The theology of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

- Illness is a part of life. At some point every person will experience it in some form or another. Very often illness teaches us profound lessons about life.

- The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us: “Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him” (CCC 1501).

- Jesus understood the horror of illness. In his day sick people were often cast out of the community. People who were not considered whole were considered unclean. Not only did they have to suffer the illness, but they also had to endure the indignity of rejection and expulsion from the community.

- We are told in sacred Scripture that Jesus was filled with compassion for sick people. The word compassion means sorrow and the deepest emotion down to one’s very entrails—to the absolute core. Jesus experienced the pain of others illness to the very core of his being. He could do no less than heal them and restore them to life in the community.

- That same compassion continues today in the ministry of the Church—through the sacramental life of the Church—through the sacraments of anointing of the sick, reconciliation as well as Eucharist.

- Jesus’ healing was a sign that the kingdom of God had arrived. Jesus had the power not just to heal but to forgive sins as well.

- Jesus did not heal everyone. The healings he did perform had a larger significance and purpose. They were signs of the arrival of the kingdom of God and the announcement of Christ’s victory over sin and death (CCC 1504).

- IMPORTANT: Sickness, while intimately connected with the human condition, is not punishment for personal, individual sins. (John 3 and Pastoral Care of the Sick PCS, #2)

- Our illness is an opportunity for us to embrace the Paschal Mystery (life, death and resurrection of Jesus) and join our suffering to the cross of Christ thereby becoming active participants in his ongoing redemption of the world. There is no greater meaning in life.

- We are expected to fight against all forms of illness and do what we can to foster good health.

- The sick people in our midst are an icon for us—a reminder of that to which we are all called—eternal life with God. The witness of the sick person is a reminder that life is transitory and that we are mortal beings. Mortal as we are, we are thus compelled to abandon our lives to God’s purpose. We are called to constant, redeeming conversion.

- Doctors and caregivers are also called to be tenacious in their fight against illness and their physical, spiritual and holistic care for the sick person.
Handout for Anointing of the Sick

The Sacrament

- The Church directs us that sacraments are opportunities for conversion.
- Sacraments are opportunities to deepen our faith in Christ. This is indeed true when it comes to the anointing of the sick.
- Those who are sick are in dire need of the God’s grace and strength lest they plunge into despair and lose heart and faith. Thus, through the sign of touch and anointing with oil Christ strengthens the sick person.
- The priests of the Church lay hands on the sick person. They offer a prayer of faith, and they anoint the sick person with holy oil—oil that has been blessed by God.
- This prayer of faith and laying on of hands and anointing manifests, makes present and signifies the grace and strength that the sacrament gives. Indeed the prayer, imposition of hands, and anointing with oil confers it (cf PCS, #5).

Theological significance of Laying on of Hands

- The laying on of hands is a sign of God’s healing, sacramental touch.
- In the Bible:
  - Hands are laid upon a person to signify a changed reality.
  - The imposition of hands sets things apart for a sacred purpose.
  - It is used as a gesture of blessing.
  - Hands outstretched over an assembly, blesses the entire group (Lev. 9:22).
  - In the New Testament, the hand was associated with power.
  - Hands were imposed to heal people. Jesus was asked to heal Jairus’ daughter by laying his hands on her.
  - The laying on of hands was also a sign of mission. The apostles laid hands on the seven and they were assigned a special service (Acts 6:6).
  - The laying on of hands was also associated with the installation of some office, either the presbyterate or apostle (2 Tim. 1:6).
  - The Holy Spirit was conferred at baptism through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:17-19; 19:6).
- In the liturgy the laying on of hands is a sign of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Every liturgical action exercises the epicletic (laying on of hands) action of calling down the Spirit of God to bless, sanctify, transform, and effect the desired grace. Hands are extended to invoke the Holy Spirit.
- Hands are extended as an invocation requesting that the Holy Spirit effect a change. For example, in Eucharist hands are extended over the bread and wine and the changed reality is the Body and Blood of Christ. In the sacrament of anointing of the sick, hands are laid, and the sick person is restored to spiritual and/or physical healing and/or wholeness.
Theological significance of oil

- Anointing with oil is a sign of a changed reality. The sick person is healed.
- Oil is medicinal; it is a healing agent; it does not easily rub off but lingers to continue its healing power and properties.
- This sacrament confers the healing of Christ the Physician; oil is used in anointing to signify and effect (make happen) a changed reality (from illness to health, from disintegration to integration, from despair to hope and joy).
- Oil is used in the Bible as a healing agent. “So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them” (Mk 6:12-13). Oil is easier to rub in than rub off.
- Oil has healing and medicinal qualities. It is an essential element of life.
  - Oil is used in cooking, for energy, lubrication and protection from the elements.
  - The greed associated with misuse of oil can destroy God’s creation. One need look no farther than the Gulf of Mexico to know the truth of that statement!
  - All those aspects found in the natural world can be used to express the reality of the Spirit.
- Our natural experience of oil reminds us of the Spirit.
  - The Spirit stays with us.
  - The Spirit heals and is a soothing, calming presence.
  - The Spirit is balm for our wounded soul, and strength in times of need.
  - The Spirit is the unifier that holds God’s people together.
- Oil expresses the ineffable reality of the Spirit.
- The Spirit strengthens us when we must lay down our lives for the sake of this precious new commodity: life in Christ.
- Oil is a necessary for life.
- The human body must have oil to survive.

Historical context

- Read James 5:13-16
- Community leaders ever since the time of the ancient Church and right down to the present have laid hands on and anointed sick people.
- As the ritual practice evolved over the centuries it was used more exclusively with those who were at the point of death than it was for sick people. It was always a sacrament for the sick,¹ but it eventually was only celebrated at the moment of death. As a result it was given the name Extreme Unction.
- Many older Catholics are more familiar with Extreme Unction than they are with Anointing of the Sick since the latter was restored as part of the renewal of the Second Vatican Council. The

¹ In spite of the evolution of this sacrament as a sacrament for the dying, “the liturgy has never failed to beg the Lord that the sick person may recover his health if it would be conducive to his salvation.” (Council of Trent (1551): DS 1696)

From Catholic Faith, Life, & Creed │ The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick │ 2.0
Handout for Anointing of the Sick

proper use of the sacrament as spiritual and physical medicine for the sick was restored and given prominence only since 1974

Sacrament for the dying: Viaticum

- The sacrament for the dying (viaticum: Holy Communion-food for the journey) was more clearly set forth as the proper sacrament for those at the point of death.
- The Eucharist is the sacrament of Christ’s Passover from death to resurrected life. It should always be the very last sacrament the faithful receives. It is the sacrament that completes the earthly journey, signifying the “passing over” to eternal life (CCC, 1517).
- Just as there are three sacraments that begin a person’s Christian life—baptism, confirmation and Eucharist, so two are there are three sacraments that bring it to a close—penance, anointing of the sick and viaticum.
- However, if death is imminent, and time is of the essence, the sacrament of penance is celebrated first if possible, then viaticum since it is incumbent on all Christians to receive Eucharist in preparation for their final journey home. Anointing of the sick can be omitted.
- A deceased person is not anointed. Sacraments are for the living. The priest should pray for the deceased person asking that God forgive their sins and welcome them into heaven (PCS, 15).
- However, if there is doubt as to whether the person is dead, the priest should confer the sacrament.

Who can receive this sacrament?

- Anyone who is seriously ill and in danger of death.
- Anyone who had already celebrated the sacrament due to serious illness then recovered and became seriously ill again.
- If that same person’s condition were to worsen further, he or she is permitted to receive the sacrament again.
- Anyone about to undergo a serious operation.
- Elderly who are frail.
- Persons with chronic illness or disability, including mental and emotional illness

Who ministers the sacrament?

- Priests and bishops are the only ministers of this sacrament.

How is this sacrament celebrated?

- This is a liturgical action and a communal action.
- Since it is a communal celebration a primary place for celebration is the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy where the Paschal Mystery of Christ, his suffering, death and resurrection, are manifested to the assembly.
- It can take place in the home, an institution, a hospital, or church.
- The sick person is anointed on the forehead and on the hands.
- As the sick person is anointed on the forehead the priest prays the following prayer: “Through this holy anointing, may the anointing in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit.”
- As the sick person is anointed on the hands the priest completes the prayer: “May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.”

From Catholic Faith, Life, & Creed │ The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick │ 2.0
Handout for Anointing of the Sick

- Adaptations can be made. The entire prayer can be prayed all at once or a different part of the body may be anointed if necessary due to the condition of the sick person.

Effects of the sacrament.
- The sick person is strengthened by the Holy Spirit to overcome their pain and difficulties. They are given peace and courage.
- The sick person participates in the Paschal Mystery of Christ and joins his or her suffering to Christ and thus participates in the ongoing redemption of the world. The sick person finds new meaning in suffering.
- The sick person is prepared for the final journey home to heaven.
Handout on the Sacrament of Reconciliation

How Do We Ritualize the Reconciliation Jesus Offers Us?

1. the sacrament of the Eucharist
2. the sacrament of reconciliation

- Jesus’ entire earthly ministry was one of healing and reconciliation. He exhorted all people to repent.
- The sacrament of reconciliation celebrates, helps us notice in a particular way the reconciliation Christ won for us on the cross.
- Jesus reconciled us to God through his sacrifice. Yet still we continue to sin.
- Important: The focus of this sacrament, however, is not our sinfulness. While we must acknowledge that we are sinners, the focus of the sacrament of penance is God’s awesome mercy through Christ.

God Calls Us to be Reconciled with God and with the Church.

- The Rite of Penance reminds us that when we sin, we harm our relationship with God.
- When sinners repent, they run into the arms of the merciful Father who knows them best and loves them most, and who offers unconditional love. They are embraced by the God who shows unparalleled compassion for his children. He goes in search of the lost and makes every effort to bring them home into the fold of his loving embrace.
- God’s love unites us with the people of God.
- The Rite of Penance reminds us that the sin of one person impacts others. The sin of one does not just harm the sinner, it harms others as well. The good news is that if the sin of one harms others, similarly, the holiness of one benefits others.
- The good we do influences others. Our good example makes a difference. The sacrament of reconciliation strengthens us to live a life of holiness that we are all called to live.
- The Rite of Penance reminds us that penance always includes reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who are harmed by our sins (cf. Rite of Penance #5).
- We are strengthened through this sacrament to be agents of peace and justice in a world ravaged by sin and oppression. Yet, the Rite also reminds us that people frequently come together to participate in injustice (cf. RP, #5).
- The Rite of Penance reminds us that it is not just our personal sins, but our participation in the social dimension of sin that we must examine and bring before God.
- “Sin and its effects are visible everywhere: in exploitive relationships, loveless families, unjust social structures and policies, crimes by and against individuals and against creation, the oppression of the weak and the manipulation of the vulnerable, explosive tensions among nations and among ideological, racial and religious groups, and social classes, the scandalous gulf between those who waste goods and resources, and those who live and die amid deprivation and underdevelopment, wars and preparation for war. Sin is a reality in the world” (National Catechetical Directory, #98).
- The Rite of Penance reminds us that we should help one another do penance by working with others to realize justice and peace in the world.

The Effects of Reconciliation
Handout on the Sacrament of Reconciliation

- Reconciliation with God anticipates and includes complete *metanoia*, conversion of the entire self, and conversion of mind and heart to God.
- Once converted, the penitent can do no less than be genuinely sorry for his or her sins and truly commit to amend his or her life. True conversion ultimately leads to transformation. Once penitents are truly sorry for sin and long for authentic transformation they:
  - Confess their sins to the Church’s minister.
  - Make satisfaction for those same sins.
  - Commit to go and sin no more. They commit to change their lives.
- In so doing and by the power of the Holy Spirit given to the Church, such penitents are forgiven.
- The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that reconciliation with God causes a “spiritual resurrection.”
- We are restored to the state that was intended for us at the creation of the world. We are in complete harmony with God and free from sin, until such time that we once again fall prey to its trap (CCC, 1468).
- God grants pardon to the sinner through the sacramental sign of absolution.
- As stated, the primary sacramental sign associated with the sacrament of reconciliation is the laying on of hands.

Four Elements of the Rite of Penance

1. Contrition
2. Confession
3. Penance
4. Absolution

Contrition

- As stated earlier, the sacrament of reconciliation celebrates what God has already accomplished through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ.
- Contrition is deep sorrow for sin and the intention to avoid sin in the future.
- Contrition is true sorrow for sin and hatred for the sin committed, together with the firm resolve not to sin again (cf. CCC, 1451).
- True contrition involves the complete conversion of heart.
- The sinner commits to changing his or her life and living in the shadow of Christ. With the help of God, he or she strives to grow in holiness.
- In the interest of true conversion, the sinner examines his or her conscience in order to uncover the areas of sin still in need of God’s healing, liberating mercy, and forgiveness.

Two Forms of Contrition

1. Perfect contrition
2. Imperfect contrition  (Refer to CCC #1451-1453).
Perfect contrition
- Perfect contrition simply flows from our love relationship with God, our absolute love of God.
- We are sorry for our sins because we love God so much and we know that our sins offend God and keep us from perfect intimacy with him.
- When we have perfect sorrow for our sins because of our love for God, our minor (venial) sins are automatically forgiven. Our grave mortal sins are forgiven as long as we promise to avail ourselves of the sacrament as soon as we are able.

Imperfect contrition
- Imperfect contrition is simply sorrow for sin because we hate the ugliness of sin or because we fear eternal damnation.
- Such contrition, while not perfect, is nevertheless a potential catalyst to bring us to the sacrament.
- Imperfect contrition does not have the power in and of itself to forgive serious sin.

Confession
- The sinner is called to examine his or her life before God.
- The sinner is exhorted to consider the areas and habits of sin in his or her life.
- The sinner is invited by God to enter into deep conversion and sorrow for sin.
- The sinner then is invited to name his or her sins.
- The sinner confesses them to God’s minister who has been given the power to forgive sins by the Holy Spirit (RP: # 6b).
- Only God forgives sins; Jesus was given authority on earth to forgive sins, and he gave that authority to the apostles and exhorted them to exercise it.
- The authority to forgive sins in Jesus’ name continues through the unbroken line of the apostles, through the ministers of the Church, the ordained priesthood.
- When sins are confessed, hearts are opened to God’s minister who has taken a sacred oath not to reveal anything that is spoken when confession is made. What is said is between the confessor and the sinner is bound by the seal of confession. The priest may never divulge the content of sacramental confession. To break the seal of confession is to commit the gravest of sins.
Handout on the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Act of Penance

- Our response to God’s incredible mercy is to perform an action that demonstrates our willingness to change, our commitment to avoid the same sins that we seem to commit over and over again: the habit of sin.
- When we sin, our actions harm our neighbor (CCC, 1459) and we must do what we can to restore the relationship and repair the harm.
- Sin harms our spiritual life. The act of penance is medicinal; it helps to heal our sin-sick soul. While we are forgiven through the sacramental sign of absolution, the disorder that causes sin is not automatically healed.
- Serious sin harms our spiritual health. We make satisfaction or penance in order to strengthen us not to sin again. The act of penance strengthens us and helps restore us to spiritual health.
- In the act of penance, the sinner affirms that Christ already made satisfaction for the sin of humanity by his sacrificial death on the cross. Sinners cooperate with the satisfaction already accomplished by making their own satisfaction.
- Sinners promise not to sin again. The sinner affirms that his or her actions speak louder than words by performing an act of penance. This act of penance may be accomplished in a variety of ways.
  o The priest might suggest that the penitent pray certain prayers, meditate on the cross of Christ, read sacred Scripture, or perform a spiritual or corporal work of mercy.
  o The priest might suggest that wrongs be righted and that harm done to another be rectified to the best of the sinner’s ability.
  o The Rite of Penance insists that sinners live ongoing lives of penance when they serve their neighbor and patiently accept the joys, sorrows, and crosses of everyday life; when they read the Scriptures and help the poor; when they perform the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.
- In summary, penance is accomplished when the sinner makes satisfaction for sins committed, when he or she promises to amend his or her conduct, and make reparation for injury.
- We can do nothing to earn God’s forgiveness. It is freely given. However, we can show God that we are serious about our intention to change our lives. Satisfaction is the means by which we commit to amend our behavior.

Absolution

- God grants pardon to the sinner through the sacramental sign of absolution.
- Through the sacramental symbol of laying on of hands, the priest confers God’s forgiveness. The Holy Spirit is invoked through the sacramental sign of extended hands and through that “epicletic” action (an epicletic action is an action that invokes the Holy Spirit), the sinner is forgiven.
- The transformative power of the Holy Spirit invites deep conversion of heart and strengthens the sinner to avoid sin in the future.
- Through absolution the sinner is not only reconciled with God, but also with the Church.
- In the story of the Prodigal Son, the father not only welcomed his son home and restored him to full stature; he also reconciled him with the community. Luke 15:11-
- Through sacramental absolution, the sinner is clothed with the reconciling robe of mercy and restored to full stature as a child of God and a member of the people of God.