

Seven Sacraments
Our Encounter with Christ
Reconciliation and Anointing: Sacraments of Healing

For the past several weeks I have been writing about three sacraments that we call the “Sacraments of Initiation.” They are called the Sacraments of Initiation because they *initiate* us into the great mystery of the Christian faith: the Mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. These three sacraments are Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. This week, I am writing about two sacraments we call “Sacraments of Healing.” They are the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which is also called Penance or Confession, and the Sacrament of Anointing, formerly called Last Rites.

Throughout our lives, there are moments we need to be healed, be it from spiritual or physical ailments. For example, there are moments we need to be reconciled to each other because we have broken the bond of friendship between ourselves and someone else. There are moments we need to be reconciled with God because we have broken our baptismal promises to live in and for Christ. And there are moments we need to be healed mentally or physically or strengthened when we are facing a serious illness. Within the community of the Church, it is the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing that respond to these profound physical and spiritual needs.

When we sin in a serious way (mortal sin) we disrupt our covenant relationship with God in a deadly way that needs to be repaired. When we sin in a less serious way (venial sin) we weaken our covenant relationship with God. All sin, be it mortal or venial, is a manifestation of “disordered love.” We love our will more than God’s will. We seek our selfish desires thinking they will bring us happiness rather than what is good. We love the creature more than the Creator. At such moments we need to be reconciled to God; we need to be forgiven. But try as we might, we cannot forgive ourselves: we must be forgiven by someone. We must be forgiven by Christ. This is why the Sacrament of Reconciliation is important. It is that moment when we encounter Christ and Christ does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Christ forgives our sins, no matter how serious they are. We are reconciled to God and to each other because Christ reconciles us to God.

There are other moments when we need spiritual and physical healing. We find ourselves suffering from a serious illness that may or may not be terminal. We are at an advanced age, weakened and near death. At such moments we have a profound need for the healing of our body and mind. It is at such moment that we can receive the Anointing of the Sick. This anointing is not a substitute for professional medical assistance. Rather, through the Sacrament of Anointing the entire church prays for the sick assuring them they are not alone. The entire church beseeches God to restore them to health.

This Sacrament was formerly called “Last Rites” because it was administered when someone was about to die or had just died. Today, we still have prayers of commendation for those who are about to die. But the Sacrament of the Sick plays a different role. Through it the entire church prays for and comforts the sick. This sacrament can be received often, and it should be received when we are seriously ill.

Next week I will consider two sacraments that define our vocations within the Body of Christ the Sacrament of Matrimony and the Sacrament of Holy Order. *Father Matera*