

Question Corner: How often to anoint?/ Baptismal sponsors unsuitable

Q. A family member was admitted recently to a hospital in central New Jersey. A local priest was called, and he came and administered the last rites of the Catholic Church. Two weeks later, the patient took a turn for the worse and was in imminent danger of death.

We asked the nurse to call a priest once more. She said that she had been told by the local parish not to call a priest if the person had already received the last rites within the preceding three weeks because there would be no additional benefit to the person.

Is this “three-week rule” church policy or simply the practice of the local pastor? (I recall the good nuns telling us that the only sacrament that could not be received multiple times was holy orders.) (Forked River, New Jersey)

A. The priest should have been called a second time. The church teaches in the Catechism of the Catholic Church that the sacrament of anointing may be repeated “if during the same illness the person’s condition becomes more serious” (No. 1515). Clearly the situation had worsened if, as you say, there was now the “imminent danger of death.”

That “three-week rule” sounds like a local and “homemade” guideline for how often to anoint someone during a long-term illness — but the nearness of death trumps all of that. Also, when death seems close, the patient (if able) is given the additional benefit of “viaticum” — literally, “food for the journey” — the sacrament of the Eucharist.

To put your mind at ease, I’m confident that your family member would have entered heaven on the strength of the first anointing — but why not offer a person every sacramental help at hand?

I do want to comment on your use of the term “last rites.” For much of the church’s history, the sacrament was commonly referred to as “last rites” or “extreme unction.” The current and more accurate term, though, is “anointing of the sick” — to indicate that the sacrament should not be reserved until the final moments of life.

Instead, it may and should be administered to anyone suffering from serious illness or from the frailty of old age or to someone facing major surgery. The primary purpose is to offer the Holy Spirit’s gifts of strength, peace and courage in dealing with one’s condition, but another hoped-for effect is that, if it be the Lord’s will, the person be healed physically.

The anointing of the sick also forgives the sick person’s sins if he or she was unable to go to confession prior to being anointed.

And one last point — about the nuns who told you that holy orders was the single sacrament that could be received only once. I wonder if they had thought about baptism and confirmation — which I would list in that same category.

Q. About one year ago, I had my daughter baptized. Since then, I have found out: a) that the godmother never completed her sacraments in the church; and b) that the godfather doesn’t even believe in God.

What can be done at this point? (I want to make sure that my daughter has the proper guidance. She is already enrolled in a Catholic school, and I am a woman of faith.) (City of origin withheld)

A. Your question serves as a good reminder of the care parents should take in selecting baptismal sponsors for their children. In this case, both godparents were chosen in error.

Canon 874 of the church’s Code of Canon Law requires that a baptismal sponsor be at least 16 years old and have already received the sacraments of first Communion and confirmation. The same canon also provides that the sponsor be a believer and a practicing Catholic “who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken on.”

The code, in Canon 872, assumes that the sponsor will maintain a continuing

relationship, helping the one baptized “to lead a Christian life in keeping with baptism and to fulfill faithfully the obligations inherent in it.”

The absence of a proper sponsor does not, though, affect the validity of the baptism.

(Note that in certain cases, such as the imminent danger of death, a sponsor is not even required; and note also that an earlier baptism in most Christian denominations is accepted as valid when a person converts to Catholicism, so that person is not “re-baptized” — even though the person usually will not have had a practicing Catholic as a godparent.)

At this point you cannot change the sponsors of record. What you might do, though, is to make sure that the godmother knows her responsibilities regarding the religious education and practice of your daughter as she grows — especially if, at some point in the future, you were not around to assure that.

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