

Anointing Of The Sick FAQ

Who is the proper minister of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick?

According to the General Introduction to Pastoral Care of the Sick, "The priest is the only proper minister of the anointing of the sick. This office is ordinarily exercised by bishops, pastors and their assistants, chaplains of health-care facilities, and superiors of clerical religious institutes" (Pastoral Care of the Sick (PCS) 8).

Who is to be anointed? Recipients of the Anointing of the Sick.

The General Introduction sets forth the norm that the anointing of the sick is intended for "those of the faithful whose health is seriously impaired by sickness or old age" (PCS 8). A person who is facing surgery may be anointed if the reason for the surgery is a serious illness (PCS 10). In addition, the elderly may be anointed "if they have become notably weakened even though no serious illness is present" (PCS 11). Children may be anointed "if they have sufficient use of reason to be strengthened by this sacrament" (PCS 12). For baptized Catholics who once had the use of reason and have subsequently lost it through unconsciousness, mental illness, or memory loss may be anointed if the person would have "asked for it when they were in control of their faculties" (PCS 14).

What constitutes serious illness?

The law does not specify what constitutes a serious illness but leaves this determination to those who are involved, especially a priest who is the minister of the sacrament. According to the General Introduction, "a prudent or reasonably sure judgment, without scruple, is sufficient for deciding on the seriousness of an illness; if necessary a doctor may be consulted" (PCS 8). In other words, a normal judgment is to be used by the priest in determining if the person is seriously ill and, if necessary, a physician may be consulted in helping the priest make his determination.

In a footnote to paragraph eight referenced above, "the word *periculose* has been carefully studied and rendered as "seriously," rather than as "gravely," "dangerously," or "perilously." Such a rendering will serve to avoid restrictions upon the celebration of the sacrament. On the one hand, the sacrament may and should be given to anyone whose health is seriously impaired; on the other hand, it may not be given indiscriminately or to any person whose health is not seriously impaired" (PCS 8, footnote 8).

According to Canon 1005, if there is any doubt about whether the person is seriously ill, the minister may anoint.

Can the Sacrament of the Sick be repeated and how often?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes that "the Anointing of the Sick 'is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly arrived'" (1514). "If a person who received this anointing recovers his health, he can in the case of another grave illness receive this sacrament again. If during the same illness the person's condition becomes more serious, the sacrament may be repeated" (1515). Thus, a person can be anointed during progressive stages of the same illness.

Communal Celebrations of the Anointing of the Sick

The Bishop's Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter maintains that the communal celebration of the Anointing of the Sick "does not allow for indiscriminate anointing of all who are sick, but only of those who are seriously so" (BCL, March 1974, PCS 108). It is for this reason, especially in the communal celebration of The Anointing of the Sick, the judgment about those who will be anointed should be predetermined. The celebrant should know who is to be anointed, having been involved in the judgment about the seriousness of the illness. Such a prearranged determination will allow the priest to properly catechize the persons to be anointed about the meaning and purpose of the sacrament.

Also, "those to minister to the sick or take part in a communal celebration but are themselves in good health may not be anointed out of 'solidarity with the sick.' Such an abuse is to be avoided, since it weakens and destroys the meaning of anointing as a sacrament for the sick" (BCL, March-April 1979, PCS 108).