



He's Gone... **by Joe Sixpack**

John was lying in a hospital, paralyzed and in a coma. His lips couldn't move, eyes couldn't blink, and not a part of his body could move in protest when he heard the doctors saying to each other, "He's gone...nothing more can be done for him."

John had been given up for dead. He heard all of this in terror, yet he couldn't show he was still alive.

A priest came in. "Called too late," the doctors told him. But the priest, true to his seminary training and the Church's teaching, ignored the doctors and went on with giving the man the last rites. He administered conditional absolution and the Anointing of the Sick, just in case there was the least amount of life left in the man.

John recovered, and everyone said it was a miracle. John later told the priest how much he felt the strength-giving, life-giving powers of the last sacrament, and how happy he was to know that the Church carries on for you even after the world and medical science give up.

The Anointing of the Sick, also known as Extreme Unction, is the sacrament instituted by Christ which gives spiritual health, and sometimes—within the Providential will of God—physical healing, to persons who are in danger of death due to serious illness, injury, or old age.

The scriptural basis for this sacrament is found both in the Gospels and James. Jesus showed it through His powers to bring back those who were apparently dead, such as in the case of Lazarus (Jn 11:1-44) and the daughter of Jairus (Lk 8:49-56), as well as many others He brought back from the brink of death. The sacrament's use is found in James 5:14-15: "Is any among you sick? Let him call the elders [priests] of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." We also see in the Gospels where Christ sends His apostles and other male disciples to perform this act while preaching (cf. Mk 6:12-13)

The Anointing of the Sick increases sanctifying grace. It also allows the sick person the grace of uniting himself more closely to Christ's Passion, giving suffering a new meaning. The Anointing of the Sick "strengthens against the temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death, removes temporal punishment due to sin; removes venial sin; and lead[s] the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God's will."¹

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, cf. 1520-1523

The Anointing of the Sick is a sacrament of reconciliation in that it remits venial sins. Also, if the sick person is unable to make a good confession prior to receiving the sacrament (e.g., coma, delirium, paralysis, etc.) it will remit mortal sins as well, provided the sick person has at least imperfect contrition. If the sick person regains his health he is obliged to make a good confession if he was not in the state of grace prior to receiving the sacrament.

Jesus tries right up to the final moment to draw us to Him. He called Judas his friend, even while the man was in the act of betraying Him, in order to call the traitor back to Him. From the cross, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46) He wasn’t in a state of despair, which would be a mortal sin. No! He was trying to get the Pharisees to remember Psalm 22, which predicted the Messiah would go through *exactly what He was going through that moment*. Jesus calls us to Himself right to the bitter end, and that is precisely what the Anointing of the Sick is all about—giving us one last chance to be reconciled to Him before we stand in His presence to be judged.

Even when someone is already apparently dead we should call a priest to administer the Anointing of the Sick. The theological definition of death is when the soul separates from the body. Just because there are no brain waves, heart beat or respiratory activity doesn’t mean the soul has left the body. The Church teaches her priests that the soul may linger with the body for quite sometime, and she insists that priests should administer the sacrament for up to eight hours after apparent death.

St. Anthony of Padua was at his friary in Italy when he learned that his father was on trial for the murder of a young nobleman, found slain on his father’s property in Portugal. St. Anthony told his brother friars he would return soon. As he exited the friary door in Italy, he entered the courtroom door in Portugal. Recognizing the famous Franciscan priest, the judge stopped the proceedings to welcome St. Anthony. The saint used that break to address the court: “I can prove my father didn’t commit this murder. If the court please, we will have the deceased himself tell you.”

The judge reluctantly agreed and court was reconvened in the cemetery, after the coffin of the slain man was exhumed. With the crowd gathered around, St. Anthony commanded the lid be removed from the coffin. Then he cried out, “I abjure you, in the name of Jesus Christ, tell us whether my father killed you!” To the astonishment of the crowd, the young man sat up in his coffin. He answered the saint, “No, Father Anthony, your father did not kill me. Father, I died without having had the benefit of making a good confession. Will you hear my confession?”

St. Anthony knelt by the coffin while the crowd backed up a little further. As the saint granted absolution, the man’s body fell back into the coffin.

The point of this true story is to show you how the body may already appear dead, but the soul can still be present. There are many other events in the Church’s history to demonstrate this as well, but this one event should suffice. So even if someone appears to already be dead, call upon the priest anyway. And I would recommend that you tell your loved ones now to do the same for you if death is sudden...and it almost always is.

By the way, this sacrament may be received more than once by someone in danger of death, if his condition worsens, or if he gets better and suffers a relapse. The elderly, whether sick or in good health, may receive the Anointing of the Sick at regular intervals. Talk to your priest, and don’t worry about bothering him, as his primary purpose in his priesthood is to bring you the sacraments...*all of them*. That is What We Believe...Why We Believe It.

Got a question? Go to JoeSixpackAnswers.com.