

Sacraments II:

The Sacraments of Healing

The three Sacraments of Initiation are generally shared across the different denominations of Christianity. The next four Sacraments are largely only Roman Catholic. This session will focus on the Sacraments of Healing, namely the Sacrament of Penance and the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

The Anointing of the Sick:

Jesus' ministry was one of healing and salvation. As he journeyed around the land of Israel preaching the Gospel, many who were ill came to him and he cured them. This action of curing the sick seems more common in the Gospels than anything else that Jesus did. But curing a sick person was only one small part of the event of curing a person. The vast majority of the miraculous healings recorded in the Gospels were cultivated around the proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus would be teaching a group of people when a sick person is brought before him. Instead of simply touching the person and healing them, Jesus would demonstrate the power of his words and the importance of his teaching by the miraculous cure. Thus curing the sick is not only a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy but an aspect of the saving mission of Jesus.

The New Testament adds more color to the already growing picture of Jesus' ministry as curing the sick. When he sent out the twelve to preach the message, he also told them to cure the sick by anointing them with oil. The same command was given in the letter to St. James: "are there sick among you, let them send for the priests of the Church and let the priests pray over them anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord." Jesus was the only one who could touch and cure or speak and cure, everyone else cured illnesses by the power of Jesus' word and by the actions he gave them. The same action applies to the modern church in which we anoint the sick with oil.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is not experienced by a lot of people since for centuries it was connected with those who are dying. The Anointing of the Sick is designed to bring the healing power of Christ upon the sick person and to support him/her with the prayers of the Church. The main elements of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, aka. the Sacrament of the Sick, are the laying on of hands and the anointing with oil. Like every Sacrament, the word is proclaimed to the person since Jesus proclaimed the mystery of the kingdom and showed the power of the kingdom through signs. After the proclamation of the Word, the priest lays his hands on the sick person. The action of laying on of hands was common in the Old Testament as a conferral of power or a gesture of healing. Jesus commanded his new disciples to lay their hands on the sick, and so we do today. After the laying on of hands, the priest anoints the person with the Oil of the Infirm. The Church implores three oils for the celebration of the Sacraments. The Sacred Chrism is used for Confirmation, Holy Orders, and Baptism. The Oil of the Catechumen is used for those who are preparing to enter into the Church. The Oil of the Infirm is used for those who are sick. All three of these oil are consecrated by the local bishop at the Chrism Mass.

The Sacrament of Penance:

Although this Sacrament has many names – The Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Sacrament of Penance, Confession – I am choosing to use its most historical and tradition name since it better fits with understanding the Sacrament. Out of all the seven Sacraments the Catholic faith professes this one has the greatest suspicion by people. Common phrases like, “why do I need to confess my sins to a priest?” or “I can just confess my sins to God” show the way in which people challenge the importance or necessity of this Sacrament. Biblically speaking, the forgiveness of sins was the major part of Jesus’ ministry if not the bulk of his ministry. According to the Gospels, Jesus’ didn’t baptize anyone, he didn’t officiate a marriage, he didn’t Confirm anyone, and he didn’t use oils to anoint anyone. But anytime a sick person came to him, he not only cured the person’s illness but also forgave their sins. In addition to healing through forgiveness of sins, Jesus’ Passion, death, and Resurrection was all about forgiving sins. For these reasons I can claim the bulk of Jesus’ ministry was the forgiveness of sins.

In the early Church this Sacrament was used for the most heinous of offenses, i.e. adultery, apostacy, heresy, schism, murder, fornication. Anyone publicly caught in these sins was required to confess them publicly to the Bishop who would assign as penance and eventually forgive the sin. Most of the early Christians believed that a person had one shot to be forgiven through these Sacrament. After that one shot was used up, the person was condemned by their sins and could not be forgiven. As the era of Christianity reached its climax in the 5th century, most people believed that the forgiveness of sins was not a one-time event but could be used continually. The Irish monks of the 7th century started a new practice under this model. They would confess their sins to one another and assign penances to help the person overcome their fault. Any simple fault or sin could be confessed to a brother monk. This practice caught on quickly and by the turn of the 10th century was the common practice in the Latin Church. By the Council of Trent in 1530, the practice was so common that special rules governed the practice. Priests were the only people who could forgive sins. Priests represented mediation between God and man. Since Jesus is the one who forgives sins, the person of the priest represents Christ who forgives sins. Priests cannot forgive sins on their own merit. By extension of the ministry of the priest in forgiving sins during the Mass and at baptisms, priests also forgave sins in the Sacrament of Penance. Then the priest would assign a penance from the manual. The Manual was a listing of every sin and its penance. Therefore if the sin of theft was three Our Fathers, then if you stole three things the penance is nine Our Fathers. The Council of Trent solidified the name of the Sacrament to the Sacrament of Penance linking it strongly to the penitential act central to the Sacrament. With the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the Sacrament received a new expression and name. Instead of manuals directing the penance, priests were given the authority to assign whatever they deemed useful to the person. Although the Sacrament still maintained its name – Sacrament of Penance – the Second Vatican Council also sought to change its flavor by adding the name the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The Sacrament of Penance has four basic parts: Confession, Contrition, Absolution, and Satisfaction. Confession is the sins the person confesses. A person who seeks the mercy of God in this Sacrament can confess whatever sins they want. Whatever is confessed during the

Sacrament is held with the highest level of confidence. A priest cannot under any circumstance reveal any information given to him during the Sacrament of Penance. Any priest found guilty of revealing information held under the Seal of the Confessional is automatically excommunicated, stripped of any priestly duties, is unable to ever exercise the ministry of priest, and must wait upon the verdict from Rome. This punishment is the harshest penalty the church gives for any specific crime. Attaching such a high penalty to breaking the seal guarantees the freedom of the person to confess whatever sins they want and the freedom to unveil anything. Contrition is the most necessary part of this Sacrament. If the person is not sorry for their sins, what good is asking for forgiveness. If a person doesn't feel sorry for their sins, the priest cannot forgive their sins. Absolution is the only part of this Sacrament proper to the priest. After the person has confessed their sins and shown contrition, then the priest prays a prayer that absolves the person from their sins in the name of Jesus Christ. The priest must pray this prayer exactly since it is not by his will that people are forgiven of their sins but by God's will. The last part of the Sacrament is Satisfaction. A person leaving the Sacrament of Penance should have two things: a way to remedy the situation called a penance and feel better after being forgiven on their sins. The penance is assigned by the priest as a small way in which the person can work to undo the wrongs their sins have caused. This can be the form of a prayer, a reading from Scripture, or something at the priest's discretion. Although many people are leery of this part of the Sacrament, it shows our desire to help redeem the world. Jesus didn't simply redeem the world and let us figure out what to do with it. He wanted us to have a part in saving and redeeming the world in union with him. These penances are that. The last part of satisfaction is feeling good about being forgiven of those sins. Once a person has been absolved of their sins, the sins are no more. God has forgiven and forgotten and the person is free from any temporal punishment due to that sin.

The actual celebration of the Sacrament is rather simple. The person comes to the priest who together make the Sign of the Cross. Then the person confesses their sins. The priest may give some advice or guidance to help the person overcome or progress in their relationship with God. Then the priest assigns a penance. The person make an Act of Contrition, which is a simple prayer showing contrition and a desire to do better. The priest then absolves the person and the Sacrament is done.

Certain sins are considered not-absolvable or require someone higher than a priest. The most obvious sins are the ones that a person is not sorry for. If a person is not contrite, then they cannot be forgiven. The following sins are reserved to a bishop: heresy, apostasy, attacking a bishop. The following sins are reserved to the Pope or the Papal office: desecration of the Eucharist or the Sacraments, assault on the Pope, violating the Seal of the Confessional, breaking one's promises or vows. Since the forgiveness of sins is necessary for salvation, a priest can absolve a person of any sin if the person is in danger of dying.