

WHEN CAN LAST RITES BE GIVEN?

Dear Father Kerper: When my grandmother died in a nursing home late at night, we couldn't find a priest to give her Last Rites. In the morning, we finally found a priest but he said he couldn't give Last Rites because she was already dead. Why not? I always thought Last Rites were for the dead.

I'm sorry that your grandmother passed into eternal life without receiving the sacrament of the sick and the prayers that a priest could have offered for her as she approached the moment of death. However, don't underestimate the value of your own prayers and your faithful presence at her bedside. Under the circumstances, you did something very good, and we must trust that everything done in love and faith will produce fruit in ways we may never know.

The priest was correct: only a living person can receive a sacrament, including the sacrament of the sick. The problem here is the misleading term "Last Rites." Unfortunately, many people continue to believe that the Catholic Church has some sort of "last sacrament" or "sacrament for the dead." We don't. Indeed, we've never had such a thing. So how did we get "Last Rites"?

This popular term emerged from an incomplete translation of the official Latin text of the old *Roman Ritual*, which contains the official prayers for the sacraments and other rituals.

The Latin version of the 1964 *Roman Ritual* has a section labeled: *Ritus continuus infirmum muniendi sacramentis extremis*. The official English translation renders the Latin as "The last rites as given without interruption." However, the Latin does not contain the term "Last Rites." Even worse, the English translation omits the key Latin phrase that means "for the fortifying/strengthening of the sick." The Latin text says nothing at all about death or dying.

All the prayers in the *Ritus continuus*/Last Rites, refer to the *living* person, not a corpse. Though some of the prayers

mention the possibility of imminent death, they simply commend a living person to God's mercy. There is nothing like an "absolution" of a dead person.

We discover the true purpose of the sacrament of the sick by examining its current formula. As the priest anoints the sick person with the Oil of the Sick, he says these carefully chosen words: "Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up."

This prayer requests three specific things from the Lord. First, it seeks "help" through "the grace of the Holy Spirit."

This help can take several forms: patient endurance of physical suffering, provision of useful medical care, renewed hope, and perhaps even miraculous healing, which does happen now and then.

Second, the prayer asks for forgiveness of sin. Here we see a clear linkage between the sacrament of the sick and penance, which may also be offered by the priest during his visit to the sick person. If the sick person cannot confess his or her sins because of unconsciousness or the inability to speak, the sacrament of the sick forgives all sins. This freedom from sin – spiritual disease – is vastly more important than mere physical healing, which is always temporary in that every healed person will eventually die.

Third, the formula concludes by requesting that the sick person be "raised up." The phrase "raised up" has a double meaning: "raised up" from the particular disease or injury; and, much more importantly, "raised up" from death into the Resurrection of Christ at the end of time. In light of the sacramental formula, it makes no sense to celebrate the sacrament of the sick for someone already dead.

So, what happens if the priest doesn't get to the dying person in time? Then a priest may administer the sacraments "conditionally." This may happen if the person has just expired or if there is any doubt that the person is truly dead. In cases like this, the priest will administer the sacraments with the assumption that the person is still alive. Most priests will do this if the apparent death happened within 20 or 30 minutes. But no one would anoint a corpse already in the morgue. Also, the *Roman Ritual* contains prayers that can be said in the presence of a dead person, and a priest or deacon may bless the body with Holy Water. These prayers and ritual acts offer grieving people support and hope in a time of trauma and darkness.

Sad to say, many Catholics now die without receiving the sacraments. This happens because some people wait until their loved one is on the verge of death and then can't find a priest.

To avoid this, people should carefully plan their own spiritual care or the care needed by their loved ones in

Obtaining the Sacrament of the Sick

▪ Seek the sacrament long before imminent death. Priests, who often serve in multiple locations, may be occupied with other duties and unable to respond. Weekend Mass schedules often prevent priests from reaching dying people.

▪ If someone is seriously ill, call the parish and inform the priest or staff member. Leave the full name of the person, institution, room number and phone number of the caregiver. Don't assume that the hospital or nursing home will call the parish. Don't be shy about following up. Messages get garbled and lost.

▪ Find out which staff person at a hospital, hospice or nursing home is responsible for spiritual care. Many institutions, especially Catholic ones, have contact with priests assigned to provide the sacraments. These priests work in partnership with your pastor.

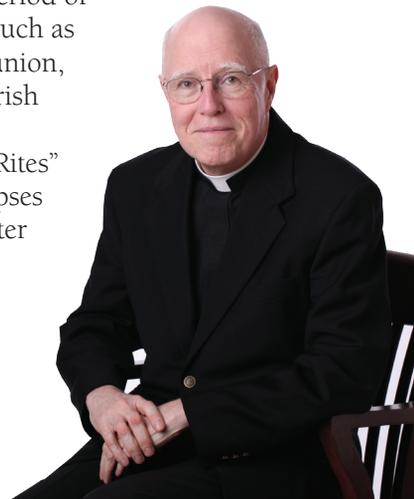
▪ A person who is facing major surgery or who has any form of serious illness, including addictions or mental problems, may be anointed at the parish. Some parishes schedule the sacrament of the sick regularly, usually after Mass. Also, the sacrament may be repeated if a person's condition worsens over time. However, there is no need to anoint a person again if he or she has been recently anointed.

a timely manner. As soon as a person becomes seriously ill, the priest or pastoral worker in the parish should be notified. Then arrangements can be made for the person to receive the sacrament of the sick, Holy Communion throughout their illness and the sacrament of penance when they are ready to become fully reconciled with the Lord.

Today, pastoral care of the sick is a "team effort," not limited to the frantic arrival of a harried priest who anoints a dying person and then rushes off to another emergency.

Proper spiritual care should be spread out over a much longer period of time and involve others, such as ministers of Holy Communion, hospice chaplains, the parish deacon, and so forth.

The old focus on "Last Rites" as something done to corpses needs to be corrected. After all, the Church offers so much more – spiritual healing, comfort, and forgiveness through the sacramental touch of the Lord to living people. ■



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