

Chapter 6

Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Anointing of the Sick (Extreme Unction)

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Editor's note:

The name "extreme unction" comes directly from the Latin, *unctio extrema*, meaning "final anointing." This was the common name for the sacrament known after the second Vatican Council as "the Anointing of the Sick." The change in name reflects an emphasis precisely on the pastoral needs of the sick (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 1499–1532). While the Church now speaks of grave illness, Saint Thomas stressed illness at the point of death. Of course, the distinction between grave illness and the threat of death was perhaps at best theoretical in a pre-industrial world. The essential features of the sacrament theologially considered, however, have not changed. The CCC lists as the effects of the sacrament: "the uniting of the sick person to the passion of Christ, for his own good and that of the whole Church; the strengthening, peace, and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age; the forgiveness of sins, if the person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of penance; the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of his soul; the preparation for passing over to eternal life" (CCC, 1532). As Professor Boyle shows, these basic elements, in the CCC simply in list form, are those of Saint Thomas; the task Saint Thomas sets himself is to establish a fitting and coherent speculative order among these elements. In this, his contribution to the theology of the Anointing of the Sick is of enduring influence. In this chapter, Professor Boyle uses the name "Extreme Unction" when describing the sacrament as Saint Thomas and his contemporaries knew it and wrote about it.

Thomas Aquinas has little to say about the Anointing of the Sick (*extrema unctio*), at least in comparison with the other sacraments.

In fact, his contemporary scholastics have little to say about Extreme Unction. Even with little to say, they still manage to disagree.

They all agree, however, upon certain features of Extreme Unction, beginning with the affirmation that it is a sacrament. It has to do with healing. This means spiritual healing can, uniquely among

the sacraments, also include healing of the body. Insofar as it has to do with spiritual healing, it has something to do with spiritual sickness, that is, sin and its effects. Finally, it is a sacrament for those physically sick, specifically for those whose illness is of sufficient gravity as to threaten death. All of these elements are found in Peter Lombard's *Book of Sentences*,¹ and on them there is agreement.

With his usual caginess, Lombard offers no speculative ordering among these elements. And so the scholastics are left with the question: How to conceive of their ordering and integrity in such a way as to articulate what is distinctive about this particular sacrament? On this question there is rather more disagreement among the scholastics; in the thirteenth century there was thinking yet to be done about Extreme Unction. With regard to the principal fault lines among the scholastic theologians—whether it is ordered to the forgiveness of venial sin and whether it was instituted by Christ himself—Thomas's position remains constant throughout his career (no to the former, yes to the latter). Nonetheless, in the effort to provide a coherent articulation of the sacrament, Thomas's thought shifts in the course of his career; it is the task of this chapter to chart this development in his thought.

The first, and by far the lengthiest, of Saint Thomas's treatments of Extreme Unction is found in his commentary on distinction 23 of the fourth book of Peter Lombard's *Book of Sentences*.²

The opening of the *divisio textus* gives the analogical frame for Thomas's analysis.

After the Master has determined about baptism, which is the sacrament for those entering, and about confirmation, eucharist and penance which are the sacraments for those progressing, here, in the fifth place, he determines concerning extreme unction which is the sacrament of those departing.³

1. The treatment of Extreme Unction is found in book IV, distinction 23; see Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*, 3rd ed. (Grottaferrata: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1971–1981), vol. 2, pp. 390–3.

2. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis*, vol. 4, ed. M. F. Moos (Paris: Lethielleux, 1947) has only the commentary on book IV through distinction 22. For distinction 23, see Thomas Aquinas, *Opera omnia* (Parma: Typis Petri Fiaccadori, 1858), tom. VII, vol. 2, pp. 873–83.

3. *Sup. IV Sent.* 23. *divisio textus* (873a). See also *Sup. IV Sent.* 2.1.2. *resp.* (Moos, 82–3) where this is one of the ways used to account for the number of sacraments. These five are put

The analogy is founded on life's movement: entrance, progress, departure. Within this frame, Extreme Unction is the sacrament of departure. By way of this analogy, Thomas neatly distinguishes Extreme Unction from the other six sacraments.

But what does this sacrament do for the departing? To what is it ordered? To answer this, Thomas turns first to its signification. The sign, the *sacramentum*, in Extreme Unction is the anointing, which Thomas, in union with the tradition, takes to be medicinal.⁴ Thus, Extreme Unction is a spiritual medicine, signified by medicinal bodily anointing. If it is medicine, then there must be an illness; spiritual illness is sin and its effects, and thus it would follow that Extreme Unction as medicine is ordered to the healing of sin. But this raises a question: How does Extreme Unction differ from Baptism and Penance, both of which also directly heal man of sin?⁵ Thomas distinguishes these according to three different analogies: Baptism brings about new life, Penance raises from the dead, Extreme Unction heals the sick. In distinguishing Penance and Extreme Unction, Thomas says that Penance is ordered to the resuscitation of the spiritually dead, while Extreme Unction is ordered to the healing of the spiritually living but sick.

If Baptism forgives original and mortal sin, and Penance forgives postbaptismal mortal sin, does this then mean that Extreme Unction is ordered to the forgiveness of venial sin? No. Penance is properly ordered to the forgiveness of sin; there is no need for a further sacrament directly ordered to forgiving sins, including venial sins, which, in fact, are forgiven by any increase in grace and devotion. So precisely to what is the medicine of Extreme Unction ordered? It is ordered to the remains of sin, the *reliquiae peccati*, which Saint Thomas here describes as a weakness of mind that remains after the forgiveness of sins. But would it not seem that everyone is ever in

together insofar as they pertain to the remedial good of one person; Holy Orders and Matrimony are sacraments ordered to the remedial good of the whole church, not of one person.

4. *Sup. IV Sent.* 23.1.2.1.sol. (876a) for all of what follows from the commentary on the *Sentences* unless otherwise noted.

5. In the *Sentences* commentary, Thomas says that the effect intended in all seven sacraments is the healing of the sickness of sin (see *Sup. IV Sent.* 23.1.1.sol. [874a]). Thus, while the specification of Extreme Unction as medicine in relation to Baptism and Penance is Thomas's principal focus, it is at least implicitly within a larger context of specification with regard to all the other sacraments.

need of such a sacrament? To specify those who are to receive this sacrament, Thomas returns to the analogical frame according to which this sacrament is the sacrament of those departing. Because the soul is preparing for its immanent departure, it most especially needs to attend to those remains of sin that have served to weaken it and render it less than fit for glory. And so it is that this sacrament is not given against those defects by which the spiritual life is simply removed, namely original and mortal sin, but against those defects by which a man is spiritually weakened such that he has not the perfect vigor requisite for the acts of a life of grace and glory.

Thomas's analysis of Extreme Unction in his commentary on the *Sentences* rests upon two of the agreed upon elements of the sacrament. The medicinal *sacramentum* distinguishes it from the other sacraments, most notably the resuscitating sacrament of Penance; its reservation to the sick in danger of death specifies it as the sacrament for the departing within the broader analogical frame of life's movement.

The remaining two elements follow from the medicinal *sacramentum*. The sacrament may heal the body as well as the soul, provided it serves the spiritual good of the soul.⁶ That it is to be administered only to the sick is a requirement of the signification of the sacrament: corporeal medicine for the physically sick signifying spiritual medicine for the spiritually sick.⁷

With the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the analogical frame has changed and with it the analysis of Extreme Unction. The analogy for the sacraments is the one familiar to students of Saint Thomas; that of spiritual life conforming to corporeal life. The specifics of corporeal life serve as the analogues for distinguishing the sacraments: generation, growth, nourishment, and so forth.⁸

The analogy from the movement of life is now gone, replaced by a more precise and substantial analogy. The weakness of the analogy from movement of life is best seen in the Anointing of the Sick itself. If Baptism is entrance, and if Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, and Reconciliation are progress, then precisely from what is

6. *Sup. IV Sent.* 23.1.2.2.sol. (876b).

7. *Sup. IV Sent.* 23.2.2.1.sol. (881a).

8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG), bk. IV, ch. 58, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Fratres Praedicatorum (Rome: Apud sedem commissionis leoninae, 1930), tom. XV, pp. 193-4.

the Anointing of the Sick a departure? From the spiritual life one entered into in Baptism and progressed in through Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, and Reconciliation? Surely not. But if it is merely departure from corporeal life, then there is no analogy from the corporeal to the spiritual in the case of the Anointing of the Sick; it is merely univocal death. One could no doubt save the analogy, but the effort would rather contort it.

With departure now gone, where does the Anointing of the Sick stand in the new analogical frame?⁹ In corporeal life, we find not only birth, growth, and sustenance, but also illness; and for illness we need medicine. So it is, too, in the spiritual life. The Anointing of the Sick is spiritual medicine. The simple beauty of this development permits Thomas to unite the healing signified by the *sacramentum* of Extreme Unction with its place in the over-arching analogical frame of the sacraments. What was two in the commentary on the *Sentences*—healing and departure—is now simply one: healing.

In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, however, there is another medicine in addition to Extreme Unction: Penance. Penance is no longer some kind of resuscitation of the dead as in the *Sentences* commentary. But if Penance is a kind of medicine, how is it to be distinguished from Extreme Unction? The answer is a tidy one: Penance is spiritual medicine; Extreme Unction is both spiritual and corporeal medicine. Thus Thomas keeps the essential signification of medicine now expressed in the analogical frame, but also links it directly to the corporeal healing of the sacrament.

The spiritual and pastoral reality of Thomas's keen hylomorphism is manifestly at work here. He says that some sin directly affects the health of the body. Conversely, while bodily illness may be an occasion of spiritual good, as a form of satisfaction for sins, for example, such illness may also impede spiritual health as when the weakness of the body impedes the exercise of the virtues. Because therefore the body ought to be properly disposed to the soul, it is only fitting that there be a spiritual medicine directed to corporeal illness as it arises from sin. Thus Thomas specifies Extreme Unction as the sacrament that is ordered against the weakness of the body insofar as it arises from sin.

Still, the sacrament may not, in fact, heal the body. This does not mean that it is useless, for the Anointing of the Sick is also ordered against other consequences of sin (*sequelae peccati*), which are the inclination to evil and the difficulty of pursuing the good. This follows because weaknesses of the soul are closer to sin than weaknesses of the body; thus, if the Anointing of the Sick is ordered to the latter, then all the more so to the former.

But this returns us to the question of how to distinguish the Anointing of the Sick from Penance and Reconciliation. After all, spiritual weaknesses are healed through penance insofar as the penitent is drawn away from evil and inclined toward good through the works of virtue he employs in satisfying for his sins. Here Thomas appeals to a reality of the spiritual life. The fact is that man does not attend to such weaknesses as he should in Penance and Reconciliation whether through negligence, the many occupations of life, the lack of time, or other such reasons. The Anointing of the Sick has, therefore, been provided for humanity such that the healing begun in Penance and Reconciliation might be completed and that humanity might be freed from temporal punishments due to sin. And all of this is ordered to this end: that nothing should remain in man that might impede the soul in coming to perceive the glory of God upon leaving the body. With this immediate ordering to preparation for death, Thomas explains that the sacrament also forgives sins, for it happens that a man has neither knowledge nor recollection of all the sins committed since this present life cannot be lived without its daily sins.

The analysis of Extreme Unction in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is tighter than that in the *Sentences* commentary because Thomas has united the *sacramentum* of Extreme Unction as medicine with the frame of the analogy from corporeal life. The medicinal is defining. In distinguishing it from Penance, he specifies it according to its twofold spiritual and corporeal healing. From the healing of bodily illness as an effect of sin, Thomas can move readily enough to the healing of spiritual weaknesses that are effects of sin. Thus, it is a healing of the remains of sin. This is characterized as a kind of completion of the sacrament of Penance. At this point he introduces the specification of preparation for death and hence the immediate need of that completion apart from the effects of Penance. In concluding

9. The treatment of Extreme Unction is found in SCG, bk. IV, ch. 73 (233-4).

his chapter on Extreme Unction, Thomas speaks of the sacrament as a consummation of all the sacraments.

That it is reserved for the physically sick is again a matter of preserving the full signification of the sacrament.

This same analysis is present in the little work *De articulis fidei et sacramentis ecclesiae*.¹⁰

When we come to the *Summa Theologiae*, however, Thomas shifts again. Of course, Thomas stopped writing the *tertia pars* before he got to Extreme Unction, and so we must go by the few remarks he makes in considering the seven sacraments as a whole, not knowing precisely how the details of Extreme Unction would have been ultimately presented.¹¹

The same analogical frame of spiritual life conformed to corporeal life is present and definitive. Both Penance and Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick are medicines. This remains unchanged. But Thomas has reconsidered the relationship between these two medicines. The specification of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* by which Penance was ordered to spiritual health and Extreme Unction to both spiritual and corporeal health is gone, replaced by a new distinction between health and robustness of health. In physical life we distinguish between health and robustness of health. One might be without illness and in this sense healthy, but lack the robustness of health that comes from exercise and a good diet. The spectrum of health beyond simply not being sick is a reality of corporeal life that Saint Thomas now applies to the spiritual life. Thus Penance and Reconciliation is ordered to spiritual health in that it is the medicine against the illness of sin and thereby restores spiritual health. The Anointing of the Sick is ordered to robustness of spiritual life; it is the medicine that attends to the various remains of sin that weaken or limit a healthy but not vigorous spiritual life. The distinction is present in the earlier writings, but here it takes on speculative purpose. Its value lies in being a distinction that is truer to the analogy of bodily and spiritual life. While the *Summa Contra Gentiles* has the analogy from bodily illness to spiritual illness, the introduction of bodily illness itself into the specification of spiritual illness is analogically awkward. It is, of

10. See Thomas Aquinas, *De articulis fidei et ecclesiae sacramentis*, II, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Fratres Praedicatorum (Rome: Editori di San Tommaso, 1979), tom. XLII, pp. 252-3, 256, 257.

11. *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 65, a. 1.

course, not insurmountable, and one could certainly say that it reflects the hylomorphic reality of man, so prominent in the account of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Still, Thomas shifts the analogy here and, as usual, does so without notice or explanation. The result is a cleaner analogy.

In this refined analogy by which the Anointing of the Sick is medicine for robust and vigorous spiritual health, it is ordered to the remains of sin (the *reliquiae peccati* again). Precisely how Saint Thomas would play this out, we can only surmise, a task I am not inclined to undertake. But the change itself is speculatively helpful. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas used one *reliquia* of sin, bodily illness, to specify the sacrament in relation to Penance, and then by a kind of *a fortiori* argument moved from the species (corporeal illness) to the genus (*reliquiae peccati*). In the *Summa Theologiae*, the remains of sin themselves can simply be the defining object within the analogical frame of robustness of health. Corporeal health will now follow neatly insofar as it is a harmful effect of sin. Because it is not needed to specify the medicinal quality of Extreme Unction, it can take a more fittingly ordered place as one of the remains of sin, which themselves precisely as remains now specify that medicinal quality. Even though we lack Saint Thomas's full treatment of Extreme Unction in the *Summa Theologiae*, we nonetheless find, in what we do have, a tighter and more unified account of the sacrament than found in his earlier work.

What Saint Thomas has to say about Extreme Unction is, all said and done, a rather modest corner of his thinking on the sacraments. Perhaps because of its very modesty, one cannot help but be struck by the attention he gives it in the delicate refinements of his thinking. What we see especially in his treatment of Extreme Unction is an ever more attentive reflection on its medicinal reality. The emergence of the analogical frame for the sacraments of spiritual life conformed to corporeal life recasts the sacrament and simultaneously gives a new unity to the treatment. From then on an increasingly clear and precise analysis of the primary analog of corporeal health makes for an increasingly clear distinction between Penance and Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick. It is precisely the clarification of the primary analogs from corporeal reality that makes possible the increasing speculative unity of Thomas's treatment of

Extreme Unction. We see how Thomas's attention, indeed his fidelity, to the primary analogs helps us understand all the better the hidden graces of God.

Chapter 7

Holy Orders and Ecclesial Hierarchy in Aquinas

Matthew Levering

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) observes that “the sacrament of Holy Orders communicates a ‘sacred power’ which is none other than that of Christ. The exercise of this authority must therefore be measured against the model of Christ, who by love made himself the least and the servant of all” (CCC 1551). Likewise, the Catechism states, “The ministerial priesthood has the task not only of representing Christ—Head of the Church—before the assembly of the faithful, but also of acting in the name of the whole Church when presenting to God the prayer of the Church, and above all when offering the Eucharistic sacrifice” (CCC 1552). Yet, in a community that Christ willed to be characterized by profound humility and mutual self-subordination (cf. Mark 9:35, 10:43–45), should some Christians have hierarchical authority vis-à-vis other Christians? Furthermore, why should only priests consecrate the Eucharist, which Saint Paul envisions as the sign of Christian unity: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:17)? As we will see, issues such as these stand at the heart of Thomas Aquinas’s theology of Holy Orders. I will first draw upon his discussion of orders in his *Sentences* commentary, and second turn to his discussion of orders in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.