

The Early Church Fathers on Anointing of the Sick

The sacrament of the Anointing of the sick, or as it is sometimes referred to, The Last Rites, is based on the teachings of Scripture. In Mark 6:13 we see that the apostles themselves performed this function: "They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." We further see that those who succeeded the apostles were instructed to do the same. James said it this way: "Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14-15). Note that the grace received not only can heal the afflicted but is designed to forgive sin as well. As is true of all the sacraments, the sacrament of the anointing of the sick is an encounter with Christ.

Hippolytus

If someone makes an offering of oil, the bishop shall give thanks in the same manner as for the oblation of the bread and wine. He does not give thanks with the same words, but quite similar, saying, "Sanctify this oil, God, as you give holiness to all who are anointed and receive it, as you anointed kings, priests, and prophets, so that it may give strength to all who taste it, and health to all who use it" (*The Apostolic Tradition* 5:1-2 [A.D. 215]).

Origen

[The penitent Christian] does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine . . . [of] which the apostle James says: 'If then there is anyone sick, let him call the presbyters of the Church, and let them impose hands upon him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him. (*Homilies on Leviticus* 2:4 [A.D. 250]).

Council of Nicaea

Concerning the departing, the ancient canonical law is still to be maintained, to wit, that, if any man be at the point of death, he must not be deprived of the last and most indispensable Viaticum (Canon 13 [A.D. 325]).

Aphraates

[O]f the sacrament of life, by which Christians [baptism], priests [in ordination], kings and prophets are made perfect; it illuminates darkness [in confirmation], anoints the sick, and by its secret sacrament restores penitents (*Treatises* 23:3 [A.D. 345]).

Serapion

We beseech you, Savior of all men, you that have all virtue and power, Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and we pray that you send down from heaven the healing power of the only-begotten [Son] upon this oil, so that for those who are anointed . . . it may be effected for the casting out of every disease and every bodily infirmity . . . for good grace and remission of sins . . . (*The Sacramentary of Serapion* 29:1 [A.D. 350]).

Ephraem

They pray over thee; one blows on thee; another seals thee (Homily 46 [ante A.D. 373]).

John Chrysostom

The priests of Judaism had power to cleanse the body from leprosy—or rather, not to cleanse it at all, but to declare a person as having been cleansed. . . . Our priests have received the power not of treating with the leprosy of the body, but with spiritual uncleanness; not of declaring cleansed, but of actually cleansing. . . . Priests accomplish this not only by teaching and admonishing, but also by the help of prayer. Not only at the time of our regeneration [in baptism], but even afterward, they have the authority to forgive sins: "Is there anyone among you sick? Let him call in the priests of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the

prayer of faith shall save the sick man, and the Lord shall raise him up, and if he has committed sins, he shall be forgiven" (*On the Priesthood* 3:6:190ff [A.D. 387]).

Ambrose

Why, then, do you lay on hands, and believe it to be the effect of the blessing, if perchance some sick person recovers? Why do you assume that any can be cleansed by you from the pollution of the devil? Why do you baptize if sins cannot be remitted by man? If baptism is certainly the remission of all sins, what difference does it make whether priests claim that this power is given to them in penance or at the font? In each the mystery is one (*Penance* 1:8:36 [A.D. 390]).

Jerome

There came also Constantia a holy woman whose son-in-law and daughter he had anointed with oil and saved from death (*Life of Saint Hilarion* 44 [A.D. 392]).

Cyril of Alexandria

[I]f some part of your body is suffering...recall also the saying in the divinely inspired Scripture: "Is anyone among you ill? Let him call the presbyters of the Church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he be in sins they shall be forgiven" (James 5:14-15) (*Worship and Adoration*, 6 [A.D. 412]).

Pope Innocent

[I]n the epistle of the blessed Apostle James... 'If anyone among you is sick, let him call the priests... There is no doubt that this anointing ought to be interpreted or understood of the sick faithful, who can be anointed with the holy oil of chrism...it is a kind of sacrament (*To Decentius*, 25:8:11 [A.D. 416]).

Hilary of Arles

Whenever some illness comes upon man, he should hurry back to the Church. Let him receive the body and blood of Christ, be anointed by the presbyters with consecrated oil and ask them and the deacons to pray over him in Christ's name. If he does this, he will receive not only bodily health but also forgiveness of his sins (Sermon 19:5 [circa A.D. 440]).

Caesar of Arles

As often as some infirmity overtakes a man, let him who is ill receive the body and blood of Christ; let him humbly and in faith ask the presbyters for blessed oil, to anoint his body, so that what was written may be fulfilled in him: 'Is anyone among you sick? Let him bring in the presbyters, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he be in sins, they will be forgiven him. . . See to it, brethren, that whoever is ill hasten to the church, both that he may receive health of body and will merit to obtain the forgiveness of his sins (Sermons 13[325]:3 [A.D. 542]).

Cassiodorus

A priest is to be called in, who by the prayer of faith [oratione fidei] and the unction of the holy oil which he imparts will save him who is afflicted [by a serious injury or by sickness] (*Complexiones in Epp. Apostolorum* [A.D. 570]).