

Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture Series
The Mystery of Israel and the Church

Fall 2012 – Series #10

Sacraments: From the Old Covenant to the New

Talk #9

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick



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Note: *This document contains the unedited text of Dr. Feingold's talk. It will eventually undergo final editing for inclusion in the series of books being published by The Miriam Press under the series title: "The Mystery of Israel and the Church". If you find errors of any type, please send your observations to lfeingold@hebrewcatholic.org*

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9. The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

Institution of the Sacrament of Anointing

The key Biblical text that speaks of the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is James 5:14–15:

Is any among you sick? Let him call for the presbyters 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.

In this brief text we find all the essential elements of the sacrament of Anointing: the minister who is the priest; the subject who is a sick member of the faithful; the matter, which is the anointing with oil; the form, which is the “prayer of faith”; and the effects, which are spiritual strengthening and the forgiveness of sins.¹

Although the Gospels do not describe the institution of this sacrament by Jesus, it is probable that this sacrament is mentioned in Mark 6:13, in which Jesus sends out the Twelve: “And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.”

The Anointing of the Sick was counted among the seven sacraments in the Council of Florence. The Council of Trent then infallibly defined that the Anointing of the Sick is one of the seven sacraments of the New Covenant, after it had been denied by Luther² and Calvin:³

Therefore, under no condition are they to be listened to, who contrary to so open and clear a statement of the Apostle James (James 5:14) teach that this unction is either a figment of the imagination or a rite received from the Fathers, having neither a command of God nor a promise of grace; and likewise those who assert that this has now ceased, as though it were to be referred to the grace of healing only in the primitive Church; and those who maintain that the rite and practice which the holy Roman Church observes in the administration of this sacrament are opposed to the thought of James the Apostle, and therefore ought to be changed to another;

1 The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has given a brief commentary on the essential elements contained in James in the Commentary on the “Note on the Minister of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick,” 11 February 2005: “Catholic theology has seen in the Epistle of James (5:14-15) the biblical foundation for the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. . . . In this text, under the action of the Holy Spirit, the Church has identified down the centuries the essential elements of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, which the Council of Trent (Sess. XIV, ch. 1-3, cann. 1-4: DS 1695-1700, 1716-1719) systematically proposes: a) subject: the seriously ill member of the faithful; b) minister: “omnis et solus sacerdos”; c) substance: the anointing with blessed oil; d) form: the minister’s prayer; e) effects: salvific grace, the forgiveness of sins, the relief of the sick person.”

2 See Luther, *De captivitate babilonica* (1520).

3 See Calvin, *Institutes* IV, ch. 19, §18.

and finally, those who affirm that this extreme unction may be held in contempt by the faithful without sin, for all these things very manifestly disagree with the clear words of this great Apostle. Nor, indeed, does the Roman Church, the mother and teacher of all others, observe anything else in the administration of this unction with reference to those matters which constitute the substance of this sacrament than what the blessed James has prescribed. Nor, indeed, could there be contempt for so great a sacrament without grievous sin and offense to the Holy Spirit.⁴

Paul VI, in the Apostolic Constitution *Sacram unzione infirmorum* of November 30, 1972, reaffirmed the definitive teaching of the Council of Trent that Anointing is a sacrament of the New Testament instituted by Christ, alluded to by Mark, and promulgated by James 5:14–15:

The Catholic Church professes and teaches that the Sacred Anointing of the Sick is one of the seven Sacraments of the New Testament, that it was instituted by Christ and that it is “alluded to in Mark (Mk. 6:13) and recommended and promulgated to the faithful by James the apostle and brother of the Lord. If any one of you is ill, he says, he should send for the elders of the church, and they must anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will⁵ raise him up again; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven (James 5:14-15).”⁶

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1511 summarizes: “This sacred anointing of the sick was instituted by Christ our Lord as a true and proper sacrament of the New Testament. It is alluded to indeed by Mark, but is recommended to the faithful and promulgated by James the apostle and brother of the Lord.”

The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* teaches that Christ instituted the sacrament:

If Extreme Unction has the nature of a true sacrament and is numbered among the seven, it follows that it must have been instituted by Christ himself; and only then was it made known and promulgated to the faithful by the Apostle St. James. There is possible evidence of its immediate institution by our Savior when he sent

4 Council of Trent, Session 14, DS 1699, Denz 910. See also canon 1 on Extreme Unction, DS 1716, Denz 926.

5 See also CCC 1511: “This sacred anointing of the sick was instituted by Christ our Lord as a true and proper sacrament of the New Testament. It is alluded to indeed by Mark, but is recommended to the faithful and promulgated by James the apostle and brother of the Lord.”

6 Paul VI is quoting the Council of Trent, Session 14, De extr. unct., chapter 1 (cf. *ibid.* canon 1); DS 1695, 1716.

out his disciples in pairs on a missionary journey, for we are told by the Evangelist that “they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them” (Mk 6:12–13). This anointing of the sick could not have been invented by the apostles; it must have been prescribed by our Lord. And its purpose must have been a supernatural one, curing souls, rather than a merely natural one, using oil to cure bodies. This is the unanimous teaching of St. Denis, St. Ambrose, St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory the Great.⁷

St. Thomas addresses the question of whether Anointing of the Sick was instituted directly by Christ, and says there were two opinions on the matter among earlier theologians. Some held that both Anointing and Confirmation were instituted by the Apostles, because the Holy Spirit was not to be given until after Christ’s Ascension. The other opinion, which St. Thomas defends, is that Anointing, like Confirmation,⁸ was instituted directly by Christ, although we do not see that institution in the Gospels as clearly as we do for the sacraments that are more central to the life of the Church, such as Baptism, the Eucharist, Holy Orders, and Penance. He writes:

Wherefore others hold that Christ Himself instituted all the sacraments, but that He Himself published some, which present greater difficulty to our belief, while he reserved some to be published by the apostles, such as Extreme Unction and Confirmation. This opinion seems so much the more probable, as the sacraments belong to the foundation of the Law, wherefore their institution pertains to the lawgiver; besides, they derive their efficacy from their institution, which efficacy is given them by God alone.⁹

In response to an objection about the lack of evidence in the Gospels, St. Thomas answers:

Our Lord did and said many things which are not related in the Gospel. For the evangelists were intent on handing down chiefly those things that were necessary for salvation or concerned the building of the ecclesiastical edifice. Hence they related the institution by Christ of Baptism, Penance, the Eucharist and orders, rather than of Extreme Unction and Confirmation, which are not necessary for salvation, nor do they concern the building or division of the Church. As a matter of fact

⁷ *The Roman Catechism*, p. 301.

⁸ See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 72, a. 1: “The institution of a new sacrament belongs to the power of excellence, which belongs to Christ alone. And therefore we must say that Christ instituted this sacrament not by bestowing, but by promising it, according to John 16:7: ‘If I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you, but if I go, I will send Him to you.’ And this was because in this sacrament the fullness of the Holy Ghost is bestowed, which was not to be given before Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension; according to John 7:39: ‘As yet the Spirit was not given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.’”

⁹ St. Thomas, *Supplement*, q. 29, a. 3.

however an anointing done by the apostles is mentioned in the Gospel (Mk. 6:13) where it is said that they “anointed the sick with oil.”¹⁰

Canon 998 of the *Code of Canon Law* defines the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick:

The anointing of the sick, by which the Church commends the faithful who are dangerously ill to the suffering and glorified Lord in order that he relieve and save them, is conferred by anointing them with oil and pronouncing the words prescribed in the liturgical books.

A different definition is given in the *Code of Eastern Churches*, canon 737 §1:

By the sacramental anointing of the sick with prayers of a priest, the Christian faithful who are gravely ill and sincerely contrite receive grace, by which, strengthened by the hope of eternal reward and absolved from sins, they are disposed to correct their lives and are helped in patiently enduring their infirmity and suffering.

Matter and Form of the Sacrament

The matter of the sacrament of Anointing is, as defined by the Council of Trent, “oil blessed by the bishop, since the unction very appropriately represents the grace of the Holy Spirit, with which the soul of the sick person is visibly anointed.”¹¹ The oil is preferably olive oil, but when this cannot be easily obtained, any vegetable oil can be used. The oil is blessed at the Chrism Mass. In an emergency when oil blessed by the bishop cannot be obtained, canon 999 §2 states that the priest may perform the blessing according to the liturgical rite, but only during the actual celebration of the sacrament.

Pope Paul VI modified the form of the sacrament to make it simpler and more in harmony with James 5:14-15:

The sacrament of the anointing of the sick is administered to those who are dangerously ill, by anointing them on the forehead and hands with olive oil, or, if opportune, with another vegetable oil, properly blessed, and saying once only the following words: “Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.”

In case of necessity however it is sufficient that a single anointing be given on the forehead or, because of the particular condition of the sick person, on another more suitable part of the body, the whole formula being pronounced.

This sacrament can be repeated if the sick person, having once received the Anointing, recovers and then again falls sick, or if, in the course of the same illness, the danger becomes more acute.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ad 1.

¹¹ Council of Trent, session 14, chapter 1.

¹² Paul VI, *Sacram unctione infirmorum*.

Subject of the Sacrament

In order to validly receive the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, one must be baptized, “gravely ill” or “in danger due to sickness or old age,”¹³ and sincerely contrite for one’s grave sins. In addition, the subject must be of the age of reason in the Latin rite (but not in the Eastern rite).¹⁴

The Council of Trent states:

It is also declared that this unction is to be applied to the infirm, but especially to those who are so dangerously ill that they seem to be facing the end of life, for which reason it is also called the sacrament of the dying. But if the sick should recover after the reception of this sacrament of extreme unction, they can with the aid of this sacrament be strengthened again, when they fall into another similar crisis of life.¹⁵

It is not necessary that the subject be in *proximate* danger of death. Probable danger through serious illness or old age is sufficient. The Second Vatican Council in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 73 clarifies:

“Extreme unction,” which may also and more fittingly be called “anointing of the sick,” is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.

The Roman Ritual (*Ordo unctionis infirmorum*) specifies the following:

Great care and concern should be taken to see that those of the faithful whose health is seriously impaired by sickness or old age receive this sacrament. A prudent or reasonably sure judgment, without scruple, is sufficient for deciding on the seriousness of an illness; if necessary a doctor may be consulted.

The sacrament may be repeated if the sick person recovers after being anointed and then again falls ill or if during the same illness the person’s condition becomes more serious.¹⁶

A sick person may be anointed before surgery whenever a serious illness is the reason for the surgery.

Elderly people may be anointed if they have become notably weakened even though no serious illness is present.

Sick children are to be anointed if they have sufficient use of reason to be strengthened by this sacrament. In

case of doubt whether a child has reached the use of reason, the sacrament is to be conferred.¹⁷

However, light sickness that does not pose any danger—such as a cold or other minor ailments or injuries—would not be sufficient for valid reception of the sacrament. Administering the sacrament to those who are clearly not dangerously ill would constitute simulating a sacrament, which is, objectively, a sacrilege. However, when in doubt about whether the illness is serious or dangerous, it should be administered. It is enough that it seem serious and dangerous to the patient or doctor. The sacrament should also be administered (conditionally) when there is doubt about whether the person is of the age of reason or still alive.¹⁸

If a person is in danger of death without being sick, as in the case of soldiers before battle or a criminal before execution, he cannot receive the sacrament of anointing, because the subject must be actually and seriously infirm to receive the sacrament.¹⁹

If members of the faithful have lost consciousness, the sacrament should be conferred if they “at least implicitly requested it when they were in control of their faculties” (*CIC*, canon 1006). The subject must have the intention to receive the sacrament, although this intention can be actual, habitual, or virtual. When the subject is unconscious, a habitual intention continues, and is sufficient for reception of the sacrament. It is sufficient for habitual intention to be implicit in the desire to do whatever is necessary for salvation. This can be assumed in all who practice the Catholic faith. Thus it is not necessary that one have explicitly expressed the desire to receive the sacrament of Anointing.

The sacrament is not to be conferred, according to canon 1007, to those “who persevere obstinately in manifest grave sin.” However, in those who have lost consciousness, if there was any probable indication of repentance, anointing can be given, as long as scandal is avoided.²⁰

17 *Ordo unctionis infirmorum*, §§ 8–12. *The Rites*, 1:780-781.

18 See *CIC*, canon 1005: “This sacrament is to be administered in a case of doubt whether the sick person has attained the use of reason, is dangerously ill, or is dead.”

19 See *The Roman Catechism*, p. 302: “Extreme Unction, therefore, may be administered only to those who are seriously ill. It may not be given to anyone else, even those otherwise in danger of death—such as those undertaking a perilous journey, or going into battle, or even facing certain death by execution. Persons who are insane may not be anointed, especially those who are so from birth; nor may children who have not yet attained the use of reason, and therefore the capability of committing sin. For the purpose of this sacrament is to heal the vestiges of sin.

20 See William H. Woestman, *Sacraments: Initiation, Penance, Anointing of the Sick: Commentary on Canons 840–1007* (Ottawa: Faculty of Canon Law, Saint Paul University, 1992), 320.

13 See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1004 §1.

14 See canon 738 of the 1990 *Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches*: “The Christian faithful freely receive anointing of the sick whenever they are gravely ill; pastors of souls and persons who are close to the sick are to see to it that they are supported by this sacrament at an opportune time.”

15 Council of Trent, session 14, DS 1698, Denz 910.

16 See *CIC*, canon 1004, §2.

Minister of the Sacrament

The minister of the sacrament of anointing of the sick is the priest or bishop. This was defined in the Council of Trent, in the fourth canon on Anointing:

If anyone says that the priests of the Church, whom blessed James exhorts to be brought to anoint the sick, are not the priests ordained by a bishop, but the elders by age in each community, and that for this reason a priest alone is not the proper minister of extreme unction let him be anathema.²¹

Canon 1003 §1 of the *CIC* states that “Every priest and a priest alone validly administers the anointing of the sick.” This canon goes on to say in §§ 2–3:

§2. All priests to whom the care of souls has been entrusted have the duty and right of administering the anointing of the sick for the faithful entrusted to their pastoral office. For a reasonable cause, any other priest can administer this sacrament with at least the presumed consent of the priest mentioned above.

§3. Any priest is permitted to carry blessed oil with him so that he is able to administer the sacrament of the anointing of the sick in a case of necessity.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published an important “Note On the Minister of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, with Commentary” on February 11, 2005, which clarifies that it is to be firmly held by the faithful (*definitive tenendum*) that only the priest can confer this sacrament. This means that this doctrine is infallible, requiring the second grade of assent from the faithful.²²

Effects of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

The particular purpose of the sacrament of Anointing is “to strengthen those who are being tried by illness,”²³ so as to bring them to full spiritual vigor and eliminate the weakness and sickness caused by sin that deprives the soul of the spiritual vigor that will help prepare for entrance into glory.

Lumen gentium 11 describes the purpose of Anointing as follows:

By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of her priests the whole Church commends the sick to the suffering and glorified Lord, asking that He may lighten their suffering and save them; she exhorts them, moreover, to contribute to the welfare of the whole people of God by associating themselves freely with the passion and death of Christ.

21 Denz 929, DS 1719.

22 See the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the *Professio Fidei*,” issued with the Motu proprio of John Paul II, *Ad tuendam fidem*, June 29, 1998.

23 CCC 1511.

Although the body is greatly weakened by serious illness, the sacrament strengthens the soul for the final combat and aids the sick person to unite his sufferings with the Passion of Christ for the welfare of the entire Church. There is a beautiful Christian paradox here. Where the body is weakened, the spirit is brought to greater heights of spiritual strength through this sacrament. This is a good example of St. Paul’s saying in 2 Corinthians 12:10: “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses . . . for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

St. Thomas explains the purpose of the sacrament of Anointing as spiritual healing, like Penance, but ordered to the final preparation for death and glory. He distinguishes it from Penance by stating that its purpose is not just to restore spiritual health, but to restore perfect spiritual vigor. As Confirmation perfects Baptism, so Anointing perfects the effects of the sacrament of Penance. St. Thomas writes:

Man needs a cure from his infirmity [sin]; which cure is twofold. One is the healing, that restores health: and corresponding to this in the spiritual life there is Penance, according to Psalm 40:5: “Heal my soul, for I have sinned against Thee.” The other is the restoration of former vigor by means of suitable diet and exercise: and corresponding to this in the spiritual life there is Extreme Unction, which removes the remainder of sin, and prepares man for final glory.²⁴

In the *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, ch. 73, St. Thomas states: “This sacrament is the last and in a certain way consummating sacrament of spiritual healing by which man is prepared so as to receive glory. Therefore it is called extreme unction.” St. Robert Bellarmine says that “this sacrament is the complement of the sacrament of Penance, and, as it were, a certain penance of the sick who can no longer do penance.”²⁵

The Council of Trent, in the introductory chapter on this sacrament, explains its importance in serious illness. Anointing fortifies the possible end of life as a powerful defense against the attacks of the devil, for “there is no time when he directs more earnestly all the strength of his cunning to ruin us completely, and if possible to drive us also from faith in the divine mercy, than when he sees that the end of life is upon us.”²⁶

The Council continues:

Furthermore, the significance and effect of this sacrament are explained in these words: “And the prayer of faith shall save the sick man, and the Lord shall raise him up, and if he be in sins they shall be forgiven him” (Jc 5,15). For the thing signified is the grace of the Holy Spirit, whose anointing wipes away sins, if there be any still to be expiated, and the remains of sin, and

24 St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 65, a. 1.

25 St. Robert Bellarmine, *De extrema unctione*, ch. 7.

26 Council of Trent, session 14, Denz 907.

relieves, and strengthens the soul of the sick person [can. 2] by exciting in him great confidence in divine mercy, supported by which the sick person bears more lightly the miseries and pains of his illness, and resists more easily the temptations of the evil spirit who “lies in wait for his heel” (Gn 3,15), and sometimes attains bodily health, when it is expedient for the salvation of the soul.

The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* explains that there are four principal effects of the sacrament: forgiveness of sins, freeing the soul from spiritual weakness, giving strength to combat the devil, and, if it is expedient, recovery of physical health.²⁷ In addition, like all the sacraments, Anointing gives an increase of sanctifying grace.

St. Alphonsus gives a good summary of the effects of the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick in his classic *Guide for Confessors*:

It gives, for instance, strength to resist the devil’s temptations in those last moments of life. It frees from venial sin, and even from mortal sin if he has forgotten to confess one and it is still on his soul. It even gives bodily health if this is expedient for the soul’s welfare. But this health will not be given if the dying man waits until recovery is impossible without a miracle. The sacrament follows the ordinary course of things by reinforcing the natural means of recovery.²⁸

With regard to the possible effect of physical healing from infirmity, St. Thomas explains that this effect will follow reception of the sacrament only if it is useful for spiritual healing:

Since reasonable working never produces a secondary effect, except in so far as it is required for the principal effect, it follows that a bodily healing does not always ensue from this sacrament, but only when it is requisite for the spiritual healing: and then it produces it always, provided there be no obstacle on the part of the recipient.²⁹

The Council of Florence, in the Decree for Armenians states: “The effect is the healing of the mind and, as far as it is good for the soul, of the body as well.”³⁰ This was repeated in the Council of Trent.³¹

St. Thomas explains that the principal effect of Anointing of the Sick is “a spiritual healing or cure”; it is meant “to cure the sickness of sin.”³² We can infer this, he says, because the sign that is used is an anointing with oil, which is a medicinal treatment, and what is signified by a sacrament indicates what it in fact realizes. However, this

sacrament is a remedy not directly for sin per se, but for the results of sin, which are defects that spiritually weaken a man, depriving him “of perfect vigor for acts of the life of grace or of glory.” Interestingly, St. Thomas says that since grace must work this remedy, and grace is incompatible with sin, this sacrament will also forgive sin if that is necessary for it to do its work of healing.

This healing grace can be understood primarily as “*union with the passion of Christ*.” The CCC 1521 states: “By the grace of this sacrament the sick person receives the strength and the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ’s Passion: in a certain way he is consecrated to bear fruit by configuration to the Savior’s redemptive Passion. Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.” Grave sickness and closeness to death give us the most profound opportunities to unite ourselves to the sufferings of Christ. Anointing gives us the strength to make the best use of these occurrences.

Res et Sacramentum of Anointing

Anointing does not imprint an indelible character, as with Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders, because, unlike those sacraments, it does not impart a particular stable mission in the Church. For this reason Anointing can be repeated if one gets another illness, or if the same one passes to a new and more critical stage.

However, although the sacrament does not imprint character, the sick person, by the very fact of suffering grave illness, has received a specific mission in the Church, and that mission involves the sanctification of that suffering, as long as it lasts, for one’s own spiritual benefit and for the entire Church. The sacrament thus strengthens the recipient for this sublime mission. This would be the reason why Anointing is received only once for each illness. For the mission of suffering lasts as long as the illness. During the entire time of the illness, the Anointing received empowers the recipient to receive the sacramental graces necessary for the sanctification of that illness.³³

The Gospel of Suffering

The salvific mission of human suffering is explained magisterially by Pope John Paul II in his great Apostolic Letter on the Redemptive Value of Suffering, *Salvifici Doloris* of February 11, 1984. The Apostolic Letter was written in the context of the Holy Year commemorating the 1950th anniversary of our Redemption. In this way human

³³ This abiding title to receive sacramental graces necessary for sanctifying a given illness can be understood as the *res et sacramentum* of Anointing of the Sick. St. Thomas, on the other hands, in *Supplement*, q. 30, a. 3, ad 3, holds that the *res et sacramentum* of this sacrament is an interior anointing, which is the interior devotion of the penitent that works the removal of the remnants of sin: “In this sacrament, that which is both reality and sacrament is not a character, but a certain inward devotion which is a kind of spiritual anointing.”

²⁷ See *The Roman Catechism*, pp. 304–305.

²⁸ St. Alphonsus, *Guide for Confessors*, 99.

²⁹ St. Thomas, *Supplement*, q. 30, a. 2.

³⁰ DS 1325; Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, p. 499.

³¹ Council of Trent, ch. 2 on Extreme Unction, DS 1696.

³² St. Thomas, *Supplement*, q. 30, a. 1.

suffering is put in the only context capable of showing its true meaning: the Passion of Christ.

The key idea of *Salvifici Doloris* is an application of the principle of *Gaudium et spes* 22: only Christ fully reveals man to himself. Only the Passion of Christ can reveal to man the meaning of human suffering. The Gospel of Christ is also a *Gospel of suffering*, alone capable of giving profound meaning, redemptive value and dignity to the deep mystery of suffering, which marks human life on earth:

The Second Vatican Council expressed this truth that “...only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. In fact..., Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear”. If these words refer to everything that concerns the mystery of man, then they certainly refer in a very special way to human suffering. Precisely at this point the “revealing of man to himself and making his supreme vocation clear” is particularly indispensable. It also happens as experience proves—that this can be particularly dramatic. But when it is completely accomplished and becomes the light of human life, it is particularly blessed. “Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful” (SD 31).

Just as each man shares in the redemption won by Christ’s suffering, so he is also called to participate in the suffering through which redemption is accomplished:

Every man has *his own share in the Redemption*. Each one is also *called to share in that suffering* through which the Redemption was accomplished. He is called to share in that suffering through which all human suffering has also been redeemed. In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ *has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption*. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ. (SD 19)

The sharing in Christ’s Resurrection implies a sharing in His redemptive Cross. Thus every Christian is called to be a co-redeemer with Christ, by virtue of participation in the entire paschal mystery (Cross and Resurrection) in His mystical Body. If we share in His passion, then we shall also share in the glory of His resurrection, and vice versa: if we wish to share in the glory of the Resurrection, we must first share in His redemptive suffering. Christ’s Passion marks out suffering as the privileged path to salvation, for each individual and for the whole Body.

The sharing in Christ’s redemptive suffering also has the effect of personal purification and strengthening in virtue. The lives of the saints show us that there is no other means more efficacious towards sanctification than the crucible of trials and suffering. St. Paul speaks of this in Romans 5:3-5:

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

Above all, however, Christ has redeemed suffering by enabling our suffering to be joined with His for the redemption of the world. We are thus given the tremendous dignity of co-redeemers, of being able to “help” Christ in His work of redeeming the world through charity proved by suffering. We might be tempted to think that this is impossible if it were not clearly taught in Scripture. This is the meaning of St. Paul’s words in Col 1:24 quoted at the beginning of the encyclical: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.”

The Protestant tradition has rejected or failed to understand this crucial aspect of the Christian life, fearing that such a participation by the faithful in redemptive suffering would somehow diminish the glory of Christ’s redemption. However, just the opposite is true. Although the merit of Calvary is infinite, Christ has willed for us the dignity of sharing in the merit and love of redemptive suffering. This condescension shows the depths of His love, for He gives us a share in what was most precious to Him, the very reason for His Incarnation. Indeed, it is in this way that suffering itself has been redeemed: by making it *redemptive*.

This doctrine is a direct consequence of the realism of our incorporation in Christ’s Body through baptism. To the degree of our union with Christ through sanctifying grace, everything that belongs to Christ, belongs to us as well. If we are truly members of Christ’s Body, then we can (and must) share in His redemptive Passion, death and Resurrection. We cannot add anything to the merit of Christ’s passion, which is infinite and exceeds our measure, but we can add our tribute of sharing in it through love. Christ’s passion is perfect, but a fundamental part of its perfection consists in being *open* to receive our participation, which He does not disdain for He makes us members of His Body. The Pope explains:

This evangelical outlook especially highlights the truth *concerning the creative character of suffering*. The sufferings of Christ created the good of the world’s redemption. This good in itself is inexhaustible and infinite. No man can add anything to it. But at the same time, in the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. In so far as man becomes a sharer in Christ’s sufferings—in any part of the world and at any time in history—to that extent *he in his own way completes* the suffering through which Christ accom-

plished the Redemption of the world.

Does this mean that the Redemption achieved by Christ is not complete? No. It only means that the Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, *remains always open to all love* expressed in *human suffering*. In this dimension—the dimension of love—the Redemption which has already been completely accomplished is, in a certain sense, constantly being accomplished. Christ achieved the Redemption completely and to the very limits but at the same time he did not bring it to a close. In this redemptive suffering, through which the Redemption of the world was accomplished, Christ opened himself from the beginning to every human suffering and constantly does so. Yes, it seems to be part *of the very essence of Christ's redemptive suffering* that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed. (SD 24)

Since Christ has elevated human suffering to a participation in His own redemptive suffering in the mystery of the Body of Christ, it follows that redeemed human suffering is worthy of veneration, as a mystery of redemption. For this reason John Paul says that suffering is “something good, *before which the Church bows down in reverence with all the depth of her faith in the Redemption*. She likewise bows down with all the depth of that faith with which she embraces within herself the inexpressible mystery of the Body of Christ” (SD 24 end).

Unfortunately, outside of Catholicism this glory of suffering is unknown to the world. I will not say completely unknown, but almost. Jewish mysticism, drawing on Isaiah's canticles of the Suffering Messiah, to which they could add century after century of exile and pain, has also grasped the redemptive value of the suffering of the just. Nevertheless, this unique insight is waiting to be incorporated into the full doctrine of the Cross of Christ.

