

“ . . . a Christian ending to our life”

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We pray at every Liturgy for a Christian ending to our life. Priests often get called to hospitals to serve the “last rites” over dying people - some are very devout members of the Church, others they have neither met nor heard of before. Everyone seems to understand that the time of death is a time when God’s presence is especially necessary and desirable. What do we really ask for when we pray for “a Christian ending to our life”?

We believe that the human person is composed of both body and soul. Death is simply the temporary (from our human standpoint) separation of the body and soul. Even as the body is buried in the earth, the soul continues its existence and stands before God for judgement. Between the time of the death of the individual and the general resurrection - the “end of the world”, when everyone’s souls will be reunited to a new, resurrected body and we will stand before Christ to be judged - we are taught that the soul feels, to some incomplete degree, either the joy of the saints or the pain of hell (which makes a logical kind of sense in that the complete person, both body and soul, is not “present”), and that after the general resurrection, when body and soul will again be united, we will fully feel either the pain of hell or the total joy of the saints.

We are taught that in order to experience the joy of the saints we must use our time here on earth to follow the path to salvation which God has shown us - much like a young dancer, ice-skater, or athlete must follow the direction and teaching of their teacher or coach and not just “make it up as they go along” if they wish to achieve any success in their chosen field. As the athlete experiences their examination when they take the playing field and the dancer when they take the stage, every Christian will experience their most important examination when they stand before Christ at their death. Consequently, as the athlete or artist must take great care to prepare themselves properly immediately before they are to perform, so the time immediately before our death is perhaps the most important time in our life.

We often hear of the “last rites”. From the standpoint of Orthodox Christianity this is at best a misguided or imprecise idea. As we prepare for death God has given us three main sacramental acts which are to ease

our transition into the heavenly kingdom: the holy mysteries of Confession and Communion; the holy mystery of the anointing or Unction; and the prayers at the separation of the soul and the body.

Confession and Communion. Our ancient tradition is very clear - a person who is about to die, if they do nothing else, should receive the mysteries of Confession and the Eucharist. This is one reason why it's important not to wait till the last minute, when a person is on a respirator and cannot talk, or is already unconscious. No one can be confessed or communed unless they are conscious and relatively coherent. The forgiveness of sins we receive through a good, honest and open confession is much more important than all the pain-killers in the world, for physical pain is temporary, but the pain of unrepented sins is eternal. The union with Christ which we obtain through partaking the Body and Blood of Our Lord in the Eucharist is that which gives us peace of mind and comfort in the difficult task of making our final farewells to our loved ones and in the terrible moment of death. We pray at every Liturgy for ". . . a Christian ending to our life, painless, blameless and peaceful". We are taught that Holy Confession and Holy Communion make this possible. We believe that Holy Communion is "the medicine of immortality". To be very concise, it must be emphasized that if anyone is gravely sick or in danger of death they should receive Confession and Communion as soon as possible. Participation in these Holy Mysteries is the sign of a Christian life, and they are likewise the mark of a Christian death.

Holy Unction. We often hear the service of the anointing with blessed oil, or Holy Unction, referred to as the "last rites". A quick perusal of the text of the Orthodox service will show that this is not the case. As we read through the beautiful prayers of this service we see that the prayers are not for a Christian death, but for the forgiveness of sins and the healing of the body and soul of the person being anointed. It is a service for those who wish to get well, not those about to die. Consequently, calling a priest to the bedside of a dying patient so that he might serve this mystery is perhaps not the most prudent thing to do. It would be much better if all of us, upon being informed that we have a serious illness, asked the priest to serve this mystery as soon as possible, while we are still strong enough to join our prayers to the prayers of the Church.

Likewise, we see that Holy Unction should ideally be served in Church, preferably with several priests concelebrating. The reason for this

is very clear, and is found in the first epistle reading of the service. *“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. . . Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders 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, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”* (I James, 5:13-16) The word “elders” in Greek is *presbyteroi* - the word from which we get the term presbyter or priest. Ideally 7 priests should concelebrate this mystery together.

It is unfortunate that the Holy Unction is almost never served in its full form - most often it's simply the blessing of the oil and the anointing itself, what in the book of needs is referred to as the order “to be used when in danger of death”. This is a beautiful service which, when approached with faith on the part of both the sick person and those present, is very powerful. It consists of the opening prayers, the blessing of the oil itself, 7 epistle and gospel readings followed immediately by 7 anointings (done by 7 different priests), and then, before the dismissal, the gospel book is opened and placed, text facing down, over the head of the ill person and the main celebrant reads a beautiful prayer asking God Himself to heal the sick person, saying *“I lay not my sinful hand upon the head of (him or her) that cometh unto Thee in sins, but implore Thee through remission of sins, and that Thy strong and mighty hand which is in this Holy Gospel which my fellow-Priests hold upon the head of Thy servant . . .”*. Even in an abbreviated form, with only one priest serving (and this is usually the only thing possible for most of our priests due to time and distance constraints here in Canada) the service can be very beautiful - especially if the family of the sick person are believers and join their prayers to the prayers of the priest.

Prayers at the parting of the soul from the body. When a person is on the verge of death we have a beautiful set of prayers in the book of needs which are to be read. It is in the form of a canon (like a moleben'), and basically is a petition to God to forgive the sins and grant a peaceful death to the one who is dying, to permit their soul to separate from their body peacefully. These prayers are rarely read for several reasons. First of all, many of our faithful simply are unaware of the existence of these prayers. Secondly, we are surrounded by non-Orthodox who have different practices, and the force of assimilation causes us to see our Faith in the light of these non-Orthodox teachings. An example of this is the idea that we

need to call the priest when someone is dying to perform the “last rites” - anointing with oil - because that’s what the Catholics do. Since the Catholics or the Protestants don’t have these beautiful and meaningful prayers at the parting of the body and soul we tend to forget that they exist. Thirdly, it’s often the case that the family doesn’t want to admit the fact that father or mother is dying, and so to pray the prayers at death is illogical. This is unfortunate, for to those who understand what our life on earth is and do not fear death, to those who have “walked with God” here below, these prayers can be a great comfort.

The holy mysteries are not “miracle cures” to be requested when the doctors can’t do anything more. Nor are they magic, with the priest saying some special words, sprinkling some magic water or oil around and which magically transform a sinner into a saint who will go straight to heaven. The main reason that the priest should be called as soon as possible to the bedside of someone who is suffering from a grave illness is that the holy mysteries are a chance, perhaps the final chance, for repentance.

John the Baptist preached confession and repentance of sins. Jesus began His ministry with the preaching of repentance. The Church exists to help us repent. As we approach death this is of extreme importance. Repentance is a conscious renunciation of the devil and all service to him, a renunciation of all our sinful acts, and a heartfelt promise to God to change our sinful way of life. This is why it’s extremely important that the priest be called when the sick person is still conscious, coherent, and able to make a good confession, able to receive the mysteries with faith. The priest cannot repent for anyone else except himself, and to expect the priest to “do something” for a person who is unconscious or under the effects of painkillers is unreasonable. The only thing he might do in this circumstance is to pray, and to try to comfort the family. We must remember that it is never too late to repent - and God wishes that everyone be saved. No matter who is dying, no matter what their sins are, whether public or private, we are taught that true repentance and reconciliation to the Church through the Holy Mysteries will bring salvation. This is the reason that we should never wait till the last minute to call the priest, and why we especially should not be afraid to call the priest to the bedside of anyone who is gravely ill for fear of “traumatizing” the patient.

In closing, one very important point must be made. Every one of us is dying. We are closer to death now than we were when we began reading

this article. Life, as we know, is a terminal illness. It's no surprise that the most important of our acts in preparing for death is approaching for Confession and Communion, for these are the central mysteries of our faith during our earthly life, the most concrete signs of our belonging to God and His Church. While it's good for someone to repent on their deathbed, it's even better to repent throughout one's entire life. None of us knows when we will die - today, tomorrow, or years from now. But we do know that those who are always prepared stand a better chance of success than those who constantly postpone their preparation, whether for school, for work, or for death.

St. Nikolai Velmirovic, in a homily about the Holy Mystery of Unction, states: *"Oh, my brethren, how ineffable is God's goodness! What has the Lord not done for us? What more could we desire? He has foreseen all our needs and provided medicine for them in advance. He only seeks from us that we believe in Him and fulfil His commandments. Is it not blind of us, and shameful, that we often carry out the directions of doctors, mortal men like ourselves, more carefully and conscientiously than we do those of God immortal? O all-gracious Lord, shatter the stone of our hearts with the power of Thy grace; that we may, before our last hour, show Thee the gratitude we owe Thee, O our gracious and most-wise God."*