



CARE OF THE SICK

Parishes and Hospitals Ministering Together

JAMES M. SCHELLMAN

We live by faith, and we believe that God is at work healing the brokenness and suffering that surrounds us, especially the suffering of the sick. The price of such healing is nothing less than the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God. In the Lord's own broken body, the brokenness of each of us and the world are being made whole again.

This healing ministry is especially expressed in the church's care for the sick among us. It is a ministry that takes many forms and reaches its full expression in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, which was instituted primarily for those seriously impaired by sickness or old age. The church's renewal of the practice of this sacrament following the Second Vatican Council is now well established. However, it may be time to revisit how we are carrying out this form of ministry to our sisters and brothers in need.

In our practice of Anointing of the Sick, the church's preference is for a communal celebration whenever possible. In this way, our seriously ill sister or brother can be consoled and lifted up by the sacramental encounter with the Lord while being surrounded by members of Christ's body and celebrated with the Scriptures and the full ritual gestures and prayers of the church.

When the renewed practice of Anointing of the Sick was introduced several decades ago, there soon developed a strong practice of celebrating it with our sick members in their parish communities. Now, however, an increasing number of people who are seriously ill are not asking for Anointing of the Sick until they are in a hospital or hospice setting. We need to consider what

this means in terms of the integrity of the sacramental experience for those who are sick and for our parish communities.

Unfortunately, the hospital experience of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick tends to be a simplified form, often the emergency form. This is true because of the difficulty of gathering hospital patients together for a communal celebration, because of the number of patients who need anointing in our hospitals and because of the decreasing number of priests available for hospital chaplaincy. The result is an abbreviated form of the sacrament for many church members who, in fact, could experience the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick in their parish churches with a priest they know and a community that loves and supports them.

ENVISIONING AN ALTERNATIVE PRACTICE

There are good reasons to consider refocusing our emphasis on celebrating the sacrament in parish settings. People with serious illnesses who don't yet require hospitalization may have needs that run deep for physical and spiritual healing and community support. Their state of hope about the healing they long for can be upheld by people who care about them and sacramental rites that are

Flannery *In Extremis*

By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

"Yesterday the priest brought me Communion and it looks like a long time before I'm afoot. I also had him give me the now-called Sacrament of the Sick.

Once known as Extreme Unction."

*— Flannery O'Connor, July 8, 1964,
four weeks before her death from Lupus*

I like the old name better than the new
containing as it does the Latin root.
For those *in extremis*, meaning dying,
not sick. Sacraments ought to tell the truth.
When he blessed my eyes & ears, lips & hands,
I felt how lucky I'd been they were mine,
for how else would I know and love the world
were it not for these gifts I've received?
And now there's another gift I want: time.
Oh, I know we all have to go, leave
this life for the next. But I'm perplexed. Pearled
gates and angels, celestial bands
of hymn-singing saints are not my speed.
This green earth is all the heaven I need.

meaningful. There also are those with serious surgeries or treatments, scheduled weeks or months in advance, who would appreciate participating in the celebration of the sacrament in their home parish setting before their procedures begin.

Parish celebrations of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick benefit not only those who are ill, but also those who are well as they surround and console the sick. Experiencing the sacrament in its full form speaks to our human need for confidence in the Lord's plans for us, whether they be plans for physical healing and wholeness or spiritual healing and union with him. This can serve as sacramental catechesis at its best.

Parish-sponsored celebrations of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick offer new opportunities for catechesis with all members of the parish on the nature of the sacrament. This could help us all understand how, as the church pleads, any of us seriously ill due to sickness or advanced years is invited to request the sacrament rather than wait until our condition leads to an emergency situation when sacramental ministry may be missed, or offered in an abbreviated form.

Many of our parish churches could benefit from a reconsideration of their practice of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The result could be a newly collaborative understanding between our hospitals and our parish communities in the healing ministry of Jesus. This fuller ministry would speak to the deepest hungers of the human heart.

When confronted with fragility and mortality, whether our own or another's, we come face to face with the meaninglessness that suffering and death carry. Our hunger for meaning is met with the faith community's full healing ministry in the name of Jesus Christ, the One who will one day bring each of us home to God and to all those who have taken the journey before us.

JAMES M. SCHELLMAN is vice president, mission integration, Our Lady of Lourdes Regional Medical Center, Lafayette, Louisiana.

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