



A CATHOLIC BIBLICAL THEOLOGY  
OF THE SACRAMENTS

# THE BIBLE *and* THE ANOINTING *of the* SICK

*Healing in Christ*



MICHAEL PATRICK BARBER

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*and* THE ANOINTING  
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# Introduction

## *The Bible and the Anointing of the Sick*

[The twelve apostles] cast out many demons, and they *anointed with oil* many who were sick and healed them.

—Mark 6:13

It is no exaggeration to say that anointing of the sick has been the most misunderstood . . . of the seven sacraments of the Church.

—Charles Gusmer<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of Jesus’s public ministry is his proclamation of the kingdom. According to all four of the canonical Gospels, the apostles began sharing in this work even prior to Jesus’s passion and resurrection (Matt. 10:1–42; Mark 6:7–13; Luke 9:1–6; cf. John 4:1–2). Paul also seems aware of this tradition (1 Cor. 9:14).

The Gospel of Mark provides us with an arresting detail about the apostles’ initial mission, however, that is often overlooked. While spreading the word

1. Charles W. Gusmer, *And You Visited Me: Sacramental Ministry to the Sick and the Dying*, rev. ed., Studies in the Reformed Rites of the Church 6 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989), 181.

about the need for repentance, the apostles also healed the sick by *anointing them with oil*.

And Jesus called to himself the twelve, and he began to send them out two by two, and he gave them authority over the unclean spirits. . . . And the twelve went out and proclaimed repentance. And they cast out many demons, and they *anointed with oil* many who were sick and healed them. (Mark 6:7, 12–13)

This intriguing report is often passed over without much reflection.<sup>2</sup> This is a mistake. Jesus’s commissioning of his disciples to heal others by anointing them with oil is not inconsequential.

That anointing people with oil was significant for early Christians is also evident from the New Testament letter of James. Like the apostles in Mark 6, the early followers of Jesus continued to minister to the sick with oil. James writes:

Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and have them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. (James 5:14)

Citing James’s instructions, various early sources indicate that unction (oil) was used in ministering to the sick in early Christianity. Catholic and Orthodox Christians would eventually come to identify anointing of the sick as one of the seven sacraments. Other Christians, even those who do not embrace a “sacrament” of unction, nevertheless have continued to use oil in ministering to the sick in accordance with James’s directive.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, as with Mark 6:13, there are subtleties in James 5 that raise many questions. To mention a few:

- Who exactly are the “sick”? The Greek word used by James is a verb, *astheneō*, “to be sick.” Is this a reference to physical infirmity or spiritual weakness?
- Why should *elders* come? Who are these figures? Are they merely elderly Christians? And why is it important that the anointing is done by *them*?

2. Take, for instance, Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark*, BCBC (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2001), 137–38, which never even mentions the Twelve’s use of oil.

3. See, e.g., Huldrych Zwingli, *Writings*, vol. 2, *In Search of True Religion: Reformation, Pastoral and Eucharistic Writings*, trans. H. Wayne Pipkin (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 1984), 102.

- What precisely does the oil do? What does the oil accomplish that prayer alone does not?

This study is going to address these and other related questions.

## The Aims of This Study

Although this book is written in a series that has Catholics as its primary audience, it is hoped that this study will benefit both Catholics and non-Catholic Christians. Its title is *The Bible and the Anointing of the Sick*. That the “Bible” comes first is deliberate—this study is first and foremost about unpacking the riches of the scriptures, which all Christians accept as containing the inspired word of God.

It is also, of course, about anointing of the sick. As we have mentioned, long before the Protestant Reformation, Christians in both the East and the West had celebrated anointing as a sacramental rite. At the time of the Reformation, this was not a new practice; they had done so *for centuries*. Even today, like Catholic Christians,<sup>4</sup> Orthodox Christians observe anointing of the sick as a liturgical rite.<sup>5</sup> In addition, though not recognizing it as a “sacrament” or a liturgical rite like Catholics and Orthodox Christians, many Protestant Christians use oil in ministering to the sick as well.<sup>6</sup>

For all of these traditions, anointing is seen not as an “addendum” to Scripture but as a practice mandated by it. The practice of anointing the sick, then, *returns* us to the biblical text. The use of oil on the infirm ensures that we focus our attention on aspects of the biblical text that we might otherwise overlook. How often, for example, is the apostles’ use of oil in their initial work

4. I deliberately avoid the language of “Roman Catholic.” The term is problematic because it obscures the fact that there are many Eastern Rite Christians who are in communion with Rome but who have their own theological, liturgical, and canonical traditions. While this author is Latin Rite, like the majority of Catholics in the West, I hope this book will also be of help to Catholics of other rites.

5. For theological treatments of the rite from an Orthodox perspective, see Paul Meyendorff, *The Anointing of the Sick*, *The Orthodox Liturgy 1* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009); David G. Bissias, *The Mystery of Healing: Oil, Anointing, and the Unity of the Local Church* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2008).

6. For example, the history of the use of anointing oil in the Anglican tradition alone is too complex to discuss here. For a classic discussion of the sacrament from an Anglican perspective, see Frederick W. Puller, *The Anointing of the Sick in Scripture and Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1904).

overlooked? A study of anointing of the sick is not simply needed for ecumenical purposes; it is needed *because it helps us better understand the biblical texts*.

Moreover, by focusing on Scripture, this study hopes to make a contribution to Catholic systematic theology. Sadly, the biblical bases for the sacraments in general—and anointing of the sick in particular—are often treated in only a cursory manner or understood in a superficial way. Works on sacramental theology often begin by mentioning the key biblical passages related to the sacrament being studied but then seldom look carefully at the exegetical issues they raise. This is a problem. It reinforces the perception that Catholic systematic theology is weakly rooted in the scriptures. What is more, I would contend that approaches that only superficially treat the scriptural bases of the sacraments are *profoundly* misguided because they fundamentally misconstrue the very nature of the theological task itself.

### Theology versus “Theologianology”

One recent Church document—a work that Pope Francis says “remains fundamental for our communities”<sup>7</sup>—insists that “where theology is not essentially the interpretation of the Church’s Scripture, such a theology no longer has a foundation.”<sup>8</sup> Theology must “essentially” involve “the interpretation of the Church’s Scripture.” Here we find a restatement of the Second Vatican Council’s teaching about the nature of theology: “The study of the sacred page should be the very soul of sacred theology.”<sup>9</sup> This articulation uses the language of Christian tradition, which views the soul as that which “animates” or “gives life to” the bodies of living things.<sup>10</sup> In sum, the Second Vatican Council is saying that to do theology apart from “the study of the sacred page” is to commit to a *dead* theology. From an authentically Catholic perspective, a nonbiblical approach to theology is not properly “theology” at all.<sup>11</sup> Catholic theology

7. Francis, *Aperuit illis* (He Opened Their Minds), Apostolic Letter Instituting the Sunday of the Word of God (September 30, 2019), §2.

8. Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (The Word of the Lord), Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church (September 30, 2010), §35; cf. Francis, *Aperuit illis* 2.

9. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (The Word of God), Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (November 18, 1965), §24. Translation from Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents, Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 113.

10. See, e.g., Tertullian, *The Soul* 6: “It is the soul itself which makes the body either animate, if it be present to it, or else inanimate, if it be absent from it” (*ANF* 3:185).

11. This present study appears in a series entitled “A Catholic Biblical Theology of the Sacraments.” The term “biblical theology,” however, is defined in different ways by different

cannot simply consist of studying different theologians' opinions. That would be "theologianology," not "theology" properly speaking. To ensure that God himself remains the living subject of theology—"the study of God"—the Church wisely instructs that priority be given to the study of Scripture, which is recognized as containing God's inspired word (2 Tim. 3:16).

This conviction that theology must first and foremost be anchored in the Bible is rooted in Christian tradition. For example, writing in the late 300s, Cyril of Jerusalem insists, "For in regard to the divine and holy mysteries of the faith, not even a casual statement should be delivered without the Scriptures."<sup>12</sup> He therefore writes that the articles of the creed represent "the most important points collected from the Scriptures."<sup>13</sup> Later Church Fathers and Doctors would echo this sentiment. Thomas Aquinas—officially recognized by popes with the honorific term "the Common Doctor," due to his lasting legacy in Catholic theology<sup>14</sup>—himself emphasized the centrality of the scriptures. While he held that it is appropriate to draw from other authorities, for Thomas, Scripture remained the primary source for theological study. For example, Thomas writes: "Sacred doctrine . . . *properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof*, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, *yet merely as probable*."<sup>15</sup>

To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that sacramental theology is *only* the result of exegetical engagement with biblical texts. That the study of sacramental theology involves something more than that is manifest from the fact

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people, and I am not particularly fond of it. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to imagine an authentic Catholic approach to theology that would be truly "unbiblical."

12. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 4.17; translation from Cyril, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, 2 vols., FC 61–62 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1969–70), 1:127.

13. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 5.12; translation from Cyril, *Works of Saint Cyril*, 1:146.

14. See, e.g., Pius XI, *Studiorum ducem* (The Supreme Guide), Encyclical Letter on St. Thomas Aquinas (June 29, 1923), §11; Francis, "Address to the Participants in the International Thomistic Congress" (September 22, 2022).

15. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, art. 8, ad 2. Translation from *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars, 1–49*, trans. Laurence Shapcote, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas 13 (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 12 (emphasis added). For more on the centrality of Scripture in the Church Fathers and Thomas Aquinas, see Michael Patrick Barber, "The Bible, the New Ressourcement, and Peter's Priestly Keys," *New Ressourcement* 1, no. 2 (2024): 271–313; Barber, "Thomas Aquinas's Exegesis of Paul and the Eucharist as *Panis Angelicus*: Typology and Transubstantiation," in *Thomas Aquinas and the Eucharist*, ed. Michael A. Dauphinais, Andrew Hofer, and Roger W. Nutt (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2025).

that the very word “sacrament” is derived from a Latin term, *sacramentum*. The biblical books were written not in Latin but in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Nevertheless, a genuinely Catholic approach to anointing of the sick must accept that theology is “essentially the interpretation of the Church’s Scripture.” As we will see, the sacrament is understood to draw us into mysteries testified to by biblical texts themselves. Pope Francis therefore insists, “Sacred Scripture and the sacraments are thus inseparable.”<sup>16</sup>

## New Light on Anointing of the Sick

Despite its long history, many have noted that the theology of the sacrament of anointing of the sick remains underdeveloped. In his comprehensive study of the sacrament, Charles Gusmer writes, “It is no exaggeration to say that anointing of the sick has been the most misunderstood . . . of the seven sacraments of the Church.”<sup>17</sup> This should not be surprising. As we have seen, from a Catholic perspective, a proper understanding of the sacrament must be anchored in Scripture. Yet, as far as I know, Gusmer’s is the only monograph-length study on the biblical roots of the sacrament. Indeed, many studies focus on Mark 6 and James 5 and then say little if anything more about other biblical passages that might shed light on the sacrament. It is therefore no wonder that the theology of the sacrament is perceived to be underdeveloped. This book responds to the call of Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote: “This sacrament deserves greater consideration today both in theological reflection and in pastoral ministry among the sick. . . . Anointing of the Sick should not be held to be almost ‘a minor sacrament’ when compared to the others.”<sup>18</sup>

The scriptural bases for anointing of the sick involve much more than merely Mark 6 and James 5. This is especially true in light of the Second Vatican Council’s teaching about the sacrament, which marked a watershed moment in the history of the Church’s understanding of anointing of the sick. In addition to the traditional passages used to explain it—that is, Mark 6 and James 5—the council explains the sacrament by citing biblical passages *never used by previous magisterial sources to articulate the sacrament of anointing*

16. Francis, *Aperuit illis* 8.

17. Gusmer, *And You Visited Me*, 181.

18. Benedict XVI, Message of the Holy Father on the Occasion of the Twentieth World Day of the Sick (February 11, 2012), §3, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/sick/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20111120\\_world-day-of-the-sick-2012.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/sick/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20111120_world-day-of-the-sick-2012.html).

*of the sick's meaning.* By studying the implications of the council's use of these texts, I will make the case that we can have a deeper understanding of the sacrament. As a result, I will advocate an approach to the sacrament that goes beyond (though not against) previous articulations.

Specifically, what we will discover when we read James 5 in light of other texts used by the Church to explain the sacrament of anointing is this: true healing involves more than mere biological health. Ultimately, true healing entails conformity to the crucified and risen Lord. This occurs through being “in Christ”—that is, through union with the “Anointed One” in the Spirit. This conformity is first realized at baptism but reaches maturity as one more fully unites oneself to Christ by love that is expressed in suffering in union with him. In uniting themselves to Christ's death through faithful suffering in love, believers participate in Christ's royal, priestly, and prophetic identity and thus look in hope to share also his resurrection. With this outlook, then, the Church can look to the scene of Jesus's own anointing at Bethany as a sort of icon for understanding the sacrament of anointing of the sick. As Jesus was anointed to prepare his body ahead of his suffering and death, believers—as members of that body—also share in what sacral anointing signifies: the life-giving power and strengthening of the Spirit. The Spirit, then, enables them to share in his dominion over sin and its effects (Rom. 5:17), to present their bodies as part of one “living sacrifice” in Christ (Rom. 12:1), and to bear suffering in a prophetic way in the world, faithfully giving testimony to Jesus (Rev. 19:10).

Yet, while the Church's understanding of anointing of the sick is rooted in many different biblical texts, James 5 has long been identified as the key text at the heart of the theology of the practice. We therefore turn to look at the core questions raised by James's instruction and how they have been answered in Christian tradition. This discussion sets the stage for the study to follow.

## 2

# James's Instructions and Christian Tradition

## *Questions about the Theology of the Anointing of the Sick*

Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and have them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

—James 5:14

This [passage about anointing the sick in James 5] ought to be received and understood as referring to the faithful who are ailing for they are able to be anointed with the holy oil of chrism, which has been made by the Bishop.

—Pope Innocent I (ca. AD 416)<sup>1</sup>

As we will see, the practice of anointing the sick is especially anchored in James 5. Although we have already quoted from it above, it is necessary to

1. Innocent I, *Letter to Decentius* 8; translation from Martin Connell, *Church and Worship in Fifth-Century Rome: The Letter of Innocent I to Decentius of Gubbio*, GLS 50 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), 47.

read James's teaching regarding anointing the sick in its immediate context. We are told:

Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and have them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous has great power in its effects. (James 5:14–16)

At first glance, this passage seems rather straightforward: the sick should be anointed, the prayer of faith will “save” the sick person, sins are to be confessed, and believers are to pray for one another. The more we reflect on James's<sup>2</sup> instructions, however, the more questions emerge. Catholic theologians will often cite the passage in treating the sacrament of anointing of the sick without engaging the various issues interpreters have raised about the text. This is unhelpful. To do sacramental theology without serious consideration of the exegetical questions involved with the passage is irresponsible.

This chapter sets the table for the rest of the study. We will not be able to answer all the questions raised by James 5:14–16 until the end of this book. In this chapter, we identify some of the key interpretive issues we will have to examine. Yet we cannot ignore the way Christian history has received James's instructions. It is necessary to look at the way the passage has been read by Christians through the ages. Long before the Protestant Reformation, James's teaching came to be read as describing an important liturgical rite. This not only is true of the West but applies to the ancient Eastern church as well. The Protestant Reformers, however, resisted a sacramental reading of this passage. Here we cover that history, looking briefly at the development of the sacrament and debates about it up to recent times. Moreover, we will see how the Second Vatican Council offered an approach to the sacrament of anointing that involves reading James 5 in light of biblical texts never before used to explain the sacrament in Christian history.

2. Following the standard scholarly convention, I simply refer to the author of the epistle as “James” without prejudice to debates about the author's identity. For different perspectives on that matter, see Dale C. Allison Jr., *James*, ICC (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 1–30; David A. deSilva, *The Jewish Teachers of Jesus, James, and Jude: What Earliest Christianity Learned from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 45–54. I use the same convention for other biblical books: Isaiah, Matthew, Mark, and so on.

## Core Questions about Anointing the Sick in James 5

James 5 mandates that the sick should be anointed with oil by the “elders of the church.” But what does this involve exactly? Here we need to consider critical interpretive questions that emerge from a careful reading of the passage.

### *Who Are Proper Recipients and Ministers of Anointing?*

In James, we are told that the “sick” should be prayed over and anointed by “the elders” (James 5:14). But who are the “sick,” and who are the “elders”? Let us take these one at a time.

First, as to the identity of the recipients of anointing in James 5, interpreters have arrived at a general consensus: there can be little doubt that James specifically has in mind the physically infirm. The Greek verb he employs, *astheneō*, typically refers to bodily sickness, especially in Christian literature.<sup>3</sup> In addition, James speaks of the “one who is sick” (*kamnonta*) being “saved” or “healed” (*sōsei*). The Greek terms here are often used to describe sick people who are restored to physical health.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, oil was often used as a healing agent (e.g., Isa. 1:6; Luke 10:34).<sup>5</sup> As we have seen, Mark 6 depicts the apostles using oil on the those with physical sicknesses. It stands to reason that James envisions a similar scenario. Furthermore, that the elders are to be summoned by the sick and to go to them suggests that the intended recipients are so unhealthy they are homebound. It appears, then, that James has in mind those who are gravely ill, not merely people with minor sicknesses.<sup>6</sup>

The meaning of the “elders,” however, is less clear. The Greek noun translated “elder,” *presbyteros*—which is sometimes also rendered in English as “presbyter”—could simply refer to people who are of advanced biological age. Yet James’s instruction can also be read against the background of other New Testament books where the word is applied to appointed leaders in the

3. Allison, *James*, 754: “The Jesus tradition . . . , as we know it, uses *astheneō* exclusively of bodily illness.” Allison cites Matt. 10:8; 25:36, 39; Mark 6:56; Luke 4:40; John 4:46; 5:3, 7; 6:2; 11:1–3, 6; Acts 9:37; 19:12; 2 Tim. 4:20; *Testament of Zebulun* 5:2, 4; *Testament of Joseph* 3:5; 9:4; *1 Clement* 59:4.

4. Allison, *James*, 754; Peter H. Davids, *James*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 192.

5. See, e.g., Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.172; *Jewish War* 1.657; Philo, *On Dreams* 2.58; Pliny, *Natural History* 23.39–40. This application of oil will be discussed in more detail in this chapter as well as in chap. 3.

6. See, e.g., Ralph P. Martin, *James*, WBC 48 (Dallas: Word, 1988), 206; Davids, *James*, 192.

churches (Acts 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; cf. 1 Pet. 5:1). Does James have a similar meaning in mind? This is a question we will have to take up in greater detail later (see chap. 6). In this chapter, however, we will look at data that indicates that early postbiblical Christians came to identify the “elders” with ordained ministers.

### ***What Is the Significance of the Use of Oil?***

As in Mark's description of the apostles' mission, James connects oil with healing. But why is oil itself important? To attribute to the oil itself healing power apart from God or faith would be superstitious.<sup>7</sup> Why should oil, then, be used? For James, the efficacy of anointing is ascribed first and foremost to “the Lord,” in whose name it is performed. So, why use oil at all?

Oil was commonly used in the ancient world as a natural healing agent. For example, in the story of the good Samaritan, it is used to dress the wounds of the man left beaten by the side of the road (Luke 10:34). Nevertheless, being anointed with oil has additional resonances in Scripture. Among other things, it is associated with reception of God's Spirit. A powerful example of this is found in the scene of King David's royal anointing. When the prophet Samuel anoints David, we are told, “The Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David” (1 Sam. 16:13). The connection between anointing and the power of the Spirit is also found in Isaiah: “The *Spirit of the Lord* GOD is upon me, because the LORD has *anointed* me” (Isa. 61:1).

The obvious question here is this: Are these traditions connecting oil to the Spirit somehow related to the practice of anointing the sick? Or is oil used in Mark 6 or James 5 simply as a kind of natural healing agent with no spiritual meaning intended? These are questions we will have to think through below.

### ***In What Way Does Anointing Bring about Healing?***

A final question raised by James's instructions is this: What connection is there between physical healing and forgiveness? The two ideas are frequently associated in Jewish and Christian literature. Among other places, in the canonical Gospels bodily healing and remission of sins are linked, perhaps most prominently in the Synoptic accounts of Jesus's healing of a paralytic (Matt. 9:2–8//Mark 2:1–12//Luke 5:17–26). Let us briefly review the story as it appears in Mark.

7. See CCC 2111.

A paralyzed man is brought to Jesus, and Jesus announces to him, “Child, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5). Hearing this, the Jewish scribes are astonished. They think to themselves, “Why does this man speak in this way? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins except the one God?” (Mark 2:7). Jesus, knowing their thoughts (Mark 2:8), asks them, “Which is easier to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or ‘Rise, and pick up your stretcher, and go home’?” (Mark 2:9). Jesus then heals the man in order to demonstrate that “the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Mark 2:10). We will return to this story later, but for now we can simply highlight that the core of the story affirms that Jesus heals the man *in order to prove that he has forgiven a man’s sins*. Physical healing is a sign of spiritual healing.

Still, questions remain about both the story of Jesus’s healing and James 5. Why is physical healing connected with forgiveness of sins? Does forgiveness of sins bring about a cure of physical ailments? We will return to these matters later (chap. 5). In addition, another question can be asked about James 5: What does the passage mean when it says that the sick person will be “saved”? Is it simply speaking of physical well-being, or is it also referring to spiritual salvation? Again, we will consider this in greater detail below. Specifically, early Christians appear to have linked anointing to *both* physical and spiritual healing.

## **James 5 and Anointing the Sick in the Early Church**

When we look at Christian tradition regarding anointing the sick, we find differences in the way the practice has been both celebrated and interpreted. Nevertheless, what cannot be disputed is this: from the earliest times, the practice of anointing the sick with oil was “catholic”—that is, “universal”—inasmuch as it was practiced by ancient Christians of both East and West.

### ***Anointing and Forgiveness of Sins***

It is not difficult to account for the fact that anointing the sick came to be associated with forgiveness of sins. Such an interpretation emerged directly from James’s epistle. After all, James moves from ministering to the sick with oil to the concept of forgiveness of sins (James 5:13–16). Remarkably, our earliest source witnessing to the reception of James’s directives specifically connects anointing to *spiritual* healing.

In the third century, the early Christian writer Origen quotes from James's directives for ministering to the sick. He explicitly interprets this passage as providing the basis for priests' ability to forgive sins.

[The penitent] is not ashamed to make known his sin to the priest of the Lord and *to seek a cure* according to the one who says, "I said, 'I will proclaim to the Lord my injustice against myself,' and you forgave the impiety of my heart" [Ps. 31:5 LXX]. What the Apostle James said is fulfilled in this: "But if anyone is sick, let that person call the presbyters of the Church, and they will place their hands on him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and if he is in sins, they will be forgiven him" [James 5:14–15].<sup>8</sup>

Origen makes a striking change to James's instructions, specifying that the presbyters will "place their hands on" the sick person rather than simply praying over the sick, as James describes. Is Origen speaking of a rite in which the sick are anointed, or does he know of a separate rite involving forgiveness of sins that he sees as having precedence in James's instructions? This is unclear.<sup>9</sup>

What is indisputable, however, is that Origen connects seeking a "cure" to the penitent's responsibility to "make known his sin to the priest"; the "cure" is found in oral confession of sins. Aside from the words from James, Origen speaks of no physical ailment. Instead, he moves from speaking of a "cure" to the psalmist's words about the Lord forgiving "the impiety of my heart." Whether Origen has any physical infirmity in mind here is not specifically stated. For our purposes, the upshot of Origen's statement is this: James's instructions about anointing and healing refer to something *more* than restoration of biological health.

Another source worth mentioning is the letter of Polycarp, which is even earlier than the passage from Origen, likely dating to the early part of the second century. Polycarp speaks of how the "elders" should "be compassionate . . . visiting all the sick."<sup>10</sup> Though Polycarp never mentions anointing the sick, one wonders if we nonetheless have here an allusion to James 5,

8. Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 2.4.5; translation from Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 1–16, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley, FC 83 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 47–48.

9. Advocates for both positions can be found. See John J. Ziegler, *Let Them Anoint the Sick* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987), 35.

10. Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 6:1, in Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 287 (modified).

which also assigns to the “elders” the task of attending to the sick. That James 5 informs Polycarp’s description receives further support from the next line, which speaks of *forgiveness of sins*: “Therefore if we ask the Lord to forgive us, then we ourselves ought to forgive.”<sup>11</sup> James 5 also moves from a description of the elders visiting the sick to forgiveness of sins. If James 5 is in the backdrop of Polycarp’s words, it would seem to suggest that Polycarp—like Origen—gave special emphasis to the *spiritual* dimension of James 5.<sup>12</sup>

Some have suggested that the spiritual emphasis of sources like Polycarp and Origen emerged because miraculous physical healings receded from view. This theory, however, lacks supporting evidence.<sup>13</sup> While some in the early Church did seem to speak of a cessation of miraculous works, others adamantly rejected such a claim. Augustine directly rebuts the notion that miracles have ceased, insisting that “even now miracles are being worked in Christ’s name, either through his sacraments or through the prayers or relics of his saints.”<sup>14</sup> More to the point, there are no data to support the claim that views of anointing changed in response to perceptions that healings had failed to occur. To the contrary, throughout the centuries we find the use of oil linked to physical healing. Here we can give a few examples.

### ***Anointing and Miraculous Healing***

Writing in the 200s, the Latin writer Tertullian relates a story about a pagan named Severus who expressed gratitude to a Christian named Proculus who had “cured him by anointing.”<sup>15</sup> Stories like these served as powerful witnesses against heretics like the Gnostics, who believed that the material world was inherently evil. Yet, notably, even the Gnostics were said to have used oil. In his famous work *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus (d. 202) reports that they had the practice of pouring oil out on a person’s body at death, not in order to

11. Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 6:2, in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 289.

12. This evidence is overlooked by those who downplay the use of James 5 in connection with the early Christian practice of ministering to the sick. See, e.g., Joseph Martos, *Deconstructing Sacramental Theology and Reconstructing Catholic Ritual* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 150.

13. Frederick W. Puller, *The Anointing of the Sick in Scripture and Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1904), 200–203.

14. Augustine, *City of God* 22.8; translation from Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. William Babcock, WSA I/7 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012–13), 506. This represents a reversal from his earlier view (see Augustine, *On True Religion* 16.34).

15. Tertullian, *To Scapula* 4.

heal the body but to enable the soul to leave it behind.<sup>16</sup> Some have suggested that the Gnostics' use of oil at death was the result of a perversion of the practice described by James. Whereas orthodox Christians followed James in maintaining that anointing could be associated with bodily healing, the Gnostics may have adopted the practice of anointing to celebrate "escape" from the body.<sup>17</sup>

In the *Acts of Thomas*, a work that dates to the early 200s, we find oil used in connection with baptism.<sup>18</sup> However, there is an episode involving anointing a man's wife who "was not well in body" (*Acts of Thomas* 67).<sup>19</sup> She ends up being anointed with "the oil of life." The anointing is accompanied by a prayer: "Lord of all orders of creation . . . anoint [the deacon Xanthippius's] flock with your oil of life, and cleanse it of its disease." Later, the apostle speaks of "holy oil, which was given to us for unction," within the context of a prayer to Jesus that speaks of "life and health and remission of sins" (*Acts of Thomas* 121). A woman is then anointed while the apostle prays: "Heal her old wounds, and wash away from her sores, and strengthen her weakness" (*Acts of Thomas* 121). These stories, however, are not presented as liturgical acts related to the instructions in James 5.

That anointings were occurring in the West in liturgical contexts is evident from a document known as the *Apostolic Tradition*. The historical development of this work remains a complicated issue.<sup>20</sup> For our purposes, it is worth noting that we find in it a liturgical blessing over oil that can be dated to the fourth century. The prayer indicates that the oil is meant to be administered to the sick with the hope of bringing physical healing to them:

O God, sanctify this oil: *grant health* to all who are anointed with it and who receive it, and as you anointed kings, priests, and prophets, so may

16. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.21.5.

17. See Cyprian Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy: A General Treatise on the Theology of the Liturgy*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle and W. A. Jurgens, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976), 422; Paul F. Palmer, *Sacraments and Forgiveness: History and Doctrinal Development of Penance, Extreme Unction and Indulgences*, SCT 2 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1959), 275.

18. See, e.g., *Acts of Thomas* 27.

19. On the dating of this work and the translation used here, see A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed., NovTSup 108 (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

20. For a discussion of the text's development and provenance, see Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 1–18.

it *give strength* to all who consume it and *health* to all who are anointed with it.<sup>21</sup>

Note here that the prayer specifically connects the oil to that used to anoint kings, priests, and prophets. This will be important later in our study.

The *Sacramentary of Serapion*, a fourth-century Egyptian work, contains a more expansive prayer over holy oil. Though somewhat lengthy, it is worth quoting in full:

We call upon you who have all authority and power, O Savior of all human beings, Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and we ask you to send healing power from the heights of heaven, from the only Son, upon this oil in *order that it may remove all sickness and infirmity* far from those who are anointed with it . . . that it may serve them as an antidote against every demon; that it may expel every unclean spirit from them, banish every evil spirit, dispel every fever and chill and sickness; *that it may grant them good grace and forgiveness of sins*; that it may be for them *a remedy for life and salvation* and bring them health and integrity of soul, body, and spirit, a perfect constitution.<sup>22</sup>

This remarkable invocation indicates that oil was associated not only with bodily healing but also with spiritual benefits—namely, the reception of “good grace” and “forgiveness of sins.”<sup>23</sup> Dale Allison notes that the Greek text includes phrases that mirror the language of James 5, making it the likely source text for the sacramentary’s prayer.<sup>24</sup>

More evidence regarding early Christian beliefs about anointing the sick can be found in the works of John Chrysostom. Writing at the end of the fourth century, Chrysostom explicitly cites James 5:

21. *Apostolic Tradition* 5:2; translation from Hippolytus of Rome, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, 2nd ed., PPS 54 (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2015), 90 (emphasis added).

22. Translation from Paul Meyendorff, *The Anointing of the Sick*, Orthodox Liturgy Series 1 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 35 (emphasis added). On the dating and provenance of this work, see Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 460.

23. Puller argues that the references to “good grace” and “forgiveness of sins” are a later interpolation, though he lacks textual evidence (*Anointing of the Sick*, 95–100).

24. See Allison, *James*, 747–48. Allison doubts this is due to direct dependence but suggests the use of wider liturgical traditions that are also shaped by James, which he dates to the second century. The postulation of additional liturgical traditions seems far more speculative than simply accepting direct dependence in this case.

God has given greater power to priests than to natural parents, not only for punishment, but also for help. . . . Parents bring us into this life; priests into the life to come. Parents cannot avert bodily death nor drive away the onset of disease; priests have often saved the soul that is sick and at the point of death, by making the punishment milder for some, and preventing others from ever incurring it, not only through instruction and warning, but also through helping them by prayer. They have the authority to remit sins, not only when they make us regenerate, but afterwards too. "Is any among you sick? . . ." <sup>25</sup>

Chrysostom goes on to quote the passage from James in full. What is notable here is that the ancient bishop evidently believes that James's teaching means ecclesial ministers have the power to bring about physical healing and forgiveness of sins. Chrysostom is not alone. Ambrose also appears to connect laying hands on the sick with the issue of forgiveness of sins. <sup>26</sup>

Writing in about 416, Pope Innocent I quotes James's instructions, adding:

There is no doubt that this [James 5:13–16] ought to be received and understood as referring to the faithful who are ailing for they are able to be anointed with the holy oil of chrism, which has been made by the Bishop. In case of emergency, this anointing is permitted not only for priests but even for all Christians. <sup>27</sup>

The Church's ministry to the sick with oil was thus seen as fulfilling the instructions found in the Letter of James. It is worth mentioning that Innocent here seems to recognize that non-priests can administer sacred oil in "emergency" circumstances. <sup>28</sup>

In addition, a notable blessing over oil is found in a work known as the *Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, which likely has its origin in the fourth

25. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* 3.6; trans. Graham Neville, PPS (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1964), 74. Whether Chrysostom knew of separate rites for anointing the sick and penance is unknown. See Ziegler, *Let Them Anoint the Sick*, 35–36.

26. Ambrose, *On Repentance* 1.8.36. Ambrose seeks to underscore the inconsistency of the Novatians, who do not permit forgiveness of sins of the lapsed, though their own priests are understood to have the power to effect forgiveness of sins through baptism.

27. Innocent I, *Letter to Decentius* 8; translation from Connell, *Church and Worship*, 47. Connell examines other textual variants, explaining why the version quoted is to be preferred (*Church and Worship*, 48).

28. See Puller, *Anointing of the Sick*, 278. Notably, Caesarius of Arles (d. 543) moves from speaking of lay anointing to a quotation from James 5. However, it is not clear that he equates lay healings with James 5 strictly speaking. See Palmer, *Sacraments and Forgiveness*, 284–85.

## Adam and Priestly Anointing

A fascinating tradition regarding the use of oil on the sick is found in *The Testament of Adam*, which can be dated sometime between the second and fifth centuries AD. In the second chapter, Adam details the way the different hours of the day are linked to important liturgical realities. We read: “At that hour [the tenth hour of the day] the waters are taken up and the priest of God mixes them with consecrated oil and *anoints those who are afflicted and they are restored and healed.*”<sup>a</sup> These lines are recognized by scholars as reflecting early Christian practice and therefore suggest that such anointing was understood both as bringing about *physical healing* and as *the work of priests.*<sup>b</sup>

a. *Testament of Adam* 2:10, in OTP 1:993 (slightly revised and emphasis added).

b. See, e.g., John M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, JSNTSup 49 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 27.

century.<sup>29</sup> The blessing is said to be for “oil for the healing of those who suffer.” The prayer asks God to consecrate the oil so that “it may deliver those who are diseased, and [that] it may *heal the sick* and *sanctify* those who return, as they draw near to your faith.” Here once again the oil is linked not only with the hope of healing of sickness but with a spiritual benefit—sanctification.

Likewise, in the sixth century, Caesarius of Arles urges the faithful not to trust in sorcerers for healing but to come to the Church to receive both the eucharist and sacred oil.

How much more correct and salutary it would be to hurry to the church, to receive the body and blood of Christ, and with oil that is blessed to anoint in all faith themselves and their dear ones; for according to what James the Apostle says, *not only would they receive health of body, but also remission of sins.*<sup>30</sup>

29. See the introduction to Grant Sperry-White, trans., *The Testamentum Domini*, GLS 22 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010). The translation of the blessing is taken from this source, though I have added italics.

30. Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon 279.5* (attributed to Augustine in PL 39:2273). Translation taken from Palmer, *Sacraments and Forgiveness*, 285 (emphasis added).

Caesarius goes on to quote directly from James 5 in the following lines. Once again, as with Pope Innocent, the possibility of lay anointing is mentioned. Nevertheless, the connection to the Church's ministers is clearly affirmed—even if the laity can administer the oil to others, it still must be blessed by the Church's ministers. What is especially notable is that Caesarius connects anointing to both physical and spiritual healing.<sup>31</sup>

The seventh-century writer Bede explicitly ties Mark 6 together with James 5. Commenting on James's instructions, Bede alludes to Mark 6, saying:

We read in the Gospel that the apostles did this. And now the custom of the Church holds that those who are sick be anointed with consecrated oil by the presbyters, with the prayer that goes with this, *that they may be cured*. Not only presbyters, but, as Pope Innocent writes, even for all Christians it is lawful to use the same oil for anointing at their own necessity or that of their [relatives], but the oil may be consecrated only by the bishops.<sup>32</sup>

He then explains:

Many persons on account of sins committed in the soul are struck with sickness or even death of the body. . . . If, therefore, the sick [have committed] sins and have confessed them to the presbyters of the Church and have sincerely tried to leave them behind and to amend, *these will be forgiven them*. But sins cannot be forgiven without a firm promise of amendment.

For Bede, then, we see that the practice of anointing the sick is understood to be rooted in both Mark 6 and James 5. Moreover, for Bede, anointing is indisputably linked to healing; specifically, it heals physical infirmities that are due to sin. This healing is not “magical” or “automatic.” It can result only from genuine repentance that is expressed in sincere confession of sins and firm purpose of amendment. For Bede, physical and spiritual healing are both associated with anointing, which is in turn understood as continuing the apostolic practice as attested in the Gospel of Mark and the Letter of James. In addition, following Innocent, Bede acknowledges the possibility of being

31. A very similar quotation is found in the seventh-century writer Eligius of Noyon, *On Correctness of Catholic Conduct* 5 (PL 40:1172–73). See Palmer, *Sacraments and Forgiveness*, 285–86.

32. Translation here and below taken from Bede the Venerable, *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*, trans. Dom David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985), 61–62 (emphasis added).

anointed by a lay person, though this must be done with oil consecrated by the bishop. Forgiveness of sins through confession, however, is solely linked with priestly ministry.

### ***Distinctions among Anointings and the Seven “Sacraments”***

In the third-century work *Acts of Thomas*, Thomas instructs a nurse to continue to anoint a sick woman with the unction he has already used on her (*Acts of Thomas* 121). Various other texts report stories of holy men and women—often but not always lay monastics or ascetics—performing miraculous healings with oil. These include Pachomius (d. 292), disciples of Antony, Hilarion (d. 371), Symeon Stylites (d. 460), Geneviève of Paris (d. 502), and Austreberta, who was Abbess of Pauilly (d. 703).<sup>33</sup> The sources that relate these healing stories typically make no mention of James’s instructions.<sup>34</sup> The ability of these figures to perform miracles, then, appears to have more to do with unique spiritual gifts for healing than the implementation of James’s prescriptions. One thinks, for example, of Paul’s affirmation that some believers are given the “spiritual gift” (*charisma*) of healing (1 Cor. 12:9, 28, 30).

As more emphasis was placed on unction’s association with forgiveness of sins—a power especially seen as reserved to ordained clergy—there was also an increased emphasis on the importance of receiving anointing from an ordained priest. Stress was put on James’s statement that anointing should be carried out by the “elders,” a term that was understood as a reference to ordained ministers. The Council of Chalons II (813) thus produced the following canon: “According to the document of the Apostle James, with which the documents of the Fathers are also in agreement, *the sick ought to be anointed by presbyters* with oil which is blessed by the bishop.”<sup>35</sup> James’s reference to “elders” (*presbyteroi*) is explicitly interpreted as referring to clergy.

But what, then, of anointings performed by nonclergy? Theologians began making distinctions between different types of sacred anointings. Theodulf of Orléans (d. 821), for example, explains that while there are fifteen different

33. See Puller, *Anointing of the Sick*, 149–89; Thomas M. Izbicki, “Saint Geneviève and the Anointing of the Sick,” *CHR* 104, no. 3 (2018): 393–414.

34. The *Penitential of Cummean* (seventh century) speaks only broadly of saints healing people in reference to James. See John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (1938; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 100. Whether this refers to lay saints is unclear.

35. Council of Chalons II, Canon 48; translation from Palmer, *Sacraments and Forgiveness*, 290–91.

## Jerome on the Multifaceted Significance of Anointing

In a homily dated to sometime between AD 391 and 392, Jerome explains that the different kinds of anointing in Scripture have different meanings, all of which must be carefully understood. He uses this to call to mind the importance of properly reverencing sacramentals used by the Church, implicitly connecting the holy rites and objects used in the Church to the use of oil in the biblical traditions.

We have read in Exodus the account of how oil is prepared for the anointing of the priest; we have read, too, of the different kind of balm used to anoint kings. There was still another unguent for prophets. What more is there to say? All these oils of unction were different, each with its own spiritual symbolism. Do we have the proper reverence for sacramentals (*de sanctis*)?<sup>a</sup>

- a. Jerome, *Homily on Psalm 132*. Translation from Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome (1–59 on the Psalms)*, trans. Marie Liguori Ewald, FC 48 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 334.

kinds of unctions, the apostles employed only three of those that had come to be known.<sup>36</sup> According to Theodulf, most anointings practiced by Christians were seen as unrelated to James's instructions.

Distinctions among the different ecclesial anointings were also made in connection with the development of the concept of sacraments. Here we cannot offer a detailed discussion of that history. Suffice it to say that, for centuries, Latin theologians simply adopted Augustine's definition of a sacrament: "Signs . . . are called sacraments when they are applied to divine things."<sup>37</sup> In other words, according to Augustine, a sacrament is essentially a visible sign of an *invisible* reality.<sup>38</sup> This was a rather broad definition, however. By 1131, following Augustine's terminology, Hugh of St. Victor would identify no fewer

36. Theodulf of Orléans, *Capitulare 2* (PL 105:221). See Bernard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, trans. Francis Courtney (New York: Herder & Herder, 1964), 247.

37. Augustine, *Letter 138.7*; translation from Augustine, *Letters: Volume 3 (131–164)*, trans. Wilfrid Parsons, FC 20 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 40.

38. See Augustine, *City of God* 10.5. For further discussion of Augustine's views and their influence on later sacramental theology, see William A. Van Roo, *The Christian Sacrament*, *Analecta Gregoriana* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1992), 38–43.

than thirty “sacraments”!<sup>39</sup> These included not only baptism and the eucharist but other pious practices such as the use of holy water and the application of blessed salt. Hugh’s interest in God’s use of material realities to impart blessing was probably occasioned by the emergence of the Albigensians, a heretical group who, like the Gnostics of old, rejected the goodness of the material world.<sup>40</sup> Hugh was therefore driven to show the various ways God uses physical things in the economy of salvation.

The first to speak of seven principal sacraments was the twelfth-century theologian Peter Lombard, whose work *On the Sentences* became a focal point for medieval theological studies. Interestingly, Master Simon, a contemporary of Lombard, arrived at the same number of sacraments. From this time on—in both the West *and* the East—the enumeration of seven sacraments became standard. Importantly, both Lombard and Simon included anointing of the sick among the seven. In these writers’ works, the sacrament of anointing was not connected to physical healing but was understood as preparation for death.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Lombard is the theologian credited with dubbing the sacrament “extreme unction,” signifying its connection with life’s end.<sup>42</sup> This, however, opened the door for debate: How could James’s teaching, which emphasizes physical healing, be viewed as a sacrament whose goal is preparation for death?

## Debates over Anointing the Sick and Recent Developments

In his oft-cited study on the sacrament, Charles Gusmer writes, “One reason why so few theologians have attempted to write on the anointing of the sick is the uneven and complicated tradition of the sacrament.”<sup>43</sup> Andrew Cuschieri likewise says, “The theology of the Anointing of the Sick is the least developed in comparison with that of other sacraments.”<sup>44</sup> Due to frequent

39. See Hugh of St. Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*.

40. See Thomas M. Finn, “The Sacramental World in the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard,” *TS* 69 (2008): 567.

41. See Palmer, *Sacraments and Forgiveness*, 298; Charles W. Gusmer, *And You Visited Me: Sacramental Ministry to the Sick and the Dying*, rev. ed., Studies in the Reformed Rites of the Church 6 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989), 29.

42. For the development of this term, see Paul F. Palmer, “The Purpose of Anointing of the Sick: A Reappraisal,” *TS* 19 (1958): 328–29.

43. Gusmer, *And You Visited Me*, 41.

44. Andrew Cuschieri, *Anointing of the Sick: A Theological and Canonical Study* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), iii.

neglect of it, one writer has even referred to it as “the forgotten sacrament.”<sup>45</sup> Here, to help lay the groundwork for the discussion in the rest of this book, I will briefly look at some of the major issues that have emerged in discussions of the sacrament.

### ***Healing, Preparation for Death, or Both?***

As we have seen, anointing of the sick has been viewed as having both physical and spiritual benefits, including physical healing and forgiveness of sins. But how are these different effects to be integrated? Over time, greater attention was given to the spiritual effects of the sacrament than to physical healing. Liturgical prayers accompanying administration of the sacrament eventually dropped references to hope for physical restoration.<sup>46</sup>

The emphasis on the sacrament's ability to remit sins also came with a significant side effect. Lest the faithful begin to take sin too lightly, it was believed that ecclesial practices involving the remission of sins should be limited.<sup>47</sup> It was common, then, for the sacrament of penance to be delayed until death.<sup>48</sup> By the eighth century, the use of holy unction on the sick was generally restricted in the West to those who were about to die. A theological dilemma began to emerge out of this. The sacrament had been traditionally anchored in the text of James, which speaks not of the death of the anointed person but of their healing. How could the sacrament involve a hope for healing if it was to serve as preparation for death?

Different explanations of the precise effects of the sacrament emerged; we cannot examine all of them here. The medieval thinker who would prove the most influential, however, is Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). It is necessary briefly to consider his contribution to this debate. Thomas finds a way to connect the sacrament of unction to the possibility of physical healing, while *also* maintaining its ability to effect spiritual healing. His thought on this matter, however, seems to mature over time.

45. William J. Bausch, *A New Look at the Sacraments*, rev. ed. (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1983), 202.

46. Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 379; John F. Cheriavely, “25th Year of the Rite of Anointing of the Sick: Challenges and Perspectives,” *Questions liturgiques* 78 (1997): 164–75.

47. See, e.g., Ambrose, *On Penance* 2.10.95 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 10:357).

48. See Palmer, *Sacraments and Forgiveness*, 118.

In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas explains that sins can affect not only the soul but the body as well. In addition, he explains that in some cases physical ailments can be borne in such a way that they are penitential. Still, he maintains that physical illness can also become an obstacle to virtue. Quoting James 5, Thomas argues it was therefore fitting for there to be a remedy for sicknesses that are due to sin:

Bodily infirmity is sometimes a hindrance to the health of the soul insofar as it is an obstacle to virtue. It was therefore fitting that a spiritual remedy should be applied against sin, insofar as sin is an occasion of bodily infirmity, and sometimes this remedy heals the bodily ailment (that is to say, when it is good for the soul's health).<sup>49</sup>

In this, Thomas affirms that the sacrament can involve physical healing.

Nevertheless, Thomas goes on to note that the sacrament of unction will not always bring about a physical cure—after all, at some point, all die. Yet, even in cases where physical healing does not occur, Aquinas insists that the sacrament still provides a spiritual form of healing—it *heals through forgiveness of sins*. This raises an obvious question. With other medieval thinkers, Thomas affirms the existence of a sacrament specifically ordered to the forgiveness of sins—namely, the sacrament of penance. Why would *another* sacrament involving the forgiveness of sins be needed if the Church already celebrates the sacrament of penance? In his answer to this question, Thomas notes that people cannot be fully aware of *all* the sins they have committed over the course of a lifetime. Extreme unction, he says, serves to address these forgotten sins.<sup>50</sup>

Thomas writes again of the sacrament of unction later in his *Summa Theologiae*. Sadly, he died before he could write the question specifically devoted to the sacrament of unction. The only place where he treats the sacrament in this work is in his general discussion of the seven sacraments.<sup>51</sup> Here Thomas observes that an analogy can be made between spiritual and physical health. In regard to the latter, health is restored in stages: (1) one is cured of sickness; (2) after one is cured of an infirmity, the person must regain their vigor. Penance

49. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.73. Translation from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Books III–IV*, trans. Laurence Shapcote, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas 12 (Green Bay, WI: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2018), 507.

50. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.73.

51. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 65, art. 1.

is compared to the first stage, while unction is identified with the second. While theologians will sometimes claim that Thomas deliberately moves away from his earlier position,<sup>52</sup> caution is required. It might be that, as with his treatment of other sacraments, Thomas offered different but complementary models for understanding unction.<sup>53</sup> Had Thomas lived to write a section specifically focused on the sacrament, he might have said something closer to what is found in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

There is, however, a question dedicated to the sacrament of unction in the Supplement to the *Summa Theologiae*, a section of the work that was completed not by Thomas himself but by his students. The treatment on unction draws entirely from Thomas's earlier treatment in the *Commentary on the Sentences* and so predates the material in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. It maintains that the sacrament of anointing is a remedy for the "remains" of sin.<sup>54</sup> This might be taken as a reference to the residual effects of sin, understood as inclinations to sin. There is also evidence, however, that the "remains of sin" refers to physical infirmities that result from sin. In the Supplement, we are told that since the infirmities of children "are not caused by actual sin, as in adults," the sacrament of unction "does not apply to children." These infirmities are expressly identified as "remnants of sin" (*peccati reliquiae*). This parallels Thomas's teaching in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* that physical ailments can be due to sin in adults and that it is these that constitute the "remains of sin" that are addressed through unction.<sup>55</sup>

Thomas's teaching on the sacraments in general and on extreme unction in particular shaped the decrees of later Church councils.<sup>56</sup> The official decree

52. See John F. Boyle, "Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Anointing of the Sick (Extreme Unction)," in *Recovering Aquinas and the Sacraments: Studies in Sacramental Theology*, ed. Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2009), 76–84.

53. For example, in his general treatment of the sacraments in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas explains that the sacrament of confirmation can be related to strength due to maturity (III, q. 65, art. 1). Later, however, he insists that this analogy should not be pressed too far, arguing that spiritual strength need not correspond to physical age (III, q. 72, art. 8). He goes on to liken the sacrament to the mark received by a soldier (III, q. 72, art. 9).

54. For what follows, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, q. 32, art. 4.

55. Notably, elsewhere Thomas affirms that "often bodily diseases are caused by spiritual sins." *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew 715*; translation from Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Chapters 1–12*, trans. Jeremy Holmes and Beth Mortensen, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas 33 (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), 263.

56. See John C. Kasza, *Understanding Sacramental Healing: Anointing and Viaticum* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2007), 51–52; Romanus Cessario, *The Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 133–34.

on unction from the Council of Florence (1441–49) affirms that James 5 refers to the sacrament. It maintains the sacrament’s capacity to bring both spiritual and physical restoration, saying that the effect of the sacrament is “to cure the mind and, in so far as it helps the soul, also the body.”<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, by the sixteenth century, theologians in the West were downplaying the sacrament’s connection to physical healing and emphasizing its role as preparation for death. This set the stage for controversy. Enter the Protestant Reformers.

### ***The Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Response***

In his work *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Martin Luther argues that James links unction to the restoration of physical health.<sup>58</sup> This, the former monk argues, is at odds with the theology of the sacrament of anointing, which—especially in his day—was understood primarily as final preparation for death. Moreover, he makes the case that James connects healing and forgiveness of sins not to the oil but to the prayer of faith.<sup>59</sup>

Other Protestant writers followed Luther’s critique. In his writings, John Calvin agrees with Luther that the miraculous healing power of oil was limited to the New Testament period. Calvin even goes as far as calling the Catholic practice of anointing the sick “play acting.”<sup>60</sup> Catholic theologians had to consider how to respond to Protestant objections. Different approaches were taken.

The great commentator on Thomas Aquinas’s work, Thomas de Vio “Cajetan” (d. 1534), comes to a surprising conclusion. Contrary to what earlier theologians had held, Cajetan argues that James’s instructions should *not* be seen as describing the sacrament of holy unction at all. He agrees with Luther that, for James, anointing is primarily aimed at physical healing. Cajetan concedes that the sacrament of extreme unction is *not* about the restoration of bodily health. Instead, he explains, its goal is preparation for death.<sup>61</sup>

57. Council of Florence, Session 8, Bull of Union with the Armenians (November 22, 1439); translation from Norman Tanner, ed., *The Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1:549.

58. Martin Luther, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 36, trans. A. T. W Steinhäuser, F. C. Ahrens, and A. R. Wentz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 118–19.

59. Luther, *On the Babylonian Captivity*, 121.

60. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.18, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1466.

61. Thomas Cajetan, *Commentary on James* 370b.

Other Catholic theologians of the time, including some of those gathered as consultants to the Council of Trent, would follow Cajetan.<sup>62</sup>

The Council of Trent's teaching on the sacrament's relationship to Mark 6 and James 5 ends up being carefully nuanced. Trent maintains that the sacrament of anointing is "insinuated" in Mark 6 but "promulgated" by the Letter of James.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, contrary to Cajetan, Trent's teaching recognizes *various* effects of the sacrament. The council affirms that the reality of the sacrament consists of

the grace of the Spirit, whose anointing takes away sins, if there are any still to be expiated, and the remains of sin [*reliquiae peccati*], and comforts and strengthens the soul of the sick person, by arousing in him great trust in the divine mercy; supported by this the sick person bears more lightly the inconveniences and trials of his illness, and resists more easily the temptations of the devil who lies in wait for his heel [Gen. 3:15]; and sometimes he regains bodily health when it is expedient for the salvation of his soul.<sup>64</sup>

We can note that Trent affirms that the sacrament can bring physical healing, though this is mentioned only at the end and is carefully qualified—physical restoration occurs only "sometimes" and only in cases "when it is expedient for the salvation of his soul." Nevertheless, given the earlier debates, it is remarkable that Trent affirms that the sacrament can have *both* spiritual and physical effects.

Moreover, Trent's use of the language of the "remains of sin" in connection with unction would become a focal point for later theological debates. Trent never specifically explains the precise meaning of the phrase. Theologians would subsequently engage in debates about its meaning.<sup>65</sup> The controversy became so heated that Benedict XIV (d. 1758) eventually intervened with a cease-and-desist order, stating that the nuances insisted upon by theologians had become so fine they were no longer helpful.<sup>66</sup>

62. See Ziegler, *Let Them Anoint the Sick*, 134–43.

63. Council of Trent, Session 4, Chapter 9.1.

64. Council of Trent, Session 14, Chapter 2; translation from Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2:710.

65. Stanislaus J. Brzana, *Remains of Sin and Extreme Unction according to Theologians after Trent* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1953).

66. See James L. Empereur, *Prophetic Anointing: God's Call to the Sick, the Elderly, and the Dying* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1982), 71; Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, 254. By making a plenary indulgence available to the dying, Benedict XIV helped to

### ***Developments in the Theology of Anointing and Ongoing Questions***

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) marked a landmark moment in the development of Catholic theology.<sup>67</sup> Leading up to the council, there was much discussion about how trends in theological studies could enrich the Church’s view of the sacraments.<sup>68</sup> As with other areas of doctrine, the council’s teaching on the sacrament of unction involved some aspects that should be recognized as genuine developments of doctrine.

First, while the council’s constitution on sacred liturgy still refers to “Extreme Unction,” it nevertheless holds that the sacrament is “more fittingly” called “Anointing of the Sick.”<sup>69</sup> In addition, we are told that it is “not a sacrament intended only for those who are at the point of death.”<sup>70</sup> The sacrament is not to be administered to those with only minor sicknesses, but it is also not to be withheld until the sick person is on the brink of death. The latter had become the norm; the council fathers, however, wanted to emphasize that the sacrament should, if at all possible, be given to those who could be conscious of receiving it.

The council also offers biblical support for the sacrament. While the James 5 passage is cited, what is especially remarkable is that the sacrament is tied to New Testament passages that speak in different ways about the believer’s participation in Christ’s suffering.

By the sacred Anointing of the Sick and the prayer of the priests, the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord that he may give them relief and save them (see James 5:13–16). And indeed, she exhorts them to contribute to the good of the people of God by freely uniting

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make the debate unnecessary by providing a way to deal with both sins and the effects of sins. On the question of the relationship between the “remains of sin” and temporal punishment, see Brzana, *Remains of Sin*, 110–11.

67. See, e.g., the comments by Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Preface,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), xv.

68. See Bernard Leeming, “Recent Trends in Sacramental Theology,” *ITQ* 23 (1956): 195–217.

69. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (The Holy Council), Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (December 4, 1963), §73; translation from Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents, Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 141. This follows a trajectory from Pius XII, who spoke of the sacrament as “sacram infirmorum unctionem.” See Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis* (The Mystical Body), Encyclical on the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), §19.

70. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §73, in Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 141.

themselves to the passion and death of Christ (see Rom. 8:17; Col. 1:24; 2 Tim. 2:11–12; 1 Pet. 4:13).<sup>71</sup>

This christological emphasis on the sick person's union with the suffering and glorified Lord is a very important development in official magisterial teaching about the sacrament.<sup>72</sup> *No previous ecclesiastical definition of the sacrament included citations of biblical texts that speak of participation in Christ's suffering.*

In one sense, the teaching on the sacrament at the Second Vatican Council reiterates what was taught by previous councils. Like other magisterial decrees, it roots the sacrament in James 5. Anointing is said to be for the purpose of asking the Lord to “save” the sick. At the same time, the council's teaching on the sacrament of anointing of the sick represents an enrichment of the Church's understanding. Not only does the sacrament involve a petition that the sick be “saved,” it also indicates that through it the sick are able somehow to “contribute” to the body of Christ by “uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ.” On one level, this sounds like previous Church documents; the sacrament is seen as a preparation for death. Yet here we find something more.

At the end of the paragraph cited above, we find references to four biblical texts. Let us take a preliminary look at them.

[We are] heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer together with him so that we may also be glorified together with him. (Rom. 8:17)

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ for his body, which is the church. (Col. 1:24)

This word is trustworthy: For if we died with him, we will also live with him. (2 Tim. 2:11)

But rejoice insofar as you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that at the revelation of his glory you may also rejoice. (1 Pet. 4:13)

71. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* (The Light of the Nations), Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (November 21, 1964), §11; slightly adapted from Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 15–16.

72. The emphasis on the christological nature of the sacraments has been a feature of recent magisterial Catholic teaching. See Dominic Langevin, *From Passion to Paschal Mystery: A Recent Magisterial Development concerning the Christological Foundation of the Sacraments* (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2015).

Note first that all of the verses cited in some way speak of the believer's union with Christ. In addition, the passages from Romans, 2 Timothy, and 1 Peter all appear to indicate that sharing in Christ's glory is in some way contingent on suffering with him. How can this be? Is not salvation based on God's free gift of grace? What is more, the passage from Colossians appears even more mysterious. How can Paul be described as indicating that his sufferings are "for you"? Is not Christ himself the redeemer? How could it be that Paul's suffering redounds for the benefit of the Church? Most important for our conversation, how does any of this relate to being anointed with oil? All of this will be discussed below.

Since Vatican II, further insight into the nature of the sacrament has been offered in two important ecclesiastical documents—namely, the reformed rite of the sacrament and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Nonetheless, as John Kasza observes, anointing of the sick continues to be "one of the least understood of the sacraments."<sup>73</sup> In part, confusion over the nature of the sacrament can be traced to broader trends in theological research. Theologians have often sought to reframe sacramental theology altogether.<sup>74</sup>

Instead of offering a full overview of contemporary discussions that would inevitably tax the reader,<sup>75</sup> let us simply make the following observation: many of the core questions that emerge in contemporary treatments of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick take us back to the issues involved with interpreting James's instructions raised at the beginning of this chapter.

First, *what is the significance of the use of oil?* Since the Protestant Reformation, this question has remained a major issue in ecumenical conversations. Is the use of oil merely symbolic, or is the oil instrumental to the healing?

Second, *who are the proper recipients and ministers of anointing?* If the sacrament of unction is best viewed as Vatican II has taught—namely, as "anointing of the sick" rather than simply a sacrament for the dying—who should receive it? How sick need someone be to qualify for it? What about young children? Significantly, there is a discrepancy in Catholic practice on

73. John C. Kasza, "Anointing of the Sick," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 558.

74. See, e.g., Godfried Danneels, "Current Challenges for Sacramental Theology," *Antiphon* 5, no. 2 (2000): 44–45; David N. Power, Regis Duffy, and Kevin Irwin, "Sacramental Theology: A Review of Literature," *TS* 55 (1994): 657–705.

75. See the excellent treatment in Matthew Levering, *Dying and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 135–47.