

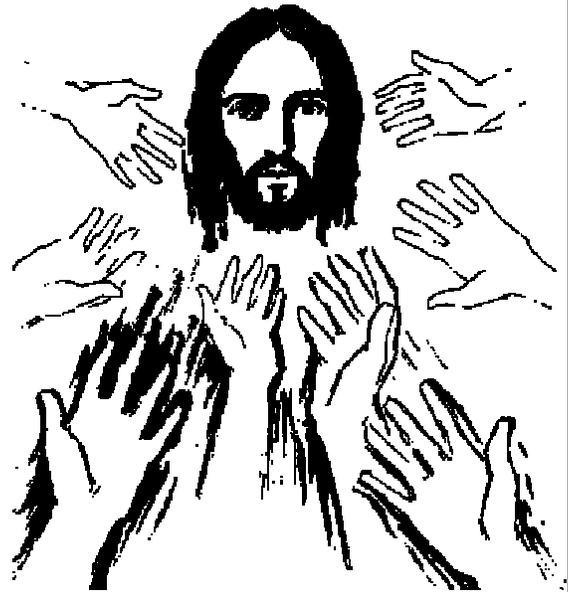
Anointing of the Sick

If one of you is ill, he should send for the elders of the Church, and they must anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up again; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.

James 5:14-15

This key text from the letter of James (written perhaps twenty five to thirty years after the Resurrection) provides a suitable starting point for looking at the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Some points should be noted.

- James does not advise that those with the gift of healing be sent for but rather the elders of the Church. Why? The elders represented the Christian community. Their presence would be a sign of solidarity of the community with one unable to come to its gathering.
 - This echoes St Paul when he writes, 'If one part (of the body) is hurt, all parts are hurt with it.' (1 Cor 12:26)
 - As representatives of the Church, only priests and bishops are ministers of the Anointing of the Sick.
 - The compassion of Christ for the sick comes out very strongly in Mark's Gospel, **particularly when Mark does not record the details of the illness and cure.** There were simply too many to record: *And wherever he went, to village, or town, or farm, they laid down the sick in the open spaces, begging him to let them touch even the fringe of his cloak. And all those who touched him were cured.* (6:56)

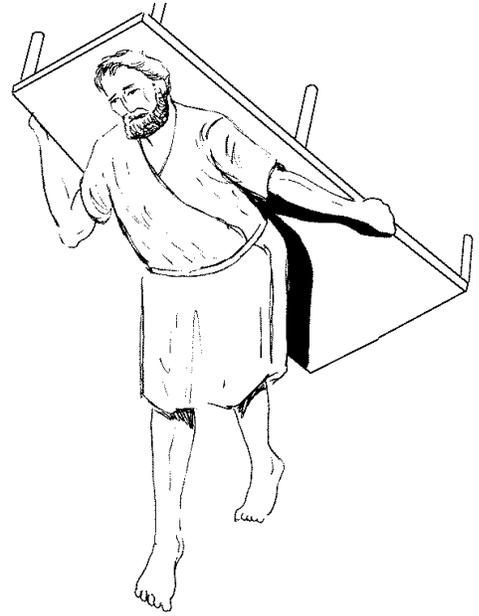


And all who touched him were cured ...

- What does James advise the elders to do? First, to pray. The '*prayer of faith*' is given great emphasis by James. Second, to anoint with oil.
 - The soothing and refreshing quality of such anointing expresses the deep and prayerful concern of the whole community for the one who is sick.
- The anointing is done *in the name of the Lord*.
 - This echoes verses near the end of Mark's Gospel: *These are the signs that will be associated with believers: 'in my name they will cast out devils ... they will lay their hands on the sick, who will recover.'* (Mark 16:17-18)
 - By invoking the name of Jesus *in faith*, the elders called forth his power.

- **Notice that healing and the forgiveness of sins are intimately linked; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven ...** The 'inner healing' so often needed for one in depression or beset by psychological problems may come from an ability to forgive oneself, to be forgiven by others and, most importantly, to receive God's forgiveness. In Mark's account of the cure of the paralytic (2:1-12), Jesus *first* tells the man that his sins are forgiven, before curing him physically.

The Healing of the Woman with the Haemorrhage is another excellent example of the way Jesus' healing were always more than just physical cures. Why is this such a good example?



- When talking about the Sacrament of the Sick, some people use the term 'last rites'. This harbours a misunderstanding. The Sacrament of the Sick is directed towards CHRISTIAN HEALING which may be accompanied by recovery, or even physical cure.
 - The last rites of the Church are reserved for the dying.
 - These are Confession, Anointing (here it is proper to speak of *extreme unction*) and Viaticum (Holy Communion received by a dying person).
 - *Viaticum* is a Latin word meaning *food for the journey*. Eucharist, in this case referred to as Viaticum, is the very last sacrament of the Christian life.

- The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick may be requested when a person *begins* to be in danger of death, for example, before a serious operation, in the midst of a debilitating illness, when a person is elderly and frail, and so on.

- This Sacrament, validly administered and received with grace, *always* brings Christian healing.
 - The person is made *whole* in mind, body and soul, and is given peace, strength and courage. **This healing is the spiritual victory over sickness.**
 - This victory is sourced in Christ's mastery over sickness and his conquest of death (to which all sicknesses point) by dying and rising. A share in Christ's Resurrection, to which every Christian looks forward in faith, is the eternal cure from all sicknesses, and all death.

