

## The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick No Longer the “Last Rites”

A trip to your local drugstore can be overwhelming if you are searching for an ointment for a rash, for sunburn, for arthritis. These chemically fortified creams and gels are the present-day versions of the balm that has been used for centuries.

The Scriptures speak frequently of the healing power of oil. The legendary Good Samaritan, when he found the battered man by the side of the road, “dressed his wounds, pouring in oil and wine” (Luke 10:34). When Jesus sent the Apostles out to serve the people, they “expelled many demons, anointed the sick with oil, and worked many cures” (Mark 6:13).

In the years after Jesus, this practice continued, even becoming required. In the Letter of James, we read: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord” (5:14). By the time of the Council of Trent, this verse from James had formed the scriptural foundation for what we today call the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

Unfortunately, over the passage of time, this sacrament came to be associated with the time when a person is preparing to die. Perhaps it was one last sacred call for healing when all the physical medicine had failed! Even the name given the sacrament identified it as literally the Last Rite. We called it Extreme Unction (from *unctio* meaning ointment and *in extremis* meaning dying).

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council asked that the prayers and rituals of this sacrament be revised and that it be renamed as the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, returning to the biblical term.

The revised ritual contains not only the traditional individual anointing, such as at a person’s home before going for surgery, but also an anointing rite with a large congregation. This can be done either during a Mass or as a separate celebration of the Sacrament. It is available individually throughout the year by appointment with one of the priests.

The revised ritual encourages all those whose health is seriously impaired by sickness or old age or who are anticipating serious surgery to receive the sacrament. The degree of seriousness is not so much a matter of a clinical decision as it is a matter of a person having a condition wherein they need healing “in body, in soul, and in spirit” (*Pastoral Care of the Sick*, #123).

The oil used in the sacrament is olive oil that has been blessed by the bishop at the annual Chrism Mass celebrated just before Easter. The cruet containing the oil is marked “OI” from the Latin *Oleum Infirmorum* (Oil of the Sick).