

THE GIFT OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

A PREPARATION GUIDE FOR THE SACRAMENT

MARY KATHLEEN GLAVICH, SND

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CONTENTS

A Sacrament for Healing • 7

Help for a Hurting World • 9

One of the Seven Sacraments • 15

History of the Sacrament • 23

Signs and Symbols • 27

The Rite of the Anointing of the Sick • 33

The Last Rites • 37

Questions about the Anointing of the Sick • 41

Scripture Readings for the Anointing of the Sick • 47

Prayers for the Sick • 55

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I Corinthians 15:53–57



A SACRAMENT FOR HEALING

DEAR READER,

If you are reading this book, it is most likely because you or your loved one is about to receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, either individually or in a communal setting. This book is meant to prepare you for receiving that sacrament.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick was commonly called “Extreme Unction,” and ordinarily it was administered only when a person was actually dying and all hope for recovery was gone. Consequently it tended to be something to fear and avoid, almost as if it were “the kiss of death.” Now the Anointing of the Sick has become a welcome and consoling event—a striking way that the Church supports and intercedes for those who are sick. In the process of bringing the Church up to date on many fronts, Vatican II also gave the “sacrament of the sick” an “extreme makeover.”

By changing the name, reasons, rites and occasions for the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, the Church actually restored it to its original form. Now this sacrament is more clearly an extension of the healing ministry of Jesus. It is a way we can experience his comfort and healing today and show support and love to our fellow Christians whenever they are seriously ill.

Because the Anointing of the Sick was usually part of the Last Rites—along with the sacrament of Penance (the other healing sacrament) and *Viaticum* (the Latin word for what is expected to be our final Communion)—the Anointing of the Sick came to be regarded as a last chance to squeeze through heaven’s gates. Today the Anointing of the Sick is not meant to be the last sacrament received but rather a ritual

of compassion that can be performed whenever anyone becomes gravely ill. The emphasis today is on the Anointing of the Sick's potential to strengthen us during illness, give us hope, and possibly even cure us if that is the divine will.

For example, many parishes occasionally offer the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick during a communal celebration. At the priest's invitation people stream down the aisles, hoping to be healed. This was unheard of in modern times until the Second Vatican Council.

You may be puzzled or curious by these changes. You or your loved one may be hesitant to receive this anointing at times when it could do a world of good. You may not be sure exactly when to ask for the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick or how to prepare for or celebrate it. If any or all of these are true, then this book is for you.

In these pages you will discover the beauty of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick as a celebration of faith. You will learn its history, the meaning of its symbols, the different ways it may be carried out, and its effects—both physical and spiritual. You will come to understand that through the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick we experience the healing touch of Jesus, the Divine Physician, and know his love.

Sister Mary Kathleen Glavich, SND

HELP FOR A HURTING WORLD

Health, wholeness, holiness—these three words are related. They are the ideal we all strive for. The Bible says that when we were created, God saw that we were “very good.” God had great dreams for us: We would live forever, sharing his life and love, and be holy and happy.

Then came the nightmare. Our first parents, whom we call Adam and Eve, committed the original sin, shattering their friendship with God and allowing evil to enter the world. Ever since then, human beings and our planet-home have been “sick.” We are now imperfect beings in an imperfect world. We get headaches and colds, cancer and AIDS. We are proud and selfish, mean and dishonest. We fight wars and commit acts of terrorism and inhumanity on one another. Earth itself suffers natural disasters, some caused by our failure to care for the environment.

God, however, has not given up on us but constantly works toward making us healthy, whole and holy—even to the point of sending his Son to conquer evil and repair our relationship with God and with one another. By sharing our human condition, by suffering and dying, Jesus overcame sin and death. We say he won for us salvation, a word derived from the Latin *salus*, which means “health.” In all that he did, Jesus carried out his self-proclaimed mission: “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

JESUS THE HEALER

Jesus both announced and initiated God’s kingdom. During public ministry in Israel, he demonstrated his power over evil by many forms of healing: He calmed storms and cast out devils; he healed people by forgiving their sins and giving them a new lease on life; he cured the blind, the lame, the deaf, paralyzed people and lepers. All were healed by his

What was visible in the Lord
has passed over into the sacraments.

Pope Leo the Great



touch. Jesus even brought people back to life.

Much of Jesus' time was spent healing. Why? Because healing is at the heart of the work of redemption. His final triumph over evil was achieved through his suffering, death, and rising to new life. Because of this "Paschal Mystery," all of us are saved, all of us are healed, and all of us can look forward to eternal life. We have Jesus' word for it.

MIRACLES HAPPEN EVERY DAY

Miracles of healing take place every day. It is part of the establishment of God's kingdom "on earth, as it is in heaven," as Jesus taught us to pray. It is a kingdom that is paradoxically already begun but not yet realized.

Every time that a doctor or nurse treats a patient, Jesus is there. Every time a researcher makes a discovery that might lead to the discovery of a vaccine or a new medicine, Jesus is carrying out his mission. Every time that a caregiver eases a loved one's pain, Jesus heals.

Jesus did not retire. Instead he handed on his ministry to his apostles, so that through his Church and its sacraments he could continue to do good and fight evil. The redemption of the world goes on. Jesus heals broken spirits through the Sacrament of Penance, and he heals broken bodies, minds and hearts through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

God's compassion for the sick is shown in nonsacramental ways too. Shrines like Lourdes in France or Fatima in Portugal are famous for unexplainable cures that occur for pilgrims to them. Many saints are known for their ministering to the sick, and some saints and holy people (such as Brother André Besette and Father Solanus Casey) were blessed with the gift of healing. Certain religious communities founded to care for the sick began the enterprise of hospitals. Recently the charismatic movement arose, in which healing—a charismatic gift of the Holy Spirit—is a primary component.

Impetus for concern for the sick is given by Jesus' identity with them. He said, "I was sick and you took care of me" (Matthew 25:36). For his followers, visiting the sick is a corporal work of mercy, that is, a ticket to heaven. Through Jesus and the compassion of his Church, God constantly proves his words, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). Our God continues to show tender care for us.

THE EFFICACY OF SUFFERING

Illness, pain, and suffering are not good. These evils should not be simply endured but combated. This doesn't mean that suffering has no benefits. On the contrary, illness may lead a person to conversion of heart. Also the sick remind the rest of us that life is fragile and fleeting and that we'd better keep higher things in mind. God never fails to draw good out of evil.

Someone might ask about a sick person, "What did he or she do to deserve this?" But our God is not an "ambush" god. He does not dole out sickness or any other kind of evil as punishment for an individual sinner. Jesus dispelled that notion, which was common among the people of his time, even as it persists among many people today.

However you look at it, suffering remains a great mystery. In Scripture, when his unjust suffering puzzled Job, the only answer he received from God was this: Who are you to question the almighty creator? Because of Jesus, however, Christians can take suffering to another level. He truly is our "Wounded Healer," and by accepting our cross and uniting our suffering with his, we can join in his saving work. Our suffering too becomes redemptive. Patiently endured, it can make up for our sins as well as the sins of others. In this light, our suffering is not meaningless

but can become fruitful, even if there is nothing else we have to offer. Closer union with Jesus in his suffering and death is a special and important vocation, in and of itself.