

Send For The Priest

Sacraments and the Sick

By Canon F. E. Pritchard.

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Whenever there is an invalid in the house, the priest ought to be told. His visit should never be looked upon as a danger signal. After all, he is a friend, not an undertaker; and visiting the sick, a great work of mercy, is an important part of his vocation. So give him a chance when need arises in your home. And do remember that, except in country districts, the fact of your having illness in your house will not be broadcast. The priest, who is not all-knowing, may hear nothing about your trouble for days, or even weeks, unless you tell him. In these days, too, when the hospital or the nursing home is the usual place for people to be ill, the place to which they are whisked off at the first vacancy, you ought to notify the priest at once.

(Note: When the patient is removed to the hospital, it is most important to tell the Sister in charge that your friend is a Catholic and wishes to see and be visited by the priest who attends the hospital. The case of nursing homes is still more urgent. Unless you tell the priest yourself, the patient may die without any priest being notified at all.)

It is not so easy, either for priest or for invalid, to get to business in a hospital ward. Moreover, a sickness, which begins with God's Blessing, will be more cheerfully borne, and a cheerful invalid recovers better and more rapidly than one who is harassed and sad. Priests are cheerful visitors and spread God's Peace; while sickness very often flings open the door for Grace.

The First Object.

Unless your sick call is for one in immediate danger, the first object of the priest will be to get into touch with the invalid. Very possibly the visit may end in nothing more alarming than a cheery "God Bless you," and a promise to call again in a day or two. Contact has been made, but just as the doctor does not give his views in the hearing of the patient, so the priest may wish to have a little talk with the relative in charge. Accompany him to the door of the house and tell him all he wants to know. His questions will not be prompted by idle curiosity. Quite often, too, he may be able to help in less immediately professional ways.

On the other hand, it must not be imagined that even when the sick person has become unconscious it is too late to call the priest. The goodness of God has provided even for this misfortune. So long as life remains, the priest is able to reach out, as it were, even into the unconscious and the last chance of Salvation is not yet gone. There is nothing sadder than the thought of a Catholic dying without the help of those Sacraments which were instituted for him as means of salvation and of which in his last hours he has so much need.

Send in Good Time.

Therefore, send for the priest, in good time if possible but, if necessary, even in the middle of the night. And, whenever you send, make sure that you send him all the information that can be of use. It is well to write it down. Say who is ill and at what address. Tell whether the sick person is a Catholic or only anxious to become one. Say the nature of the illness and whether the patient is conscious or not; whether able to swallow or unable to do so without vomiting. Mention also if any other priest has been called, and if so, whether he administered any Sacraments. All this is very useful. Try to send a grown-up Catholic with the message. In urgent cases if the messenger can wait to accompany the priest, so much the better. It will certainly save time, which may be all-important.

BE READY FOR THE PRIEST.

[Since Vatican II, the Church has issued The Rite of Anointing of the Sick and their Pastoral Care on 7 December, 1972. This document emphasized the pastoral dimension of the administration of the Sacrament and loosened the somewhat stringent pre-requisites, which our author will shortly outline and which were in place prior to Vatican II. It is, however, useful for devout Catholics to be aware of the reverential care taken by their Catholic ancestors in preparation for the worthy reception of the Sacraments.]

In every Catholic home one expects to see some objects of piety and in a sick-room a crucifix, at least, should be visible [if possible]. On Candlemas Day, 2nd February, the Feast of the Presentation of the Child Jesus, those present at Mass usually receive a blessed candle. If several members of the household are present, each one receives a candle, so that there may be several in the home.

[Blessed candles are ideal, but are no longer absolutely necessary.] Holy Water, too, may be had at church for the trouble of taking it away. [Holy water is ideal, but again, if you at least provide some water, the priest can bless it and change it into Holy Water.] These, then, with a small table, a small white cloth, or a table napkin, a wineglass or an egg-cup, and a tea-cup or saucer should be stored within reach for immediate use.

Choose a convenient spot in the sick-room, not too close to the bed, but within the range of the sick person's eyes. Then, when the priest is coming, arrange the table as a small altar. Put the clean cloth on it; put the crucifix at the back in the middle, either leaning against the wall or stuck into something that will hold it upright. The candles are arranged one on each side in a line with the crucifix.

The Place for the Holy Water.

The holy water, in the tea-cup or saucer, is put near one candle, together with a fresh sprig of privet or other green-stuff cut from the nearest hedge, to be used as a sprinkler. This should be in the holy water to avoid mistakes. The wine glass or egg-cup containing fresh drinking water is put beside the other candle, and a box with a match or two should be handy. Leave plenty of space in the front-middle of the table for the use of the priest. Should you have no candlesticks, a couple of old meat-paste jars can be made to serve. But even if you have none of these things do not get hot and bothered. Just tell the priest in your message, and he will bring his own. But there must be some clean place, where the Blessed Sacrament can be laid, and there must, at any rate, be something with clean water in it for the patient to drink after receiving Holy Communion. Also, there must be a chair by the head of the bed for the priest to sit on while hearing the sick person's confession. [The underlined sentences are the relevant ones for post Vatican II reception of these Sacraments of Confession, Communion (Viaticum) and Anointing.]

To be Kept Ready.

To resume. The following articles should be kept ready for the visit of the priest to administer any Sacrament:

- (a) TABLE NAPKIN or SMOOTH TOWEL to serve as ALTAR, CLOTH. [Yes.]
- (b) FOLDED HANDKERCHIEF to go under communicant's chin. [Recommended but not obligatory.]
- (c) TEA-CUP or SAUCER for holy water, and SPRIG of GREEN to sprinkle with. [Recommended but not obligatory.]
- (d) VERY SMALL HOLDER FOR DRINKING WATER, for example, WINEGLASS or EGG-CUP. [Yes.]
- (e) THREE CANDLES. HOLDERS OF SOME SORT FOR TWO of them. [Recommended but not obligatory.]
- (f) CRUCIFIX TO STAND or LEAN AGAINST WALL. [Highly recommended but not obligatory.]
- (g) SMALL STORE OF HOLY WATER (NOT Lourdes water). [Recommended but not obligatory.]
- (h) SMALL TABLE for "ALTAR." [Yes.]
- (i) CHAIR for the priest to sit on while hearing CONFESSION. [Yes.]

HOLY COMMUNION.

When anyone is house or bed-ridden for a considerable time, even though there be no danger of death, Holy Communion should be received as often as the priest thinks right [and at least as often as the patient was accustomed to receive while in good health]. The procedure for Holy Communion in the house never varies. It is the same for Holy Viaticum as it is for weekly or monthly reception. [What follows is the rite in accord with the rubrics of Saint Pius V. The more relaxed rubrics of Pope Paul VI are indicated in the square brackets.]

Awaiting the Priest.

Someone should be waiting near the entrance with a lighted candle. [Recommended but not obligatory.] As soon as the Blessed Sacrament arrives this light is carried before the priest to lead him to the sick-room. Here, the table has been prepared overnight and the candles are already burning. [Recommended but not obligatory.] Walking straight to the table the priest deposits his Sacred Burden in the middle and says certain (Latin) [or Vernacular] prayers, sprinkling the sick and the others in the room with holy water. Then, all go out of the sick-room and, closing the door, leave the priest to hear the invalid's confession. When this is over, the door will be opened, as a sign that all who wish may enter. They genuflect and take up their position, kneeling out of the gangway. One (or all) now repeats the Confiteor preferably in Latin. [The Penitential Act as at Mass is recommended to be said.] Then the priest, turning towards the sick, gives the general absolution as used at Mass. The appointed person now puts the folded handkerchief under the chin of the communicant. [Recommended but not obligatory.] Taking the Host and showing It, the priest now says, three times, the "Domine non sum dignus." [The "Lord, I am not worthy" prayer as at Mass is said.] Then he communicates the sick person and returns to the table where he attends to the pyx (the silver box in which he brought the Host), and then hands the glass or cup containing drinking water to the person in charge, who helps the patient to take a drink. (Any water, which remains over, should be poured out on to the earth in the garden or into the fire, when the priest has gone.)

If he still bears the Blessed Sacrament the priest will now turn round and make the sign of the cross with It over the people, in which case he must be conducted to the front door by the candle-bearer with lighted candle, and in silence. [Highly recommended but no longer obligatory.]

If he be not taking Holy Communion elsewhere, he will turn round and give an ordinary spoken blessing, signing the cross as usual with his hand as in Mass. He may or may not say prayers beside the bed according to his own judgment.

Note: If the patient is a woman, she should have her head covered just as in church, as also must any other ladies in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. [As most know now, this is recommended but no longer obligatory.]

THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK.

This Sacrament, commonly called Extreme Unction, and badly mispronounced at that, has suffered from its name. [Vatican II, in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, paragraph 73, recommended that it be called Anointing of the Sick.] But this is not an essay on philology or any kindred subject. It is enough to say that Extreme Unction has no special connection with being, as they say, “in extremis.” It is the bad and slovenly habit of too many, when translating, to jump at similarity of spelling and to conclude that there is identity of meaning, which is an error. Any Catholic who is seriously ill may be anointed. It is the last kind of anointing given by the Church. Babies are anointed on back and breast and head when they are baptized. [Breast and Head only are generally anointed in the revised ritual.] At Confirmation, we are anointed on the forehead. In the making of a priest his hands are anointed, when he becomes a bishop his head is anointed; and kings, of old, were called “the Lord’s Anointed” for the same reason. There remains only one more form of anointing, hence called the Last Anointing or, in Latin form, “Extrema Unctio.”

[Canon 1004 indicates succinctly who may receive the sacrament: "The anointing of the sick can be administered to a member of the faithful who, having reached the use of reason, begins to be in danger due to sickness or old age." When new illness develops or first illness relapses or worsens, the patient may receive the sacrament a further time. Anointing of the Sick may also be given numerous times in the case of old age or chronic illness based on the "pastoral judgment of the priest".]

What the Catechism Says.

Extreme Unction, as the Catechism tells us, is “the anointing of the sick with Holy Oil, accompanied by prayer.” It is true that this Sacrament may not be administered unless there is danger of death, (note that this does NOT mean that one must be at the POINT of death) but its secondary object is to remove that danger if God so wills, and it frequently does so — one might almost say more frequently than not. It is the doctor’s best auxiliary. How so? Because it completes the spiritual work of the Sacrament of Penance, removing all the vestiges of sin from the soul, and soothing away trouble and anxiety. The patient is at peace, and medicine and treatment have a far better chance to achieve their purpose. Therefore, the Sacrament should be called for and clamoured for, and not put off till disease has reduced patients to a condition from which nothing but a first-class miracle can deliver them. The Sacrament does not (ordinarily) work miracles — it acts, as it were, naturally on the body, through its supernatural effect on the soul.

Preparation for Anointing.

When therefore the priest in attendance considers that the patient should be anointed, the table should be prepared as for Holy Communion — cloth, crucifix, candles, holy water, but no drinking water, unless the patient is to communicate. See that the feet of the sick person are uncovered, and that the bedclothes will easily be turned up when the time comes. [This was necessary in the ritual of Saint Pius V, as the feet were anointed as well. Now only the forehead and hands are generally anointed.] If Holy Communion is to be given, it will precede the anointing, and will be given precisely as above in the section on that Sacrament. Immediately afterwards the anointing will be administered. [Since Vatican II, the Church now prefers to give Holy Communion after the Sacrament of Anointing, not before.] The priest will require assistance only at the anointing of the feet, unless the patient is comatose or unconscious. The bystanders will say the Confiteor [The Penitential Act as at Mass is recommended to be said] or when so directed, and will kneel and pray silently while the sick person is being anointed.

[What follows is the ritual of Saint Pius V.] The anointing takes place on both eyelids, both earlobes, both nostrils, compressed lips, palms of both hands, and insteps of both feet. At each pair of anointings, the prayer is that the Lord may forgive “whatever sins you have committed by” — sight, hearing, smelling, tasting and speaking, touching, and straying. When the whole ceremony is ended, the priest will require to wash his hands after wiping off the oil with cotton wool and a little bit of stale bread, which are afterwards burnt. Then take him to the door, without candles or ceremony. [In the revised ritual of Pope Paul VI, the priest anoints the sick person's forehead with oil (usually in the form of a cross), saying: "Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit." He then anoints the hands, saying, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up." He may also, in accordance with local culture and traditions, and the needs of the sick person, anoint other parts of the body, but without repeating the sacramental formula. This is the form established for the Roman Rite through the papal document *Sacramentum infirmorum* of 1972, previously mentioned.]

After the Anointing.

After a patient has been anointed, it is usual for the priest to pay short visits for prayer at frequent intervals — if possible every day. It might help if you arranged for these visits for a time that would be convenient for both. And it might help the patient if the altar remained in position and the candles were lighted whenever the priest's visits took place.

THE LAST BLESSING.

The Church has by no means finished with the patient when the Anointing of the Sick has been administered. [When new illness develops or first illness relapses or worsens, the patient may receive the sacrament a further time. As mentioned, Anointing of the Sick may also be given numerous times in the case of old age or chronic illness based on the "pastoral judgment of the priest".] Besides the frequent visits of the priest, and a wealth of special prayers for the sick and dying, there is the final gift of the Pope's Blessing and the Plenary Indulgence which latter comes into operation at the very moment of death. The ceremony is exceedingly simple, the result incalculable for eternity.

When this blessing is given by itself, all that is necessary is a crucifix and some holy water. The crucifix should be put into the hands of the dying person.

To Gain the Indulgence.

It is necessary that the patient, in order to obtain the benefits of this great gift should, while the blessing is actually being given, call upon the Name of Jesus saying, "My Jesus, Mercy," either with voice, or if that be no longer possible, at least in his heart. If there is danger of delirium or of coma approaching before the priest arrives, then the sick person should be urged to say this prayer at least in heart, with the intention of gaining the indulgence when it is administered. For it appears that this is a necessary condition for gaining the indulgence. It is also advisable that the patient should be helped to resign all things to the adorable Will of God and to accept sickness and even death from His Hands saying, "Thy Will be done."

For the Blessing.

When the blessing is given the priest will say the usual introductory invocation of Peace upon the house and will then ask someone present to say the "I confess" or Confiteor [or Penitential act as at Mass]. And that will be all. When the blessing has been given and the crucifix placed against the lips of the dying person, you precede the priest to the door and open it for him.

The lengthy, though beautiful prayers for the dying should not be said all at once, but one now and then, while it is most useful to say very slowly the same invocation over and over again.

"Jesus, Mercy" is one of the very best, and the old standard invocation seems always more than welcome: "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, help me in my last agony. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you. Amen."

"WHEN A PRIEST CANNOT BE HAD."

This is conceivable even in a big city. Sudden illness, accidents, heart attacks, are not unusual: babies, too, whose baptism has been postponed for some reason, good or bad, are apt to sicken and die. So it is well to know what is best, against the evil day when one may suddenly be called upon to act.

First, however, in importance is the question of Baptism in danger of death. This seems simple, but it MUST be done properly or it may easily be in vain.

All Done by One Person.

In the first place, all must be done by one person; the water must be poured by the one who says the words. Secondly, the water must flow over the actual skin of the body, and preferably the forehead. And thirdly, the words must be said while the water is poured. If the water does not flow, it is probably in vain, sacramentally. If it does not touch the actual skin, whether because of hair, or oil, or grease, or for whatever reason, most theologians maintain that it is certainly in vain: And only when the water is poured on the head is it done as the Church decrees as desirable. The amount of water to be used need not worry us. An excellent plan is to dip two fingers in water and gently but firmly wash a small patch of the child's forehead free of grease. The water is then poured, for example, with a spoon, or one's hand, on the moistened patch, and as the water begins to trickle the words must also begin: "I baptize you, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." It does not matter if the trickle ceases before the words are finished so long as it accompanies the words for some little way. Trickle and words, employed by one person only, are the necessary parts of baptism, and any clean water will serve (or in absolute emergency, any water at all). But be it remembered that no lay person may baptize if a priest can be had in time. It would be a mortally sinful usurpation of a priestly function [such was Canon Law in the author's day].

When a baptism takes place in the above circumstances it must not be forgotten

(a) that the Parish Priest must be informed at once, and

(b) that should the child survive it must be taken to the church without delay for the rest of the Baptismal Blessings and Exorcisms and Anointings.

Sudden Illness.

Suppose a sudden illness and the impossibility of getting a priest, what should one do? The patient cannot be left and there is nobody to send. Moreover, perhaps there is great pain and languor, and human nature suggests that the sick person be left to die in peace. But Eternity may be at stake.

Gently but firmly say to the invalid something like this: "You are very ill, you may be in very great danger. So we will make a little act of sorrow for all your sins. The priest may not be in time. Kiss this crucifix. Now listen while I pray. Join if you can: O my God, I am very sorry that I have so often sinned against You, because You are so good, and with Your Help, I will never sin again. My Jesus, Mercy. Mary, my Mother, pray for me. Saint Joseph, pray for me. My dear Guardian Angel, stay with me."

Above all, "Jesus, Mercy." This can be said at intervals of a minute or two, and is, believe me, most helpful. Persevere with it, till you are quite certain that the sick person is beyond your reach.

Hearing lasts long after the power to move or speak has gone for ever.

AFTER DEATH.

— How the Rosary is placed.

In arranging a Catholic body, it is usual to interlace the dead fingers with the rosary and to arrange them on the breast at about waist level. It is practically impossible to join the hands palm to palm and the other way is just as satisfactory. It is usual, when possible, to have a crucifix and two candles in the room with the dead. Also a small vase of holy water and a feather, or sprig of green, to sprinkle the dead when visitors come to pray. A handkerchief should be laid over the face of the departed and only removed when special request is made. Some people are willing to pray and to sprinkle holy water, who cannot easily look upon the dead features, and this should by no means give offence. God has made some callous and others sensitive. Blessed be His Holy Name.

The Body brought to the Church.

Subject always to considerations of health and charity, every Catholic is entitled to have his body brought to the parish church for the Funeral Service. Arrangements for this should be made with the clergy who will know at what time the church will be available.

As soon, therefore, as possible, go to the Parish Priest to announce the date proposed for the funeral in agreement with the undertaker, and to arrange for the bringing of the body into the church.

Offerings should now be made by those who can do so, but the Funeral Service is entirely free in the case of the poor. It is clear, however, that poverty cannot be pleaded in conjunction with elaborate external pomp; if this is indulged in, the customary Church Fees must be paid in all justice.

In Catholic funeral arrangements, a car should be provided to take the priest and his servers to the cemetery. This car goes immediately in front of the hearse.

It is desirable, though not necessary, to have the appointed Mass said in the presence of the body on the morning of the funeral, but if this be not convenient, the Mass can be said earlier or later in the

week. [This paragraph was written when the Communion fast was from midnight. Now, however, when the Communion fast is only one hour, it is far more common and indeed highly recommended that a funeral be accompanied by a 'Funeral Mass'.]

In all these matters, it is simpler and easier to consult the local clergy than to go by a book, however simplified. [Yes, indeed.]

Do not expect the priest either to deliver a homily or to accompany you home after the burial. He may do either or both, but it is often a very heavy burden.

After the Funeral.

Remember the Dead after their funeral. They can no longer help themselves. Do not waste money on flowers or elaborate funerals, but rather multiply Masses for the Faithful Departed. Remember the bitter cry of the Patriarch Job, which the Church has placed in the mouths of the dead, "Have pity on me, have pity on me, at least you my friends, for the Hand of the Lord has touched me." And do not forget the promise of Our Lord Himself, which is also a warning: "With the same measure that you shall mete withal it shall be measured to you again."

Let us prepare for our own approaching departure by constant remembrance of those who have gone before, and so we shall lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

SICK CHILDREN, TOO.

When a child under the age of seven, the age of reason, is taken seriously ill, always notify the priest as soon as possible. The Church has provided blessings for sick children and they are meant to be used.

One cannot help noticing that children, even of very tender years, on their sick bed often seem to have a sharper and clearer understanding than they have in perfect health. Of course, once a child has been considered able to receive the First Holy Communion, that child must be treated as an adult in matters of religion, and so, when in danger, must be both anointed and fed with the Holy Viaticum.

Should such a child die, the obsequies are just as for a grown-up person and prayers and Masses are to be offered for its soul.

But should a baptized infant die, or even a child that has not been considered sufficiently mature to be admitted to the reception of Holy Viaticum, the funeral will be the Ceremonial for Infants and, where possible, the 'Mass of the Holy Angels', as it is called, will be offered in the presence of the little body, in thanksgiving to God for the Children's Glory, and to beg consolation for the parents in their loss.

Stillborn or unbaptized infants cannot receive Catholic burial at all. [Canon Law after Vatican II considerably modified this ruling. The Church has now provided special liturgies for the funeral of unbaptized infants.] But as to what may be their fate in the next world, we are in ignorance in the theological sense. We have the words of the Lover of little children Himself: 'Unless a man ("quis") be born again of water and the Holy Ghost he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God' (John 3:5). We know too, that "God so loved us" (1 John 4:11). Therefore, the general view of Christians is that the poor little ones will not be unhappy but will enjoy a certain natural happiness; knowing, loving, and serving God in a purely natural way. Nevertheless, parents whose neglect may be responsible for their children not having realised their supernatural destiny will have a terrible judgment to face.

Indeed, it is written concerning the mere giving of scandal to a child, a remediable evil, that it were better for that man “that a millstone should be hanged about his neck and that he should be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Matthew 18:6). But how much greater than scandal is it to deprive “these little ones” for all eternity of that for which they were sent into the world?
