

Anointing of the Sick: A Sacrament of Healing

It seemed unusual to me that “Annie” was alone as she pushed open the door to the funeral home and struggled to climb onto the bench to sit beside me.

The 5-year-old had lost her teenage sister to cancer just four days before, and since then she was constantly being held by members of her family. This was the first time I had seen her without someone else by her side. She looked very small as she sat with her worn teddy bear on her lap swinging her patent-leather clad feet below the bench.

Annie initiated the conversation. “My sister, ‘Katie,’ died. Did you know that Miss Kristin?” “Yes, Annie, I did know that.” Annie put her head down nuzzling her teddy bear. “Miss Kristin, why didn’t God make the cancer go away?”

As the coordinator of Pastoral Care for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, I have companioned families, parish communities and schools through loss and crisis for the last six years. Although some memories have begun to fade together, I can still clearly recall Annie’s question and the look she gave me after she asked it. As lucidly as I remember that moment, I can recall witnessing Katie’s reception of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick in her hospital room.

Annie’s question of “Why didn’t God make the cancer go away?” is a complex theological one. Suffering, sickness and pain of loved ones are difficult to reconcile with our knowledge of a merciful and benevolent God. This is especially evident in family and friends when a child is suffering. However, God’s healing is present even when we may not see it or it may not be in the way we would desire. While there was not a physical miracle for Katie, the sacrament of the anointing of the sick provided her with courage, strength and peace. It united her suffering to the Passion and death of Christ, and prepared her for the final resurrection.

In his letter, James states, “Is any 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 man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (Jas. 5:14-15).

After receiving penance, the anointing of the sick, and Viaticum (holy Eucharist) from the priest, Katie fell asleep peacefully for the first time in days. While the cancer still beset Katie’s body, her mother told me that she could feel that Katie was “at peace in a new way” for her final journey (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1523) to the arms of Christ.

The sacrament of anointing of the sick is not, however, only for persons who are terminally ill or dying. It is also for people struggling with mental illness, and those of declining health due to serious illness. It is an opportunity for Catholics to call upon Jesus at a time when we are most vulnerable, knowing that he resides always beside both us and those we love.

On the bench outside Katie’s funeral, Annie paused momentarily after asking her question, “Why God didn’t make the cancer go away?” She looked up at me and with all certainty and sincerity explained, “God made it so Katie’s not sick anymore. No more pain and hurting, anymore. He loved her a lot. She’s in heaven with Jesus. Right, Miss Kristin?” With equal certainty and sincerity, I was able to look into those brown eyes and reply, “Yes, Annie. Jesus loves her. He welcomed her. And she doesn’t have to be sick ever again.”

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This is the fourth in a series of articles about the six-week spring session of Why Catholic?