



by Jethro Higgins

What are the Last Rites?

Last Rites are the sacraments received when a person is nearing death. When a person is in danger of death a priest may be called in order that dying persons might receive the last rites, which include Confession, Anointing of the Sick (formerly extreme unction) and final reception of holy Communion (*Viaticum*). These sacraments provide the forgiveness of sins, help the individual to prepare for death, and bring peace and courage to the sick person as the Holy Spirit guides them on their final steps to eternal life.

**Anointing of the sick
also known as extreme unction**

As stated above the last rites are not a sacrament, but a group of sacraments offered at or near the hour of death. The sacrament of anointing is actually not always administered within the context of the last rites, which makes it all the more intriguing that the two are often confused. Anointing is offered to persons who through sickness or old age, and the complications thereof, are nearing death. However, it is also offered to persons who are struggling with illness but not in danger of death, provided the nature of the illness is sufficiently serious. Anointing of the sick is a sacrament that must be administered by a priest or bishop, and there are no extraordinary ministers for this sacrament like there are for baptism and Communion.

Extreme unction is an unusual sounding name to modern ears. However, it is very descriptive. Extreme comes from the word "extremis," which Merriam-Webster defines as:

*in extreme circumstances; especially:
at the point of death*

Unction is a very interesting word it has three meanings all of which apply quite well to the sacrament. It could mean:

- The act of anointing as a rite of consecration or healing. Check.
- Something used for anointing. Check.

- Religious or spiritual fervor or the expression of such fervor. Check.

So, unction refers to the act of anointing the sick, the oil used to anoint the sick AND the spiritual disposition and hoped for response to the anointing. The hope for the sacrament is to bring about the physical healing of the individual who receives it as a continuation of Christ's healing ministry. However, the sacrament also conveys a spiritual healing that is always present even if a physical healing does not result from anointing. The sacrament also carries with it the forgiveness of sins, especially beneficial for those who lose the capacity to make a good confession near the end of their life.

What's in the name of a sacrament?

So, why the multiple names for this sacrament of healing? Well, many sacraments are known by other names for example: marriage and matrimony, penance and confession, holy Communion and the Eucharist and the sacrament of the altar and the blessed sacrament. In the same way that we use different names to emphasize different aspects of the sacraments listed above, the Church uses the name anointing of the sick to emphasize that one need not be approaching death in order to receive the graces proper to this sacrament. The name extreme unction, which became the technical term for the sacrament in the 12th century, may seem to imply in the word 'extreme' that it is reserved for the final stages of life. That is not necessarily the case so the language of anointing the sick is often preferred to communicate that the sacrament is open to others as well.

What else are the last rites?

So we know that there are three common sacraments offered in the last rites, but the one that is most proper to the dying (for those who are still able to ingest food) is Viaticum or the final reception of holy Communion. For some who may still be journeying toward the Church near the hour of their death the last rites may also include baptism and confirmation. The proper order to

administer the sacraments near the hour of death would be confession first, then the anointing of the sick and finally the reception of the Eucharist. It is a very beautiful thing that the last act of our loved ones as they pass from this world would be to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord. Another reason for this order would be that if miraculous healing of the sick person were to occur through the sacrament of the anointing of the sick there would be no need to receive Viaticum. If the individual has not been baptized yet it would be proper to be baptized first and then receive the sacrament of confirmation before receiving the rest of the sacraments proper to the last rites.

What role does music play in the anointing of the sick

Music has long been associated with healing, and medical science is starting to recognize its healing properties through music therapy. Studies are showing that bringing music into the care of the sick greatly improves response to treatment and quality of life. So, there are some well accepted medical applications that come into play when incorporating music into the lives of the sick and dying. In addition, bringing music into these difficult and potentially grieving times is a great spiritual blessing for friends and family of the person who is ill. Before my grandmother passed away the whole family gathered outside the family home and sang Merle Haggard and Creedence Clearwater Revival songs until the wee hours of the morning telling stories about the past and laughing. Those songs still bring me comfort to this day when I find myself missing her.

Liturgically music has a role in any application of the sacraments. Even sacraments that are not administered within the context of the Mass leave room for music whether in chanted prayers or suggestions of "an appropriate hymn may be sung at this time" in parenthesis. All of the sacraments, however, have an option to celebrate the rite within the context of the Mass and for anointing of the sick that would commonly be called a healing Mass. There would of course be opportunity within this liturgical context to select music with a message of healing.

Outside of the celebration of the sacraments it also makes sense to share comforting music with the sick person. Whether to prepare them for the future reception of the sacraments, to meditate on the gift of God's Grace after the reception of the sacraments or simply for the comfort of music therapy. OCP has a treasure trove of beautiful music for these purposes.

However, I would like to highlight 3 newer songs that offer great comfort along the journey of dealing with illness.

Songs of healing and comfort

"Healed in Christ" (ocp.org/songs/89272) is a beautiful song to accompany those struggling with illness and their family and friends. From Sarah Hart's new album *Sacrament*. The lyrics are extraordinary as you'll hear in the video below, and Sarah's natural style leads her listeners toward hope and great comfort in times of trial and difficulty.

Josh Blakesley's song "We Come to You" (ocp.org/songs/75986) from his album *Waiting* is a beautiful and thoughtful song of hope that draws the listener to place their brokenness and their needs at the feet of Jesus who has the power to heal us and make us whole again.

Grayson Warren Brown composed this beautiful song "Meditation" (ocp.org/songs/77971) with a simple and repeatable line that prays for Jesus to heal us, hold us and help us find rest. If you are seeking to incorporate just a small amount of simple music into an anointing, this is the perfect song to use.

This series is intended to provide a more in-depth look at each of the Sacraments their institution in the Bible, current practice, and some beautiful musical suggestions. Explore more from related articles in this series:

- **Baptism:** *What is Baptism?*
- **Eucharist:** *What is the Eucharist?*
- **Confirmation:** *What is the Sacrament of Confirmation?*
- **Confession:** *Sacrament of Reconciliation*
- **Anointing of the Sick:** *Last Rites and the Anointing of the Sick*
- **Matrimony:** *Being husband and wife*
- **Holy Orders:** *What is the Sacrament of Holy Orders?*

To view this content online and other parts of this series visit ocp.org/sacrament-series

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