

**RCIA**  
**SESSION 17**

**The Sacraments of Healing**

**“Through the sacraments of Christian initiation, man receives the new life of Christ. We are still...subject to suffering, illness, and death. This new life as a child of God can be weakened...by sin. The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies,...has willed that his Church continue...his work of healing and salvation...This is the purpose of the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick.”**

*(#1420, 1421 Catechism of the Catholic Church)*

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## **THE SACRAMENTS OF HEALING RECONCILIATION & ANOINTING OF THE SICK**

### RECONCILIATION:

Did you hear the one about the guy who goes to confession...? You probably have. It's no surprise that there are plenty of Confession jokes. Human beings tend to joke about whatever makes them nervous. And the idea of Confession can make people edgy. After all, the sacrament of Reconciliation (often called confession) is a place where things we are most inclined to keep hidden are brought into the light.

As human beings, we have all committed sins. We have a little storehouse of things we've done or failed to do that we feel ashamed of, and that weighs on us. We drag these secrets around like overstuffed luggage. The more this excess baggage piles up, the less freedom we have to move in the world. *Our capacity for moral action is stifled.*

When we sin, the repercussions of our actions extend out like ripples on a pond. We may be truly and heartily sorry for our actions, but there's simply no way that sorrow alone will make things right. Sin is a crime against relationship, and only in relationship can it be healed. When we sin, we hurt God, ourselves, and others. And we need to mend all three of these relationships. The sacrament of Reconciliation attends to each of these relationships in a powerful and positive way.

Why is it necessary to tell a priest your sins? It is important to tell another human being about our wrongs. It helps us avoid the twin temptations of either rationalizing our wrongs or magnifying them out of proportion. Why a priest? The priest is authorized to celebrate this official sacrament, standing in as representative and symbol for the entire Body of Christ, which consists of Jesus and those who believe in him. The priest simply officiates at what ought to be a celebration and completion of a process of repentance that begins when one first feels remorse for sin. The sacrament is the symbol of the transformation taking place and the forgiveness always being offered by God.

So the rumor of "Catholic Guilt" isn't wrong. However, guilt is not always a bad thing. There is good guilt. It simply depends how we use that guilt. Some people feel it's best to simply dismiss guilt. But guilt can be valuable. Just as a fever alerts us that our body's being attacked by an infection we need to treat, guilt tells us our soul is suffering and needs attention. We're out of integrity in some way.

Look at two examples of dealing with guilt from among Jesus' closest friends, the apostles Peter and Judas. Both of these men denied Jesus at a crucial time in his life. They turned their backs on him. Afterward each felt excruciating remorse. Judas felt that it was up to him to justify himself, which of course he was not capable of doing. In his despair he took his own life. Peter, on the other hand, recognized his betrayal, opened his heart to God's mercy, and was forgiven. Having restored his relationship with Jesus, he went on to spend

his life committed to preaching the same love and forgiveness that he had received.

The sacrament of Reconciliation consists of a series of outward and inward actions that provides us with the actual means to achieve reconciliation with God, ourselves, and others. The sacrament is not a quick fix nor magic. It's not a fast chance to 'take the easy way out' of guilt or responsibility. It is an opportunity to address the moral, communal, and personal aspects of sin, to practice repentance, and ultimately, to achieve reconciliation. The goal is not simply to absolve sin, but to invite the participant to conversion, to begin to live a new kind of life in tune with God's ways.

There are actually five steps or stages of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Examination of Conscience: ***an exercise to help us reflect on our lives and our behavior. Helps us mature morally.***

***Confession:*** telling about our situation or sin begins the healing by being honest with ourselves and taking responsibility

***Contrition:*** Expressing true sorrow is what constitutes the sacrament. God wants our hearts, not empty actions.

***Satisfaction:*** Restoration of relations by making amends and doing penance. Sin is not totally private. We can't simply say we're sorry and not make amends to those we hurt. We must change our ways and try to begin living a new life.

***Absolution:*** The words of absolution are the only set formula of the rite of reconciliation and they come from the priest, acting for Jesus.

The ritual of reconciliation is not just going through the motions. It has the power to change us. In the sacrament we bring our sins into the light not to experience shame, but to free us from shame. When we keep our sins hidden, our lives diminish and shrink. We are living with death rather than life. The sacrament of Reconciliation is always available, waiting for you to come into the light.

## **The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick**

Sickness, the loss of health, is a result of the general breakdown of man that was a punishment from God for the sin of Adam. The Gospels have a lot to tell us about how Christ devoted much time and energy to healing the sick. In Matthew we hear Jesus toured the whole of Galilee preaching and healing every disease and infirmity. ... All those suffering from various disease were brought to him. Besides his own work of healing Christ gave this power to his Apostles and sent them out on a missionary journey similar to his own. In ST. Mark's Gospel the Apostles "cured many sick persons by anointing them with oil." In addition to healing the sick, Jesus instructed the disciples to drive out unclean spirits. In St.

Luke's account the apostles are given "authority over all the demons." Who are these spirits or demons and what relation is there between them and illness?

It is important to affirm our belief in demons still active in our world today. They are active, hostile to God, and have one aim with regard to creation, to pervert it to themselves. As to their relation with sickness –many believe illness is due to a superior evil power. This superior power has its being, not only in the impairment of the body, but also in the confusion and ruin of the spirit. We may not ascribe all sickness to the devil. Yet there is certainly the possibility, and we must be well aware of it. Sickness, whether caused by devils or not, is a perfect arena for diabolical operation. Man is not divided into body and soul, but composed of these elements, in such a way as to achieve an interrelated unity. The body certainly reacts on the soul, just as the soul reacts on the body. When we feel good, it is generally much easier to be good. Sickness weighs down the spiritual life. It is often more difficult to pray when we're sick, even though we have more time for it. Sickness can have two bad effects on the life of the soul; an absorption in self, a selfishness, that results in peevishness, a demanding temper, all forms of uncharity; then there is the lethargy, the sluggishness that impedes the movements of man toward God. We can see what use the devil can make of sickness, for such a condition provides a climate where the devil can thrive. A sick person, weakened as he is, is prone to temptations and falls, which causes a person to become discouraged and impatient with himself.

In the gospel accounts of Christ's miracles it is very clear there is a relation between faith and healing. This relation has meaning for us still today. Christ devoted himself to driving out demons and to healing but the individual's cures depended on faith, either of the sick person or of his petitioners. In his healing work Jesus was breaking the hold of Satan over the sick, by restoring them to health for their supernatural good. Today, with all our science, and the healing power of Christ sickness is still with us. As with other areas of our life, Jesus has provided for this important one through the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.

Vatican II brought to this sacrament not only a new name but also an understanding closer to that of the early Church and the mission of Jesus. From the 12<sup>th</sup> century until the Council, the term "extreme Unction" or "Last Rites" was used. You might guess, and rightly so, that people dreaded calling a priest to administer to a loved one a rite that by its very name heralded death. The solace and healing graces of a ritual anointing was therefore often lost to the ill person or put off until it was almost too late. On the other hand, people had a great fear of dying without a last priestly blessing. Catholics carried cards or wore medals that read: "I am a Catholic. In case of accident, please notify a priest."

In those days, people were far more apt to die at home rather than go to a hospital. Practically every household was equipped with a sick call set, usually in the form of a crucifix that slid open to reveal a vial of holy water, small candles and a bit of cotton for the anointing.

Anointing of the Sick is the sacrament administered when a person's health is seriously impaired due to illness or old age. Anointing may also be done before major surgery. Even children who are seriously ill can be anointed if they are capable of understanding the meaning of the sacrament. The sacrament may be administered on an individual basis or in a communal setting.

The sacrament channels God's healing graces to comfort and strengthen the faith of the person who is ill. It can help a person endure suffering. In addition to the spiritual benefits, an anointing has positive psychological effects, and sometimes even results in a physical cure.

The chief purpose of the sacrament is health, recovery from sickness. Anointing of the sick sanctifies the soul and heals the body. Yet, when we consider what a sacrament is, a symbolic action that gives grace, there is a contradiction here. Health is natural. The life of grace is supernatural; so the object of anointing of the sick has to be the giving of sacramental grace. The health that is the object of the sacrament is a restoration, in some degree of integrity so the person is enabled to triumph over his ailing body to live a full supernatural life, despite his sickness.

Today we have one sacrament with two rituals: one for the sick, another for the critically ill or dying. The latter ritual aids the passage from this life to eternal life. Holy Communion given to a dying person is called *Viaticum* (provision for a journey). The anointing, when given to the dying, gives the grace to see death as the risen Christ sees it, as conquered, as in reality only a temporary stage in the Christian's life, and there not really death. If a Catholic is unconscious or too ill to respond, but those present believe that the person would wish to receive the sacrament, it can still be administered.

Satan's great spheres of operation are sin, sickness, and death. The victory of Christ over all three is made present for us personally in the sacraments, and this is particularly so in penance and the anointing of the sick. Every absolution given, every anointing is Christ coming into the territory of Satan to break his hold. It is the presence in the world of the victory of Christ over Satan.