

11-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Griffin, Eric R. (1997) "Anointing With Oil in the Name of the Lord," *Consensus*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol23/iss2/11>

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Anointing With Oil in the Name of the Lord¹

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Luke 7:8-9

"For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

James 5:14

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

One of the comforting things about having sympathy with the catholic aspect of the church is that one can believe things based on the authority of the church; if you haven't yet been able to puzzle things out for yourself personally, there is a certain degree of trust one can give to the fact that the church catholic has expressed certain beliefs and done certain things for a very long time, and you too can safely believe them on the basis of that authority. For example, it took me a long time to be reconciled with the Creed when I first came into the church. I didn't know whether I personally believed all the things in it. But then I made the decision to recite it anyway, conscious of the fact that I was identifying myself with the institution which has confessed this faith since the fourth century. In the process of using it, I have come to understand its truth and its place in the Christian tradition. The Creed is now no longer a problem for me.

For me, the sacramental sign of anointing with oil and prayers for healing is another such thing. I do it; I believe in it; but I do not know what to believe about it. But there are a few things I do *not* believe about it, and I would like to share some of my thoughts with you, travelling a *via negativa* which I often suspect must precede any positive affirmations of faith.

The first question I often get asked is, "Does it work?" In fact I was asked this on Saturday. I replied, "What do you mean by 'work'? Do you mean that getting anointed somehow ensures healing? More so, say, than just the laying-on-of-hands? More so than mere intercessory prayer or medical intervention? Do people who receive anointing somehow have a better chance of recovery than those who don't?" I utterly and absolutely reject this instrumental, utilitarian approach to prayer and sacrament. Of course it doesn't "work" in the common usage of the word "work". That is not what it is intended for.

In fact, it is just this sort of thinking which has led to some of the greatest abuses of the sacrament, which scandalize the church as a whole. Some of those snake-oil faith-healers we hear about so much and are plagued with on television and evangelistic miracle crusades have done immeasurable damage to the church of Christ because they have exactly this sort of superstitious view of prayer and healing. And this is my fear: superstition. We risk fostering a view of Christian faith which is akin to magic and supernaturalism; a *National Inquirer* view of religion and faith.

We must understand that sacramental action and prayer are not some sort of incantation that, if you get it just right, will manipulate the cosmos in your favour. I met a Christian once, an older man, who talked about something called "binding prayer": he and a friend had agreed in faith to pray together for the means to hire a helicopter to fly all across Canada and drop evangelical tracts on all the cities; they prayed together, and now, he said, since they had agreed in faith, God was obliged to do as they asked, because the Bible said that wherever two or three are gathered, etc., etc. This is exactly what we must avoid.

Anointing as part of the church's ministry of healing and deliverance is not a magic formula with guaranteed results; this

is an outward and visible sacramental sign of prayers for healing, an intense focusing of prayer in action rather than words, of raising up before God our pain, our need for wholeness and grace, perhaps even offering it up to God as a sacrifice. It was once explained to me by a very conscientious Roman Catholic that to offer one's suffering up to God as a sacrifice can transform the suffering itself into something which sustains us. This is a mystery for me, but it is how some have experienced it.

The second hesitation I have has to do with whose faith is at work here. When I was on my candidates' retreat in preparation for ordination some years ago, our chaplain was a retired bishop whom I admired very much. The people organizing the final Eucharist asked him whether he would include anointing for those who wished it at the intercessions, and he agreed. He was careful, however, to explain for those who were apprehensive about receiving it, that its efficacy was based not on our faith, but on his. Oh dear! I presume he was pastorally trying to alleviate any hesitations some folks might have had towards the action. But what he ended up implying was that whether or not any good comes from anointing is entirely dependent on the faith of the anointer. I have since had reason respectfully to disagree with the bishop. The old word is Donatism, but that is too strong here. The Thirty-nine Articles, Article 26 to be specific, talk of just this sort of thinking, of the unworthiness of the ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament. No, what happens here is not a function of how much, how well, or how correctly I myself happen to believe. I do this out of obedience to the Word and to the tradition of the church. Just because I don't myself understand it cannot hinder what happens. At least I certainly hope not.

So is it dependent on the faith of the recipient? A sort of unctuous receptionism? That whatever happens, or fails to happen, is your own darn fault? This sort of thinking, and I have met it, makes me shudder. It says that the reason God has not answered my prayers is because I have not asked correctly, or because my faith is somehow defective. There are three things wrong with this. First, it is blaming the victim. Second, this is superstition again: if you get the formula right, God will do it. Third, it makes faith itself into a work: if you only believe hard enough, then God will give you what you want. This is the sort of twisted thinking which underlies the pernicious

“prosperity Gospel” we sometimes run across. You know, if you become a Christian, God will reward you in all sorts of material ways, with health, wealth, good luck, immunity from personal difficulties, and so on. So we are asked to become Christians for personal gain and self-interest. Nothing here about the cost of discipleship, the love of Jesus, or taking up your cross daily, or God’s grace being sufficient for you. No: the efficacy of anointing is not based on your faith. Nor on mine. It is God’s faithfulness alone that is the issue here.

So I invite you—those who so desire—to come forward at communion time with your prayerbook as a sign to me that you wish to receive prayers, laying-on-of-hands, and anointing with oil for healing, for yourself or for another, for mind, body or spirit. Will God in some way grant to you some special grace which is withheld from others who do not do this? I do not know; but I sincerely doubt it. Of course this does not mean that nothing at all may result. Like any ministry of the church, this is a *means* of God’s grace, but not the sole access to it.

There is a story which has made its way around my home diocese in which the suffragan bishop visited a very high anglo-catholic parish, but had not quite yet decided for himself just what he thought of their liturgical traditions. He was presiding at the Eucharist, and at the offertory the thurifer brought him the incense, and as the Bishop was rather uncomfortably censuring the altar, he was heard to be praying in a low voice, “Can’t do any harm, might do a little good; can’t do any harm, might do a little good...” I want to say right off, this is most emphatically *not* what I am saying about anointing with oil. I personally have been deeply moved at times when I have received it; other times, I felt nothing; but then do not let your present mood and frame of mind dictate to you the state of the health of your soul. I have seen others deeply affected by this sacramental sign, and occasionally at my hands, for which I am profoundly grateful, and not a little humbled.

I do not pretend to understand what happens here; but I do believe in what we are doing. I take it seriously, aware of my deficiencies in faith. Quite frankly, I am not ashamed of my agnosticism in this matter. By definition no mystery can be adequately comprehended by us; this is what the word *mysterion* means. And just like my early hesitations about saying

the Creed, what counts here and now is our belonging to the community of faith which does this thing, and we receive it in the community, in fact in the context, of the most fundamental action which defines who we are as a community, the Eucharist. So like the Eucharist, this is an intensely personal act; but it is not, and should never be, a private act.

Notes

- ¹ This sermon was preached in the Fall term of 1994 in the Founders' Chapel at Wycliffe College, Toronto, at a morning eucharist which was the first one of the year to include anointing and special prayers for healing.