

“I go to the anointing Mass every month. I’m not sick but I’m 84 and I want to be ready.” Patient, Beenleigh.

“I was anointed many years ago when my rheumatoid arthritis was beginning to effect me badly. A friend in the parish asked me if I wanted the anointing and I agreed. At that stage I was looking for a miracle cure, but what I found instead was acceptance and love. I’ve needed many operations since and the arthritis is very bad but I haven’t felt the need to be anointed again.”

Parishioner, Daisy Hill

The rite of anointing is the sacrament that brings to reality within the context of a Church community the healing that sprang from Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God. For the present Church, participating in the movement of the Holy Spirit in the renewal of this rite, the history of anointing, with all its blind alleys and parallel tracks through the imagination of the Church, is a fruitful guide to the sacramental potential of its future, and also a catalogue of examples of how to kill it stone dead. An uncritical and anachronistic perspective on the rite of anointing of the sick, based on thought worlds of the past, risks the unfulfilled expectation of miraculous cure and a descent into mere magic that denies the meaning of suffering, the complexity of the social nature of illness, the science of medicine even with all its limitations, and the possibility of sacramental relevance to the post enlightenment mind.

The symbolic meaning of the sacrament of anointing the sick must ultimately depend on the attitude to disease of the culture making use of the rite.

Understandings based on a simplistic model of disease being a departure from some natural wholeness brought about by sin entering the world cannot stand in a world where disease is accepted as part of the natural order that is subject to rational investigation simply as a part of the human condition. However, if we regard sin as what separates us from each other there is much in the rite that would overcome that offence and reciprocally reconcile the community and the sick. The outcome of such reconciliation does produce miracles, but of a nature that an outsider might regard as mundane and unremarkable, so not surprisingly the rite has been constantly threatened as a sacrament by the need to define what a successful outcome might be.

The history of the rite reveals embarrassment over whether restoration to physical health is really the aim and especially whether it is a rite for the living or the dying. Yet a rite that traces its lineage to the healing ministry of Jesus should still have the power to be a meaningful expression of our legitimate desire for wholeness in an age where new sorts of outcasts are being created and the diseases of social isolation and lifestyle excess appear in parts of the world where death from infectious disease and cancer are being pushed back to the limits imposed by age itself. Anointing as a communal and active sacrament fulfils a desperate need but needs to be carefully distinguished from any passive and anachronistic sham healing by talisman, charisma or the neo-indulgence ministries of the televangelists. The potential for the sacrament is to become far more communal and a powerful instrument for social justice.

To canvass the theology of anointing the sick requires as much an understanding of illness behaviour as of Jesus' healing ministry. I will take my lead

from those two areas of study and then look at how the healing potential of the Kingdom of God was approached throughout Church history. The recent progress in the restoration of the rite to broader usefulness will act as the pivot to explore directions towards which the theology of the sacrament may evolve and to postulate possible symbolic memories of the Church that could catalyse that reaction.

Modern faith healing in the western world has a well-deserved appalling name. The magician, Randi, an expert in fooling the public as entertainment, notes:

In investigating modern faith-healing, I came across every common method of technical, psychological, semantic, and physical chicanery that one can imagine being used to deceive the public – and some new ones, as well.¹

Failures of faith healing remain hidden because of shame and embarrassment. Dealing with the devastation that their “healing” was unsuccessful makes the victim an outcast due to their so-called lack of faith, and my experience is that patients blame themselves rather than the abusive minister. It therefore represents an anti-sacrament that isolates and defeats and I can only agree with the opinion of the committee of the United Lutheran Church, whom Randi quotes with approval, of the religious quackery of some faith healers:

1 [The faith healers] blame any failure of the healing ceremony on the subject’s lack of faith.

2 They ignore any attempt at the use of scientific methodology in their work.

3 The motive is simply a desire for money and the personal power to exploit.²

¹ James Randi, *The Faith Healers* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1987), 45.

² Randi, *The Faith Healers* 59.

Since that assessment in 1962 the major difference is the use of the media by such practitioners as Benny Hinn to acquire an international reach for their organizations and their subsequent ability to inflict damage on a far wider scale of disillusionment and distrust. An African experience is salutary:

The question, however, is: Who are these people who claim to have been cured? Where do they come from? Why is it that they are always strangers whom nobody has seen before? And why are they never seen again thereafter?

Each Kenyan town has its easily recognised blind beggars or cripples. If any of these were healed, the whole town would acknowledge that a miracle had been performed. But the great evangelists come and go, and these blind beggars and cripples remain exactly where they were before.³

It is clear that healing crusades based on individual cults of personality and divorced from Christ-like service risk abuse, and the over hyped claims can successfully separate the desperate from their common sense and their money. The sacrament of anointing when performed within a community of faith is everything these acts are not.

The concept of illness versus disease impacts on the many layers of what healing may constitute. The term “disease” denotes a pathological entity readily subject to medical investigation, whereas “illness” is the subjective experience of that disease.⁴ To experience relief from an illness is not the same as saying a disease has been cured. Certainly, at a very basic level, insufficient food will necessarily retard recovery from physical illness. At a deeper level the hope engendered by the support of family and community provides an antidote to

³ ‘Outlaw These Miracle Merchants,’ *The Nation (Kenya)* 29 Sept 2001, quoted in “Faith Healing” <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/f06.html> accessed 28/2/2005.

⁴ David Field, “The Social Definition of Illness,” in David Tuckett (ed) *An Introduction to Medical Sociology* (London: Tavistock, 1976), 334.

despair, without which the immune system is crippled.⁵ Recovery will also depend on the degree to which the social causes and implications of ill health are relieved. For example, for the white-collar worker a bad back may be an inconvenience; for the labourer it may represent loss of work, status and even family, with meagre subsistence support dependant on continued disability. You could perhaps cure that sickness with the support of a protective trade union. Society's purity concerns also change perception of illness, and fear works against inclusiveness. Our societies' lepers wait upon the anointing of the Church, none more than those with HIV where it could address "the marginalization of the person with AIDS by restoring the true significance of life through invitation back into the community."⁶

The current state of affairs in affluent cultures where people expect good health is most atypical for human history. In the premodern world, infectious disease would frequently intrude in spectacular epidemics.⁷ With poor nutrition, due to the inability to transport or store food successfully, local famines would take an enormous toll and, with infant mortality rates terrifyingly high, expectations for health were naturally low. However, at least between epidemics and famines, survivors of the first five years given subsistence nutrition and a reason to live would generally survive their ills, albeit with a frequently extended convalescence.⁸ The major impediment to health therefore was not lack of modern medical care but lack of food and social support. Since our immune system relies on both physical and emotional sustenance, a leader who created a community that supplied both, to people accustomed to being without either, would create a healing

⁵ Kenneth Pelletier and Denise Herzing, "Psychoimmunology: Toward a Mind-Body Model," in Anees Sheikh and Katharina Sheikh (eds) *Healing, East and West* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), 350.

⁶ Gary Chamberlain, "Chronicle: Rituals and Healing in the Crisis of Aids," *Worship* 63 (1986), 464.

⁷ W. Stephenson *The Ecological Development of Man* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972), 140.

⁸ Douglas Gordon, *Health, Sickness and Society* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1976), 158-61.

community and a kernel of a reputation would be created. In addition, liberation from fear and isolation is a powerful cordial and would have harnessed what we now recognise as a placebo effect.⁹ While the actions of the immune system are inscrutable, such healing will often still be of functional rather than structural nature. More crudely put: there are lots of crutches left behind at Lourdes but no prosthetic limbs.¹⁰

The tradition of Jesus as a healer can be seen to arise from the nature of this community of God's reign he instigated, but it is worthy of note that he was not unique in the reports of his achievements. He is in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets such as Elijah and Elisha.¹¹ Hanina ben Dosa, a near contemporary of Jesus, is noted to have performed similar feats including healing Gamaliel's son at a distance¹² in a manner reminiscent of Matthew 8:5-13. Like the Gospels, these accounts were written well after the events¹³, and in an age of faith and oral tradition a degree of amplification is understandable.¹⁴ Nonetheless, whatever formed the engine of this healing was not something absolutely unique to Jesus. The essence of that dynamism needs to be considered as the basis for an anointing rite that seeks to recreate this possibility without the physical presence of Jesus. The healings in the Gospels, however, remain the prime exemplar that tests the sacrament.

Much of that healing tradition is from Markan sources with lesser contributions from Lukan sources, Q and John. By the time the traditions are recorded, the healings have already attracted extra layers of meaning (see appendix).

⁹ Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 683.

¹⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1998), 297.

¹¹ Dionisio Borobio, "An Enquiry into Healing Anointing in the Early Church," in Mary Collins and David Power (eds), *The Pastoral Care of the Sick* (London: SCM, 1991), 38.

¹² A. N. Wilson, *Jesus* (Hammersmith, London: Flamingo, 1993), 31.

¹³ Charlotte Allen, *The Human Christ* (Oxford: Lion, 1998), 298.

¹⁴ Crossan calls it "devotional inflation." *The Birth of Christianity*, 298.

As Bausch notes, the healings of Jesus are never recorded in the Gospels simply for the fact that someone was cured.¹⁵ This contrasts with the pure gratuitous magic found in sources such as Infancy Thomas¹⁶ in an early corrective against the shallow display of miracle on demand. A recurring motif is Jesus condemning the protectors of the Sabbath over their attitude to healing. These are capped by the attitudes attacked in the story of the Good Samaritan. (Luke 10:29-37) That religious rules can impede the chances of physical health remains a problem today and an impediment to the success of the rite of anointing from a community perspective.

Jesus is noted to heal fever, rash, breathlessness and bleeding, all more symptoms than defined diseases, but certainly all potentially the result of disease curable within a community providing food and company. Until later writings such as the Lazarus story (John 11:1-44) and perhaps Secret Mark and Infancy Thomas¹⁷, there are no raisings from the dead; in Mark it is not at all clear Jairus's daughter is really dead (5:39). The healings are a sign of the Kingdom as announced by Jesus' reading of Isaiah (Luke 4:18) because living the reign of God not only restores hope and nutrition, but also removes the psychological need to remain separate out of shame. Crossan's paraphrase of the Kingdom is salutary:

That ecstatic vision and social program sought to rebuild society upward from its grass roots, but on principles of religious and economic egalitarianism, with free healing brought directly to the peasant's homes and free sharing of whatever they had in return. The deliberate conjunction of magic and meal, miracle and table, free compassion and open commensality, was a challenge launched not just on the level of Judaism's strictest purity regulations, or even on that of the Mediterranean's patriarchal combination of honour and shame, patronage and parentage, but at the most basic level of civilization's

¹⁵ William Bausch, *A New Look at the Sacraments* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-third Publications, 1983), 199.

¹⁶ Robert Miller (ed), *The Complete Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994) 371-9. (9:1-6, 10:1-3, 16:1-2, 17:1-4, 18:1-3 – these are mainly showy raisings from the dead by the infant Jesus)

¹⁷ Miller, *Complete Gospels* 371-9, 411.

eternal inclination to draw lines, invoke boundaries, establish hierarchies and maintain discriminations.¹⁸

The separation of healings and exorcisms might suggest a need for separate consideration, but the understanding of disease revealed in the stories blurs the two (eg Matt 9:32-4). They are frequently linked in summarising statements (eg Mark 3:10-12) and interestingly require the same participation of the afflicted as the more ordinary healings. The exorcisms can be in response to Jesus' preaching (Mark 1:39) or his mere presence (Mark 5:7) but the circumstance presented an opportunity for those separated from community to be restored by the ritual drama of exorcism.¹⁹ In these two cases there is faith from the outcast "possessed" who is released from their bonds, in other exorcism traditions the faith is with the friends and family who present them (eg Matt 9:32, Mark 7:26). It could be argued that anointing should be seeking modern dramas as appropriate to our lives as exorcism was to Jesus' era. Certainly at the very least the liturgy of the word and Christ's presence in the Eucharist can be triggers to restore people to community just as Jesus' teaching and presence heralded the exorcisms.

From the perspective of precursor of a sacrament, the failures of the healing mission are notable. Jesus was not as successful in Galilee (Mark 6:5) where he was too well known to inspire such faith and hope. Jesus did not heal everyone (John 5:2-9). His disciples also had failures (Mark 9:14-29). That they happened seemed certain, as their recording is an embarrassment. Mark has Jesus blame the disciples' failure to heal an epileptic on lack of technique (9:29), whereas Matthew attributes the same failure to lack of faith (17:20). The difficulties the evangelists have in explaining them presage the vicissitudes the anointing rite would have through its history.

¹⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), 196.

¹⁹ Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, 35.

It is notable that those healed became part of the community (Luke 8:13) that became the early Church, in an early witness of the mutual benefit found when the sick are embraced by a group of people. It is central to the identity of these first Christian communities that they carried on the healing mission of Christ. It is part of the commission to the twelve in Mark (6:13), the Jamesian Church in Jerusalem (James 5:14), a gift of the spirit for Paul (1 Cor 12:9), and finds a place in Luke's memoir concerning Peter and Paul (Acts 3:7, 14:10). Already in Mark and James anointing with oil is associated with healing.

If one of you is ill, 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 will raise him up again; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. So confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, and this will cure you; the heartfelt prayer of a good man works very powerfully. (James 5:14-16)

Apart from providing an early tradition that would seem to preclude the priesthood from any special claim over both reconciliation and anointing, we have very early evidence for the use of oil. Oil was known as medicinal from Greek medical texts as well as Jewish sources such as Philo and Josephus.²⁰ Olive oil in particular was considered not only to be therapeutic, but as a plant that thrived in Palestine it was an essential commodity for food, fuel and wood, and resonated with its hallowed use in sacrifice and kingly anointing through the traditions of the Jews.²¹ Sustenance, shelter, light and healing come together in this symbol which would have formed a necessary part of the offering from the community²² creating a healing environment of shelter, warmth and food for the poor. For Jewish Christians in James's community the association of oil with atoning sacrifice (Lev

²⁰ Martin Albi, " 'Are any among you sick?' The Health Care System in the letter of James," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 (2002), 137.

²¹ Paul Achtemeier (ed), *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 728.

²² Frank Andersen, *Eucharist: Participating in the Mystery* (Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt Publishing, 1998), 47.

2:4) would add to the depth of the sacrament because of being steeped in the Genesis myth where sickness is consequent upon sin.²³ For the Greeks the word for oil, *elaion*, meant mercy and compassion.²⁴

Therefore, while other methods of healing such as laying on of hands existed, anointing was rightly the preferred method by which the grace of healing bequeathed by Jesus flowed from the church²⁵, as it symbolically conveyed the practical health promotion aspects of the reign of God community. There is definite evidence of anointing in the Patristic era right back to the first century, including an inscription on a tablet referring to such healing practices²⁶. Prayers to consecrate the oil go back to at least 215²⁷, where Hippolytus notes that the Bishop said such a prayer, and that the oil was taken home by the faithful to be used both internally and externally as a medicine. In 373 Pope Innocent, in commenting on James, clearly says that physical illness is the target of the anointing and that the laity are to be involved:

Now there is no doubt that these words are to be understood of the faithful who are sick, and who can be anointed with the holy oil of chrism, which has been prepared by the bishop, and which not only priests but all Christians may use for anointing, when their own needs or those of their family demand.²⁸

Although customs of blessing olive oil brought by the laity were only possible in places like Italy where olive trees actually grew²⁹, further north, the Gelasian Sacramentary from the Frankish Kingdoms in the sixth to eighth century³⁰ also stressed that actual healing from illness was the expectation of the sacrament. Oil

²³ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred* (New York: Image Books, 1982), 369.

²⁴ Stanley Harakas, "The Sacrament of Healing," *International Review of Mission* 90 (2001), 82.

²⁵ Borobio, "Healing Anointing," 46.

²⁶ Bausch, *New Look at the Sacraments*, 203.

²⁷ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 372.

²⁸ Bausch, *New Look at the Sacraments*, 203.

²⁹ H. B. Porter, "The Origin of the Medieval Rite for Anointing the Sick or Dying," *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 7 (1956), 212.

³⁰ *New Catholic Dictionary* <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/ncd03495.htm> accessed 3/4/2005.

being a more precious commodity away from sunny climes may have begun the process of narrowing those considered able to anoint:

God, Father of all consolation
It was by your will that the sick in their weakness should be healed by
your Son:
Hear the prayer of faith;
Send from heaven your Holy Spirit, our advocate, upon the richness of
this oil which by your kindly providence is produced by the olive tree
for the restoration of the body.
Through your blessing may it be a source of strength for the mind,
body and spirit of all who are anointed with it.
May it dispel all their pains, weakness and sickness.³¹

This focus on physical healing and the living as well as lay access to the rite of anointing disappeared in the Middle Ages. The idea that sickness was a divine punishment had become pervasive and physical healing became secondary to the condition of the soul.³² Bausch suggests that it was difficult to say that a sacrament always effects the grace it contains when it was obvious that even those with saintly intentions refused to recover reliably.³³ A closer association with those not expected to recover removed that embarrassment and, since that tied the rite to penitence, it also inevitably removed the laity from the scene. It became expensive due to the need to pay the priests involved³⁴ and, since it removed hope rather than restored it, became robbed of its sacramental intent. Having no active participation by the dying person, it was reduced to removing the last remnants of sin, the “consolation of the church” to those who had no time to do penance³⁵. Since it had some of the aura of the Cathar’s consolamentum³⁶ it was thought that you had

³¹ J.D. Crichton, *Understanding the Sacraments* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), 176-7.

³² David Kinsley, *Health Healing and Religion* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 105.

³³ Bausch, *New Look at the Sacraments*, 205.

³⁴ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 377-84.

³⁵ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 378.

³⁶ Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1978), 251.

to remain a perfect penitent should you be unfortunate enough to recover.³⁷ For these very good reasons its popularity declined and the rite was rarely performed.

As these strictures were unfortunately fossilised at Trent into the rite of extreme unction the reformers were merrily satirising the deficiencies of the rite.

In *The Faerie Queen* the Red Cross knight is in need of healing:

Home is he brought, and laid in sumptuous bed:
Where many skilfull leaches him abide,
To salve his hurts, that yet freshly bled.
In wine and oyle they wash his woundes wide,
And softly can embalme on euery side.
And all the while, most heavenly melody
About the bed sweet musicke did diuide,
Him to beguile of grieve and agony. (I.v.17) ³⁸

Oil to embalm and beguile rather than heal and save is Spenser's negative view of extreme unction.³⁹

While anointing was degenerating into extreme unction the healing associated with the Kingdom of God could still be seen in the traditions of the Church but only in trajectories somewhat divergent to orthodoxy. The grail stories were a medieval rite, at least of the imagination, that focussed on healing and specifically the health of the king and linked it to the state of the land in general. Originating from Christian, Celtic and oriental sources, the procession of the grail in its various forms including the lance, the cup and the platter allowed the possibility of healing for the king and therefore the land. In Chretien's version, Perceval fails to heal the land because he does not "ask who was served from the grail."⁴⁰ In various versions, the Fisher King or Arthur's land is wasteland and the grail is the potential

³⁷ Bausch, *New Look at the Sacraments*, 206.

³⁸ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (London: Penguin, 1978), 96.

³⁹ Sarah Plant, "Spenser's Praise of English Rites for the Sick and Dying," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 32 (2001), 407.

⁴⁰ Chretien De Troyes, *Arthurian Romances* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), 417.

source of healing.⁴¹ Daring to ask the question in the face of the Church's most profound relics and symbols would have provoked the answer that the grail serves all people and this insight would have healed the land. All this suggests that beneath the official dogma, a return to the healing community of Christ was not beyond the medieval imagination.

With the restoration of the rite of anointing to a concern with healing since Vatican II the Church had the opportunity to clarify its attitude to sickness. It was confirmed that Christ loves the sick and that their afflictions are not linked to personal sin; moreover their suffering is an ongoing wound of Christ. Medical intervention is encouraged, as is the fight against all illness. The place of the rite is to support the ill person to both bear suffering and fight illness and the caveat is supplied that a cure is possible if it is useful to their salvation.⁴² The link to completion of penance was retained, as was the restriction to priests.⁴³ That the ordained are the only people allowed to lead the rite has been recently confirmed⁴⁴, although the reasons given, attributed to the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, are simply errors of fact⁴⁵. More importantly, it is simply impractical, and ignores the fact that many members of the laity have at least as good a grasp of the issues surrounding illness and death as the clergy.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, the new rite was a breakthrough in its potential to go back to what Jesus and his people offered – the possibility of physical healing by participation in the reign of God. From Vatican II anointing of the sick was

⁴¹ John Matthews, *The Elements of the Grail Tradition* (Shaftesbury, England: Element, 1990).

⁴² *Pastoral Care of the Sick* (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1982), 10-12.

⁴³ *Pastoral Care of the Sick* (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1982), 12, 14.

⁴⁴ "Anointing of the sick rules affirmed," *The Catholic Leader* 3 April 2005, 6.

⁴⁵ The commentary is reported to note that the Church has always reserved it to priests, that James was referring to priests rather than simply the elders in the community in 5:14 and that it was the only doctrine maintained in papal documents. All these statements are false.

⁴⁶ Mary Collins, "The Roman Ritual: Pastoral Care and Anointing of the Sick," in Mary Collins and David Power (eds), *The Pastoral Care of the Sick* (London: SCM, 1991), 14.

conceived as a communal rite⁴⁷, emphasising that the ill are not alone as, even if the priest is the only other person present, he represents the community.⁴⁸ The aim is to restore wholeness and remove alienation⁴⁹ and so has a positive effect on health outcomes by restoring hope and community. The support created is of course both moral and practical such that a rite designed to be performed by a community should be backed up by that community's decision to support the sick person in a practical way. From the perspective of the one anointed it is an active and public profession of faith, since the individual must decide that the sacrament is necessary.⁵⁰ This allows the participant to grow into a new understanding of their illness,⁵¹ finding "a horizon of meaning to make sense out of an otherwise desperate situation".⁵²

This may mean the participant is assisted in recovery, but at its best the rite could also mine a positive expression of extreme unction. With the approach of death the patient is given Christ's strength in the face of death, to accept the need to let go of a life too degrading to continue.⁵³ The experience that the suffering then minister their stories of faith back to the community further emphasises that we are in no way looking at a passive rite simply relating to a priest who makes someone better:

Far from there being a simple dichotomy of sacramentally-empowered minister and passive recipient, instead there should be a complex of participants in the paschal mystery of Christ, mutually giving and receiving the transforming power of the cross.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 392.

⁴⁸ Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mysic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994), 184.

⁴⁹ Bausch, *New Look at the Sacraments*, 208-9.

⁵⁰ David Power, "The Sacrament of Anointing: Open Questions," in Mary Collins and David Power (eds), *The Pastoral Care of the Sick* (London: SCM, 1991), 101.

⁵¹ Cooke, *Sacraments*, 185.

⁵² Walter Cuenin quoted in Gary Brock, "Liturgical Ministry to the Sick: An Overview," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 45 (1991), 41.

⁵³ John Hilary Martin, "The Healing of the Lord," *Compass*, 23.1 (1989), 10.

⁵⁴ Thomas Knowles, "The Testimony of the Sick," *Compass* 21.2 (1987), 34.

Cooke's description of Christian communities as "sacraments of healing"⁵⁵ recalls the healing nature of the Jesus community and takes healing from a personal to a social justice level capable of healing beyond the community:

As sacrament of the risen Christ's saving presence in history, the church is a sacramental cause of society's healing. That it is by being itself a community in which Christians live in honest reconciliation with one another, in which the values Jesus taught and exemplified counter the person-denying values embodied in modern systemic evil, and in which the commitment to a covenant relationship is translated into justice and beyond that into loving concern for each person in the community.⁵⁶

The sacrament of anointing, which was historically undermined by its association with sin and confession, can now therefore intersect with reconciliation in a new and productive way. Since our communities of faith in the developed world are implicit in the cause of illness by social inequality,⁵⁷ the reconciliation active within the community can be poured outwards in efforts to reconcile with those whose health is impacted by poverty. The reciprocity involved would have the potential to reduce both the diseases of want and excess where they impact.

Potential for "a number of ritual uses"⁵⁸ has been noted to effectively launch the sacrament creatively beyond the individual into a community celebration. A rite of healing for communities would have greater resonance if it involved anointing everyone, akin to a community rite of reconciliation, into a commitment to live in a way that would improve the health of all. This would make a great deal more sense than the large group anointing designed for sites of pilgrimage⁵⁹ that, divorced from any community basis, can be opportunities for little more than passive wish fulfilment and were wisely left out of the English version of Pastoral

⁵⁵ Cooke, *Sacraments*, 205.

⁵⁶ Cooke, *Sacraments*, 205.

⁵⁷ Cooke, *Sacraments*, 180.

⁵⁸ Power, "Sacrament of Anointing," 105.

⁵⁹ Collins, "Anointing of the Sick", 6.

Care for the Sick.⁶⁰ The potential risks of a “communal” rite without a community is exemplified by the need to control the activities of Archbishop Milingo, an African prelate still practising a healing mission in his Rome-enforced exile in Italy. I cannot see that exorcism is an appropriate drama to lead to wholeness when its lack of resonance with Western thought can leave only trivialised reactions:

As religious pageantry in the medieval tradition, it was highly effective. The ugly shrieks of the demons served to underline the beauty of the singing, and the possessed twitched only yards from the rhythmic order of the nuns’ choir... A Milingo mass is both compelling and revolting. There was a sad story behind many of the faces on the congregation, and they came in search of miracles... Amid so much human misery the antics of those possessed by demons were an affront... I spotted one of the most energetic and witch-like of the women recovering from her exertions with a cigarette during the lunch-time break.⁶¹

As medieval pageant that might lead to healthier “ritual uses”, I suggest an adaptation of the grail procession that was after all concerned with the health of the whole land and was itself adapted from multifaith sources by the Cistercian order.⁶² It would be appropriate scaffolding on which to erect such a new community rite:

A man came down from heaven garbed in bishop’s robes ... on a glorious throne, which they set down next to a table supporting the Holy Grail. [Josephus] prostrated himself on hands and knees before the altar; after a lengthy interval the sound of the chamber door flying suddenly open burst upon his ear. He turned his head towards it, as did the others too, to see the angels who had borne him thither proceeding from the room; two had candles in their hands, the third bore a cloth of red samite, the fourth a lance which bled so freely that the drops were falling into a container which the angel held in his other hand. The first two placed the candles on the table, and the third laid the cloth beside the Holy Vessel; the fourth held the lance upright over the Vessel so that the blood running down the shaft was caught therein...next Josephus acted as though he were entering on the consecration of a mass.⁶³

This may be a little over the top for the austere nature of our sacraments these days but the grail procession is seen in many manifestations. A Eucharistic

⁶⁰ Marc B. Caron, “The Twentieth-Century Sources for the Communal Celebration of the Sacrament of the Sick,” *Worship* 72 (1998), 408.

⁶¹ Edward Stourton, *Absolute Truth* (London: Viking, 1998), 190-191.

⁶² P.M. Matarasso (trans.) *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (London: Penguin, 1969), 20.

⁶³ Matarasso, *Quest of the Holy Grail*, 274-5.

celebration incorporating a communal rite of anointing could have a procession starting with the lance, which would remind us that we are implicit in the wounds of Christ that sickness represents. The spear has further resonance as the source of the blood and water from Christ's side so important to the early Church's appreciation of baptism.⁶⁴ The platter would follow and should be empty to symbolise want, with the oil to heal and the gifts to fill the need to follow.

From the perspective of an affluent Catholic community, the intent is to make meaningful the social commitment to healing and to make into a sacrament the commitment to organizations such as Caritas and St Vincent de Paul. There are already ad hoc and informal ways that access the symbolic for this purpose; for example, our church in Daisy Hill is one that has used the simple famine dinner of fish and rice to commence Lenten contributions to Project Compassion. This acknowledges "our participation in structures of injustice which perpetuate relations of domination and dependence."⁶⁵ In areas of need it is more likely to be expressed in communities espousing liberation theology where Church and community boil down to a simple fight for survival.⁶⁶ While exorcism may no longer be an appropriate drama to bring outcasts back into community, such a communal rite of anointing certainly is, and invites participation of modalities such as dance and movement to challenge the dread that continue to separate.⁶⁷

While Vatican II rescued the sacramental intent of anointing as an active, communal rite involved with the living and related to their health, this rite is not a conduit to miraculous faith healing. In the spirit of the communities of the reign

⁶⁴ T. M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 10.

⁶⁵ Harvey Perkins, "Issues of Contextual Theology: An Australian Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 28 (1976), 289.

⁶⁶ Marie Conn, "The Sacramental Theology of Leonardo Boff," *Worship* (1990), 524.

⁶⁷ Chamberlain, "Chronicle", 463.

of God instituted by Jesus, this sacrament contains its grace when performed by a church that prevents sickness from causing separation and ensures nourishment in physical and emotional terms to support the afflicted through the experience. The important place of the exorcised in forming the early community of the Church is testament to the enrichment that those who have personally faced the reality of the temporary nature of life through serious disease bring to those complacent in their comfort. The rite's history of association with penance reminds us that reconciliation allows healing. The era of extreme unction recalls the need to accept death as part of life and that, even in places with seemingly endlessly extended life spans, there are times when death is a release to be embraced. In a world that suffers both from disease of excess and lack, anointing for the sick makes sense in a communal fashion when it brings our joint responsibilities in this area to such a pitch of meaning that appropriate action can only follow.

Appendix: Healings and Exorcisms in the Gospels

Earliest tradition	Issue	Parallels
Mark 1:23-28 Heals demoniac (exorcism)	Authority	Luke 4:33-37
Mark 1:29-31 Simon's mother in law - fever	Reciprocity	Matt 8:14-15, Luke 4:38-39
Mark 1:32-34 Many exorcisms and healings	Demons know him	Matt 8:16-17, Luke 4:40-41
Mark 1:39 Exorcisms	Preaching	Matt 4:32 (adds healing)
Mark 1:40 Leper	Faith	Matt 8:1-4, Luke 5:12-16, Egerton 2 ⁶⁸
Mark 2:1-12 Paralytic	Sins forgiven	Matt 9:1-8, Luke 5:17-26
Mark 3:1-6 Withered hand	Sabbath	Matt 12:9-14, Luke 6:6-11 G Nazoreans 4 ⁶⁹
Mark 3:10 Many healings and exorcisms	Authority over spirits	Matt 4:24-25, 12:15-16, Luke 5:1-9
Mark 5:1-2 Gerasene Demoniac	Demoniac sent back to his community	Matt 8:28-34, Luke 8:40-56
Mark 5:21-43 Jairus's daughter + Haemorrhage	Faith	Matt 9:18-26, Luke 8:40-56 (?daughter more dead)
Mark 6:5 Nazareth - under whelming	No miracles	Matt 15:29-31
Mark 6:13 Commission of the twelve anointing with oil and exorcism	Kingdom ethics	Matt 10:1-16, Luke 9:1-6
Mark 7:24-30 Syrophoenician woman's daughter (exorcism)	Faith (foreigner)	Matt 15:21-28
Mark 7:31-37 Deafness and speech impediment	Attempts at secrecy	Matt 15:29-31 (adds lame, maimed and blind)
Mark 8:22-26 Blindness	Sent home	
Mark 9:14-29 epilepsy (exorcism)	Faith	Matt 17:14-21, Luke 9:37-43
Mark 10:46-52 Blind Bartimeus	Faith	Matt 20:29-34 (2 blind men), Luke 18:35-43
Matt 8:5-13 Centurion's servant	Faith (foreigner)	Luke 7:1-10, John 4:46-54
Matt 9:32-34, 12:22-44 Dumb demoniac	? in league with the devil	Luke 11:14-15
Luke 8:1-3 Women exorcised and healed	Travelled with the healed	

⁶⁸ Miller, *Complete Gospels* 415.

⁶⁹ "I was a stonemason making a living with my hands. I plead with you, Jesus, give me back my health so that I won't have to beg for my food in shame." Miller, *Complete Gospels*, 444.

Luke 13:10-17 Cripple (exorcism)	Sabbath	
Luke 14:1-6 Dropsy	Sabbath	
Luke 17:11-19 Ten lepers	Faith	
Luke 22:51 Servant's ear	Non-violence	
John 5:2-47 Pool of Bethzatha	Sabbath	
John 9:1-7 Blind	Sin	
John 11:1-44 Lazarus	Baptism	Secret Mark ⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Miller , *Complete Gospels* 411.

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