

Father Keith Burney  
Pastoral Reflection for 08/26/2021

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Recently, I was asked to write a pastoral reflection on the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, in order to remind people when, and under what conditions, they should request this sacrament for themselves or for their loved ones. Unfortunately, even in our day and age people continue to connect this sacrament to ideas they have about the “Last Rites,” so they will wait to request the Anointing of the Sick until the very moment of death. Consequently, some people are even afraid of the sacrament, because they believe that requesting it means death is imminent.

The Second Vatican Council clearly taught that the Anointing of the Sick “is not a sacrament for those only at the point of death.” In addition to those who are dying, people who are seriously ill, who are about to have surgery, or who have been weakened by advanced age should also receive the sacrament. The General Introduction to the Rite of the Anointing of the Sick says that “...the Church exhorts them to associate themselves willingly with the passion and death of Christ.” Moreover, it continues:

“Those who are seriously ill need the special help of God’s grace in this time of anxiety, lest they be broken in spirit and, under the pressure of temptation perhaps weakened in their faith.

“This is why, through the sacrament of anointing, Christ strengthens the faithful who are afflicted by illness, providing them with the strongest means of support.”

Even if the Anointing of the Sick is being requested for someone who is dying, if possible, it should be requested and administered *before* the person is imminently at the point of death, for several reasons. First, if the person is still conscious, he or she will have the opportunity to make a final Confession, to receive Holy Communion as Viaticum (or “food for the journey”), *and* to receive the Anointing of the Sick in preparation to go home to God. Additionally, it is also ideal to have family and friends present for the anointing, in order to pray for and with the dying person. Finally, requesting the sacrament before someone is imminently dying avoids the worry of whether or not a priest will be available to come at the last minute. Of course, emergencies do happen, and priests will make every effort to come anoint the dying when we’re called to do so. It is our privilege to administer the sacraments, especially in those trying times, and to make sure souls are ready to meet the Lord face-to-face.

God bless,  
Father Keith