

# Anointing of the Sick: The Mystery of Illness

**W**e get hurt. We wear out. The lungs, the eyes, the memory, and any of the many limbs and organs that compose us break or ache. Gloom comes over us then: pity for ourselves, sorrow, depression, anger. But hope can come, too, and courage, and sometimes peace.

All of this is marked and celebrated in the rites of our tradition. With a word and a deed, with touch and breath and spit and mud, Jesus heals those who ail. In every place and time, we who are the church remember and tell stories of healing, anoint the sick with oil and share the one bread even with those who cannot assemble for Mass. Thus the sick and the healthy, the homebound and the spry, saints and sinners are made one and remain one, a single body of many parts.

Anyone who is seriously ill can be anointed, including the elderly who become weaker, even if no illness is present; those waiting for surgery when a serious condition is the reason for the operation; sick children who have sufficient use of reason to be helped by the celebration; and those who are unconscious or who have lost the use of reason, provided that they probably would have asked for the sacrament had they the use of their faculties. Furthermore, many forms of mental illness are now known to be serious. So the mentally ill may be anointed, provided that they will be helped and not harmed by the rite. If you have questions, consult a priest or other parish leader.

The most complete celebration of the sacrament is a communal one, a celebration in which those to be anointed are surrounded and supported by other members of the Christian community, whether at home, or in the house of the church (for those who can leave their beds and come here). In song and in silence, with scriptures and prayers, we strengthen the bonds of love and faith that are stronger than the most lethal disease and more powerful even than death.

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