

THE SACRAMENT OF THE SICK

LUKE DEVINE, O.P.

“Who is the man that shall live, and not see death?” “Yesterday for me and today for thee.”¹



HO can read the above quotations from Holy Scripture without picturing to themselves the manner of their own death, or rather the manner in which they would like to die?

As in the Spring few if any give much thought to the trials which will in all probability come with the Winter; so also few while enjoying the spring-time of life, fail to provide for the winter of life that must inevitably follow. And as in the former it is usually the approach of the Fall which awakens us to a realization of our danger, so in the latter does sickness or old age conjure up the “terrible thought” that soon we shall have to face the moment of separation from this life and our entrance into the next.

Yet, why should this be a “terrible thought”? Why should it not be the happiest moment of our lives here on earth? The answer is found in the heart of everyone who asks the question. It is not so much death we fear, as the lives we look back upon when death comes to claim us.

That we should be willing to embrace death rather than fear it has been the teaching of the Church throughout the ages, since only through death can we attain life everlasting. What greater proof of this need we offer than the lives of countless saints who welcomed the end of this troublesome life in the words of the holy man, Simeon: “Now thou dost dismiss thy servant, O Lord, according to thy word in peace.”²

But for the greater number of His children, Christ knew that His admonition to “watch and pray” would go unheeded; so in His merciful Providence He left, for sinner and just alike,

¹ *Ps.* lxxxviii, 49; *Ecclus.* xxxviii, 23.

² *Luke*, ii, 29.

a sacrament of divine strength and supernatural efficacy by means of which we might all pass victoriously through the trials and temptations of our last moments on earth. This sacrament the Church of Christ has named "Extreme Unction," the "last anointing."

How little the ordinary Catholic knows about this sacrament beyond that it is called "Extreme Unction" and is administered in time of dangerous illness. And how prevalent is the erroneous opinion that one must actually be dying before the reception of this sacrament is possible. The lack of knowledge may be the result either of the brevity with which Extreme Unction is treated by the majority of writers, or from the little attention it receives in the pulpit. The erroneous opinion that only those about to draw their last breath are capable subjects of Extreme Unction is merely an echo of what was all too frequently practiced in the past. The priest was called only after every natural remedy had failed to check the patient's rapid decline, thus making it impossible for more than a part of the sacrament to prove beneficial.

For a few moments, then, let us consider what the sacrament of Extreme Unction is; to whom and when it may be administered; and lastly the manifold effects it produces.

Father Prummer, O.P., accurately defines Extreme Unction as: "a sacrament of the New Law, which through the anointing with blessed oil and the prayer of the priest confers, upon man capable of sin and gravely ill, health of soul and sometimes of body."³

That Extreme Unction is numbered among the seven sacraments of the Church and that its institution is of divine origin we learn from the definitions of the Councils of Florence and Trent. The former Council states: "The fifth sacrament is Extreme Unction, the matter of which is olive oil blessed by the bishop."⁴ And the Council of Trent defines: "If any one says that Extreme Unction is not truly and properly a sacrament instituted by Christ Our Lord and promulgated by Blessed James the Apostle, but merely a rite handed down from the Fathers or an invention of man, let him be anathema."⁵

Upon what grounds does the Church base these infallible

³ Prummer, Vol. III, p. 408.

⁴ *Denz.* 700.

⁵ *Denz.* 926.

declarations? We are referred to the Epistle of St. James. In the fifth chapter, the fourteenth and fifteenth verses read as follows: "Is any man sick among you? Let him bring in the priests of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick man: and the Lord shall raise him up: and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him." Herein we have all that is essential for a sacrament: a sensible sign, grace conferred, and divine institution. The sensible sign is easily discernible in the anointing with oil by the priest and the simultaneous pronouncing of the words prescribed. The last two essentials of the sacrament are contained in the words "and if he is in sins, they shall be forgiven him." The forgiveness of sins is obtained only through the infusion of grace, a prerogative that can be attributed to God alone.

Now to whom and when may this great sacrament be administered? "Extreme Unction," says the Church in her Code of Canon Law, "may be administered only to the faithful who have reached the age of discretion and are in danger of death on account of sickness or old age."⁶

The "danger of death" spoken of above does not need to be immediate. Extreme Unction is essentially a sacrament of the sick. This is clearly indicated by the text of St. James and so interpreted by all theologians. Any grave illness, the final issue of which is seriously doubtful, justifies the administration of this sacrament.

That many delay asking for Extreme Unction until the sick person is about to draw his last breath is a lamentable abuse. Such un-Christianlike conduct is prompted by a lack of faith, foolish imagination, false charity, or inadequate comprehension of the sacrament and its effects. In consideration of what we have already said concerning the lack of knowledge, we will confine ourselves to the other three reasons which lead to the neglect of this sacrament.

Catholics lack faith when they confine themselves to mere earthly medicines for the restoration of bodily health, instead of making use of the supernatural means provided by God in this sacrament. They fail to see that easing a man's conscience and strengthening his soul in the happiness of divine grace is in itself sufficient to produce a favorable physical reaction. Moreover,

⁶ Canon 940.

in Extreme Unction, the health of the body as well as that of the soul is most fervently implored of God.

Others of the faithful put off the administration of this sacrament because they foolishly imagine that the sick person must afterwards inevitably die. The advent of the priest to them, far from being a consolation, is a certain sign that all hope is gone. That this results from an ignorance of the effects of Extreme Unction together with a very poor manner of reasoning is sufficiently evident.

Lastly we have those among us who deny Extreme Unction to the sick on the plea that they are thus being charitable. They refuse to tell the sick person how dangerous his condition really is, certain that it would but add to his anxiety and hasten his end. They forget that this very uncertainty is usually more detrimental than the knowledge they withhold; that the patient may have on his mind far more serious worries than the sickness that is slowly robbing him of bodily life, worries which once unburdened may enable him, if at all possible, the more quickly to recover.

What, then, are the effects of this sacrament that demand its reception as soon as we discover we are dangerously ill?

The primary effect of Extreme Unction is the increase of sanctifying grace in the soul. Considered under this aspect it is rightly classified among the sacraments of the living. In the ordinary course of events, it is immediately preceded by two other sacraments, Penance, and Holy Eucharist in the form of Viaticum. Should the sick person have already lapsed into unconsciousness, conditional absolution and Extreme Unction may still be administered, as long as the sick person has previously manifested some sign of contrition for his sins or a desire to receive the sacraments. And even one step further does the Church go, so zealous is she for every soul entrusted to her care. Conditional absolution and conditional Extreme Unction may be administered to an unconscious Catholic, even without such external manifestations, if there is sufficient reason to believe that the unconscious person is still capable of an act of internal sorrow for his sins. Such persons, although they are totally unconscious to all external appearances, are capable of such internal acts in many instances according to the common opinion of both theologians and physicians. If the Church then, in extraordinary cases, acts so generously to procure, if possible, the sanctification of her children, let us take care lest we be un-

worthy of such generosity by wilfully neglecting to receive Extreme Unction at the proper time and under ordinary circumstances.

By the infusion of this sanctifying grace, not only the remains of sin but even mortal sins are removed from the soul. Interpreting the words of St. James, the Council of Trent declares: "If anyone says that the sacred unction of the sick does not confer grace nor remit sin, let him be anathema."⁷ So under this aspect, Extreme Unction is a sacrament of the dead and as such infuses grace when validly received.

Nor is this infusion either indirect or accidental, as sometimes occurs in the administration of Confirmation or the Eucharist, but direct as was the will of Christ when He instituted it. How aptly then is Extreme Unction spoken of as a most precious sacrament! How merciful God is to us who are so half-hearted in our service to Him! As in Penance we have a proof of God's infinite love for the sinner who, after manifesting some sorrow for his sins, obtains His forgiveness through the confessional; so in Extreme Unction we behold the infinity of His mercy in His willingness to forgive mortal sins, even when the recipient is no longer able to confess but confined merely to an internal sorrow for his sins.

As in every sacrament, so also in Extreme Unction, a special grace properly called "sacramental grace" is conferred. By means of this grace we may obtain a threefold effect. The first is a strengthening of the soul by exciting confidence in God, thus giving patience and vigor against temptation. How many of us when about to die, or when there is even any danger of dying, can look back over our past lives and feel confident that we are worthy of forgiveness? And who in sickness does not need the grace of God to bear his sufferings with resignation, or to ward off the innumerable temptations with which the devil in our weakness tries to overcome us? In Extreme Unction Christ offers us all these necessary graces. He places no condition. He merely says "ask and you shall receive."

The second effect is the cleansing from the soul of venial sin and all the remains of sin. Since Extreme Unction disposes the soul for immediate entrance into heaven, it must necessarily eliminate everything, even the slightest stain of imperfection. That this effect be produced, it is necessary that the recipient be

⁷ *Denz.* 927.

sorry not only for some of his venial sins but for all of them. Yet this does not mean that each venial sin must be remembered in particular, but rather that none be expressly excluded.

By the "remains of sin" we mean the weakness of the soul which remains even after sin has been forgiven and which makes it more prone to evil. When the remains of sin have been taken away by Extreme Unction, the mind and will are completely restored to full health having been debilitated by the sinful embrace of evil.

The final effect of this sacramental grace is the restoration of bodily health if, in the sight of God, it is expedient for the salvation of the soul. For those who wait until death is inevitable, it would be more than presumptuous to expect a cure which would demand a miracle on the part of God. For this reason all are exhorted to receive this sacrament in the beginning of any serious illness. And even then should one whom we love be called by God, is it not better that he be "taken away lest wickedness should alter his understanding or deceit beguile his soul?"⁸ So at all times we should resign ourselves perfectly to the will of God, for "Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when He cometh, shall find watching."⁹

Many may wonder why, if Extreme Unction is so beneficial to the sick, it is not administered more frequently? According to Canon Law: "This sacrament cannot be repeated in the same sickness, unless the patient has recovered after receiving Extreme Unction and his condition has again become critical."¹⁰ The reason for this is that, according to the teaching of the Church, the effects of this sacrament continue as long as the sick person is in that particular grave illness.

Msr. Cortet, the late bishop of Troyes, sums up very nicely an admonition which is well worth keeping in mind: "Many have a sort of horror of Extreme Unction; they imagine that this sacrament is not the sacrament of the sick, but of the dying, and that those who have received it are inevitably doomed to die. This is a fatal error, a prejudice based on ignorance of the teachings of the Church. Since Our Lord Jesus Christ, in His infinite mercy, has instituted a sacrament so efficacious for the relief of the sick, and its effects are so admirable and certain,

⁸ *Wisdom*, iv, 11.

⁹ *Luke*, xii, 37.

¹⁰ *Canon* 940, n. 2.

why is this sacrament not zealously requested at the beginning of a serious illness? Why do the relatives in their blind and cruel affection, instead of calling the priest, keep him away until the patient asks for him? Sometimes someone dares to speak to a patient of Communion, but Extreme Unction is frequently postponed to the moment when, having lost all consciousness, he is no longer able to join in the motherly and fortifying prayers of the Church and to cooperate by his personal disposition with the efficaciousness of the sacrament. Why is this? You hasten to call a physician as soon as disease appears among you, but you do not call upon the Supreme Physician of body and soul, who holds in His hands the keys of life and death! You carefully apply to your ills the remedies prescribed, you make the patient take even the bitterest draughts, you beg him to submit to the most painful operations; but you do not procure for him the spiritual medicine of Extreme Unction, which would vivify his body and soul!"¹¹ Strong words indeed, but how justly merited by the majority of us.

Let us, then, never wait too long in a serious illness before asking for the administrations of God's priests. And, lastly, even though to all appearances the person seems to be already dead, the priest may yet be of the greatest assistance and on no account must we hesitate to call him. Especially is this recommended when the death has been sudden or preceded by a comparatively short illness, because it is the common doctrine and teaching of the Church that very often the Sacrament of Extreme Unction may be administered as long as a half hour or even an hour after apparent death sets in.

¹¹ *Catholic Moral Teaching*, Surlbled and Eggemann, p. 268.