



What is the difference between Anointing of the Sick and Last Rites?

Anointing of the sick is one of the Seven Sacraments of the Church. The purpose of this Sacrament is the healing of body and spirit. This was part of Christ's ministry on earth, to heal the sick and forgive sins. Christ's ministry on earth was continued by the Apostles to whom Jesus gave authority and by their successors, the bishops and their priests today.

It used to be, before Vatican II, that Anointing of the Sick was only given when death was near, thus, it became synonymous with the Last Rites, and thus the confusion today. Vatican II however returned the Sacrament of Anointing to the earlier understanding that it was to be done both for the dying (as Last Rites) and for those seriously sick (not Last Rites).

Anointing of the Sick should be given to anyone who is seriously ill or grown weak with age. It is also appropriate for someone preparing for serious surgery. There is no need to wait for death to be near to receive this Sacrament. If there is the slightest and remotest danger of death, the Sacrament should be given. A person can request the Sacrament at any time (sooner is better than later for all involved). The Sacrament of Anointing can be repeated, but only should be done if the condition changes, some new illness comes up, or the situation becomes gravely worse.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, formerly known as The Last Rites, on the other hand, can include three Sacraments: Penance (Reconciliation), Anointing of the Sick, and Eucharist. Sometimes a person close to death is not able to communicate or swallow, so often the sacrament consists of only the anointing. Since death is close, the priest may include special prayers for the dying including the Apostolic Pardon, a prayer calling upon God's grace to release you from all punishments in this life and the life to come. Anointing is less for physical healing than it is for spiritual healing and strength. It brings the forgiveness of sins.

So, I encourage people not to wait for this Sacrament of Healing. We need grace sooner than later, and grace doesn't wear out or expire. If you anticipate a serious surgery, or early if a serious illness strikes, please ask for the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. We need God's healing both of body and soul.