

5 Sunday A (Anointing of the Sick)

February 5, 2023

St. Patrick

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We heard from the New Testament Letter of James: **“Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.”** And then James ends in teaching about healing, **“The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”**

I love this sacrament of healing—the Anointing of the Sick. Only in the mid-1970s, after the Second Vatican Council, the church encouraged this sacrament to be celebrated also during Sunday Mass, in a communal setting, and not only at the hospital or at a sick bed. It encourages us, as church, that *we* pray over the sick, together, led by the one High Priest, Jesus.

As St. James reminds us: **“The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”** Yes, the church wants us to pray together.

It was in 1977, in my first parish after being ordained a priest. I served at St. Paul’s Church in Whitehaven. Pope Paul VI told us that we could begin celebrating the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick in the context of the Sunday Mass. It was a big deal, and we catechized the parishioners of St. Paul at length, teaching what the Sacrament of Anointing means.

We were going to celebrate this sacrament at all the Sunday Masses in a couple of weeks. I visited the homebound every First Friday and brought them Holy Communion. At the beginning of that month, I told all the families of the homebound about the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. I taught that it was no longer called “Extreme Unction”—what this sacrament was called when it was celebrated only right before a person died. No, the Church went back to the teaching in the Letter of St. James and the early tradition of the church. It is, rather, a sacrament of healing and hope.

The first family I visited that First Friday lived on Winchester Road. It was Sy Pretti and his wife Rosie. Sy had suffered a stroke and was confined to a wheel chair. I talked with them, and the caregiver who assisted in his care, about the

Sacrament of Anointing, and would be able to bring Sy to that Sunday Mass. We were all excited.

As I left, the caregiver led me to the front door. Before opening the door, she looked at me and asked, “Father, can I be anointed with that special oil too?” She told me about her ailment.

I was stunned. So new to being a priest, I had never had such a question asked. I was pretty sure that she was of another Christian faith. It just came out of me, hopefully Spirit-led, “Sure, that would be wonderful!”

Later on, I had a hunch what the “correct” answer might be. This anointing was a sacrament for Catholics only. Instead, I could ask God’s blessing on her.

That Sunday this caregiver stood next to Sy and both received the sacrament with joyful and profound devotion. She, as was he, were deeply touched by the laying-on of hands and by the Anointing.

So was I. That was an “aha” moment for me—an epiphany of what it means really to be “Catholic,” that is, all embracing.

As St. James taught, **“The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”** That caregiver’s faith, Sy’s faith...and, yes, *our* faith is powerful, as we together humbly ask God for the healing that each person to be anointed most needs.