

WHAT CATHOLICS BELIEVE
An introductory booklet series



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Jesus in His Church

Jesus Christ is both God and a human being. As our representative he took upon himself the sins of the whole world when he went out to die on the cross. By accepting our sins he also accepted death, which is the consequence of sin. The life of Jesus did not end with his death. In fact, death could not hold him and he rose again to life. In the process he conquered both sin and death. That's why we can now share in the life of Jesus and be confident that our sins can be forgiven.

Jesus lives now – he is active in his Church and will be active until the end of time. Jesus founded the Church to carry on his work of saving us from sin and death. Because he has gone back to his Father he isn't now visible on earth. But Catholics believe that he is with them still, that he is true to his promise –

'And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time'
(Matt. 28:20).

Sometime after Jesus died, when a man named Saul was travelling from one place to another persecuting Christians, Jesus appeared to him and said, *'Why are you persecuting me?' (Acts 9:4)*. What Saul learned at that moment changed him forever. Driven by his understanding that Jesus identified himself with the Christian community, the Church, Saul had a remarkable change of heart and became a Christian, one of the most committed and ardent followers Jesus ever had.



'I absolve you
from your sins'

Before Jesus died he gave power to the Church so that it could act and speak in his name and with his authority. But he didn't give away those powers – he said that he would continue to be present in the Church, doing the things he was called to do by his Father. So when the Church teaches, makes holy, strengthens and blesses, it's Jesus who does these things. Most consoling of all, when the Church forgives sins it's Jesus who is present to forgive.

Here on earth we meet Jesus in his Church. When we are sorry that we have sinned and look for pardon we find Jesus in the Church waiting to welcome us back to his friendship. There is a particular ceremony – more than a ceremony, a sacrament – which Catholics take part in when they want to admit their sins and have them forgiven. When the priest says, 'I absolve you from your sins', he is speaking with the Church's authority. But that isn't all, since Jesus is forgiving the person through the words and blessing of the priest.

Catholics call this ceremony by various names. Its official name is the 'Sacrament of Penance' (so-called, because we show that our sorrow is real by undertaking some penance, a prayer or action, which demonstrates it.) Sometimes it's referred to as 'Confession' – because in it we 'confess' our sins. Often it is referred to as 'Reconciliation' – both because we are 'reconciled' to the fact that we are sinners and because the Sacrament reconciles us to (draws us back into the friendship of) God and the community of believers. In this booklet it will be called the Sacrament of Penance.

What is Sin?

As a result of our Baptism we are called to lead a life of love modelled on the life of Jesus. Sin is the opposite of this. God calls us to grow in goodness but we may fail to hear that call. We can try to see things from God's point of view and act according to that vision, or we can choose to ignore God's plan and refuse to become part of it.

We can be grateful to God, who created us and redeemed us from sin and death, or we can be ungrateful – taking no notice of the many mercies which God directs into our lives. We can model our actions on the life of Jesus Christ, or we can prefer to live a life entirely of our own making. We can do what God calls us to do, or we can live according to our own preferences and the fashions of society. We can accept the offer which God has made to join his family, or we can refuse it and prefer to live a selfish life. This refusal to recognise what we are, beings who depend upon God, is a mark of pride. And pride is the foundation of all sin.

In his Letter to the Romans, St Paul gives a glimpse of the effects of sin. He says the Romans did not try to know and love God and so,

... since they would not consent to acknowledge God, God abandoned them to their unacceptable thoughts and indecent behaviour. And so now they are steeped in all sorts of injustice, rottenness, greed and malice; full of envy, murder, wrangling, treachery and spite, libellers, slanderers, enemies of God, rude, arrogant and boastful, enterprising in evil, rebellious to parents, without brains, honour, love or pity (Rom. 1:28-31).

This is a rather terrifying picture of people's behaviour in the pagan Roman Empire of Paul's day. It shows sin at its worst. It also demonstrates that sin is a rejection of God and of the love God has for us. The basic evil of sin is that



pride is the foundation
of all sin



We sin whenever we realise
that our act is wrong

we turn away completely from God. We sin whenever we realise that our act is wrong, opposed to what God expects of us, and yet still freely decide to do it. We have chosen our bad will instead of God's loving will – that is the basis of our sin.

Temptations Are Not Sins

From time to time, we all feel tempted to do something which we know to be wrong. We may suddenly feel tempted to hurt someone by our words or actions (for example, to take something which isn't ours, or to refuse to help someone who needs our help). These temptations are unpleasant but they aren't sins. They only become sins when we give in to them and do the thing which we are tempted to do.

It's hard for us to accept the fact that we are weak people. Sometimes it might seem that we can manage our lives by ourselves without any help. But if we do think like that, it doesn't take long to discover that we are headed for a fall. We need help to control our thoughts, words and actions and resist temptations to act in an unloving way so God makes that help available to us. Jesus has overcome sin by his death and rising from death. United to him by our faith and love we share in his victory over sin, and realise that nothing except our own free choice can separate us from God's love.



we have the power to say 'no'

Our Freedom

We are free to give in to temptations or not to give in to them; to sin or not to sin. No matter how much our freedom may be limited by our upbringing or the circumstances in which we live, in most cases we have the power to say 'no' when we are tempted to do something wrong.

However we can't commit a sin if we don't realise that the thing we are about to do is wrong. This needs to be said because there are people who have never been taught that some forms of behaviour are wrong. It's impossible for them to commit a sin if they don't know that it's a sin. So God doesn't condemn them. There are also people who are mentally ill or suddenly overwhelmed by passion who do things for which they are not really responsible – they aren't really free. They do things almost unconsciously. Those people don't commit a sin either – or they commit a lesser sin, depending upon their knowledge of what they are doing and their freedom to stop doing it.

God judges us by our knowledge and our freedom. He is a loving Father and is prepared to excuse us whenever possible. But he is also just. He knows our reasons for acting in certain ways; he knows the pressures which come upon us to influence what we do. He takes account of all these things, but finally, we must take responsibility for our actions. If we decide to reject God, and if that's the pattern of our life until we die, then we will separate ourselves from his love forever.

Some people are very strict on themselves. That may sometimes be a good thing, but it may also be a sign that they are too narrow and intolerant. But if they are intolerant of other people and refuse to forgive them for real or imagined hurts, then we can be almost sure that they are not truly loving people. We should be very slow to judge others because we don't know what pressures they are under. Nor should we be too harsh upon ourselves, because God made us in his own image, loves us and has accepted us as his friends.

Yet being too strict is not as common as being too lax, too easy-going, too ready to excuse ourselves for doing wrong. That, too, is wrong. Catholics have to steer between these two extremes. The compass they have to steer by is their conscience, guided by the Church, and focused on love of God and love of others.



Luke 6:36-38

We should be very slow
to judge others

Being Sorry for Our Sins

Sins are not forgiven in some kind of automatic way. In all the sacraments it is Jesus who is present with his gift of a sharing in God's life, but we can only receive this if we are truly seeking God. It is the nature of religion that our faith draws us towards God. So the sacraments are effective for us only when we respond personally to the gifts which God offers us through them. This personal response is essential when we approach Christ for forgiveness.

The Sacrament of Penance will have no meaning for us, no effect upon us, unless we are sorry for our sins. It needs to be a sincere sorrow – both because of the things we have done and because those actions have offended our loving God. If we truly love God we will truly regret the actions which damage our friendship. So we will reject our sins. Sorrow for sin is our way back to God and to the community of believers. It's necessary if we want to be members of God's kingdom.



There can be no forgiveness if we aren't sorry for our sins

Sorrow marks our turning away from sin and turning back to God. There can be no forgiveness if we aren't sorry for our sins – if we don't regret them, make a firm decision not to repeat them, and ask God to forgive them. Much more than words is required. We can't just say a hurried 'I'm sorry' and then go back to old bad habits. It must be a true sorrow, which comes from deep within us. It can't just be a feeling of sadness because of something we did or because we were found out. It must come from our faith in God, and demonstrate that, with the help of the blessings we receive through the Sacrament of Penance, we are determined to remain in God's love.

Confessing our Sins

Catholics believe that if they want their sins forgiven they must not only feel sorry for them, they must also confess them. The Bible is very clear that the beginning of the process of our repentance is our admission (confession) that we have sinned. One example is King David. He had sinned seriously, as he confessed to the prophet Nathan. Nathan replied that God forgave him and that he would not die (*see 2 Sam. 12:13*). If he hadn't confessed his sin against God he wouldn't have been forgiven.

The Bible has examples of how the early Christians believed in this practice. In the Acts of the Apostles (*see Acts 19:18*) we can read how the Christians in Ephesus confessed their sins. Some of them had done wrong by dabbling in magic. To express their sorrow they confessed their sins and burnt their books. They realised that the prayer and forgiveness of the Church was an essential part of the process of being restored to God's friendship. St James, the apostle, tells us in his letter (*see Jm. 5:16*) that people should confess their sins. And the apostle John makes the same point in his first letter:

If we say 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves and truth has no place in us; if we acknowledge our sins, he is trustworthy and upright, so that he will forgive our sins and will cleanse us from all evil (1 Jn. 1:8-9).

We can find the same idea in the story of the two men who went to the Temple to pray. It's especially important because it was told by Jesus himself:

Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood there and said this prayer to himself, 'I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like everyone else, and particularly that I am not like this tax collector here.'



they must also confess them



anyone who humbles
himself will be raised up

I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get.' The tax collector stood some distance away, not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast and said, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'

This man, I tell you, went home again justified; the other did not. For everyone who raises himself up will be humbled, but anyone who humbles himself will be raised up (Lk. 18:10-14).

It's obvious then that we have to admit our sinfulness before we can expect to be forgiven. Jesus gave the apostles a double power – to forgive sin or to hold back from forgiving it. Priests today use the same power. The only way they can judge that someone is truly sorry for sin is to hear the person confess it.

Spend some quiet moments
with some of the above
scriptures.



What Should We Confess?

It's obvious that not all the things we do wrong are equally sinful. So it's also necessary to distinguish between two kinds of sin – serious sin and less serious (sometimes called venial) sin.

A Catholic who has committed a serious sin (for example a sin against one of the Commandments) will want to attend the Sacrament of Penance. The sin itself may be forgiven earlier by God as a result of our sorrow which includes our willingness to celebrate the sacrament. In that case the power of the sacrament begins working in us even before we attend it. In fact, it's this very power which calls us to the sacrament. Less serious sins (venial sins) can be confessed in our private prayer to God; but many Catholics prefer to admit these in the Sacrament of Penance also. They aren't asked to give a whole list of the many little things they didn't get right, but to mention one of them as an example and try

to get to the bottom of the problem by finding their cause. For example, if someone talks in an unkind way about a number of people it may be that their true problem is that they are envious of them. In that case, the sin is envy.

Because we are human beings, always likely to do things which aren't worthy of us as God's friends and members of a loving community, we may continue some bad behaviour even though we try very hard not to. In that case we should continue to confess these things. We aren't perfect beings; we are reconciled to the fact that we are sinners and that the society in which we live is also often sinful. We are always in need of a change in the way we live, and therefore we need to take part in this sacrament again and again.

Many good people have to try and resist particular temptations for years before they overcome them. They know that it is only with God's help that they can succeed. They are holy and close to God because they are sincere and never give up. Again and again they come back to God and renew their sorrow and their determination to try to love and serve God better. God never rejects them.



Sacrament of Penance & Reconciliation

Having decided to confess their sins and admit their sorrow, Catholics go to a priest at a time when the rite of sorrow and forgiveness is being held. Other people will probably be gathered at the church at the same time. Sometimes there will be a purely private ceremony. In that case people spend some time praying quietly, asking God's help to be able to remember sins, to confess them honestly and to be sorry for them. They think about God's love and mercy, especially as shown in the life of Jesus, and recall the sins they have committed since they last attended the sacrament. They ask God to help them avoid these sins in the future and make a firm decision not to repeat them.

Then they wait for their turn to go into the 'confessional' – the small room where the ceremony will take place. They have the choice of speaking face-to-face with the priest or of remaining anonymous. So they can choose to sit in the chair in front of the priest or to stay in the small curtained area which safeguards their privacy.

The rite begins with a welcome from the priest. This indicates the hospitable nature of the sacrament. It isn't something to feel anxious about. It may be followed by a short reading from the Bible.



face-to-face or
remaining anonymous

Then the penitents confess their sins briefly and without unnecessary detail, admit their sorrow, and ask for God's pardon and the blessing of the People of God.

The matters mentioned may seem quite small – 'I don't pray regularly'; 'I've been unkind to some people because I find it hard to forgive them for what they did.' The real purpose of this confession is to recognise and admit the wrong *attitudes* which lead us to do certain things – or

not to do them. People are required to confess whatever matters impact negatively upon their relationship with God. So they may say something like ‘I’ve injured my relationship with God by not saying any prayers.’

The priest may then give some advice and some encouragement before requiring each person to do something to compensate for their sins – say some prayers, go without some pleasure, or do some merciful work for others.

This penance is not only to make up for the past but also to help begin a new life for the future and to strengthen people against their weaknesses.

After stating their sorrow they receive the blessing of God and of God’s People when the priest says the words of forgiveness. The main part of this blessing is, ‘I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ Then they leave, staying in church for a short time to give thanks to God and, if applicable, to say the prayers which they were given as a penance.

Our sin may not be merely against God; it may also be against the community. That’s why the Sacrament of Penance has some public features. One style of the sacrament which Catholics particularly like has a prayer ceremony beforehand. All those who wish to receive the sacrament gather in the church and say prayers of love and sorrow. Then, one by one, they enter the place where the priest is and make a private confession of their own sin. Afterwards, as a group, they will say prayers of love and thanks for God’s mercy.

For Catholics, taking part in the Sacrament of Penance is part of their ordinary religious life. They decide for themselves when they are in need of it. A few people participate weekly; others three or four times a year.



I absolve you from your
sins in the name of the
Father and of the Son and
of the Holy Spirit

Authority to Forgive

Catholics have always believed that priests, the ministers of Jesus and of the Church, have the authority to forgive sin in the Sacrament of Penance.

Again and again during his lifetime Jesus claimed for himself the authority to forgive sin. He did so even though many of the Jewish people of the time were deeply shocked. They believed that only God could forgive sin – but they couldn't believe that Jesus was God. Then, on Easter Day, he gave that authority to his Twelve Disciples. St John tells how it happened:

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them. He said to them, 'Peace be with you,' and, after saying this, he showed them [the wounds in] his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord, and he said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.' After saying this he breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained' (Jn. 20:19-23).

There are accounts of other occasions too (especially in the Gospel of St Matthew) when Jesus promised this authority and gave it to Peter (*see Matt. 16:17-19*).

Through the centuries the Church has used this authority to forgive sins. Catholics have always believed that Jesus continues to do this, through the priest, in the Sacrament of Penance.

The Priest's Attitude and Ours

The priest, as the one who channels God's mercy towards the sinner, listens to the confession in the name of Jesus. The priest knows he is not there to condemn the sinner but to pave the way to pardon and peace. The fact that the person has come to confess is reason enough for the priest to give the assurance of God's mercy. The sacrament is, in fact, a sacrament of mercy – its whole purpose is to link us once more with the life and love of God which we have rejected as a result of our sin.

Our confession must be a sincere and sorrowful account of all the serious wrong we have done since we last confessed. Every confession is a turning back to God, telling of our sorrow and resolving, with God's help, to do better in the future. Without this sorrow there can be no forgiveness.

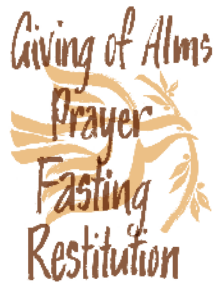
We may realise our own weakness and we may be conscious of strong and evil habits in us. As we tell God of our sorrow and our determination to do better, we should also admit our own weakness by saying such prayers as, 'God, you know how weak I am and you know that I may fail you again. Please help me.' This does not make our sorrow insincere, or make us unworthy of God's pardon. We know that we will gain this if we are sincere. We know that as a result of God's forgiveness we will be given special helps (graces) to lead a different life.

Doing Penance

The Church believes that God expects us to make up for our sins. This means that we should do penance either in this life or after we die. The person who attends the Sacrament of Penance completes it by doing a penance which the priest requires. In early days it was often very severe, but these days it usually consists of saying some particular



The priest, as the one who channels God's mercy towards the sinner, listens to the confession in the name of Jesus



doing a penance

prayers or doing some good action. It is meant to make up, to some extent, for our sin and to help us move into a new stage of life. But we must not be misled by the fact that the penance may not seem particularly severe. Its value is that it shows we are ready to repair some of the harm we have done.

The Social Aspect of Sin

We are members of the people of God with whom he has reached a loving agreement. Because, as a result of our link with Jesus, we are members of one Body, what we do affects the whole Body of Christians. Even if we don't reach our full potential we still harm the community because we fail to add to its growth of love and mercy. St Paul puts it this way,

If one part is hurt, all the parts share its pain. And if one part is honoured, all the parts share its joy (1 Cor. 12:26).

The sin of one person harms others, just as the goodness of one benefits others.

It's part of God's will for us that we love not only him but also our neighbour. In order of importance, love of God comes first; but in order of activity, love of neighbour has priority. St John reminded us of this when he asked how we could possibly love God, whom we can't see, if we don't love our neighbour whom we can see.

All sins are against God's law because they injure our neighbour or ourselves. The Commandments which God gave to Moses are concerned with our duties to God and to other people. Some sins are like stones thrown into a pool of water – they send ripples which spread outwards, further and further. These are the social injustices for which we may be in some way responsible. So, as followers of Jesus, we must consider our social responsibilities when we prepare for the Sacrament of Penance.

Our Human Needs

One of the advantages of the Sacrament of Penance is that it helps us to see ourselves as we really are. We know we can't hide anything from God. He knows our good qualities and our faults. It's easy to deceive ourselves and pretend that we never do wrong. It's easy to blame others, or the way we were brought up, or the people we meet. It's true that these things play a part in our lives. But when we come to prepare for the Sacrament of Penance we can't afford to be dishonest because we are facing an honest, just and good God. We may be tempted to deceive the priest or even ourselves – but God will always know the truth.

Once we recognise our sinfulness we find comfort in sharing our difficulties with someone else. The priest takes the place of Jesus and will always try to help us. It is often easier to discuss our difficulties with someone who is known to us only as an adviser than it is with a personal friend. We also know that the priest is bound by the strictest law of secrecy and may not mention outside the Sacrament of Penance anything he is told there. He would have to be ready to die rather than do that. He may not even discuss anything privately with us unless we ask him to.

In the Sacrament of Penance we meet Jesus Christ, our saviour. We tell our failings with sorrow, and we look for his mercy with confidence. Of course, we can and should say that we are sorry to God at other times, but in the sacrament there is a new aspect to our encounter with God's love for Jesus comes to us. We open our minds and hearts to him and he fills us with love and strength. We leave the sacrament, happy to have known God's mercy once again, and determined to try to do better. We can say with St Peter,

'Lord, you know everything; you know I love you'
(Jn. 21:17).



the priest is bound by the
strictest law of secrecy

Why We Need the Sacrament

So far you have read about how God gives us his friendship when we live our new life, sharing in the life of Jesus. You have read how Baptism and Confirmation give us this new life and strengthen it. You have also read how, in the Eucharist, Jesus comes to us to share his love for and relationship with the Father.

Yet there is no doubt that, in spite of all that God does for us, we often fail to live up to our obligations. We fail God – just as, at times, we fail other people. We don't do things we should do, or we do what we shouldn't. Jesus told us how we should act when he said,

*'If you love me, you will keep my commandments'
(Jn. 14:15).*



to have a much clearer view

But then, aware of our weakness, he left us a way to renew our friendship with him even though we ourselves were responsible for losing it. That way is the Sacrament of Penance.

We also need the sacrament because the very fact of thinking about our actions helps us to know ourselves better. Unless we know ourselves truly – our faults as well as our good points – we will make wrong judgments about what we are capable of. And unless we have a model of goodness to live by we will lead a very mixed kind of life.

Preparing for the Sacrament of Penance also helps to remind us that we do not live alone, that our actions have effects upon others. The sacrament helps us to be less selfish and to have a much clearer view of the rights of others in society.

Finally, revealing ourselves truly to another person leaves no room for vanity. So the Sacrament of Penance helps to remind us of our humanity. We aren't perfect; we aren't

gods; we are human beings who mean to do well, but often act badly. When Catholics receive the Sacrament of Penance they experience a healing of their moral illness, while, at the same time, they give a sign of their faith in a loving God and a further sign of their hope for a closer and more honest relationship with God and with God's people.

Two Gospel Stories

Jesus loved sinners but he hated their sins. His aim was to invite sinners to reject their sins and live once more in friendship with God. One incident in the Gospel gives a good example of this. It happened that Simon, a teacher of the Hebrew religion, invited Jesus to his house for a meal. Simon wasn't sure whether Jesus was a prophet, a great teacher or a deceiver and so he offered Jesus none of the usual signs of welcome when he arrived.

During the meal a woman came into the room (*see Lk. 7:36-50*). St Luke delicately described the kind of person she was when he said that she 'had a bad name in the town'. She knelt weeping at the feet of Jesus and when some of her tears splashed on his bare feet she wiped them away with her hair. Then she anointed his feet with some scented ointment which she was carrying.

Simon was astonished by what he saw, and he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who this woman is that is touching him and what a bad name she has'. Realising what he was thinking, Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon,

'You see this woman? I came into your house, and you poured no water over my feet, but she has poured out her tears over my feet and wiped them away with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but she has been covering my feet with kisses ever since I came in. You did not anoint

my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. For this reason I tell you that her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love. It is someone who is forgiven little who shows little love.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven' (Lk. 15:44-50).



Your sins
are forgiven

There are many other occasions in the Gospel when Jesus forgives sins. He always made it clear that he had come to save people from sin. He came to call them back to the love and friendship of God. He never rejected them if they were sorry, but he was firm in his demand that they should sin no more. If we are truly sorry for our sins we will make a strong decision to change our ways. By our attendance at the Sacrament of Penance we give expression to that determination.

The second story is a well-known one – the story of the Prodigal Son. The younger son left home and wasted his money on an evil way of life. Finally, poor and desperate, he decided to return to his father's house. As he came close to it he saw his father standing watching out for him, waiting to welcome him and receive him back into his home (*see Lk. 15:11-32*).

The son is any sinner; the father is God. The story shows how God does not hold our past actions against us as long as we are sorry and return to him with love. Only people who are proud say, 'I have never done anything wrong. I don't need your forgiveness.' At that moment they may consider that they don't need God, but one of the lessons which life teaches us is that those who attempt to rely solely upon their own efforts will eventually fail.

Yet at that very moment God's hospitality and love will still be available. God will be nearby, waiting for us to have a change of heart, longing to exchange his love and faithfulness for our love and faithfulness.

What place does forgiveness have in your everyday life? Talk over your questions on the Sacrament of Penance with a friend or Priest.



The Sacrament of Anointing

In the Gospels, the healing of the sick is an important part of the work of Jesus. He was viewed as a compassionate man and a healer. He consistently invited those who were sick and diseased to come to him and be healed. His ministry of healing seemed to reach a crescendo as time passed. More and more people came to him as his reputation grew. He never turned anyone away. He also continued to make the point that while he was healing them physically they also needed to take whatever steps were necessary (including confession of their sins) to heal their relationship with God.

He had always been compassionate to those who were ill. At the beginning of his working life, when the disciples of John the Baptist came to interview him, Jesus made a simple but powerful statement:

‘Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again, and the lame walk, those suffering from virulent skin-disease are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor; and blessed is anyone who does not find me a cause of falling’ (Matt. 11:4-6).

Jesus not only showed his followers that they should be compassionate, he also told them who deserved it most:

‘... when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind’ (Lk. 14:13).

When Jesus first called his twelve disciples he gave them authority to heal diseases and illness of every kind (*see Matt. 10:1*). And after his rising from death he promised that the sick would recover after his disciples had laid



the deaf hear

their hands on them and prayed over them (*see Mk. 16:18*). Earlier in St Mark we can read how Jesus sent the Twelve around the villages to teach the Good News. In the course of their work they ... *anointed many sick people with oil and cured them (Mk. 6:13).*

After reading the Gospels we have no doubt that Jesus felt a deep compassion for the sick and that he wished his followers to care for them also. Just as the Twelve continued that work of healing, so do priests today. One of their practices is to anoint the sick while praying over them – exactly as the Twelve had done. This is a sacrament – the Sacrament of the Sick. Like all the other sacraments, it is Jesus who acts in it.



anointed many sick people
with oil and cured them

St James explained how the anointing of the sick operated in his day. He was writing to a group of Christians:

Any one of you who is ill should send for the elders of the church, and they must anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise him up again; and if he has committed any sins he will be forgiven (Jm. 5:14-15).

From these words of St James we see that the purpose of the Sacrament of the Sick is to heal, to comfort, and to restore the sick person to the community.

The Catholic Church has always been faithful to the instructions of St James. From time to time there have been variations in the way the sacrament is given – for example for a long time it was reserved for people who were about to die. (It was then called ‘Extreme Unction’, which means ‘the Last Anointing’, and was believed to be the final sacramental experience which brought a dying person to Heaven.) But during the twentieth century the Church reconsidered the origins of the sacrament and

emphasised that its true purpose was to heal the living of their illnesses.

Even though there have been changes over time in how the sacrament was applied the essential belief is always the same – that Jesus Christ, our healer, has come to us in a sacrament just as he came to the blind, the lame, and the lepers in the villages of Judea and Galilee so long ago.



The mystery of suffering in
body, mind and spirit

Because all the sacraments exist to respond to a real human need we can appreciate that those who are ill have a special need for help and consolation. Not only their bodies, but their whole person. That's why, through the sacrament, sins are forgiven. The mystery of suffering in body, mind and spirit is addressed through this sacrament.

Who Can Receive It?

Any Catholic who is ill is invited to receive it. The same applies to elderly people even if they are not ill, because they may be frail and prone to illness.

The Rite of Anointing

The rite of anointing begins with a blessing and an opportunity for the Sacrament of Penance. Readings from the Bible follow along with prayers in which the sick person and his or her relatives and friends can join. The laying on of hands follows. Then comes the anointing with oil on the forehead and the hands. This oil and the prayer which accompanies its putting on are the outward signs of the Sacrament of the Sick. The words the priest says as he anoints the sick person are:

Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up. Amen.

This prayer speaks of salvation and rising – and it sees the Sacrament as a giving of the Holy Spirit. The ceremony ends with a special prayer for the sick person, followed by the Lord's Prayer. Communion may be taken before the blessing.

The Sacrament may also be given during Mass and to several people at the same ceremony. This fact illustrates the source of its healing power – the death and rising of Jesus which is continued in the Mass.

Not only does the Sacrament of Anointing reveal the concern which Jesus felt for the physical and spiritual welfare of those who are sick and which he wanted his followers to continue, it also gives the sick the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as a result of which the whole person is brought back to health. The Sacrament limits anxiety, strengthens our trust in God's care, and reminds us that God will care for us at all times – in sickness and in health.



oil on the forehead
and the hands

For all that, the sacrament operates and works within the sphere of ordinary natural law. It isn't a demand for a miracle. Ultimately we all have to die – even if we aren't sick. And death is terrible – so we need blessings to die well, even though if God wills it, we can avoid it for a while.

Sacraments all belong to the reality and the genuineness of life – they bless that genuineness by opening it to the power of God. But rather than destroy our human nature, the grace and power of the sacraments enhance it. The sacraments make our lives more genuine; they don't remove us from the sphere of being human.



What do you like most about the Sacrament of Anointing?

Did you know?



The Sacraments of Healing

During the celebration of the Sacraments of Anointing and Penance, the priest places his hands on or near the head of the recipient and prays that the person's illness and sins be healed and absolved by the power of the Holy Spirit. This gesture with the hands is called 'epiclesis' (see Acts 8:17, Jm. 5:14, Jn. 20:22-23).

Nihil obstat
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