

Anointing ought to be community rite

By Gretchen Dent
Genesee Hospital Chaplain's office

The Pastoral Care of the Sick, which encompasses the Rites of Anointing and Viaticum, was approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1982 and has been used in draft form since 1974. As with all revised rites, it has taken time to gain acceptance. It continues to be a process that we journey with, and will continue to learn about and adapt to as we step into the future.

Despite the fact that the rite seems lacking in its ability to address the needs of terminally ill people and of the families and friends of those who are ill, it is my personal experience that people are beginning to find meaning in the celebration of this rite.

When we first began using this rite at Genesee Hospital, people were frightened of it — still associating the rite with the "Last Rites" and as a signal that there was no longer any hope for recovery. Now we are beginning to have some patients who ask for the sacrament, and many who are surprised at how comforting and beautiful it is. They are the ones who will bring the rite to its fullness as they pass along their experience to others.

Because of my work as a volunteer at the hospital, I was asked to be one of the people to bring the Oil of the Sick to be blessed by Bishop Matthew H. Clark at the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday. It was an honor to be asked to participate in the blessing of this oil, which will be used all year

throughout the diocese.

As the days passed by and I rehearsed the words to ask for the bishop's blessing, I began to feel the heaviness of my responsibility. Anyone who has read Annie Dillard may recall her narrative after being asked to buy the wine for Communion and her journey back with it in her knapsack. Her mind is filled with images of her responsibility, capability and worthiness as the wine becomes heavier and heavier. I, too, found the burden getting heavier.

At this point in time, only ordained priests preside at the Rite of Anointing, but the rite is meant to be a communal celebration, as are all sacraments. Unfortunately, due to the limited availability of priests and circumstances within a hospital setting, the communal aspect is rarely achieved. There may be one or two extra people present at times, but even that is a luxury. Perhaps, the challenge to us all as baptized Christians is to complete the communal aspect of anointing. Jesus was a living sacrament. He healed by word and touch, and brought his healing presence to those who were ill. As baptized Christians, we have that same responsibility to all who are ill.

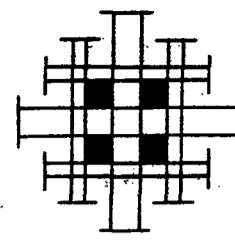
Because of my own personal experience of serious illness and of being very close to death, I can attest to the importance of community support. There were many people who brought God's healing presence to me in varied ways: in Scripture, in their own words, but most of all in their own presence and touch. It seemed as if there was always someone sitting there

quietly when I opened my eyes and, almost without exception, everyone physically touched me while they were with me. What gifts they were, what strength they gave to me — what hope and faith they brought! There was also the person who brought the fragrant grapes of fall for my "communion wine." Their beauty, taste and fragrance filled my days and nights with the reminder of God's love and care.

This was my first experience of being able to "feel" the prayers of a community, and it brought a new dimension to prayer. All of the cards and calls made me keenly aware of the community's prayer and support — support not only from my own community, but from the larger church as well. This support gave me the strength to face a threatening and frightening illness, but also made the period of my illness a sacred time that I will carry with me always. It has given a new dimension to the Rite of Anointing.

I'm certain that I was not the first or last

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person to experience these feelings while seriously ill, but perhaps that is why the urn of oil was so surprisingly difficult to carry. It was not only the physical weight of the urn, but also the weight of our responsibility to the sick. If we carry the oil together, however, no one's burden will be too heavy.

As I asked Bishop Clark to "bless this oil for the anointing of all who suffer in mind and body," I sent part of me and each of you with the oil that will be used this year.

Our challenge in this rite is to be a part of it — to participate when it is possible and immerse ourselves in its beauty. As baptized people of God, we are called to "ease the sufferings ... of all whom the Church anoints with this holy oil" (*Pastoral Care of the Sick*).

Nazareth Academy offers summer tutoring

ROCHESTER — The Sisters of St. Joseph are offering summer tutoring in math and reading skills for students completing grades one through eight. The programs will run from 8 a.m. to noon on weekdays from July 9-27 at Nazareth Academy High School, 1001 Lake Avenue. Registration fee is \$130 per subject, and the deadline is June 30.

Teachers will work one-on-one with

students in 45-minute sessions. Registration and scheduling is on a first-come, first-served basis. For information or to register, call Sister Francesca Tundo, 716/621-1714.

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