

Anointing of the Sick: The Sanctification of Human Suffering¹

ROMANUS CESSARIO, O.P.

Saint John's Seminary

Brighton, MA

Sacrament for the Rich

In the thirteenth century, Extreme Unction was known as the sacrament for the rich. Parish priests—to cite one example—would claim, as a particular sort of in-kind stole fee, ownership of the linen sheets upon which the sick person had been anointed or of the candles that had been lit during the ceremony. One piece of evidence from Germany in 1260 reports that only those “worth at least two cows” should bother asking for the sacrament.² Clerical avarice and other factors, such as the fear of contagion from those dying, contributed to making Anointing a forgotten sacrament. One may argue that today Anointing of the Sick again suffers eclipse, though for different reasons. The obliviousness results in part from various misunderstandings about the sacrament’s purpose in the Christian life. Overall, and contrary to what the Church expects, a certain lassitude has taken grip on both the ministers of the sacrament and those who should seek its administration either for themselves or for others.³

A widespread and general confusion among Catholics about the need for any sacrament partly explains today’s neglect of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. By and large, contemporary Catholic thought provides sketchy instruction about the purpose of the sacraments and therefore about their necessity. To set forth this basic Christian catechesis

¹ This paper was delivered at the Priesthood Conference held in Providence, RI, on August 1, 2017.

² See Bernhard Poschman, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, trans. F. Courtney (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 244n30.

³ See however what is prescribed in canon 1001 of the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (*Code of Canon Law*).

does not require recourse to elaborate theories. Aquinas captures the Church's teaching on the necessity of the sacraments with both clarity and succinctness: "Sacraments," he writes, "are necessary for man's salvation inasmuch as they constitute certain sensible signs of invisible things by which man is sanctified."⁴ Instead of this solidly orthodox position, however, not a few parishioners likely think of sacramental celebrations as so many figures on their cultural landscape. They feel at liberty to choose to participate, moreover, in the ones that suit their pleasure and convenience. Young priests report that, not uncommonly, they meet parishioners at civic or social events who compliment them on their performance at the parish but who rarely attend Mass.

One cannot emphasize too much the importance of priests' giving proper instruction on sacramental efficacy for the sake of their pastoral practice.⁵ Forgetfulness of sacramental efficacy, namely, that the sacraments do something in the supernatural order, affects Anointing of the Sick in particularly harmful ways. Take one example. Many Catholics think of this sacrament as ordered to providing comfort to a grieving family instead of sacramental graces to the sick or dying person. Others, including lay ministers, opine that, for reasons of relevance to the average believer, the sacrament requires non-sacramental and even secular rites to complement its administration. Not a few churchgoers, for instance, consider Anointing as the appropriate Catholic setting to offer a Christian-tinged form of psychological grief counseling. It seems to me that, in order to preach effectively about the need for gravely sick Catholics to receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, priests must first preach about the nature of the Church's sacraments and their efficacy. This moment of evangelization must include an explanation of what is distinctively efficacious in each of the Sacred Seven.

To ensure the integrity of the Church's sacramental practice requires, to sum up, sound preaching and catechetical instruction. As misunderstandings about the nature of Anointing spread, the Catholic people come to entertain odd notions about sacramental practice. Given the above-mentioned confusion about the last rites, many Catholics understandably came to espouse the view that lay people or at least deacons could serve as ministers of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. It seemed to such folks that professional training not sacramental character best prepares one to care for the sick and dying. The popular appeal that this proposal met among

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 61, a. 3.

⁵ For further discussion, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., "Sacramental Causality: *Da capo!*," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11 (2013): 307–16.

clerics and lay people illustrates the extent to which the Church's sacramental actions have become desacralized. This abuse, moreover, enjoys a certain logic within some schools of liturgical theology. If the sacraments are mere symbolic actions that aim to alter or to sustain a person's religious consciousness, what difference does it make who performs them? In fact, it may be argued, one should prefer the more gifted symbolic enactor to a deputed religious functionary. Similar observations can be made about the other sacraments. If the Mass provides a meal, why can't anyone serve it? If the Eucharist occasions a community event, why should the priest offer Mass without the event planner, and so on? If Holy Orders deposes a functionary, why reserve priestly ordination to men? If Penance affords me someone to tell my troubles to, why should I confess my seemingly unproblematic adulteries, and so on? At the Franciscan church in New York where confessions are still heard daily, I recently found a sign posted on the confessional. Its message: "Tell only your sins and not those of your neighbor or husband!" In a word, the Truth matters, as Dominicans like to remind us.

In a *Note* dated February 11, 2005, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was obliged to clarify what had become a widespread misconception about the suitable minister for the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The Congregation, as you know, reaffirmed that only priests and bishops can administer this Sacrament.⁶ In a commentary published shortly thereafter by two Dominicans in *The Priest* magazine, the authors explained that the reasons for this determination pertain directly to the theological meaning of the sacrament, that is, to its sacramental efficacy. What does Holy Anointing do? It confers, declare the authors, a "radically personal configuration to Christ on the part of a faithful Christian in the final moment of earthly existence."⁷ The authors conclude that this kind of consecration and the remedy for sin that accompanies it argue for the necessity that the minister of Anointing possess the priestly character, which establishes a man as "Christ's instrument for his Church."⁸ What is more, in the Sacrament of Anointing, there occurs, as in each sacrament, both a distinctive form of divine worship and a distinctive form of rescue from man's fallen state. Only priests and bishops can validly bring about

⁶ For the text, see *Origins* 34 (April 7, 2005): 672–73.

⁷ See J. Augustine DiNoia, O.P., and Joseph Fox, O.P., "Priestly Dimensions of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick," *The Priest* 62 (2006): 10–13. One may take this consecration as a description of what abides in Anointing of the Sick, the *res et sacramentum*.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] no. 1581.

these effects through their administration of the sacraments.⁹ The Anointing of the Sick may no longer be thought of as the sacrament of the rich. However, its fruitful reception today is reserved in many cases to those who benefit from extraordinarily sound pastoral care.

Anointing of the Sick and Sacramental Realism

Students of sacramental realism have become familiar with the terms image-restoration and image-perfection. As the necessity for Baptism indicates, Christian living requires sacramental mediation. No one can shimmy up to heaven alone and unaided. In order to reach the goal of heavenly Beatitude, the human creature requires grace for restoration or forgiveness and grace for its perfection or ennoblement. The vision of God, as sound theologians insist, does not form part of the natural human good.¹⁰ God must enable the human intellect to see him “face to face” (1 Cor 13: 12).¹¹ Indeed, Adam with his preternatural human perfection lacked the beatific vision of God.¹² Sinful Adam and his heirs find themselves further disadvantaged by reason of their attachment to sinful disorders and the “remains”—the *reliquiae*—that even forgiven sins leave on the soul and in the body. According to the ordinations of divine wisdom, each sacrament distinctively readies a believer for heavenly bliss by restoring and perfecting his or her Godly image.

Anointing of the Sick mainly effects image-restoration. This explains why the Church refers to it as a Sacrament of Healing.¹³ Because, however, the anointed Christian unites himself to Christ, Anointing also fosters image-perfection. Whoever draws close to Christ in charity receives growth in the virtues and gifts. These virtues and gifts perfect the human soul by making it grow in charity. Within the context of Anointing, this perfection arises from the participation of the believer in the sufferings of Christ. In fact, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explicitly specifies that this configuration aims to unite the believer to Christ’s Passion. The relevant text continues: “in a certain way he [the one anointed] is consecrated to bear fruit by configuration to the Savior’s redemptive Passion.”¹⁴

⁹ The *Code of Canon Law* was modified to make this point in canon 1003, §1: “Every priest, but only a priest, can validly administer the anointing of the sick.”

¹⁰ See Steven A. Long, “On the Possibility of a Purely Natural End for Man,” *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 211–37, and *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

¹¹ See *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4.

¹² See *ST I*, q. 94, a. 1, ad 1.

¹³ See *CCC*, §§ 1420 and 1421.

¹⁴ *CCC*, §1521.

The editor of the *Catechism* usefully points out that this consecration may be compared to the abiding consecrations that those who are ordained and those who are lawfully married receive in the sacraments proper to each vocation in the Church. So Holy Anointing brings healing to what remains of sin in us and strengthens the soul for its going forth. In the sixteenth century, Trent called Extreme Unction the sacrament of those going forth, of those departing (*sacramentum exeuntium*).¹⁵

The place that the Anointing of the Sick holds in the pattern of Christian living receives further explanation in the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who picks up the themes from theologians who came before him. Because they believed, rightly, that the existence of seven sacraments reflected divine Providence not historical accident, the early medieval theologians sought to discover the spiritual significance hidden in the number of the sacred realities. In order to explain the number of the sacraments, Aquinas, for his part, employs two models. One model organizes the sacraments in relation to the Eucharist. On this plan, Penance and Anointing of the Sick ready a person to receive the Eucharist.¹⁶ The other model compares human growth and development over the course of a lifetime to spiritual growth. Bodily needs find their parallels in spiritual needs. Within this perspective, Anointing of the Sick (which Aquinas calls “extreme unction” [*extrema unctio*]) “removes the remaining effects of sin and renders man ready for final glory.”¹⁷ The old terminology captured something lost in the present usage. The word “extreme” referred to a final consecration to Christ, not to the end of life (*in extremis*).¹⁸ In the same article, Aquinas further explains his meaning when he places the Sacraments of Forgiveness and Healing together under the heading of sacraments that supply a remedy against the harmful effects of sin. As I have mentioned, each sacrament supplies a grace for image-restoration. So Aquinas writes: “The Eucharist [provides a remedy] against the soul’s proneness to sin; Penance against actual sins committed after Baptism; Extreme Unction against those elements of sin which remain, those namely which, whether through negligence or ignorance, are not sufficiently removed by Penance.”¹⁹ In Aquinas’s outlook, all the sacraments supply remedies for sin. This orthodox Catholic teaching, however, has all

¹⁵ See CCC, §1523.

¹⁶ See ST III, q. 65, a. 3.

¹⁷ ST III, q. 65, a. 1.

¹⁸ This meaning remains in the description of the sacrament that appears in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; see §1535.

¹⁹ ST III, q. 65, a. 1.

but disappeared from the instruction given by those liturgical practitioners and sacramental symbolists who have been overly influenced by optimistic Christian anthropologies.

When the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to what Anointing of the Sick effects, it mentions more generally the “the forgiveness of sins.”²⁰ The reason for this broader description of the special effects of Anointing lies in the practice of the Church not to take sides in theological debates. In fact, Aquinas throughout his career denied that Anointing “is ordered to the forgiveness of venial sins.”²¹ On the other hand, Saint Bonaventure and Scotus and his school after him “saw,” in the words of one expert, “the principal effect [of Anointing] in the remission of venial sins which weigh on the soul of the dying man and prevent his complete abandonment to God.”²² For his part, Aquinas held that contrition suffices for the remission of venial sins and that Anointing remains ordered to the elimination of the “remains” (the *reliquiae*) of original and personal sins. By “remains,” he means the dying person’s weaknesses and unfitness as well as his lack of strength and vigor. Spiritual conditions that are rendered more acute by bodily infirmity. Think of the impatience that the Little Flower exhibited on her deathbed when she was given the wrong dose of medicine.²³

For the purposes of contemporary pastoral practice, it matters little, in my judgment, whether one follows Aquinas or Scotus. Because of casuistry and other developments in moral theology, few people have become familiar with the analogical character of sin. Instead, the atomistic categories of mortal and venial sin predominate in catechetical instruction. Aquinas prefers a fulsomely theological account of actual sin, which he understands as any movement that originates in fallen nature and that moves a person away from the Good God. Whatever veers from the teleology of the good, even those movements which arise outside of an explicit consciousness, fall under the analogy of sin, that is, of an action deprived of its due ordering to an end.²⁴ Unlike the moralists of the modern casuist period, Aquinas does not think first of all about culpability or guilt. His moral theology

²⁰ See CCC, §1532.

²¹ For a discussion, see the very informative article by John F. Boyle, “Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Anointing of the Sick (Extreme Unction),” in *Recovering Aquinas and the Sacraments: Studies in Sacramental Theology*, ed. Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2009), 76–84.

²² Poschmann, *Anointing*, 253.

²³ *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. J. Clarke (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1975), 267.

²⁴ See *ST* I–II, q. 21, a. 1. The key to the definition consists in an act that lacks a due order (*debitum finem*) to its end.

escapes moralism. He instead emphasizes a fallen world in which God constantly comes to the help of the sinner by sacramental means, whether one of the Sacred Seven or other sacramentals. So the “remains” of sin may be thought to segue easily into what we call light or venial sins.²⁵ In fact, the eighteenth-century papal Magisterium warned against over-analyzing the nature of the *reliquiae peccati*.²⁶

The above considerations about the primary effect of Anointing raises the question of how Penance and Anointing complement each other in the life of the sinful, sick Christian. The *Roman Ritual* stipulates the order of the sacraments in what is called a continuous celebration of Penance, Holy Anointing, and Eucharist for those who unexpectedly find themselves in danger of death. The *editio typica* urges the priest to be very attentive to the desire of the dying person to make a confession.²⁷ If we wonder why Penance and Holy Anointing would be administered together, the answer lies in the distinctive sacramental graces that each sacrament mediates through the instrumentality of the priest. Aquinas explains the difference by analogy with bodily health. One may be without illness but still not in good shape. Penance is ordered to spiritual health inasmuch as this sacrament brings healing from the illness of sin, whereas Holy Anointing restores robustness to a fatigued spiritual life. Its medicinal effects attend to the various remains of sin that weaken or limit a healthy but not vigorous spiritual life.²⁸ Note that what Aquinas says about Anointing conforms to his overall vision of the spiritual, that is, the Christian life. “Now the aim and end of the spiritual life,” he says, “is that man be united to God, which union is achieved through charity.”²⁹

In light of Catholic teaching, it would be difficult to argue that the Anointing of the Sick forgives grave sins when the sick person is able to obtain their forgiveness through the sacrament of Penance.³⁰ Thus, we find the provision in the *Roman Ritual* for administering both Sacraments of Healing at the same time. What about the case of someone who was not

²⁵ The category of the imperfection remains foreign to Aquinas’s thought. It represents a juridical way of speaking about the “remains” of sin. For further discussion, see James C. Osbourn, O. P., *The Morality of Imperfections*, Thomistic Studies 1 (Washington, DC: Pontifical Faculty of Theology, Dominican House of Studies, 1943).

²⁶ Pope Benedict XIV (1740–1758) issued the warning; see Poschmann, *Anointing*, 254.

²⁷ *Rituale Parvum*, §115.

²⁸ See Boyle, “Anointing,” 82.

²⁹ *ST* II–II, q. 44, a. 1.

³⁰ However, see what is said about the necessity of Baptism in *CCC*, §1257.

able to obtain forgiveness through the sacrament of Penance—a circumstance mentioned in the *Catechism*? There we read that the effects of the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick include “the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of Penance.”³¹ In his standard textbook of sacramental theology, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, the late Father Colman O’Neill offers an explanation of this provision that recognizes the difference in the sacramental causality exercised by each of the Sacraments of Healing. “Should the recipient,” writes O’Neill, “be in a state of grave sin, and granted that he has such sorrow as is compatible with this state—that is, attrition—anointing will bring him absolution.”³² Father O’Neill goes on to signal the difference between what is required for the valid reception of Penance and what Anointing requires. He even speaks of a certain advantage that Anointing enjoys over Penance. “It is not certain,” O’Neill observes, “that penance can benefit an unconscious person since, although the required imperfect sorrow may be present, it is not clear that it can be externally manifested as the sacrament requires.”³³ Anointing on the other hand does not require such active external participation. Anointing requires only that one suffer from a serious illness and has exhibited at least an implicit desire to receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. This implicit desire may not be as widespread among Catholics as when Father O’Neill composed his volume at the time of the Second Vatican Council. No wonder the *Code* urges both pastors of souls and those who are close to a sick person to ensure that the priest administers the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick in a timely fashion. Timely means theologically timely. The medical determination of death does not necessarily indicate when the opportune moment for administering the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has passed. The *Roman Ritual* stipulates that the priest may make a judgment about the status of the moribund person and use the form for emergencies.³⁴

The Sanctification of Human Suffering

Our contemporary cultural circumstances in North America put a certain pressure on pastors of souls. The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick makes little sense without a firm faith in the final articles of the Apostles’ Creed. “I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

³¹ CCC, §1532.

³² Colman E. O’Neill, O.P., *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, rev. Romanus Cessario, O.P. (New York: Alba House, 1991), 287.

³³ O’Neill, *Meeting*, 287–88.

³⁴ *Ritulae Parvum*, §15.

Amen.”³⁵ Abbreviated funeral rites contribute to the impression that dead bodies hold no purchase on sacred places, whether churches or cemeteries, or on sacred rites. So what about moribund bodies? Secular influences and even sometimes Catholic opinion urge people to reduce the dearly departed to a cherished memory of a life once lived. In general, popular psychological speculations make it difficult to imagine life outside of consciousness as experienced by the living. A Cartesian anthropology and other expressions of dualism also make it difficult to talk about the vision of God, Beatific Vision. People find it implausible that they can “see” something without bodily organs. The Church’s anthropology which acknowledges that the powers of knowledge and love are rooted in the immortal soul escapes the comprehension of many Christian believers.³⁶ In short, as the growing enthusiasm for euthanasia indicates, people prefer to make short work of death instead of preparing patiently for death to happen according to the designs of divine Providence. Few, in fact, remark on how much mercy killing sins against the requirement that each creature submit to the wise and loving plan of divine Providence. How many Catholics today would grasp the pathos of these lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” subtitled, “To the happy memory of five Franciscan Nuns exiles by the Falk Laws drowned between midnight and morning of Dec. 7th. 1875”?

And they the prey of the gales; / She to the black-about air, to the
breaker, the thickly / Falling flakes, to the throng that catches and
quails / Was calling “O Christ, Christ, come quickly”: / The cross
to her she calls Christ to her.³⁷

In addition to teaching their people to accept the dying process, even under the most dramatic circumstances, as a period of time set aside to wait for Christ to come and bring them home, pastors also face the formidable challenge of explaining to their people why suffering sanctifies the Christian believer.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick directly addresses the human sufferings that accompany the dying process. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that the anointed Christian finds solace in

³⁵ See CCC, §185 (overleaf).

³⁶ See CCC, §367: the “soul can be gratuitously raised beyond all it deserves to communion with God.”

³⁷ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” from *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Robert Bridges (London: H. Milford, 1918), lns. 188–192.

Christ's own sufferings: "Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus."³⁸ One is reminded of the enigmatic phrase that Saint Paul utters: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church" (Col 1:24). A general rule of pastoral practice stipulates that preaching must precede the sacraments. No preacher can assume that his audience understands that Christ has instituted a special sacrament in order to consecrate human sufferings, that is, to make their patient endurance an act of worship. Dominicans draw inspiration from the Virgin of Siena. Saint Catherine used the expression "compassionate blood."³⁹ Her instruction to the dying sinner stresses the importance of our viewing death as an expression of divine Providence. She urges that we cherish the right remedy that the Savior offers to sinful man for all kinds of *reliquiae* and suffering. She insists on the sinner's maintaining a personal union with Christ. The sick and dying who heed the wisdom of Catherine of Siena find healing and strength by invoking the power of Christ's compassionate blood.

To conclude, I return to the notion of sacramental efficacy. One may take inspiration from the examples of saints like Catherine of Siena and Thérèse of Lisieux. Not everyone, however, can find the interior strength to imitate them, even as both of these woman saints show with a theological finesse not often found in everyday saints how easily even sinners can maintain some union with Christ. So pastoral care must center on the sacrament that Christ has instituted as an effective instrument of uniting the sick and dying person to himself, one that depends first of all on his power and not on ours. To appreciate the value of this grace requires our recognizing the central place that suffering plays in image-restoration. Or, as Father O'Neill laconically puts it, "suffering has clearly a special significance in the church of the crucified Christ."⁴⁰ Think of Christ's satisfaction for sin and of the Eucharist as sacrifice. Of course, these themes regrettably do not predominate in much of Christian education. At the same time, the Christian profession of faith contained at least implicitly in the acclamation after the consecration announces that Christ's resurrection has conquered suffering and death. So faithful Catholics should

³⁸ CCC, §1521.

³⁹ For a discussion of Catherine of Siena's teaching on human sufferings and the Cross of Christ, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., *Compassionate Blood: Catherine of Siena on the Passion* (Paris and New York: Magnificat, 2016), 85.

⁴⁰ Colman E. O'Neill, *Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments* (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1998), 202.

be prepared to understand that the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick intervenes in the life of a Christian believer at the moment when the temptations caused by human sufferings are most likely to tempt one to doubt and despair. Consecration to the compassionate blood of Christ offers an alternative to such a dreadful end. The anointed believer can enter personally into the mystery of the suffering Christ and bear witness to his victory. O'Neill again captures the drama of this moment and the sacrament instituted to sanctify it: "It is perhaps the ultimate and unavoidable outcome of Christian life, where salvation alone can give meaning, that justifies numbering anointing among the sacraments."⁴¹ N.V

⁴¹ O'Neill, *Sacramental Realism*, 203.