

*C.C. - Sacrament of the anointing
of the sick*

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APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRAMENT OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Sacram Unctionem Infirmorum

Pope Paul VI

November 30, 1972

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APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRAMENT OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

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SERVANT OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD

FOR AN EVERLASTING MEMORIAL

The Catholic Church professes and teaches that the anointing of the sick is one of the seven sacraments of the New Testament, instituted by Christ and that it is “alluded to in Mark (6:13) and recommended and promulgated to the faithful by James the Apostle and brother of the Lord. He says: “Is there anyone sick among you? He should ask for the presbyters of the Church. They in turn are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. This prayer uttered in faith will reclaim the one who is ill, and the Lord will restore him to health. If he has committed any sins, forgiveness will be his” (James 5:14-15).¹

From ancient times testimonies of anointing of the sick have been found in the Church’s tradition, particularly in the liturgy, both in the East and in the West. The letter which Innocent I, our predecessor, addressed to Decentius, Bishop of Gubbio,² and the venerable prayer used for blessing the oil of the sick: “Send forth, Lord, your Holy Spirit, the Paraclete,” which was inserted in the eucharistic prayer³ and is still preserved in the Roman Pontifical,⁴ are worthy of note in this regard.

In the course of centuries of liturgical tradition, the parts of the sick person’s body to be anointed with holy oil were more explicitly defined in different ways. Several formulas were added to accompany the anointings with prayer, and these are contained in the liturgical books of various churches. During the Middle Ages, in the Roman Church the custom of anointing the sick on

the five senses with the formula: "Per istam Sanctam Unctionem et suam piissimam misericordiam indulgeat tibi Dominus quidquid deliquisti," adapted to each sense,⁵ prevailed.

In addition, the teaching concerning anointing is expounded in the documents of the ecumenical councils, namely, Florence, Trent especially, and Vatican II.

After the Council of Florence had described the essential elements of the anointing of the sick,⁶ the Council of Trent declared its divine institution and explained what is taught in the Letter of James concerning the holy anointing, especially with regard to the reality and effects of the sacrament: "This reality is in fact the grace of the Holy Spirit, whose anointing takes away sins, if any still remain to be taken away, and the remnants of sin; it also relieves and strengthens the soul of the sick person, arousing in him a great confidence in the divine mercy; thus sustained, he may more easily bear the trials and labors of his sickness, more easily resist the temptations of the devil 'lying in wait' (Genesis 3:15), and sometimes regain bodily health, if this is expedient for the health of the soul."⁷ The same council also declared that these words of the Apostle state with sufficient clarity that "this anointing is to be administered to the sick, especially those who are in such a condition as to appear to have reached the end of their life, whence it is also called the sacrament of the dying."⁸ Finally, it declared that the priest is the proper minister of the sacrament.⁹

The Second Vatican Council adds the following: "'Extreme Unction,' which may also and more fittingly be called 'anointing of the sick,' is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the appropriate time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived."¹⁰ The use of this sacrament is a concern of the whole Church: "By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of her priests, the whole Church commends the sick to the suffering and glorified Lord, asking that he may lighten their suffering and save them (cf. James 5:14-16). The Church exhorts them, moreover, to contribute to the welfare of the whole People of God by associating themselves freely with the passion and death of Christ (cf.

Romans 8:17; Colossians 1:24; 2 Timothy 2:11-12; 1 Peter 4:13).”¹¹

All these elements had to be taken into consideration in revising the rite of anointing, in order better to adapt to present day conditions those elements which were subject to change.¹²

We thought fit to modify the sacramental formula in such a way that, in view of the words of James, the effects of the sacrament might be fully expressed.

Since olive oil, which until now had been prescribed for the valid administration of the Sacrament, is unobtainable or difficult to obtain in some parts of the world, we decreed, at the request of numerous bishops, that in the future, according to the circumstances, another kind of oil could also be used, provided that it be obtained from plants, inasmuch as it is similar to olive oil.

As regards the number of anointings and the parts of the body to be anointed, it has seemed opportune to simplify the rite.

Therefore, since this revision in certain points touches upon the sacramental rite itself, by our apostolic authority we lay down that the following is to be observed for the future in the Latin Rite:

The sacrament of the anointing of the sick is administered to those who are dangerously ill, by anointing them on the forehead and hands with properly blessed olive oil or, if opportune, with another vegetable oil and saying once only the following words: “Per istam Sanctam Unctionem et suam piissimam misericordiam adiuvet te Dominus gratia Spiritus Sancti, ut a peccatis liberatum te salvet atque propitius allevet.”

In case of necessity, however, it is sufficient that a single anointing be given on the forehead or, because of the particular condition of the sick person, on another more suitable part of the body, the whole formula being pronounced.

This sacrament can be repeated if the sick person, having received the anointing, recovers and then again falls ill or if, in the course of the same illness, the danger becomes more serious.

Having established and declared all these elements concerning the essential rite of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, by our apostolic authority we also approve the Order of the Anointing of the Sick and of their pastoral care, which has been revised by the Congregation for Divine Worship. At the same time, where necessary, we derogate from the prescriptions of the Code of Canon Law or other laws hitherto in force, or we abrogate them; other prescriptions and laws, which are neither abrogated nor changed by the abovementioned order, remain valid and in force. The Latin edition of the order containing the new rite will come into force as soon as it is published; the editions in the vernacular languages, prepared by the episcopal conferences and confirmed by the Apostolic See, will come into force on the dates to be laid down by the individual conferences. The old order may be used until December 31, 1973. From January 1, 1974, however, only the new order is to be used by those concerned.

We intend that everything we have laid down and prescribed should be firm and effective in the Latin Rite, notwithstanding, where relevant, the apostolic constitutions and ordinances issued by our predecessors and other prescriptions, even if worthy of special mention.

Given in Rome at Saint Peter's, on the thirtieth day of November, in the year 1972, the tenth of our pontificate.

Paul PP. VI

NOTES

¹ Council of Trent, Session XIV, *De extr. unct.*, chapter 1 (cf. *ibid.*, canon 1): CT, VII, 1, 355-356; Denz.-Schön. 1695, 1716.

² Letter *Si Instituta Ecclesiastica*, chapter 8: PL, 20, 559-561; Denz.-Schön. 216.

³ *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Aeclesiae Ordinis Anni Circuli*, ed. L. C. Mohlberg (*Rerum Ecclesiasticarum Documenta, Fontes, IV*), Rome 1960, p. 61; *Le Sacramentaire Grégorien*, ed. J. Deshusses (*Spicilegium Friburgense, 16*), Fribourg 1971, p. 172; cf. *La Tradition Apostolique de Saint Hippolyte*, ed. B. Botte (*Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen, 39*) Münster in W. 1963, pp. 18-19; *Le Grand Euchologe du Monastère Blanc*, ed. E. Lanne (*Patrologia Orientalis, XXVIII, 2*), Paris 1958, pp. 392-395.

⁴ Cf. *Pontificale Romanum: Ordo benedicendi Oleum Catechumenorum et Infirmorum et conficiendi Chrisma*, Vatican City 1971, pp. 11-12.

⁵ Cf. M. Andrieu, *Le Pontifical Romain au Moyen-Age*, vol. 1, *Le Pontifical Romain du XI^e siècle* (Studi e Testi, 86), Vatican City 1938, pp. 267-268; vol. 2, *Le Pontifical de la Curie Romaine au XIII^e siècle* (Studi e Testi, 87), Vatican City 1940, pp. 491-492.

⁶ *Decr. pro Armeniis*, G. Hofmann, Council of Florence, I/II, p. 130; Denz.-Schön. 1324f.

⁷ Council of Trent, Sess. XIV, *De extr. unct.* chapter 2: CT, VII, 1, 356; Denz.-Schön. 1696.

⁸ *Ibid.*, chapter 3: CT, *ibid.*; Denz.-Schön. 1698.

⁹ *Ibid.*, chapter 3, canon 4: CT, *ibid.*; Denz.-Schön. 1697, 1719.

¹⁰ Second Vatican Council, Const. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 73; AAS, LVI (1964) 118-119.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 11: AAS, LVII (1965) 15.

¹² Cf. Second Vatican Council, Const. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1: AAS LVI (1964) 97.

