

Ask Fr James

My Mother was a woman of strong faith but at 91 she became weak and was unable to speak any longer but received anointing before her death. Was her sins forgiven her?

The anointing of the sick is the ritual of applying oil blessed and consecrated by the bishop by clergy on the sick for their own well-being of body, mind, and spirit. At one time, the anointing of the sick was associated with dying and was called *Last Rites*. This is a misunderstanding of this sacrament. The deathbed ritual anointing which a dying person receives is called viaticum. In those days, it was called the "last" anointing or extreme unction. The prayers that are said during viaticum anointing includes asking God for the forgiveness of their sin and giving absolution.

Now, there is the question about whether a very sick person who could no longer speak could have their sins forgiven since they couldn't confess orally. The answer to this question is that the church has moved away from the legalistic understanding of the sacraments to the invisible spiritual efficacy of the sacraments. The Vatican Council II employed the notion of *ex opere operato* to explain this matter. It simply clarified that sacramental grace, grace was given by God, is present and available through the sacrament and is not dependent on the "holiness" of the person or the priest. What this means is that we allow God's grace to happen without forcing the matter. God alone effects grace and the sacramental rite is a sign of God's desire to give grace. Thus the church teaches that God could be moved through the sacraments to give grace to the individual on the condition that the person was worthy of receiving it. So, if a weak patient could not confess orally, through the sacrament, the sick, they are allowed to name in their silences—their deepest sorrows and doubts—created by illness and, through the touch of anointing with oil and prayer, God conveys blessings and healing while restoring the sick person.

Anointing of the Sick is an important sacrament of the church's healing ministry. This sacrament, like saying Mass and hearing confession is exclusively a priestly function. The church teaches that sacraments are not of human origin but of divine origin and "is a visible form of an invisible grace." It is a fulfillment of the command by Jesus to his disciples to go out and heal the sick (Mt 10: 1, 8, Lk 6: 36, 9 1-6). The minister of the sacrament must carry out the intention of the Church while the recipient must have the proper intent for receiving the sacrament. By this rituals of healing and reconciliation, there is an outpouring of God's grace into all situations where people cry out to God in suffering, illness and injury.

You may email/send your faith questions to Fr. James and he will answer them in our Sunday Bulletins