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—Call the priest.  
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by Winfrid Herbst, S.D.S.

A QUEEN'S WORK  
PAMPHLET

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# CALL THE PRIEST

By Winfrid Herbst, S.D.S.

**Does a person who receives Extreme Unction before death go straight to heaven?**

Yes; if he receives it with the proper dispositions. As confession is designed by God to save souls from hell, so Extreme Unction is designed by Him to enable them to escape purgatory. But let us take a concrete case. A man is seriously sick. The priest is called. He finds him sincere, well-disposed, and able to make a good confession. He tells his sins and then finishes with an act of imperfect contrition directed to all his sins, mortal as well as venial. He then receives absolution. So the *guilt* of his sins has been removed. Extreme Unction is then administered, not to remove the guilt of the sins, for they have already been forgiven, but to remove the remains of the sins of his whole life, in other words, to blot out the full debt of temporal punishment due to his sins. Thus Extreme Unction removes the only obstacle between his soul and heaven. That is what we mean by saying that, administered in time to one properly disposed, Extreme Unction prepares the sick person for immediate entrance into heaven. (*Vide* Noldin, Vol. III, 430 [d], 1925.)

Hence, though it is never too late to call the priest and Extreme Unction can be given even to the unconscious, it is not difficult to see the great advantages of having this

sacrament administered in time. No wonder, then, that Canon Law says: "Great care and solicitude must be used to have the sick persons receive Extreme Unction while they are fully conscious." But how sick must one be in order to receive this sacrament? "The degree of the danger of death," says Father Woywod, O.F.M., in his Commentary on the Code of Canon Law, "is an element which is incapable of precise definition. It is, however, certain that the danger need not be imminent, nor the malady so serious that there is little or no hope of recovery. The ancient practice of the Church teaches that any ailment which may be fatal to the patient is sufficient ground for administering Extreme Unction, and one need not wait until the sickness takes a fatal turn. In several rituals of the ninth and following centuries we read that the sick person should stand or kneel, or recite the Our Father and answer the questions addressed to him, all of which supposes that the sick person was not so close to death."

By all means, let us get rid of the silly notion that when the priest comes to administer Extreme Unction it is a sign to make arrangements for the funeral. And the best way to get this nonsensical, superstitious, ignorant notion out of people's (and sick persons') heads is to call the priest as soon as there is a serious sickness, thus making Extreme Unction what it really is, the sacrament of the sick, not the sacrament of the dying. "Is anyone *sick* among you? Let him call in the priest."

Moreover, one of the effects of Extreme

Uction is to restore the body to health, if God sees fit. Also, this effect can be more readily expected if the priest is called before the disease has made notable progress. Many, even non-Catholic, physicians have the laudable custom of summoning the priest at once when a Catholic patient is dangerously ill; and their experience is that then the largest percentage of cases get well after Extreme Uction.

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**A person is in the state of mortal sin when there is a sudden accident or he is suddenly taken sick and sinks into unconsciousness, so that when the priest arrives he cannot go to confession. Before he dies, the priest administers Extreme Uction. Are his mortal sins forgiven so that he can be saved?**

The Council of Trent teaches that the effects of Extreme Uction are (1) to confer grace, (2) to forgive sins, (3) to relieve from sickness.

Now, in the first place we must remember that Extreme Uction is a sacrament of the living and that it was not instituted primarily for the forgiveness of mortal sin. By its very nature it gives the "second" grace, i.e., an *increase* of sanctifying grace. The recipient of Extreme Uction should, accordingly, be in the state of grace, and hence, if he has mortal sin on his conscience, he must beforehand make an act of perfect contrition or receive absolution with attrition, or, if neither is possible, he must at least make an act of attrition (attrition is imperfect

contrition). The custom of the Church calls for confession before Extreme Unction, and divine law commands confession if one is in mortal sin and in danger of death.

We are concerned here with only one of the effects of this sacrament, namely, to forgive sins. Extreme Unction forgives venial sins. It also forgives mortal sin, if the patient is not conscious of being in the state of mortal sin, or if having had such consciousness but having had imperfect contrition only, he has not had the opportunity of confessing his sins, as may happen in the case of an accident, a stroke of apoplexy, etc.; for in the form, or prayer, of the sacrament there is no distinction made between venial and mortal sins: "May God forgive thee whatever sins thou hast committed." Neither does the Council of Trent, nor the text from St. James' Epistle limit the effect of Extreme Unction to slight offenses.

We must here attend to a difference between Extreme Unction and the other sacraments of the living. All sacraments of the living forgive mortal sin when the recipient is in the state of mortal sin, provided he be not aware of it and have at least imperfect contrition. But Extreme Unction will forgive mortal sin even if one is conscious of it, provided, while having imperfect contrition, one has not the opportunity to confess.

If in such a case the person should not die and should regain consciousness, he would have to mention his mortal sins in confession later on, just as one who makes an act of perfect contrition and thereby is

forgiven all mortal sins must nevertheless mention those sins in confession — not because they are not forgiven but because of the precept that all mortal sins must, if possible, be submitted to the power of the keys.

We add some further remarks about Extreme Unction. The principal effect of Extreme Unction, as quite commonly held by theologians today, is the comforting of the soul of a sick person by which he is strengthened against the dangers of spiritual debility which follow a serious illness. And a sick person is also one who has met with an accident that puts him in danger of death. Hence even if the cause of the sickness was external and violent, the sick person may validly and lawfully receive Extreme Unction. (Cf. Capello.)

The spiritual debility mentioned above may be unruly passions, temptations, fear, diffidence, anxiety, distrust, depression. It may have reference to the past life, to the present, to the future. Against such debility Extreme Unction gives its vigorous spiritual injections of courage, confidence, child-like trust in God.

Furthermore, Extreme Unction at once remits in their entirety all past unforgiven venial sins; this is quite certain if we make an act of imperfect contrition for them, even if we do not, since we cannot, recall each one individually. This act of contrition should be made at the time we receive the sacrament or shortly before. We have already spoken above about Extreme Unction and the forgiveness of mortal sin.



Moreover, Extreme Unction, while it will always remove some of the temporal punishment due to sin if worthily received, will probably remove all temporal punishment if the one who receives it makes an act of imperfect contrition more fervent than that required by Baptism in an adult and less fervent than that demanded by confession in order that these sacraments may remove all temporal punishment. It should be quite possible for a person to make such an act of imperfect contrition. But it seems to be quite certain that an act of *perfect* contrition coupled with this sacrament would make the soul ready for immediate entrance into heaven, without going to purgatory. If a little debt of temporal punishment should be incurred between the time of receiving Extreme Unction and death, this would be remitted either by the prayers and good works of the sick person or by indulgences gained, especially by the plenary indulgence attached to the Apostolic Blessing given immediately after Extreme Unction; for this plenary indulgence suspends its effect until the very moment of death; in other words, it is not gained when the Apostolic Blessing is conferred but at the very moment of death.

How merciful the Savior, to institute this precious sacrament! And how eager the sick should be to receive it! And how solicitous those in charge of the sick should be that they do receive it!

Another effect of the sacrament of Extreme Unction is that it sometimes restores bodily health to the sick person, provided he



receives it before his natural physical forces are exhausted, if it conduces to the soul's welfare.

How this is done we really do not know, but it is attested by the experience of priests, doctors, and nurses.

In conclusion, let us recall that the real reason why the Divine Savior instituted the sacrament of Extreme Unction is to cleanse the soul so perfectly from all traces of sin and its effects that the dying person, if he prepares sufficiently for it and cooperates generously with its graces, may go right straight to heaven, may at once be united with Christ and be welcomed by His smile in eternal bliss. (Cf. Clarence McAuliffe, S.J., in *Review for Religious*, Vol. 4, No. 5, "Extreme Unction, Key to Heaven.")

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**If someone is killed or dies suddenly can the priest give Extreme Unction if the body is still warm?**

The priest may not give Extreme Unction to one who is certainly dead; but, according to the testimony of learned physicians in our day, a person may still be living, even when it appears that he has breathed his last, since (they say) life but gradually departs from the body. Because of this (theory), a priest *may* and more probably *must* conditionally anoint (and absolve) one who after a lingering illness has already been apparently dead for a half an hour, more or less, or one who has already been apparently dead for two or more hours in case of a sudden accident. Hence, it is never

too late to call the priest. From the answer to the question preceding this, it is easy to see that getting the priest may mean the eternal salvation of a soul.

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I know of a man who led a very wicked life, was drunk every day for a year, and then one night was brought home in a dying condition and unconscious. The priest was summoned and stayed with him for hours, often calling him by name. But he remained unconscious and did not speak. The priest anointed him. They took him to the hospital. He died five hours after, having never recovered consciousness. Please tell me whether you think his soul was saved.

What an unusually sad death! Surely, no one would care to die like that. The only consoling thing about it was the priest at his bedside—an unmerited grace of God.

But was this soul lost? No one would dare to assert that he was. Perhaps he got the grace to make an act of perfect contrition just before he lost consciousness. Perhaps he knew the priest was at his side and heard his voice and exhortation, even though he could not give any sign of it (such states occur often enough). If he did, he perhaps made an act of contrition. If so, his sins were forgiven by the conditional absolution which the priest surely gave him.

He received Extreme Unction; and we know that the effects of this great sacrament go very far. So, for instance, the patient may be deprived of his senses, he may not know that the sacrament is being

administered to him; but if at any time, before becoming unconscious, he had the desire to receive it, the sacrament would justify him, provided he had never retracted his intention to receive it. It is also probable that Extreme Unction will effect the justification of the recipient even if he had never had the desire of it, but would have desired it if he had known its necessity. For such an interpretative intention is sufficient reason for a priest to administer it; and for the sick person who is unable to confess, that intention is probably sufficient for the remission of his sins. Although we cannot affirm as certain that Extreme Unction will thus remit the mortal sins of those who are unconscious and unable to confess even by a sign, since the Church has not so declared, we may state, as absolutely certain, that many are saved through Extreme Unction who otherwise would be lost.

It is, therefore, never too late to call the priest. And while there is life, there is hope. Pray for the conversion of sinners.

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### **Is Extreme Unction administered to a Catholic who commits suicide?**

Let us take the sad case of a Catholic who commits suicide. He is, let us suppose, unconscious and just breathing his last or has just died. According to the testimony of learned physicians, as we noted before (p. 7), a person may still be living even when it appears that he has breathed his last. Now, a Catholic man commits suicide and the distracted relatives rush for the priest and bring him to the unfortunate man. Will

the priest administer the sacrament of Extreme Unction to that miserable murderer of himself?

It may be that the priest under certain circumstances will not do so, particularly for fear of giving scandal to the faithful and to others. Here is a man who evidently died in mortal sin. And Extreme Unction is not to be administered to those who obstinately persist in their impenitence in a manifest mortal sin, but in case of doubt it is to be administered conditionally (Canon 942).

But he can explain this to the bystanders, thus obviating scandal, and tell them that this is a case of doubt. The poor man was probably not responsible for what he was doing and was sorry for it immediately afterwards but when it was already too late. The priest can really say nothing concerning the state of soul of one lying unconscious, even though apparently dead; and he may, therefore, always give such a one the benefit of the doubt. The internal intention on the part of the priest of doing all that he can do is sufficient conditional intention in such a case.

But suppose this man had been a bad Catholic and had positively repudiated the ministry of a priest up to the moment of unconsciousness. Even then, provided there is no scandal given (and one must leave this matter to the judgment of the priest), it appears right to administer Extreme Unction, at least conditionally, to such a one; for who can judge the state of soul of one who is lying apparently unconscious? Nu-

merous cases are reported of persons who knew everything that was going on around them but were unable to move a finger or open their eyes. It seems that this cataleptic state is not so very uncommon just before death. (Cf. Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, 1st ed., Vol. 4, pp. 8 and 9.)

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**A little boy seven years and nine months old, who had never gone to confession before, went to confession on his deathbed. He could not receive Holy Communion because of his physical condition, but he did receive the sacrament of Extreme Unction. Just an hour before he died this little boy said: "Fire! fire! they are throwing down hot irons!" Is there anything to this? Do you think that this boy is lost or that he must suffer a long time in purgatory? He was a good boy and went to Mass every Sunday after the age of seven, except when he was sick.**

There is absolutely nothing to it. The sick often say the strangest things in fever and delirium. This boy, so good and faithful, still almost in his baptismal innocence, purified in soul by the sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction, must have gone straight to heaven; if he went to purgatory it was surely but a swift passage through its cleansing flames. That such a soul should be lost is a thought that is utterly repugnant to the Catholic heart and may not be entertained for even a moment. Still, we should never neglect to pray for even such children. They may need our help in purgatory. We never know.

Parenthetically, we may here remark that this boy's parents were evidently good, well-instructed, and practical Catholics. They knew that as soon as a child reaches the age of reason it should go to Mass at least on days of obligation, that such a child should go to confession and, if possible, to Holy Communion, that it should receive *the sacrament of the sick*, Extreme Unction, when seriously ill. Children who have reached the use of reason and are judged capable of deceit and sin, may and should, if sick with a disease that gives warning of danger, be anointed, even if they have not yet received their first Holy Communion, and even if they have not yet made their first confession. Let parents remember this and call the priest in good time. "It is an altogether detestable abuse not to administer Extreme Unction to children after the use of reason," said Pope Pius X, that greatest friend of the little ones (*Decret. Quam Singulare*).

And since we have touched upon this subject, we cannot refrain from quoting the following illuminating and necessary words of Msgr. Cortet, late Bishop of Troyes, whom disease had brought to the very portals of death and whom Extreme Unction brought back to life: "Many have a sort of horror of Extreme Unction; they imagine that this sacrament is not the sacrament of the sick, but of the dying, and that those who have received it are inevitably doomed to die. This is a fateful error, a prejudice based on ignorance of the teachings of the Church; and if you have no proof of that teaching, let me tell you that I received the



last sacraments several months ago, and not only am I not dead, but they powerfully contributed to bring me back to life."

The same bishop adds: "Since Our Lord Jesus Christ, in His infinite mercy, has instituted a sacrament so efficacious for the relief of the sick, and its effects are so admirable and so certain, why is this sacrament not zealously requested at the beginning of a serious illness? Why do the relatives in their blind and cruel affection, instead of calling the priest, keep him away until the patient asks for him? Sometimes someone dares to speak to a patient of Communion, but Extreme Unction is frequently postponed to the moment when, having lost all consciousness, he is no longer able to join in the motherly and fortifying prayers of the Church and to cooperate by his personal disposition with the efficaciousness of the sacrament. Why is this? You hasten to call a physician as soon as disease appears among you, but you do not call upon the Supreme Physician of body and soul, who holds in His hands the keys of life and death! You carefully apply to your ills the remedies prescribed, you make the patient take even the bitterest draughts, you beg him to submit to the most painful operations; but you do not procure for him the spiritual medicine of Extreme Unction, which would vivify him, body and soul!"

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**Do you think that almost every person who dies in the grace of God is going to purgatory after death?**

No; we do not think so. We rather think



that since the Divine Savior, so good and loving, instituted the sacrament of Extreme Unction primarily in order that the faithful may be preserved, not only from hell, but also from purgatory, this sacrament will take full effect in many, many cases. (There are, by the way, also the many plenary and partial indulgences to be gained during life and at the hour of death; many, many souls will also be saved from purgatory by them; but we prefer here to speak of Extreme Unction.) However, that Extreme Unction may have this effect, it must, of course, be received. Never let a person die without a priest if you can help it! Get the priest in good time! Better too early than too late!

What we wish to tell you here is that many, many souls are going directly to heaven after death because of the sacrament of Extreme Unction, received with the proper dispositions, for Extreme Unction was instituted to prepare the soul to go straight to heaven without any delay in purgatory. This is the teaching of all theologians. Noldin (n. 429, a) says: "This sacrament is instituted as a proximate preparation and disposing of the soul, that it may enter heaven without delay." The same author also says (n. 430, 2): "This sacrament was instituted to remove whatever hinders the soul's entrance into heavenly glory." Pruemmer (578, b) states: "Since Extreme Unction is the immediate preparation for heaven, it should remove whatever interferes with the soul's entrance into heaven." Father Joseph Kern, S.J., in his book on Extreme Unction says: "Extreme

Unction is the perfect healing of the soul with a view to its immediate entry into glory." Lehmkuhl (n. 715) holds that "Extreme Unction disposes the soul and prepares it proximately for entrance into heaven." Suarez, speaking of the sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction (disp. 41), thinks that "if this sacrament meets no obstacles, it takes away every evil from the soul that might in any way impede or retard its entrance to eternal glory." Albertus Magnus (*IV, disp. ii, ad 1*) believes that "Extreme Unction was instituted to remove the remains of sin in so far as they obstruct the immediate flight to heaven." St. Thomas (*Suppl., Q. xxix, ad 1*) says: "This sacrament immediately disposes man for glory." St. Egbert, Archbishop of York in the eighth century, tells us: "It is written that the soul of the one who has received this rite [Extreme Unction] is equally as pure as the soul of a child that dies immediately after baptism" (*Eccl. Rev., LV, 296*). "All Scholastic doctors, without a dissenting voice, teach that it is an undoubted truth that Extreme Unction is instituted for the purpose of disposing the soul of the dying for its immediate transfer to heaven" (*ibid.*). The Council of Trent (Session XIV) calls Extreme Unction "the complement (or completion) of the sacrament of Penance, because it supplies what is left undone by Penance, effacing all that remains of sin (even after confession)."

Reflect again upon the wondrous effects of the sacrament of Extreme Unction. (a) If the soul be in sin, in mortal sin, and

unable to confess them, those mortal sins are blotted out, provided the person concerned had at least imperfect contrition before being stricken. (b) This sacrament remits the last vestiges of sin that bind the soul to earth, blotting out all weakness and timidity of soul and that last attachment to sin which keeps the soul from yielding itself completely to the loving mercy of God. (c) It pours into the soul a great and loving confidence in God. (d) It gives the soul marvelous strength to withstand the onslaught of the demon. (e) It frequently restores bodily health to the person receiving it, if such restoration to health be advantageous to the soul's salvation. (f) This sacrament disposes the soul for immediate entrance into heaven. We have the authority of saints, Doctors of the Church, and of learned theologians for the assertion that if a soul receives this sacrament with due dispositions, with sincere sorrow for every sin ever committed, and with an earnest desire to receive all the effects of the sacrament, that soul goes straight to heaven without any purgatory!

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**When the priest is to come to the house with the Blessed Sacrament for the sick, what preparations should be made, and what procedure should be followed after his arrival?**

A sick-room table should be prepared near the bed of the sick person. It should be covered with a clean white cloth and on it there should be a crucifix, two candlesticks with beeswax candles, a finger bowl with

water, a glass of water, a spoon, holy-water and sprinkler, and a napkin. All this is for Holy Communion. If Extreme Unction is also to be administered, add to the above a clean saucer with six small balls of cotton and another saucer with salt or pieces of bread and lemon; and somewhere nearby have a basin of water and a towel for the priest to use in washing his hands.

Someone should light the candles before the priest arrives at the house and see to it that everything is in its place on the table and that everything in the room, including the bed and the sick person, is as neat and tidy as possible. There should also be a chair at the bedside for the priest when he hears the patient's confession. It is most embarrassing, not to say disgraceful, when people must run around in confusion, looking for matches and this and that, after the priest is in the room with the Blessed Sacrament. Have everything prepared well in advance. When the priest is at the door someone should meet him with a lighted candle and, after he has vested or removed his overcoat, escort him to the sick-room. The always beautiful greeting, "Praised be Jesus Christ," may be said when meeting the priest at the door; but it is not necessary to say anything. The reverential silence that shows the quiet adoration of the heart is more impressive than anything else and is a token of grateful welcome. The other members of the family, unless duties require their absence, should be in the room kneeling and silently praying. They should not be sitting or standing around in other

rooms as though they had no faith and piety. No one should speak to the priest unless absolutely necessary. They should remain kneeling until he bids them retire. They remain out during confession, until given a sign by the priest to return. Even while outside they should kneel and pray and not stand or sit around and talk. Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, God Himself, is in the house! While in the sick-room all should follow the priest in prayer. All kneel for the blessing which the priest imparts to the sick person before he leaves. If he still has the Blessed Sacrament, it is unbecoming to detain him with conversation. After he has gone, the water in which he washed his fingers should be poured into the fire. It is no longer prescribed that it be given to the sick person. But water may and should be given if the sick person has difficulty in swallowing the Host. In case Extreme Unction was administered, the salt, or bread and lemon, as also the pieces of cotton, should be burnt, so that the holy oil on them be not desecrated. In many cases, however, the priest will take these things along, at least the cotton.

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**Don't you think that it is just terrible for a Catholic physician or a relative or a priest to come around and tell a seriously sick person to receive Extreme Unction? Why, the shock is enough to kill the sick person on the spot and it surely must aggravate his condition and hasten his death.**

We are glad to be able to say that these ideas about the reception of Extreme Unc-

tion are quite wrong. Very, very rarely do patients react like that. The experience of priests and physicians shows that the predominating note in the attitude of the patient toward his reception of the last sacrament, in the large majority of cases, and these regardless of age and sex, is *confidence of faith, and its sequel, relaxation*. The commonly expected reactions of fear varying in degree from simple nervous apprehension through the stages of worry, stark terror, hysteria, and despair, as implied in your question, are the exception rather than the rule.

Up to the time of the reception of the beautiful and saving *sacrament of the sick*, there is an inhibition in the patient in the form of emotional tension. In the presence of that inhibition neither spiritual nor muscular relaxation is possible. This inhibition being removed by the reception of this dear sacrament, a peaceful soul inhabits a peaceful body; and the chances of recovery (if the priest is called in good time, while there are any chances at all) are greater than before. The patient becomes less fretful and more at ease. His attitude is more cheerful. He is always relieved in mind and, seemingly on not too infrequent occasions, also in body; for it is common to find that reception of Extreme Unction appears to relieve pain. The patient is buoyed up by two separate hopes. If he is not to die, the sacrament just received will speed his recovery; and if death is inevitable, he will pass on with a sense of security for the future. He has a clean soul; and a clean soul contributes



realistically to a terrorless death. Did you ever notice the unaffected expression of faith on the face of a man who has just received the last sacraments? It is an expression of faith vastly superior in its marks of beauty to any observed during the course of untroubled life.

The power of Extreme Unction is also manifest in the psychological reaction of the persons at the immediate bedside. How often has it been noted that the atmosphere of the sick-room, seemingly heavy with doubt and uncertainty, suddenly becomes clear and light following the reception of the last sacrament by the patient. To each one may come the impression that the end is not yet, that there is still some hope. There is some kind of a change in those around the sick-bed; and that change is undoubtedly due to the relief of nerve-muscle tension when the individual emotions of fear and doubt are replaced by confidence and by the conscious satisfaction of something accomplished. The patient's relatives rightly console themselves with the thought that, no matter what may now happen, their dear one will not go to his Creator unanointed. They have consummated a duty not only to their relative but also to their religion and their God. They have also very effectively avoided the probable qualms of conscience that would have come should they have been neglectful of the step taken. They are likely to experience, too, a marked sense of relief from another point of view. An otherwise intelligent and mature individual will often exhibit a morbid and



stupid type of solicitude for a patient. It is based upon the actually nonexistent terror with which a sick person is supposed to become possessed at the mere mention of the last sacrament. The possibility of this attitude being found in the sick-room is always present. A perfectly splendid but highly emotional husband or wife, brother or sister will at times almost harshly turn aside the doctor's suggestion of Extreme Unction on the entirely false premise that the very sight of the priest with the holy oils is sufficient cause for a grave relapse, an emotional storm bordering on hysteria, or even sudden death from shock, as suggested in the above question.

For this reason, with strong emotion clouding reason and judgment, Extreme Unction is all too often unreasonably delayed. Only after insistence by the physician has broken down prejudice, do these well-intentioned relatives allow the priest to administer the sacrament; and only after the threatened storm fails to materialize, do they realize with wonder and awe that they have been mistaken. Then and only then do they experience the relief of mind that should have been theirs at the first suggestion of the last sacrament. Many, if not all, physicians have yet to see a patient upset by either the pre-announced or the unheralded entrance of the priest into the sick-room for the purpose of ministering to the ill.

We conclude by observing once more that, if at all possible, Extreme Unction should be received while the subject is conscious

and fully aware of what is taking place. (Cf. Clement J. Handron, M.D., in the *Linacre Quarterly*, 1941.)

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**May one administer Baptism (or, if one is a priest, also Penance and Extreme Unction) to an unconscious dying person when one knows nothing at all about his religion?**

If one has any reason for thinking that such a person is probably not baptized and that he would want to be baptized, one may baptize him. It is easy to conjecture that one who has heard of the Christian religion would have the will to be baptized. Indeed, even in the case of a person opposed to Christianity and who during his life strove to resist the call of grace, it may reasonably be supposed that he has changed his mind in his present danger of death and now desires faith and Baptism. Therefore, in our country every unconscious dying person not yet baptized may be baptized at least conditionally, that is, "If thou art capable, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

Moreover, in large cities there are now so many persons who have not been baptized, even though born of persons themselves baptized, that it is impossible to find out with certainty whether they have been baptized or not. It will accordingly be well to administer conditional Baptism to such an unknown unconscious dying person (before conditional absolution, if the one who baptizes is a priest).

Again, a sufficient will to be baptized is contained in every act of true attrition; for

there is no true attrition without at least the implicit wish of belonging to the Church outside of which there is no salvation. But now, the wish to belong to the Church necessarily carries with it the implicit wish or will to accept the action of the one who baptizes.

We should remember, too, that there are many, even of those who live in the darkness of paganism, who seem to get enough out of their religion to believe in a God who is the punisher of evil and the rewarder of good; and we are not to deny the possibility of such a faith in anyone.

Wherefore, taking into consideration the supreme necessity of Baptism, it seems that there is no dying person, either in Christian or pagan lands, who may not be conditionally baptized, if scandal be excluded, that is to say, if by our act no harm will come to the Church, a danger quite easily averted ordinarily.

They *may* be baptized conditionally; but, because there are also weighty authorities who do not agree with the above, there is no *obligation* of baptizing such, unless they have in some probable way manifested the formal intention of receiving Baptism (cf. Vermeersch-Creusen, *Epitome Iuris Canonici*, 5th ed., Vol. 2, n. 35). Apropos of the above the late Father Vermeersch once wrote: "I could not resign myself to permit a single soul to be lost that might have been saved by my ministrations."

Regarding this matter Father Henry Davis, S.J., a safe theologian, says: "Cases may arise, especially in missionary countries,

when a dying person has never manifested a desire for Baptism; it may even be that such a person has positively refused to become a Christian and has given orders that a missionary should not be allowed to come near him in his last moments; furthermore, he may even have rejected, before loss of consciousness, all ministrations of the priest. Nevertheless, such a person may have changed his mind in the last stages of consciousness, and since indeed there is every hope that he did so, under the universal salvific will of God, and since the very presence of a priest must be considered to be a manifest act of divine providence, conditional Baptism may and, we believe, should be given such a one. It must, however, be admitted that Baptism may not be given in such cases if the Christian religion would thereby be condemned and thought magical and superstitious by numbers of pagans present. The wise missionary will know how to administer the sacrament secretly without giving scandal" (H. Davis, S.J., *Pastoral and Moral Theology*, 1st ed., Vol. 3, pp. 54 and 55; New York: Sheed and Ward).

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My father died some time ago. For a few days before he died he was without the use of reason, unconscious, in a sort of coma, but he could eat and drink a little. While he was in that state the priest came and gave him Holy Communion. He swallowed the Host all right, but he really did not know what he was doing—I mean he didn't know he was receiving Holy Communion.

## Did it do him any good then?

No doubt your father, like all good Catholics, often during his life expressed the wish and made the intention to receive Holy Communion by way of Viaticum before his death. And, as you say elsewhere, he had gone to confession a few days before receiving the Viaticum as described in your question. So he was manifestly in the state of grace. Hence the reception of the sacrament of the Eucharist in the manner you describe did indeed do him much good; it benefited him automatically (*ex opere operato*). If afterwards he likewise received Extreme Unction, it also was of great benefit to him spontaneously. That is the way the sacraments work when one cannot work along at all, except for the previous intention and desire. Indeed, as in the case of the Baptism of infants, they work automatically when the recipient cannot work along at all. It is quite different with other good works. If a child without the use of reason would say a Hail Mary, parrot-like, or if a man in a coma would mumble the same prayer without knowing what he was doing, no grace would be received for that, because grace here depends entirely upon the subjective act (*ex opere operantis*).

\* \* \*

Is it true that if you receive the sacrament of Extreme Unction a few days or even weeks before your death the indulgences attached to the sacrament are not applied to the soul until the moment of death? If this is true, then am I justified in

**believing that such a person goes straight to heaven?**

You are somewhat confused about this matter. There are no indulgences, strictly so called, granted for the reception of Extreme Unction. But of itself "Extreme Unction is the perfect healing of the soul with a view to its immediate entry into glory." In other words, many no doubt go directly to heaven after death, without going to purgatory, because of the sacrament of Extreme Unction, received with the proper dispositions.

The indulgences you are thinking of are those that can be gained at the hour of death, and by which many, many souls will also be saved from purgatory. In particular there is the plenary indulgence at the hour of death bestowed through the Apostolic Blessing, which blessing the priest almost always gives after conferring Extreme Unction. That a person in danger of death be able to gain this indulgence, besides the general conditions, it is required that he be ready to accept death with resignation from the hand of God, and that he invoke orally, if he can, the most holy name of Jesus, otherwise at least mentally. If all the conditions (also the forgiveness of all venial sins) for gaining a plenary indulgence are present at the moment of death, the person who has received the Apostolic Blessing goes right straight to heaven, since the effect of this indulgence is deferred to that very last moment.

You may be edified by reading in English



the concluding words of this Apostolic Blessing:

“May our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, Who gave to His blessed Apostle Peter the power of binding and loosing, of His most tender mercy receive thy confession, and restore unto thee that first robe which thou didst receive in Baptism; and I, by the power committed to me by the Apostolic See, grant thee a plenary indulgence and remission of all thy sins. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“Through the most sacred mysteries of man’s redemption may God almighty remit unto thee the pains of the present and the future life, open to thee the gates of Paradise, and bring thee to everlasting joys. Amen.

“May God Almighty bless thee: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

No wonder good Catholic people get the priest at once as soon as somebody is seriously sick. They never put it off for a moment!

\* \* \*

**Does a person who is conscious when receiving the sacrament of Extreme Unction receive more benefit from it than one who is unconscious?**

If at all possible Extreme Unction should be received while the subject is conscious and fully aware of what is taking place; for then he is still able to join in the motherly and fortifying prayers of the Church and to cooperate by his personal disposition with the efficaciousness of the sacrament.



The answer to your question is simply "Yes, of course." Just to mention some of the more obvious effects, you may recall that, after the patient has received Extreme Unction while conscious, his is a more peaceful soul in a more peaceful body. He becomes less fretful and more at ease. His attitude is more cheerful. He is always relieved in mind and quite frequently also in body; for it is common to find that the reception of Extreme Unction appears to relieve pain.

Remember that Extreme Unction is a sacrament of the living. It was not instituted primarily for the forgiveness of mortal sin; by its very nature it gives an *increase* of sanctifying grace. That is why the custom of the Church calls for confession before Extreme Unction, and the divine law commands confession if one is in mortal sin and in danger of death. Hence the recipient of Extreme Unction should be in the state of grace; and, therefore, if he has mortal sin on his conscience, he must beforehand make an act of perfect contrition or receive absolution with attrition, or, if neither is possible, he must at least make an act of attrition (attrition is imperfect contrition). It is true that Extreme Unction forgives even mortal sin if a person had merely attrition for it and then before he could go to confession lost consciousness, as may happen in the case of an accident, etc. In such a case Extreme Unction produces first grace more surely than does absolution, since it does not call for any external manifestation of contrition. Hence the impor-

tance of anointing those who are dying but unconscious.

But that is all so much less sure and satisfying. No wonder, then, that Church law says: "Great care and solicitude must be used to have the sick persons receive Extreme Unction while they are fully conscious."

\* \* \*

You say, "Call a priest." But we do not like to call him unless there is a real reason for doing so. How sick does one have to be in order to receive Extreme Unction?

If the sick person seems to be in danger of death, even if that danger is *not* immediate or most serious or very serious, call the priest.

Even if the doctor or the sick person or his family or people in general think that there seems to be no danger of death, but one sensible person thinks that there is, call the priest.

When you are in doubt as to whether there is a danger of death or not, call the priest.

When a person is in danger of death because of old age, call the priest.

If the doctor or others think the sickness is light, but the sick person considers himself in danger of death and asks for Extreme Unction, call the priest.

If the doctor or some other prudent person thinks the sick person is in danger of death, but the sick person himself considers the disease to be light, call the priest.

If the sickness only lightly afflicts the ill

person but is in reality dangerous, call the priest.

If the nature of the sickness is not known and there is a prudent doubt whether it is serious and dangerous or not, call the priest.

If a person has a sickness that carries with it a sure danger of death, though he may still live for many months, and there is reason to fear that later on he might not have a chance to receive Extreme Unction, call the priest.

If a person is suffering from a serious and dangerous disease and he is going to have an operation, and also if such a one refuses to have the operation, call the priest.

When there is a prudent doubt whether a sick person already anointed has gotten out of the danger of death in the same sickness and has fallen into another danger of death, call the priest.

If the patient was anointed when in danger of death from one disease and then gets into danger of death from another disease that developed after the first danger was over, call the priest.

When in doubt as to whether there is a new danger of death, call the priest.

If the patient falls into a new and distinct danger of death even in the same illness, call the priest.

If there is a new and distinct danger of death, irrespective of the length of time from the former anointing, call the priest.

When there is doubt whether, in the same illness, a patient has recovered from a for-

mer and fallen into a new danger, call the priest.

In case of a lingering illness, after a lapse of about a month from a former anointing, if it seems that the patient has recovered from a former and fallen into a new danger of death, call the priest.

If a sick person recovers from a dangerous illness in which he was anointed and then falls into another dangerous illness, call the priest.

If in the same sickness the sick person certainly recovered from the danger of death and then fell into another danger of death, call the priest.

If a person has just died without a priest, as long as there is no certain sign of death, that is, as long as it is still probable that there is life in him (which may be up to two hours or more), call the priest.

Lest the principal effect of the sacrament of Extreme Unction, namely, the comforting of the soul, be rendered entirely or almost null, be sure not to defer this sacrament until the dying person cannot at all, or only in a very imperfect way, cooperate with its graces, but in good time call the priest.

If an insane person who lost the use of reason after he had attained it, is sick and in danger of death, call the priest.

Even if such a mentally ill person who is sick and in danger of death has no lucid intervals, call the priest.

Even if the insane or unconscious who is sick and in danger of death cannot have any apparent devotion, call the priest.

Even if the insane who is sick and in danger of death is tossing about or is unruly, call the priest.

Finally (and this will cover many cases like polio, rheumatic fever, pneumonia, Caesarian section, complicated labor), if the sickness seems to be serious and dangerous, where it is real sickness and has been prudently considered dangerous, though there is really no immediate danger of death, call the priest.

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Fr. Jerome Jacobs, S.D.S.

*Provincial*

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THE QUEEN'S WORK  
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St. Louis 18, Missouri