

COLUMNISTS

Council altered understanding of anointing rite

In the decades before the Second Vatican Council, calling in the priest to anoint a loved one would sometimes provoke an intense argument within the family. Asking for the last rites was the equivalent of throwing in the towel at a prize fight. It was giving up.

This attitude toward the last rites of the church was derived from a common pre-Vatican II belief, promoted even by some theologians, that the sacrament of extreme unction (as it was formerly known) was only for the dying.

When it changed the name of the sacrament from extreme unction to anointing of the sick, the council came down on the side of a different group of theologians who had been arguing that this sacrament is for anyone afflicted with a serious illness or in advanced age, and not only for those near death (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n. 73). The last sacrament is Viaticum, or final holy Communion, not extreme unction.

Because of this significant change in the understanding of the sacrament, there are now far fewer frantic, middle-of-the-night phone calls to rectories from hospitals, convalescent homes, and private residences. Catholics and health personnel generally have been made aware that the sacrament is not to be delayed until a person is at death's door. It can, and should, be administered early



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

enough so that the one who is ill or aged can derive as much spiritual benefit from the sacrament as possible and as much comfort and support from family and close friends.

Indeed, the new rite assumes that members of the church, including relatives and friends, have visited with the sick, prayed with them, and brought them Communion, and are now with them for the celebration of the sacrament.

Anointing, therefore, is not to be regarded as a private, once-and-for-all event that happens only when the end is near or in emergency situations. Rather, it is the culmination of a series of rites and acts of pastoral care.

This broader, richer character of the sacrament was highlighted in Pope Paul VI's apostolic constitution of 1972, which officially promulgated the reformed rite.

The anointing is not only a ministry to

the sick and the dying, but also an act of conferring a special ministry on the anointed ones themselves. They are raised up as particular models of faithful and hope-filled association with Christ in his passion and death, and thereby "contribute to the welfare of the whole People of God" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 11).

The laity were directly involved in the administration of this sacrament for at least the first eight centuries of the church. Members of the eucharistic assembly took home with them not only the consecrated hosts but also the holy oils to be administered to the sick. Although members of the clergy undoubtedly visited the sick in the course of their pastoral duties, for the most part the laity were the ordinary ministers of the sacrament.

The gradual clericalization of the rite of anointing occurred because of the tendency of many Christians at the time to postpone the sacrament of penance until the end of their lives. But since the sacrament of anointing was reserved to those in full communion with the church, it could not be received until after one's late-in-life confession of sins to a priest.

This practice of postponing the anointing until after final penance led to the creation of a continuous rite of penance, anointing of the sick and Viaticum, all of which were administered by a priest. (For-

tunately, the practice of delaying penance was discouraged by the Council of Trent in the 16th century.)

Among the important aspects of the sacrament that were lost in this development was the notion that the sacrament of anointing was for physical as well as spiritual healing. It is meant not only to prepare individuals for life after death, but also for a productive return to this life, if God should so will it.

Like every sacrament, anointing of the sick is a sign as well as a cause of grace. As such, it reveals the church to others as a sacrament of Christ the healer, the one who saves us in our human wholeness, body as well as soul.

At the same time, the sacrament reminds the church that it is a community which itself is always in need of healing, a community subject to physical as well as spiritual reverses.

Indeed, the church is "always in need of being purified and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 8), and it is the healing Christ who marks out the path and who summons the church to follow it.

As in the case of the sacrament of anointing itself, the church does not delay doing that until the end.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

The pope is the 'key man' in the church

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 16:13-20. (R1) Isaiah 22:15, 19-23. (R2) Romans 11:33-36.

Next Sunday's first reading and the Gospel are especially important in view of the pope bashing going on today and the public dissent to the magisterium.

Jesus said to Peter, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom in heaven." Jesus never promised that to anyone else. Jesus told the other apostles that whatever they bound on earth would be bound in heaven, and whatever they loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven (Mt 18:18). But he never promised them the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus promised that to only one man, Peter and his successors. It was a promise to make Peter and his successors the head of the apostles, a promise of primacy, a promise that they would be the key men in the church. The fact that the church in Sunday's liturgy uses the passage from Isaiah about the key man in the kingdom of David with this Gospel expresses clearly how she meant the words of Jesus to be interpreted.

Each king had a key man in his palace. He was the viceroy or vizier or prime minister: the first man in the kingdom, second only to the king himself. He alone stood side by side with the king on festive occasions. In the absence of the king, he acted as regent of the kingdom.



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

He carried on his shoulder, like epaulets, two keys: one to the king's palace, and the other to the king's treasury. He alone could open or close the door to the King's palace and to his treasury. He was indeed the key man in the kingdom.

In the Isaian passage (R1), Shebna is being replaced in office because he abused his power: He would take bribes to secure an audience with the king or he would dip a hand into the treasury to line his own pocket. So he was replaced by Eliakim.

Eliakim, God said, would be like a peg. A peg is a reliable support to hold things up; people could depend on Eliakim. He would open and close doors, not for his own or his relatives' benefit, as Shebna had done, but for the benefit of all.

By promising to give Peter the keys of the kingdom, Jesus was promising to make Peter his key man. He also

promised that Peter would be more than a peg; he would be a rock, a firm foundation for his palace, the church.

The papal flag has two colors: gold and white. On the white part is the papal tiara, or triple crown, signifying the pope's power to teach, rule and sanctify. Underneath the tiara are two keys crossed to form a St. Andrew's cross. The silver key refers to the papal power to forgive sins and the golden key his power to grant indulgences.

Not for self-glorification does the pope claim this power. For Jesus conferred authority on Peter and his successors for service: "Feed my lambs and feed my sheep." That is why the proudest title of the Vicars of Christ on earth is "Servant of the servants of God."

People need to be fed the truth. Jesus asked the apostles, "Who do people say that the son of man is?" The people were all wrong then and they are equally wrong whenever their opinions go contrary to the magisterium of the church. What do people say about abortion, artificial contraception, the pill, homosexual acts, divorce, ordination of women? If what they say is contrary to the teachings of the rock, they are all wrong.

To Jesus' question, only Peter gave the answer that has resonated through the ages: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." To Peter alone Jesus

said, "I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32).

That is why the jaws of death, error from within and persecution from without, will never prevail against the rock. He is not only the key man, but the man who is Spirit-guided.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming, NY.

Daily Readings

Monday, August 26

2 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 11-12;
Matthew 23:13-22

Tuesday, August 27

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, 14-17;
Matthew 23:13-22

Wednesday, August 28

2 Thessalonians 3:6-10, 16-18;
Matthew 23:27-32

Thursday, August 29

1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Mark 6:17-29

Friday, August 30

1 Corinthians 1:17-25;
Matthew 25:1-13

Saturday, August 31

1 Corinthians 1:26-31;
Matthew 25:14-30

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Kids' Answers from page 12

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Reuben | 7. Benjamin |
| 2. Judah | 8. Gad |
| 3. Joseph | 9. Levi |
| 4. Naphtali | 10. Zebulun |
| 5. Simeon | 11. Dan |
| 6. Issachar | 12. Asher |

They are all sons of Jacob.

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