

15th Sunday (B)

15th July 2018

‘Anointing them with oil’

Amos 7: the Lord took me from herding the flock. Ps 84: I will hear what the Lord God has to say ... Eph 1: *In Him we have redemption through His blood*
Mk 6: 7–13: *take nothing for the journey*

By this time next week I will be in Lourdes on the diocesan pilgrimage. One of the loveliest moments in the week comes when in a special ceremony we celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick for the frailer, and more-sick members of the Pilgrimage. Today’s readings gives me a chance to speak about this Sacrament, from those last few lines of the Gospel: *they ... anointed many sick people with oil and cured them* (Mk 6:13). Probably — along with the ordination of priests — the Sacrament of the Sick is the least-known, least experienced, Sacrament of the Church ... and yet it is crying out to be better understood.

The Apostles, going out according to Jesus’s commands, to the towns and villages of Galilee, take with them not just the spoken message of the Gospel, but also the power of Christ to heal and comfort. Quite clearly, according to this passage we’ve just heard, there was an anointing with holy oil that accompanied their prayer of

healing; and this is direct evidence for the anointing from Christ that we celebrate today as the Sacrament of the Sick.

The reason I am keen to speak of it is that there is much misunderstanding over this sacrament, and many Catholics will leave off asking to receive it even when seriously ill. Families are often reluctant to call the priest to visit and anoint a sick loved one, since they fear that it would be tantamount to ‘giving up’ on them — admitting finally that they’re dying. Well, the Sacrament of the Sick should not necessarily have those connotations. As believing Catholics we should long for the healing and comforting presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives; we should really desire the Spirit’s presence, especially when we are weak or sick, facing major surgery or even death ... At these vulnerable times of life we should deeply yearn to receive God’s gifts of grace in the sacraments. Let me make a few key points:

1. The Sac. of the Sick is *not* just for those who are dying. It is for the dying, but it is not *only* for the dying. It is for anyone with a degree of serious illness — which can include a mental illness. It can be given to those about to undergo

major surgery; and to anyone who is frail through old age.

2. The Church intends that the Sacrament is given to those who are conscious: there are, just like in any other liturgy, beautiful responses that form a part of the rite; and so it is intended that the person being anointed, and their family and friends with them too, can join in the prayers. It is, like so much in the Church, a prayer of the community: the sacrament is celebrated in the context of Christ's people, surrounding the sick person with faith-filled love & prayers.
3. In some cases, of course, anointing will take place for a very sick person who is no longer conscious; the Sacrament is still effective, but it affords the sick person less personal and conscious involvement. In sickness one needs a whole range of support, including emotional and spiritual support; and the Sacrament can provide this, by the grace of God. It is never sensible to keep putting off the Sacrament until someone is unconscious and unable to participate fully in the rite. The priest of course will anoint those on the point of dying; but it is better if he's had the chance to minister to the sick person on prior occasions too if possible.
4. The Sacrament of the Sick is meant to form one part of the rites for those who are dying: the Church's intention is for

those in serious illness to be able to receive forgiveness in Confession; Anointing with the Sac. of the Sick; and then also Holy Communion. Sometimes, owing to their condition, it may be that a spoken Confession, and the actual swallowing of the Blessed Sacrament, is impossible, in which case the Anointing alone will suffice, but it is not what is ideal.

So, in essence, we must not fear, but embrace the Sacrament of the Sick when the times comes for us, or for some sick relative. A friend of mine who, after a major operation and a recovery, chose to offer himself for training as a priest, and is now a parish priest and hospital chaplain, once told me this: *My own memories of being anointed, just before going into theatre for my transplant, often help me empathize with patients when I am on call. It was a most wonderful experience and left me feeling perfectly accepting of either death or life.* This is a note of blessed hope, reminding us of the power of Christ over life and death, and blesses us with all the graces in our needs! Let's never fear the Lord's sacraments; let's want His divine help when we are humanly at our weakest moments.