debt of sin. Is it surprising, then, that, for this critical moment, Christ would provide a final application, a final anointing, of his own Passion and Death, which, in a properly disposed Christian, could eradicate all the remains of sin, all the punishment due to sin, so that the soul would enter heaven immediately?

Many authors concentrate on the prayers to be recited after the anointings. It is to be hoped that the Church will do something about those prayers. At least, another prayer should be added to the ritual, to be used at the discretion of the minister, begging God in his mercy to release a child of his, suffering from an incurable disease, from his misery. This would free relatives and friends from foolish guilt feelings.

If however, God raises the sick man up from his bed, he will arise strengthened in body and immeasurably invigorated in spirit. There should be no greater spur to a vigorous life of virtue than a brush with death, experienced with the aid of a "last" anointing that turns out not to be the last.

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²¹ To be published in *Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Meeting of SCCTSD*, 1962.

²² J. S. Selner, S.S. *The Sunday Visitor*, Feb. 18, 1962.

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