

Fr. Joe Chapter 12 ~ Extreme Unction In his own words...

Before Vatican II, the Sacrament of the Sick was called Extreme Unction or the last anointing. People would wait until they were dying before they would ask for this sacrament. Sometimes they would wait too long and death would come suddenly. We were taught to administer this sacrament conditionally not knowing when the soul leaves the body even though the person appears to be dead. I have experienced this on several occasions.

One night after supper, the doorbell rang. A teenage boy stood there soaked to the skin. It had been raining all day. He said that he believed that his grandma died. I got a raincoat, took him to my car and we drove several miles down the highway until we reached a barnyard. We parked the car and began walking through the flooded fields until we got to a little one-room cabin. The cabin was lit by a kerosene lamp. When we got inside, I could see the body of his grandmother lying on a bed in the corner. I tested for breathing and reflexes. I anointed her conditionally and finally told the boy that she was dead and he should get an undertaker. I would stay with her body.

I sat there in a rocking chair. The rain pelting on the roof, images seemed to dance against the shadows of the oil lamp, and her body seemed to be moving. I stepped out on the porch in the darkness and a cat screeched nearby. I ran back into the cabin and I rocked until I saw a light coming across the fields. It was a neighbor's tractor with the boy and an undertaker on a wagon. I always admired the faith of that boy who cared so much for his grandmother, not only while she was living, but also when she died.

On another occasion, I had just picked up my high school students and we were gathered at the Wallace home. The telephone rang and it was for me. Someone, 40 miles away had died and they needed a priest. I immediately told my students that class was called off and that they should find another way home, I needed to go on this sick call.

I started across the country to go to the home of the dead person. It took better than one hour before I got there. When I arrived, the family had told me that he had died early in the afternoon. They had been trying to get a priest all afternoon and none were at home. I went into the room and the body was already cold and just like stone. I did not want to upset the faith for these people, so I did give the sacrament conditionally. I came out and told them that I did all that I could do for the person, and asked them whether they had called an undertaker. They said, "no." They were told in catechism class that they should not call the undertaker until the priest gets there. I admire the faith and knowledge of these simple people. The fire department and medics knew that we believed and cooperated with us.

One Sunday morning I was saying Mass at one of the missions. We could hear the ambulance coming down the highway. It had pulled into our churchyard and a medic ran into the church saying they were taking Mrs. Smith to the hospital. I left the altar, got into the ambulance and anointed her. They I returned to the altar to go on with the Mass. As the ambulance sped away, I think the congregation was greatly affected about this and seemed to be more serious than any other Mass.

Vatican II gives us a new insight into this sacrament. It is no longer called the Last Anointing or Extreme Unction, it is called the Sacrament of the Sick. Christ brings strength and healing to the person. He does not necessarily bring a cure, but an uplifting, spiritually, emotionally and mentally. It can also be given to a person when illness or weakness threatens their lives. Christ enters this life and helps them. He helps them carry the cross. It may be repeated every six months or so by using the new rite. The condition is still there, but He is with them in the hour of death if it should result. So today, we are very seldom called at the last minute to anoint someone with Extreme Unction as we did in those pre-Vatican II years.