



By Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers

# Anointing of the Sick and the Deacon

*Deacons can be present in deeply meaningful ways with the sick*

There is a poignant scene in the priestly vocations video “Fishers of Men” (Grassroots Films) where a priest runs to the scene of a rollover car accident and administers the anointing of the sick to a dying teenager. Afterward, the priest greets a young boy who witnessed the incident and saw the priest in action. That boy later becomes a priest himself. If the video were about diaconal vocations, the deacon would also run to the scene but could only pray with the teenager extemporaneously or utilize one of the rites found in the pastoral care of the sick that can be used by deacons.

Yet, this is not the case with other sacraments. Under certain conditions, anyone can baptize and, in specific circumstances, a layperson can witness the blessing of a marriage. Why is it that a validly ordained deacon cannot administer the anointing of the sick to someone dying?

The biblical foundation for this sacrament can be found in the Epistle of James, which states: “Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven” (Jas 5:14-15).

The crucial elements of this passage are twofold. First, even though the diaconate was already established at the time of James’ letter, the faithful were to call for the ordained priest when they were sick or in danger of death. Second, it is clear that the forgiveness of sins is intimately connected with the anointing of the sick, thereby connecting this sacrament with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which bishops and priests can only celebrate.

In 2005, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a Note on the Minister of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The document states, “Only priests (bishops and presby-

ters) are ministers of the anointing of the sick.” The Vatican document goes on to say that “this doctrine is *definitive tenenda* [to be held definitively]. Neither deacons nor laypersons may exercise the said ministry.”

The Vatican was responding to inquiries from a number of dioceses regarding pastoral solutions for the ill and dying when there are not enough priests. It was suggested that this problem could be overcome by delegating permanent deacons and certain qualified laypeople as ministers of the anointing of the sick. The Vatican stated in its commentary that “the person who acts in this sacrament is Jesus Christ; the priest is the living and visible instrument. He represents and makes Christ present in a special way, which is why the sacrament has special dignity and efficacy in comparison with a sacramental.”

This definitive teaching should not be a point of contention within the diaconate community. Deacons can still be present in deeply meaningful ways to our brothers and sisters who are infirm. God is not bound by his sacraments, so if a priest is not available, God can still work through the deacon to bring grace, solace and peace to the sick and dying. We can bring Jesus to them in viaticum and pray with them during the last moments of their earthly lives. I remember the first time as a deacon that I was present when someone died. He was unconscious and on life support. I held his hand and prayed with him and his family. When he died, his wife turned to me and asked, “Is he gone?” I replied, “Yes. He has gone to be with Jesus.” Deacons may not be able to provide the anointing of the sick, but we can still serve the infirm with the love of Christ. **TD**

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