

## **The Sacrament of the Sick** **(part of a continuum of spiritual and pastoral care)**

**I**n 1972, Pope Paul VI authorised a new rite for the anointing of the sick which replaced the earlier rite. Following official approval, the English text - *Pastoral Care of the Sick* - was published for use in this country in 1983. As we will see in a moment, the new Sacrament of the Sick (in its fullest form communion and anointing - for the sick not just for the dying) continues to be associated in people's minds with the old "last rites", which not only does a disservice to the sacrament, but can sometimes make pastoral care of the sick unnecessarily difficult for the priest.

**T**wo years before that, a new rite for funerals had also been authorised. Once again the English text took a little time to be officially approved, but the *Order of Christian Funerals* was eventually published by our Bishops' Conference in 1990 and its use made mandatory from Easter Sunday 1991. The two rites taken together provide what was referred to in our seminary studies as a "continuum of care", a pastoral provision that becomes clearer when we look at the component parts of the two texts.

**T**he text for the pastoral care of the sick begins with prayers to be offered when making such a visit – not even a eucharistic visit but simply one made out of pastoral concern and to offer the support and encouragement of scripture and prayer. There is then a longer rite to be used in visiting someone who may be confined to home or a hospital for a long enough period of time that a eucharistic visit becomes appropriate and whether made by a priest, deacon or minister of holy communion.

**T**he rite then provides for the anointing of the sick (which can take place within, or outside of, Mass). The introduction explains that the purpose of this sacrament is to offer encouragement, hope and support to "those whose health is seriously impaired by sickness or old age". It may also be celebrated with someone who is about to undergo treatment or surgery in hospital and it may be repeated if, for example, the person recovers and then becomes ill again, or if, during the same illness, their condition becomes more serious.

**B**eing anointed with the Oil of the Sick is the principle action and sign of the sacrament, a sacrament celebrated with someone who is sick and not necessarily dying. Therefore it is extremely important that people no longer associate being anointed with what used to be called "the last rites" when a priest was typically called at the last moment to anoint someone on the point of death or, as used to happen, actually anointing them after they had died. That's not what the sacrament of the sick is about. A priest should be able to visit someone who is sick at home or in hospital, to celebrate the sacrament with them, without

causing them to panic – which they will if they continue to associate being anointed with being given the “last rites”. In this context oil is a symbol of renewal and new life (we use oil in various forms to, for example, enrich wooden surfaces, restore life to leather, and to treat dry skin).

**O**n the other hand, and perhaps contrary to earlier practice, the priority for someone who is approaching death is for them to receive the sacrament of holy communion, not just to be anointed. This introduces the word *viaticum* which, in its literal sense, means “food for the journey”: holy communion as spiritual nourishment for the passage through death to eternal life.

**A**s the rite points out, if someone has been anointed at the beginning of a serious illness, *viaticum* (communion) received when death is close, will be better understood as the last sacrament of Christian life: *viaticum*, not anointing. It is important, therefore, that a request to receive communion should be made when the person is still able to receive and to participate as fully as possible in the rite. *Viaticum* may be received frequently, even daily. The person may then also be anointed, although in this case the sign and action is meant to offer hope, support and encouragement as death approaches. In this context a phrase may be used that we were familiar with in the old rite: *extreme unction* – final anointing. Communion as *viaticum* is always a priority unless circumstances make it impossible. If the person is unable to receive, or if the priest has been called to an emergency situation where there is no opportunity for communion, the priest should then anoint them and give absolution.

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**I**n terms of what we have called a “continuum of care”, the rite then provides prayers and readings for when death has occurred. It is very important to bear in mind that a priest is not permitted to anoint someone after they have died and therefore shouldn't be put on the spot by being asked to do so. As the text of the rite states:

A priest is not to administer the sacraments of penance or anointing, instead he should pray for the dead person. It may be necessary to explain to the family that sacraments are celebrated for the living, not for the dead, and that the dead are (more) effectively helped by the prayers of the living”.

**D**uring the Prayers for the Dead, the priest may make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the deceased and/or bless their body with holy water, but he may not anoint them. Given that immediately after death is not the best time to try to explain this to family members who may not know and have asked for the person to be anointed, we priests need to keep repeating the Church's teaching so that people do know. Another point to be borne in mind is that the Prayers

for the Dead are intended to be said with family members present, as much for their support and consolation as for the person who has died. This is confirmed in the text by such phrases as “it may be necessary to explain to the family”, “the minister greets those who are present”, and that the body may be blessed “for the comfort of those present”.

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Pastoral care and pastoral need following a death now take us on to the second of the texts, the *Order of Christian Funerals* with its options for the various funeral rites that can be celebrated – again decisions that should be made in discussion with the parish priest, not the funeral director.

The text continues where the other left off, providing prayers to be said with the family in the presence of the deceased whether immediately after death or later at home or in a chapel of rest. It then offers various options according to what the family decides, decisions which, again, should be made after discussion with the priest.

The first option is for the deceased to be received into church the night before the funeral. This was often an almost automatic choice, but it happens less and less these days. The extra cost involved may be a consideration, also a church’s remote location may make it inadvisable to leave a coffin unattended overnight. It also has to be said that a reception can be as upsetting for a family as the funeral itself and they perhaps need to consider whether they are going to be able to handle the double upset of a reception and then the funeral itself.

The next decision to be taken is whether it is to be a funeral service or a funeral (requiem) Mass. As the text states:

The *Order of Christian Funerals* makes provision for the minister, in consultation with the family, to choose those rites and texts that are most suitable to the situation (and) most closely apply to the needs of the mourners.

When the deceased has made a specific request in this regard then, obviously, as far as possible this must be respected, but this in itself highlights all the more the need for decisions to be made together as a family ahead of time – preferably when death isn’t imminent and therefore decisions can be made in light of practical, not purely emotional, considerations.

A funeral is our cultural way of bidding farewell to someone who has died and of then disposing of their mortal remains in a way that hopefully offers comfort and consolation to the bereaved. In that sense, therefore, the rites that accompany the funeral are for the benefit of the bereaved. In an ideal situation, where the entire family is church-going, the Church would envisage requiem Mass being the automatic choice. However such an ideal is increasingly rare

these days and it might, therefore, be unhelpful to make family members sit through a funeral Mass if, because they no longer practise their faith, they would therefore be excluded from the sacrament of communion which is at the heart of the celebration. Mass for the deceased can be offered at any time, and so the more immediate question is what funeral rite will be most supportive and consoling for the immediate family? These are things that, again, should be discussed ahead of time, and which need to be discussed with the priest before any other arrangements are made with the funeral director.

**O**n the sometimes difficult subject of choosing songs and music, the *Order* says that the texts of the songs chosen “should express the paschal mystery of the Lord’s suffering, death and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture.” We are therefore not allowed to use secular music in church, though occasionally a piece of classical instrumental music *might* be appropriate.

**T**he rite reminds us that scripture readings may not be replaced by non-biblical readings (an appropriate short poem may be read by a family member or friend in addition to the readings from scripture) and that “liturgical tradition assigns the proclamation of the readings to readers [commissioned ministers of the word]” as opposed to family members or friends being asked to read. It may be more appropriate for one of them to be asked to say a few words about the deceased - if they felt they’d be able to on the day.

**A**s far as the committal is concerned, burial has long been traditional for Catholics although the Church does now permit cremation where at one time it didn’t. Once again this is best discussed as a family ahead of time. Someone saying they want to be cremated is all very well, it’s whether the immediate family is OK with such a choice that matters. The rite provides a short service of committal for use at the graveside, or at the crematorium, as well as for the burial or dispersal of ashes.

**W**hilst fully acknowledging the grief of the bereaved and the loss they have suffered, the focus of a Christian funeral is on the future: on life after death. We gather to worship in hope of resurrection – that’s what our Christian faith is all about. At the same time, of course, we are also celebrating and thanking God for the life of the person who has died. The funeral rites seek to achieve a balance between these various aspects and, in their own way, conclude the continuum of spiritual and pastoral care that has gone before.

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