

Mass with Anointing of the Sick  
October 30, 2021

We are celebrating this morning two sacraments—not only the Eucharist but also the Anointing of the Sick. The scriptural basis for this latter sacrament is most clearly expressed in the Letter of James, where we read: “Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise him up.” We also know that over the centuries this sacrament became narrowed down, often understood as to be given only to persons near the point of death—and for that reason it was long called “extreme unction.” We can be glad that the liturgical reforms of Vatican II restored the original sense of the sacrament as one offered to anyone who is sick. Indeed, many of the prayers of this sacrament ask the Lord for the restoration of physical health. For example, one of them prays that the Lord Jesus, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, will “heal the weakness of your servant, forgive his sins, expel all afflictions of mind and body, mercifully restore him to full health, and enable him to resume his former duties.” This prayer calls to mind the various healings that Jesus himself performed during his time on earth, such as restoring sight to blind Bartimaeus, as we heard in last Sunday’s Gospel.

Such prayer is rightly the way we are to pray when first faced with some illness of mind or body. A person might say to himself something like “God wants to free me from this diminishment—God wants this chalice to be taken from me.” In his wonderful book *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard de Chardin wrote: “To struggle against evil, and to reduce to a minimum even the ordinary physical evil which threatens us, is unquestionably the first act of our Father who is in heaven. It would be impossible to conceive of God, and still more impossible to love Him, under any other form.”

This is the kind of prayer that Jesus himself prayed in the Garden of Gethsemani, asking the Father to take the chalice of suffering from him—but with the important addition: “yet not my will but yours be done.” All of us know that however successfully we may have dealt with these passivities of diminishment in the course of our life, sooner or later we confront the reality that one or another of these passivities has installed itself at the very heart of our life: if not by some fatal accident that can take the life of even the very young, then certainly old age with that essential deterioration from which none of us can escape, leading us to an end that is the sum and consummation of all the previous diminishments. So it was with Jesus on Calvary; so will it be for us. The liturgy’s recognition of this truth is expressed in some of the other prayers for this sacrament of anointing, such as the following: “God of mercy, look kindly on your servants who have grown weak under the burden of years.... Fill them with the strength of your Holy Spirit. Keep them firm in faith and serene in hope, so that they may give us all an example of patience and may joyfully witness to the power of your love.”

At that point in the life of anyone of us, we lose all foothold within ourselves and are called to trust lovingly in the God who raised Jesus from death and calls us to share in his victory. None of us can know with absolute certainty when a prayer for full healing or, on the other hand, a prayer of total surrender in the face of death is more called for, because this is simply not up to us. But even with that degree of uncertainty, we can pray in words such as these from Fr. Teilhard: “O Lord, the more deeply the physical evil is encrusted in my flesh, the more it will be you that I am harboring—you as a loving principle of purification and detachment. The more the future opens before me like some dizzy abyss, the more confident I may be of losing myself and surrendering myself to you.”

In that spirit of trust in our loving and saving God, we now turn to the rite of anointing.