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“Forgiveness in the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick”

During my seminary studies, I have had the opportunity to see a few people anointed. A question that arose from these experiences is the forgiveness of sins within the Sacrament of Anointing. The sacramental formula for anointing includes “May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.” When I hear “frees you from sin” I think of the forgiveness of sins. However, clearly, it is not the formula for absolution nor does it state that it grants forgiveness. Rather, it makes a pronouncement that the Lord is the one who frees us from sin.

When the Sacrament of Anointing is done for someone near death it includes the apostolic pardon. This apostolic pardon is not the sacramental formula for absolution. In fact, if the Sacrament of Penance is celebrated the apostolic pardon is given after absolution. The apostolic pardon removes the remnants of sin.

The idea that the Sacrament of Anointing includes the forgiveness of sins is not a new idea. In fact, it is found in James 5:13-16, a foundational text for anointing. James writes, “If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven” (5:15b). Thus, it would seem that anointing brings forgiveness of sins.

However, this is not the tradition of the Church. The next verse in James (5:16) calls for one to confess his sins. According to Gusmer, James’ understanding of anointing is not simply for physical healing but a more wholistic healing that includes body and soul.¹ The healing of the soul involves the removal of the *remnant* of sin. Penance forgives the sin.

¹ Charles W. Gusmer, *And You Visited Me: Sacramental Ministry to the Dying* (Rev. Ed). Collegeville, Liturgical Press. 1990. 8.

To answer the question of anointing of a person who is in need of reconciliation we turn to the letter of Pope Innocent to Decentius in 416 A.D. By this time, the blessing of the oil is reserved to the bishop. However, lay people were administering the anointing. The question had arisen ‘can the bishop anoint?’ Innocent answered that the bishop could anoint but should be careful not to anoint a penitent. Until they are reconciled the penitent cannot receive any of the sacraments. Today, the Church continues to maintain that the Anointing of the Sick is not to be conferred on anyone in state of serious sin.²

So, Anointing is not *meant to grant* forgiveness on its own. However, for those who see Anointing as extreme unction it is seen as bringing the forgiveness of sins. This is the result of confusion over the distinction of sacraments. As the Sacrament of Penance became a sacrament received at the point of death, Penance, Anointing, and Viaticum became to be seen as one rite because the latter two could not be administered until Penance was first completed. So, all three rites would be celebrated as one continuous action.³ (Properly done, this is still an appropriate practice for a person in immediate danger of death.)

The scholastics believed that Anointing had two purposes, healing and remission of sins. Since anointing was done only when death was imminent it became to be seen as for the forgiveness of sins.⁴ The Franciscans saw it as for venial sins while the Dominicans believe it was for the “remission of the remnants (*reliquiae*) of sin which impeded the soul’s passage to glory.”⁵ Neither of these are distinctly for the forgiveness of grave sin.

In every option for Communion, Viaticum, or Anointing, the option to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance in place of the penitential rite is presented. In doing so, the Church

² *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*. Edited by ICEL, New York, Catholic Book Publishing Co. 1983, 15.

³ Gusmer, *And You Visited Me*, 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

recognizes the intimate connection between Penance and Anointing first presented in James 5:13-16. Both are Sacraments of conversion and healing. Conversion in that Penance calls for us to turn away from sin. Anointing is conversion in placing our illness in God's hand, seeking the spiritual above the earthly. Healing in that Penance seeks to heal the wounds of sin and Anointing calls for healing of the spiritual anguish one may go through in illness and suffering.

The Council of Trent stated "This reality is in fact the grace of the Holy Spirit, whose anointing takes away sins, if any still remain, and the remnants of sin" (taken from Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Constitution of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick). This is repeated in today's *Pastoral Care of Sick*, "If necessary, the sacrament also provides the sick person with the forgiveness of sins and the completion of Christian penance."⁶

Thus, the Church does not exclude the Sacrament of Anointing bringing forgiveness of sins. Perhaps it is best understood as Gusmer states "Oftentimes for a sick Christian, a serious illness may be a conversion experience that finds full expression in the sacrament of penance celebrated as an authentic personal encounter with the risen Christ, the primordial sacrament."⁷ Reconciliation is about conversion. What we translate today as penance is the word *metanoia*. It may be better translated as conversion. The conversion a sick person undergoes should lead them to reconciliation with God and the community around them.

Thus, in my own reflection I would conclude that anyone who has been properly catechized in the Sacraments of Penance and Anointing would desire to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance before being Anointing if they are in a state of grave sin. In doing so, they receive the forgiveness of sins in Penance and the Anointing heals the remnants of their sins. However, if through no fault of their own they are not able to express their sins, for example, they are

⁶ *Pastoral Care of the Sick*, 6.

⁷ Gusmer, *And You Visited Me*, 161.

unable to speak because of their illness, or even to express their need for the Sacrament of Penance, then the Sacrament of Anointing is capable of the forgiveness of sins. In this case, it is *contrition* on the part of the sick person that is necessary. In his discussion on the Sacrament of Penance, Aquinas saw contrition as essential. Contrition is caused by grace and leads the person to the sacrament. Thus, the truly contrite person who is unable to confess can receive forgiveness in their anointing.

This would parallel the concept that a person in a state of grave sin, when unable to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance, may make a perfect act of contrition and receive the Eucharist, providing they intend to go the Penance as soon as possible. Each sacrament has its own primary purpose but they overlap in their power to confer God's grace. Forgiveness and mercy is at the heart of God's grace.

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