

THE DEATH OF THE "LAST RITES"

Here's a quiz for you. True or false?

- T F 1. As soon as a Catholic dies you should call a priest to anoint the body.
- T F 2. Those who die without receiving the last rites are in danger of losing their salvation.
- T F 3. If you're sick and a priest enters the room you know the end is near.
- T F 4. If your parish offers a communal anointing of the sick at Sunday Mass, everyone should feel free to receive the sacrament.
- T F 5. The sacrament for the dying is now called the anointing of the sick.
- T F 6. If a priest is unavailable a deacon can administer the anointing of the sick.
- T F 7. If a priest comes to your house to anoint the sick, everyone else should leave the room.

When it comes to the last rites, confusion still reigns among Catholics and non-Catholics alike. At the time of a Catholic's death, many expect it's time for an anointing. But that may not be appropriate at all. To make the confusion worse, we don't really have a single ritual properly called "last rites" even though most people assume we do. We have several rites that we may celebrate for the sick, the dying, and the dead, but they go by various titles under the general heading, "Rite of Anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick."

When someone you love is sick and dying, or if *you* are sick and dying, you'll want the best spiritual care the church can provide. But all too often the sick do not receive the sacraments when they can do the most good. In extreme cases, some families wait until the one they love is near death before they first contact the parish. We have a rich array of sacraments and prayers for the sick, but like china in the cabinet they often go unused.

By the way, that quiz you just took? All those statements are false.

The old system was easier to remember: Last rites. Last of the seven sacraments. Last day of life. The sacrament we called "extreme unction" served the dying. When someone lay near death, you called the priest, whatever the time day or night. He would come anoint and pray for the one who was dying. The name of the sacrament used two words not in common usage, but easy enough to figure out. "Unction" referred to the anointing. "Extreme" meant "last" or "at the point of death." If you were very sick at home when the priest came to visit, his appearance could have scared the living daylights out of you. You knew that everybody had given up on you. Time to call the priest. The family's last great act of charity for the one who had lived among them with faith.

Memories of the old system still languish. Some Catholics get nervous if their priest is inaccessible, takes a day off, or goes on vacation. They want him handy in case of an emergency, like a fire extinguisher or a seatbelt. But the diversification of priestly ministry and the dwindling numbers of priests in pastoral service have reduced availability. People fear that one of the casualties of the priest shortage is the death of the last rites. Since only a priest can give the sacrament, they smell trouble if one won't be around when they die.

The "last rites" as we knew them have died. But it's not because priests are scarce. It's because the system has been upgraded.

The new system provides ample opportunity for care. The church offers a variety of rites for the stages of sickness and death. A priest need not be on hand for all of them, and the one which requires his presence, anointing, can be done regularly and peacefully throughout the advance of illness. If someone dies after an illness without having been anointed because no priest could be found at the last minute, the problem may not be the shortage of priests but the shortsightedness or misunderstanding of the caregivers.

Besides, if you're putting your stock in deathbed rituals to get you through the pearly gates of heaven while living a life distant from the sacraments, you've missed out on some of the basics about church, faith, and salvation.

The church offers a variety of sacraments to the sick and the dying: reconciliation, anointing, communion, and even confirmation.

The basics are these: The sacraments of reconciliation and anointing require the ministry of a priest. Reconciliation is encouraged throughout one's life; anointing is given to the sick and may be repeated when a sickness advances or returns. The goal of both sacraments is healing.

Communion may be brought to any of the sick who cannot attend church. As death approaches, it should be given as "viaticum", the communion of the dying. A priest may administer confirmation to one who is dying who has never been confirmed.

Other prayers that do not include the sacraments are most appropriate for the sick, the dying, and the recently deceased.

Here are some scenarios to consider:

- You've broken your leg and you're not allowed to drive. You might be able to get a ride to church, but the effort will wear you out just trying to get to a pew. You'd like some spiritual nourishment. What rites can the church offer you?

You're probably not a candidate for the anointing of the sick. Candidates for this sacrament are described as "dangerously ill due to sickness or old age." But you are eligible for a share in the Sunday eucharist. Any minister of holy communion can bring communion to your home. When lay ministers are appointed to that task for your parish they accept the responsibility of distributing communion in church, but also to serve the sick and homebound. Only a designated minister of holy communion should bring you the sacrament, not just any family member or friend.

If you'd like to celebrate reconciliation, you may ask your priest to come.

- You're going in for serious surgery next week. You're still mobile, but would like some prayers from the church to help you prepare yourself. What should you ask for?

Ask for the anointing of the sick. The rite says, "A sick person should be anointed before surgery whenever a dangerous illness is the reason for the surgery." This sacrament is not for saying goodbye to the dying. It's to bring healing to the sick. If you're facing serious surgery, you're a candidate for the anointing. Only a priest is authorized to administer this sacrament. No deacon or communion minister may do so. Your priest may celebrate anointing at a daily or Sunday Mass at church, or in a prayer service at your home or in the hospital, with or without communion. If you have family or friends around, let them join in the prayers. They don't have to leave the room unless you'd like some privacy for the sacrament of reconciliation or to discuss a personal matter with the priest. The rite of anointing presumes that some of the faithful will be on hand to join in the responses, the readings, and the prayers. They can even sing songs.

- You're 67 years old and basically in good health. You show up at church one Sunday and discover that the priest will offer the anointing of the sick to the congregation. Should you receive the sacrament or wait for another time?

Get yourself up there and receive the sacrament. Candidates for the sacrament include those who are advanced in age. There's no defined number of years, but if you're collecting senior citizen discounts at the mall, shouldn't you consider yourself eligible for this?

- You've been struggling with cancer for several years and it's come back more serious than ever. You're tired of chemotherapy. Your quality of life has deteriorated. Your doctors have told you treatment will only briefly prolong the inevitable. You've thought and prayed about it a lot. You've been anointed several times over the years. You honestly feel it's time to prepare to die. Should you ask for the sacrament of anointing?

This is the time to prepare for viaticum. The anointing of the sick is a prayer for healing. If you're not ready to go and you'd like another chance, ask your doctor for treatment and ask your priest for anointing. If you're preparing yourself to die, choose viaticum. If an anointing would make you feel better, you certainly may request it. You always have the option to be anointed during the rites for the dying, even just before receiving communion as viaticum, but viaticum is the more important sacrament.

Viaticum is a special form of communion given only to the dying. If there is a sacrament of "last rites," this is it. Viaticum may be administered by a priest or any communion minister. It is best to request it when you know you are dying, are still

conscious, and can swallow. The rite of viaticum may begin either with the sacrament of reconciliation or with a penitential rite like the one we use at Mass. In either case, if your minister of viaticum is a priest, he will give you a plenary indulgence on this occasion. (Yes, they still exist.) After the scriptures, the minister will invite you to renew your baptismal promises, lead a brief litany of prayer, and offer you communion as usual. The minister will then say, "May the Lord Jesus Christ protect you and lead you to eternal life." You answer "Amen". You may receive communion under the form of bread or wine or both. Others present may receive communion. All may then exchange a sign of peace.

If someone you love is dying, it is best to request viaticum under the same conditions: while he or she is still conscious and can swallow. When death is near, and when the one dying has accepted her or his condition, the time for anointing has passed. It is time for viaticum.

- You haven't been to confession in years, and you'd like to go, but you just haven't done it. You're basically living a good life, and you figure you can always make a good confession when you're dying.

The sacrament of reconciliation is intended to help us make a change of heart. If you're putting off reconciliation, you might ask yourself a tough question: Could it be that you really don't want to change your behaviors? In fact, would you literally rather die than change? The church offers us this sacrament of God's mercy for our spiritual growth. It enhances our personal life and stabilizes the peace in our community. The church cannot guarantee you the presence of a priest at the time of your death, but it does strive to keep the sacrament of reconciliation within easy reach throughout your life.

If you're taking care of people who are very sick or dying, you may ask them if they'd like a priest to visit for reconciliation. It's up to them. You can make the arrangements at a time agreeable to patient and priest.

- You've never been confirmed. Now you're dying. You've always been told that you should celebrate the sacrament of confirmation, but it never seemed very important. Now you're starting to wonder. But the preparation required for the sacrament sounds like more work than you can do in your condition.

Cheer up. Any priest may confirm you in this condition. If kids ever complain about the preparation for confirmation and ask for a way just to get confirmed without having to go through all the requirements, tell them there is a way. They can start dying. No classes. No service projects. No wait for the bishop. Any priest can confirm the dying.

Seriously, if you've never been confirmed and find yourself near death, let your priest know. The church greatly desires that all members be confirmed. But if you've never been confirmed and are not near death, follow the local procedures to celebrate the sacrament as soon as possible.

- You're taking care of a dying relative in your home. She's been anointed several times and has received communion as viaticum. Now, she's unconscious, dying. You'd like someone to lead some prayers. Is there anything left the church can offer?

Yes, the church offers "The Commendation of the Dying." This set of prayers appears in the same book the priest uses when he anoints the sick, so few people ever see it. Anyone at all can lead these prayers. You don't have to be a priest, a deacon, or a communion minister. The commendation includes a series of short scripture quotes, readings, the litany of the saints, and a set of other prayers. If you don't have the official texts, do not despair. Any prayers are appropriate for the dying. Read from the bible. Pray the rosary. Turn to a favorite prayer book. You certainly may ask a priest to lead these prayers, but if he cannot come when you think it's time, you yourself or anyone else may lead these "last rites."

If you wish, the priest may anoint someone who is no longer conscious, but the sacrament will have more significance if it can be administered prior to that time.

- The person you've been caring for has died. Are there any more prayers which should be said?

Any prayers can be said. We do have "Prayers for the Dead" in the same official book. As with the prayers for the dying, you may ask a priest to come, but if he cannot, anyone may lead the prayers for the dead. If you don't have the official book, any other source will do just fine. If you'd like to pray as an individual or a family, then pray the way you know how.

It is not appropriate for the priest to anoint someone who has died. If there is reasonable doubt, he may anoint conditionally by saying first, "If you are alive, we pray. . . ." This practice used to be more common--just to make sure, in case some life was left. However, sacraments are for those who are living. Once you've died you don't need sacraments any more. You may meet Christ face to face.

So, back to the true or false statements.

1. False. If someone has died, a priest does not anoint. He or someone else may lead prayers for the dead.
2. False. The sacraments and prayers the church offers to the dying do not guarantee eternal life. They are celebrations of the faith of the individuals who are dying and the community that supports them. If someone tragically dies without access to the church's sacramental ministry, it does not spell eternal condemnation. The all-powerful Christ may still work salvation for those who believe.
3. False. If a priest enters the room when you're sick and offers to celebrate the sacrament of anointing, it may be because you can still get better. There's no need to think the end is near just because he walked in.
4. False. Not everyone is eligible for the sacrament of the anointing when it is offered at Mass. Candidates are those who have a serious illness, are facing serious treatment, or are of an age when they are susceptible to illness. If you're of reasonably good health, and younger than elderly, you should hold off.
5. False. The sacrament of the dying is not the anointing of the sick. The anointing is for the living and it prays for healing. The real sacrament of the dying is viaticum, "last communion," which gives food for the journey to eternal life.
6. False. Only a priest may offer the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. Deacons do not have permission to do so. At other times of our history as a church, deacons and even some laity anointed the sick. But the church currently restricts the administration of this sacrament to ordained priests. Still, other ministers may effectively offer other prayers for the sick and dying, and should be invited frequently to do so.
7. False. If you're present when the priest arrives to anoint, don't run away. Hang in there and join in the prayers.

Within a Christian's life, here's how the anointing might fit. Live life in close union with the sacraments, including Confirmation, the Eucharist, and Reconciliation. If you face some serious illness, or if you've reached an age when you're more susceptible to one, present yourself for the anointing of the sick. You may do so repeatedly in your life--once or twice a year if you wish. More frequently if a serious illness advances. If you sense the approach of death, you may request viaticum. At the end of your life, friends and family may offer the commendation for the dying, and after your death they may offer you prayers for the dead.

The church has made the sacraments for the sick more available now than they ever have been. The old system of "last rites" has died, but a new more diverse one has been born. The care we give the dying will strengthen our own faith in the one who promises us victory in life over death.

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