

Penance and Anointing of the Sick as Sacraments of Reconciliation and Healing: Use and Abuses Today

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This paper entitled, “Penance and Anointing of the Sick as Sacraments of Reconciliation and Healing: Use and Abuses Today” analyses the sacraments as means of renewal and commitment that can be useful in the project of New Evangelization. The important factor is the effective and efficacious use of the sacraments, assessed by how well they meet the basic needs of the faithful to know and worship God. Using theological, expository and analytical methods, the essay discusses the use and abuses that can promote reconciliation and healing, and conversely hinder them. Earlier, the paper briefly commented on the nature of Penance and Anointing of the Sick from a theological point of view. It argues that sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick bestow sanctifying power, transform and renew the faithful who would participate in them well. With abuses the sanctifying grace is relegated to the background. However, it presented a few random thoughts on the liturgical implications, in order to provide a roadmap for renewal and commitment today. Both the ministers and recipients of the sacraments must be in a good state of mind and body towards the celebrations to have its full effects.

Keywords: penance, anointing, reconciliation and healing

Introduction

It is certainly correct to agree with the Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in the Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Africae Munus*, that the task facing the Catholic Christianity in Africa is “commitment to evangelization, to the *missio ad gentes* and to the new evangelization.”¹ Quite expectedly, *Africae Munus* notes that,

in its precise sense, evangelization is the *missio ad gentes* directed to those who do not know Christ. In a wider sense, it is used to describe ordinary pastoral work, while the phrase new evangelization designates pastoral outreach to those who no longer practice the Christian faith.²

Evidently, *missio ad gentes*, as ordinary pastoral work or as new evangelization,

at the heart of all evangelizing activity is the proclamation of the person of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God (cf. John 1:14) who died and rose again and is ever present in the community of the faithful his Church (Matt 28:20).³

In this way, Pope Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation, The Joy of the Gospel, *Evangelii Gaudium*

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¹ Pope Benedict XVI, A Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus* to the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful on the Church in Africa in service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace (henceforth AM), 19th November, 2011.

² AM no. 160.

³ AM no. 160.

corroborates that the Church must rediscover the richness and beauty of Christ and His Gospel which is beautiful in the liturgy. He writes:

Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy, as part of our daily concern to spread goodness. The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving.⁴

According to Pope Francis, this Jubilee Year of Mercy is an opportunity for the Church to make more evident its mission of being a witness of mercy like God whose fundamental stance towards humanity is mercy. The Pontiff observes that, “Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life....Nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy.”⁵ During the Year of Mercy, the liturgical assembly can expect not only emphasis on sacramental penance and indulgences as well as the Eucharistic adoration. Before the tabernacle or monstrance, they should find the Gospel of Mercy flowing from the divine presence of the liturgical celebrations.⁶ The thrust of the essay is to spur renewed commitment to the missionary mandate to evangelize the world in this New Era of Evangelization.⁷

It is demanded of this essay to explore “Penance and Anointing of the Sick as Sacraments of Reconciliation and Healing: Use and Abuses Today” as means of renewal and commitment that can be useful in the project of New Evangelization. But we need to ask: in what does the good use of the Sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick consist? Surely, they call for respect and decorum which the sacred actions require as sacraments of reconciliation and healing. The important factor is the effective and efficacious use of the sacraments, assessed by how well they meet the basic needs of the faithful to know and worship God. The present topic “Penance and Anointing of the Sick as Sacraments of Reconciliation and Healing” speaks directly to these issues on renewal and commitment. We illustrate the use and abuses that can promote reconciliation and healing, and conversely hinder them. We shall proceed by first commenting briefly on the nature of Penance and Anointing of the Sick from a theological point of view. This essay argues that sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick bestow sanctifying power, transform and renew the faithful who would participate in them well. With abuses the sanctifying grace is relegated to the background. Finally, we hope to present a few random thoughts on the implications, especially how all these relate to New Evangelization in order to provide a roadmap for renewal and commitment today.

The Nature of Sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick

For better understanding of the issues under discussion, it is important to grasp the meanings of the sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick. The Catholic Christianity professes and teaches that they are among the seven sacraments of the New Testament, instituted by Jesus Christ. Penance (also known as Conversion, Reconciliation, Confession or Forgiveness) is the sacrament by which sin committed after baptism is forgiven through the absolution of the priest. The sacrament prompts the sinner to detect his/her sins and

⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World* (Vaticana: Libreria Editrice, 2013) no. 24.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* (henceforth MV), (Vaticana: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015) no. 10.

⁶ Peter J. Elliot, “Sacred Liturgy: Great Mystery, Great Mercy” in *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* <http://www.hprweb.com/2015/11/sacred-liturgy-great-mystery-great-mercy> accessed on 8th January, 2016.

⁷ *Instrumentum Laboris*, Second Onitsha Archdiocesan Synod 2016, Theme: New Evangelization in Onitsha Archdiocese: Renewal and Commitment (Onitsha: Feros 2, 2016) p. xiii.

invites one to confess and offer satisfaction for them and to amend one's life in the future. The name "penance" suggests conversion therapy, fostering the real change of life that the sacrament required,⁸ and it was commonly understood as necessary for the removal of the punishment due to sin. In recent times, as Echema would say, the preferable name for the sacrament of Penance is "Reconciliation" because the conversion of a sinner, the penance or satisfaction that the person makes, the confession of the sins so committed and even the forgiveness received by the penitent, are always related to reconciliation with God, with the Church, in the home, the neighbourhood, the school, the workplace, indeed the world at large.⁹ Since it is one of the sacraments of reconciliation and healing in the life and ministry of the Church, it refers to that sacrament by which sins committed after Baptism are remitted if and when the sinner performs certain acts and receives absolution from a qualified priest. The ultimate purpose is for the reconciliation of the faithful to God and the Church. Indeed, reconciliation gives priority to God's gracious love which, in Christ, draws Christians who have fallen to sin into a life-giving communion. This communion transforms them into the likeness of Christ, frees them from sin and leads them into a life of love and communal charity.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church corroborates the fact that this sacrament is called reconciliation because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles (cf. 2 Cor 5:20).¹⁰ Furthermore, whoever lives by God's merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord's call to be reconciled to his or her brothers and sisters (cf. Matt 5:24). Thus if Christians love their neighbours, they will not feel comfortable until such neighbours are treated in a just and fair manner. That is what the sacrament of reconciliation celebrates since liturgy essentially celebrates what the Church believes, hence, the wise dictum "*lex credendi, lex celebrandi, lex vivendi*" (what the Church believes, she celebrates and she lives out). Christians who are united and reconciled will obviously support one another and together take action for change in the society. The bond of Christian charity demands that one should share with others. It sets an obligation before the Church, both local and universal for peaceful co-existence.¹¹

On the other hand, the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is the sacrament of the living and not of the dead as some erroneously thought.¹² It is the sacrament whereby the anointing of the sick with holy oil by the priest, is accompanied with prayer and administered when a person is sick or in danger of death, accident or old age. The sacrament is to comfort and strengthen the soul, to remit sin and even to restore health when God sees it to be necessary. The primary and proper purpose of the sacrament is to bring about a spiritual healing to the sick, so that the sick may have strength to bear suffering and resist evil. The comforting and strengthening grace of the sacrament will bring about a spiritual healing.

According to the traditional classification of the seven sacraments, Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist are classified as Sacraments of Christian Initiation, while Matrimony and Holy Orders are Sacraments of Love and Service whereas Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick are known as Sacraments of Reconciliation and Healing. During his public ministry, Christ went about doing good and healing the sick especially those

⁸ Lawrence E. Mick, *Understanding the Sacraments Penance* (Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007) 21.

⁹ Austin Echema. "The Sacrament of Reconciliation: Implications of the New Term" in *Journal of Inculturation Theology*. 4 (April 1997), 42.

¹⁰ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Ibadan: St. Paul's 1992) 1443, 361.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion on the liturgical challenges of the sacrament of Reconciliation (see Emmanuel C. Anagwo, "Liturgical Challenges of the Sacrament of Reconciliation among Igbo Christians" in Ferdinand Nwaigbo *et al.* *The Church and Reconciliation in Africa*, (Port Harcourt: CIWA Publications, 2009) 330-344.

¹² Austin Echema, *Anointing of the Sick and the Healing Ministry: The Nigerian Pastoral Experience*, (Frankfurt: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2006) 168.

tormented by the devil. Over the centuries, the Church has never failed to preach the sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick. She preaches, speaks and celebrates them as sacraments of reconciliation and healing.

The Gospel of Reconciliation

Both sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick provide a veritable platform for lasting reconciliation. Reconciliation is an achievement, a process, and a goal in the life of the human community. Every human society desires reconciliation. Anything to the contrary suggests the divisions and hostilities found among nations and peoples, within societies and families, between people and their environment, and even within each person. Following after the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the Early Church celebrated with penitential rituals according to the Jewish and biblical traditions. For instance, the chief one was the Day of Atonement when the high priest ritually confessed his and the people's sins to God. Ritually, he then transferred the sins of the nation to a goat, called Azazel, which was allowed to be taken into the wilderness. Originally, this has given rise to the term "scapegoat." The high priest then offered the required sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem as a sign that all would change their lives. Locally, rabbis recommended penitential acts, such as the wearing of sackcloth, ashes, chains, rags, fasting, public groaning, weeping and asking for prayers from the faithful.¹³

Jesus Christ, as the Messiah, preached a Gospel of God's love, forgiveness and reconciliation. He showed compassion to sinners who flocked around Him. It was later reported that the earliest Christian communities would find it difficult to deal with the matter of sin and forgiveness; hence, they continued their Jewish penitential practices. Members were expelled in extreme cases until they repented from their sins (see 1 Cor 5:1-13). Baptism was considered the means of repentance and response to Jesus' invitation to a new life—the Kingdom of God. The Early Church presumed that all would wait in baptismal innocence until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. In the sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick, the Catholic Christianity experience the merciful presence of Christ, who reveals to her who God truly is. Through this encounter, individual members of the Church are incorporated more fully into the body of Christ, and in that body they find their true identity. Indeed, through both sacraments Holy Spirit empowers Christians to continue the mission of evangelization in the world. As evangelizers of the contemporary society, all are called to become ambassadors of reconciliation, ministers of healing, sacraments of God's love, agents of justice and peace in the society and indeed Missionaries of Mercy.¹⁴

The Ministry of Healing

It is clear from the overview of the gospel of reconciliation described above that for much of Christian liturgical history, reconciliation with God, community and the self was seen as a type of healing, providing health to the sinner and restoration of wholeness in relationships. Turning to another aspect of our discussion on healing is to review another avenue of holistic healing. Jewish people were holistic in attitude. A penitent for the sacrament of Penance is spiritually sick and in need of healing. While using the best of known medicines

¹³ Greg Dues, *Revised and Updated Catholic Customs and Traditions: A Popular Guide*, (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 2001) 155.

¹⁴ In the spirit of the Year of Mercy, the Missionaries of Mercy must be priests who are patient, possess an understanding of human frailty and are ready to express the loving kindness of the Good Shepherd through their preaching and in the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (see Padre Mike Umoh, *Jubilee Year of Mercy What About It? (Including the Rite of Consecration of the Family to the Divine Mercy in the Home)*, Ojota: Center for Media Development, 2015, 17).

and cures, the Jews confessed that God was in-charge of healing (see Psalms 32, 38). They looked to a messianic age when all physical and moral evil would be eliminated. Christians believe that Jesus did everything the prophets foretold of the messianic age. He was lavish in his Healing of every kind of sickness and diseases, even bringing the dead to life. More often than not, he would join to this healing a forgiveness of sin. This ministry of healing was practised also by His disciples whom He sent out in pairs (see Luke 9:1, 10:9; Mark 6:13). Later, after Jesus left them, the apostles continued this healing ministry (see Acts 3:1-10, 14:8-18). Charismatic healing flourished in some communities (see 1 Cor 12:9) and enjoys a revival today.

The Letter of James describes clearly the practice of physical and spiritual healing in early Christianity: Is anyone of you sick? Then call for the elders of the Church and have them pray over him/her, anointing one with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise one up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. (See James 5:14-15)

During early centuries Christians were credited to have privately used oil blessed by the bishop or priests as forms of internal and external healing remedy. In this way, it served as a kind of medicine or ointment. In some localities blessed oil was also used publicly to anoint penitents as part of an extensive reconciliation process. Only with the 5th century was there evidence that priests rather the laity used oil to anoint the sick. Church authorities encouraged this official use of oil as a healing sacramental, probably to counteract the people's temptation to seek pagan alternatives.¹⁵

In the course of time, prayers for physical healing were dropped. The spirit of the ritual was one of preparation for death only. It was no longer a hurting part of the body to be anointed-only the senses, feet and hands with a prayer that sins committed by them be forgiven: "Through this holy anointing and his tender mercy, may the Lord forgive whatever sins you have committed by sight..."¹⁶ And the anointing followed absolution and communion. It had become the last anointing (*extrema unctio* "Extreme Unction"). In this form, it was finally listed as one of the seven sacraments in the Middle Ages. However, the Council of Trent returned to more ancient understandings by teaching that this rite of anointing both forgives sins and also heals the sick. Unfortunately, this particular teaching of Trent had little effect on pastoral practice or popular understandings of the sacrament. In the 1950s, a gradual change in thinking evolved because of research into the ancient practices related to the use of oil to anoint the sick for healing. The sacrament once again was offered to those who were seriously ill and not necessarily dying.

The reformed liturgy of the Second Vatican Council supported this direction in thinking. The renewal of the sacrament, now called the Anointing of the Sick, was completed in 1972. Today, several forms of this ritual are now available. If it probably is the final anointing, then it should be accompanied by communion or *Viaticum* and, if desired, confession. Those with less serious illness may receive the sacrament alone or with others in a more public fashion, for example in the parish Church. Once again, the emphasis is on healing rather than absolution from sin. Only the forehead and palms of the sick are anointed with the prayer: "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up."¹⁷

The anointing of the sick is meant for the healing of the sick if God pleases and if God wishes to call

¹⁵ Dues, *Revised and Updated Catholic Customs and Traditions* 160.

¹⁶ Dues, *Revised and Updated Catholic Customs and Traditions* 161.

¹⁷ *The Rites of the Catholic Church as Revised by the Second Vatican Council, Volume One*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990) 774; Canon 847 § 1.

him/her-the anointing obtains for one the forgiveness of sins and the grace to face death with confidence and the assurance of mercy. James did not say the oil or even plus the prayer will cure the sick. Rather it is the prayer offered in faith that will make the sick person well. James did not make claims for the oil alone but more, the Lord. There is the invocation of the name of the Lord Jesus which entails not a pure medical process but a spiritual activity covered up with faith. This is the fundamental teaching of the Church. Understandably, the oil itself does not have any power; instead, it is only God who can anoint a person for a specific purpose. Whenever we use oil, it is only a symbol of what God is doing in our midst.

Use of the Sacrament of Penance

By use we mean the administration of something for a purpose. When something is administered into good use, we derive some benefits or effects. In this case, the institution of the sacrament of Penance by Jesus Christ took place when He rose from the dead. He gave the apostles and their successors the power to bind and loose (cf. John 20:19-23), the power to forgive and retain anyone's sin. This shows the fact that priests did not give themselves the power to forgive and retain sins, rather they were given by Jesus Christ after His resurrection. Thus, when a penitent's sin is forgiven, there are effects of the sacrament of Penance.

The sacrament is used to restore the sanctifying grace. The sacrament of Penance restores to the penitent the sanctifying grace which was lost through mortal sins. Sanctifying grace is that by which our souls are made holy and pleasing to God. Thus, when we fall into mortal sins, our souls become unholy and thus not pleasing to God. So, through the sacrament of Penance, we receive back the sanctifying grace.

The sacrament imparts peace and serenity. Occasionally, the recipient receives peace and serenity of conscience with profound consolation of the spirit. It makes the penitent enjoy the mercy, the kindness and the love of God even in their inner experience. It reconciles the penitents to the Church, the society and the self.

It helps the penitent to avoid sin in the future. The sacrament gives the penitent actual grace and special strength by which he/she may overcome temptation and lead a good life. Works of Reconciliation are not only for the punishment of past sins, they act as a remedy to weaken the power of evil tendencies.

The sacrament of Penance also brings about the forgiveness of sins. It brings to the penitent the forgiveness of sins and the guilt of the sins and also remits the eternal punishment due to the sins. This is the principal effect of the sacrament, that is, remission of sins by infusion of graces by which eternal punishment is removed.

Above all, it is good to know here that in the sacrament of Penance not all the temporal punishment due to sin is remitted even though it is partly remitted by the penance given in confession. A classical example from the Sacred Scripture is the case of David who sinned against Uriah by sleeping with his wife as well as plotting his death (see 2 Sam 12:13-14).

Use of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

The Catholic Christianity believes, teaches and professes that all Christians who have reached the age of reason and one in danger of death from accident, old age or other sickness are qualified to receive the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. There are spiritual effects in this regard. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers this summary of the effects of the Anointing of the Sick:

- 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 sick 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.¹⁸

It follows that anointing of the sick brings about spiritual healing. This appears to be the primary effect of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The comforting and strengthening grace of the sacrament brings about a spiritual healing. By this, the sick person receives comfort and strength against temptations. He obtains resignation to God's will, fortitude to suffer and trust in God's mercy. The person is made capable of resisting the temptation to self-withdrawal and discouragement.

It remits the venial sins and the temporal punishment due to sin. The temporal punishment is remitted by the performance of the rite of the sacrament itself according to the dispositions and devotion of the recipient. Thus, this is a kind of preparation to enter heaven by the remission of venial sins and the cleansing of soul from the remains of sin.

The sacrament gives health of the body when necessary. The sacrament restores bodily health when this is good for the welfare of the soul of the sick person. Often, the peace of mind that follows confession and the knowledge that the sacrament has reconciled the sick person with God react beneficially upon the body of the sick person and causes the restoration of his/her health.

Liturgical Abuses of the Sacraments

“Whatever is worth doing, is worth doing well” is an expression that can comfortably find justification towards the correct use of sacraments in the contemporary society. This is because liturgical abuse has gained much currency and ascendancy now than ever since the era of the New Religious Movements upsurge, Pentecostalism, global search for security and a litany of psychosomatic illness and ailments that defy medical diagnosis and therapy. In everyday language, “to abuse” means “to make wrong or bad use of something” especially disobeying the laws guiding the matter under study. Somebody once said that the commonest abuse in Nigeria is drug, that is, through self-medication. People prescribe drugs for themselves without due reference to competent medical authority and norms for such prescriptions. In the celebration of the sacraments, it arises out of some people's inability to adhere to laid down liturgical laws and practices.¹⁹ *The Code of Canon Law* stipulates, “the liturgical books approved by the competent authority, are to be faithfully followed in the celebration of the sacraments. Accordingly, no one may on a personal initiative add to or omit or alter anything in those books.”²⁰ Earlier on, the canonical legislation enjoins all concerned to celebrate the sacraments with great reverence and due care. As regards others—deacons and laypersons—the canon law prohibits them from performing actions or saying prayers proper to the celebrating priests. At times, our liturgical actions are full of personal idiosyncrasies borne out of exaggerated sentiments.²¹ Federico Suarez pinpointed that, “some few clerics, backed up by their (charismatically minded) supporters, threw themselves into what has been called 'liturgical experiments or experience.’”²² In this case, Penance and Anointing of the Sick as Sacraments of Reconciliation and Healing that deserve their names must be celebrated in tune with the liturgical laws, in the spirit of the liturgical seasons, and being guided by other rules of propriety. Today more than ever, these

¹⁸ CCC no. 1532.

¹⁹ SC no. 13.

²⁰ Canon 846 § 1.

²¹ See *Aberrations in our Liturgical Praxis: Liturgical Series Published by Awka Diocesan Liturgy Commission*, i.

²² Federico Suarez, *Vine and the Branches* (Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1995) 50.

sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick have been plagued by some liturgical abuses which range from the part of the ministers of the sacraments to the recipients of the sacraments.

Ministers of the Sacraments

One of the major abuses in our sacramental celebrations today is that some pastors of the Catholic Church lack empathy to the penitent which “does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitude of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman caught in adultery.”²³ A confessor abuses the sacrament of Penance if he is unsympathetic to the situation of the penitent. It is the demand of the Church that the minister of the sacrament of Penance should not see himself just as a judge, but equally a merciful judge, who like Jesus should show mercy to the sinner. When he celebrates the sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good who binds up wounds...The priest is sign and instrument of God’s merciful love for the sinner.²⁴

It has often been observed that some penitents are forced to confess to particular confessors. Ideally, one is free to choose one’s confessor and it amounts to abuse of the sacrament of Penance for any priest or competent authority to force any penitent to choose a particular confessor. A minister may advise the penitent on why a particular confessor is preferable but he should do this with great caution and sense of modesty, in order to avoid giving the semblance of coercing the penitent to confess to a particular confessor.

Another salient point is that there is no condition on which a minister can break the seal of secrecy of the sacrament of Penance even at the point of death. It amounts to a grave abuse of the sacrament and grave punitive consequence for the minister who directly divulges the confession of a penitent.²⁵ According to Canon 1388, it amounts to *latae sententiae* (sentence [already] passed) used in the canon law of the Catholic Church. It is an automatic excommunication reserved to the Holy See; and he who does so only indirectly is to be punished according to the gravity of the offence in question. It has been noted too that the worst abuse of the sacrament of Penance is from some priests. Unfortunately and regrettably, though negligible number, use it to make sexual advances. It is a grave sin for any minister to ask for sexual satisfaction through the sacrament of Penance. Among the accusations against some priests in the Western and European countries during the cases of sexual abuse was that some confessors are culpable of immodest sexual advances in the guise of counselling, etc. We may ask, “Why have some priests degenerated to this level?” The answer is simply because they have lost the sense of sin and their vocation. As a result, they mislead those that come their way. Canon 1387 has stringent measures for any minister that abuses the sacrament of Penance through solicitation of a penitent to commit a sin against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue. He is to be punished according to the gravity of the offence, with suspension, prohibitions and deprivations and in more serious cases is to be dismissed from the clerical state.

Some pastors use the confessional as counselling platform. Counselling is not the same with absolving a penitent. Though a minister may give pieces of advice to the penitent, and is always encouraged to do so, but the confessional is not appropriately for counselling *per se*. It amounts to abuse of the sacrament to keep other penitents unduly waiting while the minister keeps on counselling one penitent for hours unending. Worse still,

²³ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia, Apostolic Exhortation on The Joy of Love*, [henceforth AL] (Vaticana: Libreria Editrice, 2016) no. 38.

²⁴ CCC no. 1465.

²⁵ Canon 983; 1388.

some confessors make appointment, enquire for the personal details of the person like: “What is your name?”; “Your voice sounds familiar”; “Can we meet in my office/house?”

It is becoming the order of the day that, at times, there is monetary attachment to the sacraments, leading to simony or worse still, commercialization of the sacraments. In common parlance, it is said “pay before service.” For instance, such pastors insist the penitent pays ones due before accessing the sacraments. Such priests will be asking questions like: Have you paid the levies? Has the leader of the pious society or station catechist cleared him of any debt? It is an abuse of the sacraments to use them as pastoral strategy whereby the faithful may be denied sacraments without grave reasons. In this regard, canonical legislation states: “The sacred ministers cannot refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, are properly disposed and are not prohibited by law from receiving them.”²⁶ Consequently, it is a liturgical abuse to deny the faithful the sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick because of their inability to pay for certain levies for things like ordination, car, burial, catechist, etc. In the same manner, it will be prejudicial and absurd to deny parents the sacraments because their children are married to non-Catholics.²⁷

In recent times, some pastors use the sacrament of Penance for begging money. After confession, some pastors initiate discussions like, “I have not been seeing you in the parish Church. The parish is need of your contribution...” In the same manner, some confessors establish personal relationships with the wealthy or rich penitents at the confessional by requesting their mobile phone contacts before/after the prayer of absolution. Such statements and overtures are capable of derailing and compromising the essence of the sacraments for spiritual growth, reconciliation and healing. Another dangerous trend is that some confessors go to the confessional without the rightful liturgical vestments and decorum. Some priests wear shorts and T-shirts to the confessional. It is also unfortunate that some priests do not give time to administer this sacrament of Anointing of the Sick to those who are in need to receive it. They make all forms of excuses to downplay this pastoral care of the sick.

Recipients of the Sacraments

It is an abuse of the sacrament of Penance when the penitent approaches it with levity, without proper and adequate preparation. Any worthwhile human venture calls for preparation. It is true that nobody plans to fail but often many people fail to plan. A popular adage says: “One who fails to plan, plans to fail.” This is also true of the liturgy where we worship God. Both remote and proximate preparations are important to make serious improvement. Some penitents do not prepare well for confession. They just rush to confession and rush out. In some instances, you hear some expressions like “Father, please hear my small confession”. Mick notes that “for many people it has been a mere footnote to the sacraments, something to be done in a couple of minutes before leaving the Church building.”²⁸ Similarly, a penitent should not proceed to the confessional after heavy drinking of alcoholic wine. It is sacrament of reconciliation where the penitent should show contrition for his/her sin(s).

On the other hand, those inviting the priest for anointing of the sick should, if possible, prepare the venue and the sick person for the sacrament. In the spirit of Pope Francis’ recent Encyclical Letter on the care of the

²⁶ Canon 843.

²⁷ Jude A. Asanbe, “The Canonical Duties and Rights of the Lay Faithful in the Church” in *Journal of Inculturation Theology (JIT)*, 5/1 (April, 2003) 75.

²⁸ Mick, *Understanding the Sacraments Penance* 23.

environment entitled *Laudato si'*,²⁹ the liturgical environment and space should be conducive for prayer. They should also know when to call a priest for the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. Some of the lay faithful lack the basic understanding of the sacrament that it can be received as many times as possible, as long as there is need to pray for God's healing. They continue to think that it is the last rite to be received at dying point. As Echema indicates: "there are people who still consider the sacrament as a kind of religious pronouncement of death, so that sending for the priest automatically means arranging for the funeral as it was wrongly understood in the past."³⁰ This is totally wrong to assume the sacrament as "a certificate to death" and such mentality should change with continuous reorientation.

Another area of abuse is that occasionally we hear of sexual solicitation on the part of the penitent when he or she uses the confessional. In this way, they believe that it is the best platform to seduce the minister. This is serious and a grave sin too. Again, when one hides one's sin at the confessional because of fear or shame, it is an abuse of the sacrament where the mercy of God flows. Regrettably, it is also observed that some tell lies at the confession. Penitents who are truly sorry for their sins should confess all their sins in order to receive absolution.

There is need to emphasize that one is not free to reveal matters heard during confession. The liturgical and canonical sanction against breaking the confessional secrecy of the sacrament of Penance equally applies to everyone. While penitents may be free to divulge their secrets like sins, any other person who happens to eavesdrop to the confession of another one must under great obligation keep the confession secret and should, on no account, divulge it to another person. Canon 1388 § 2 says: "Interpreters and others mentioned in can.983§ 2, who violate the secret, are to be punished with a just penalty, not excluding excommunication."

It is unfortunate that some of the Christ's faithful have not grasped the value of the sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick. Thus, the former is wrongly understood as a license to commit sin since they know they will go for confession. In this way, they see it as where they go to wash themselves in order to sin again. For such people, they do not know that it brings about liberation from bondage that may stifle ones business, success or academic life, if not confessed. Furthermore, some lay faithful are engaged in the anointing of oil recklessly, given impression that every available oil is the same. They have plenty of oils like love oil, back to sender, breakthrough, stop evil, good luck, love, attraction, marriage partner, career promotion, business trip, family protection, enemy plan scatter, all purpose, road opener, attack my attackers, money drawing, success, separation, confusing, out of bound, God is mysterious anointing oil. In fact, they have over 70 different oils in existence. Some instances have them with the inscription, "This oil was consecrated under the Eucharistic power". Definitely, there will be the tendency to buy it. In most cases, they are just paraffin, and not real oil.

Funny enough, there is a verse from the Bible for each of the name of the oil. They use biblical passages to back up these abuses. One of them once told the writer, "Father, but this thing works for him". On another occasion, one of the sellers retorted that, "A woman said that after using the oil, it made her to get a husband". According to him, it is because people are using them, that is why they are in business. We must remind ourselves that it was because of aberrations that the Universal Catholic Church published *Redemptionis Sacramentum: On Certain Matters to be Observed or to be Avoided Regarding the Most Holy Eucharist*,³¹

²⁹ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter on the Care for our Common Home, Laudato Si* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015).

³⁰ Echema, *Anointing of the Sick and the Healing Ministry* 168.

³¹ *Redemptionis Sacramentum: On Certain Matters to be Observed or to be Avoided Regarding the Most Holy Eucharist* {henceforth RS} (Okpuno: Fides Communications, 2004).

while the Catholic Church in Nigeria issued a document on Healing Ministry in 1996. In the “Guidelines for the Healing Ministry in Nigeria”, it was stated clearly the lay ministers are not to anoint if it will be understood as a sacrament.³² Only priests can have portable “oil stock” which has a section for each of the three holy oils.³³ Lay faithful are not to handle the holy oils, even to carry them, except in emergencies. The oil of St. Raphael, St. Michael the Archangel and so on, are sacramentals like holy water in the Catholic Church and are considered as blessed oils. As sacramentals, lay faithful can use them but that it is an abuse for them to use the Church’s oil administered only by a priest in the Anointing of the Sick.

These ugly trends militate against liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council with the celebrated theological jargons, “*approfondimento*” (renewal) and “*aggiornamento*” (updating), whereby her liturgical and sacramental worship will benefit from this inflow of fresh air. Hence, the recent instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments notes that liturgical abuses “are often based on ignorance, in that they involve a rejection of those elements whose deeper meaning is not understood and whose antiquity is not recognized.”³⁴ Indeed, these obstacles and others not mentioned here emanated from a misguided sense of flexibility, creativity and adaptation or better still a false sense of liberty. All stifle the right of the faithful to have liturgical and sacramental celebrations carried out according to the mind of the Church which was originally billed to exclude all the defects and gestures that go against the spirit of the liturgy. The current drive for New Evangelization must find a way to curb these aberrations since “a stitch in time saves nine.”

Implications: Celebrating the Sacraments Towards Renewal and Commitment

There is no doubt that our reflection on use and abuses of the Penance and Anointing of the Sick as Sacraments of Reconciliation and Healing has prepared us to discuss the implications towards renewal and commitment. The paper is of the view that some of the faithful in Africa and indeed the contemporary society are not conscious of their merits for Christian witnessing and salvation. This brings about their lackadaisical attitude in participation during their celebrations with varied wrong notions on the sacraments. In order to achieve these renewal and commitment needed as vehicles of New Evangelization, some implications which are not exhaustive, but can be established to serve as helpful insights that would promote meaningful participation are proffered.

One of the outstanding implications is proper catechesis on the true purpose of sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick. The purpose of all liturgical formation is to develop in the Christians “a living, explicit and active faith, enlightened by doctrine”³⁵ for the purpose of making all Christians personally committed to the message of salvation. It will also shed light on every Christian and facilitate the maturity of the faith and as such, the Christian would be able to communicate it accordingly. Supporting this view, Francis Cardinal Arinze agrees that “A major challenge facing the Church in every age is to see that every Christian receives adequate and ongoing liturgical formation, according to each person’s vocation and mission.”³⁶ Some worshippers have

³² “Guidelines for the Healing Ministry in Nigeria” issued by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), September 14, 1996.

³³ There are three sacred oils: the oil of catechumen, oil of chrism (*sanctum chrisma*) or oil of gladness and oil of the sick (*oleum infirmorum*).

³⁴ RS no. 9.

³⁵ CCC no. 14.

³⁶ Francis Cardinal Arinze, *Celebrating the Holy Eucharist* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006) 118.

badly developed their liturgical knowledge due to years of poor liturgical formation. Ignorance is what we reap as “*nemo dat quod non habet*” (One cannot give what one does not have).³⁷ It is often said that “a blind man/woman cannot lead another blind man/woman or else both of them will fall into a pit.” According to Saint John Paul II:

In view of the growing alienation of many from Christian doctrine and the Church, it is a pressing responsibility of the Bishop to be, above all, a witness to faith, to sincerely confess and teach the Catholic faith together with his priests and catechists and to preserve it in its original purity. Common new efforts for re-evangelization and formation of convinced Christians through an organic plan of deepened catechesis are the real answer to the evils and defects which become clear from the diagnosis of the present situation of our dioceses.³⁸

Consequently, ongoing catechesis and formation should be a priority in every pastoral plan and action of the parish and the arch/diocese.

There is also the need to re-educate the priests on the value of the sacraments. While we must acknowledge the efforts of some priests in celebrating the sacraments well, we must remark that some priests are not concerned about the celebration of the sacraments especially according to the mind of the Church and God; hence, the abuses continue to multiply. The priests should be re-educated that they have a very important role to play in the celebration of the sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick and indeed, other liturgical celebrations. This could be done through periodic seminars, conferences, symposia or workshops, which they should strongly be encouraged to attend. They should be completely involved and concerned with the activities of their parishioners. Consequently, they become an integral avenue capable of making Christians to be full, active and conscious participants in the celebration of the sacraments.

The pastoral care of the penitents and the sick is also the area that needs to be explored by pastors and the lay faithful in order to alleviate the problems and sufferings of the faithful. Imagine the number of Catholic Christians we lose to faith because of lack of solidarity during ill health. Lack of a deep and close relationship between the pastors and his flock and among other Church members engender abuses of the sacraments and sacramentals. The pastors must be emphatic and so soothe the hydra-headed problem of the people. Pastoral care of the sick and troubled in need of reconciliation and healing include availability for confessions, organizing Mass for the sick, sick calls, and practical works of charity. This is in *tandem* with Pope Francis’ admonition that the Catholic faithful, led by priests, should draw attention to the next-door neighbour in order to bring God’s love to the broken and needy of the world. The Holy Father affirms that the Church must rediscover the richness and beauty of Christ and His Gospel in the liturgy, “in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.”³⁹

Furthermore, authentic liturgical inculturation of the sacraments is advocated as an antidote to the abuse of the sacraments. Lack of inculturation will ever continue to constitute a stiff challenge to the growth and existence of the Catholic Christianity in Africa. It is not enough to condemn the liturgical abuses of the sacraments, we should equally proffer some alternatives and options from the cultural values and genius of the people. Igbo worldview, for example, is replete with the understanding that the Christian message can integrate

³⁷ Some Catholics lack the basic understanding on the structure of the sacrament of Penance. The story of the woman who asked the priest after confession to knock at the confessional to signal the end of the confession is a classical example. In Igbo language, she said, “*Fada nwam, korom kpon kpon*” (literally translated as: Father my son, knock for me to go). For her, knocking at the confessional is part of the structure of sacrament.

³⁸ John Paul II, “Address to the Bishops of Scandinavian Countries” in *L’Osservatore Romano* 13 (30 March, 1987) 17-18.

³⁹ EG no. 20.

positive values as a way of incarnating the word of God.⁴⁰ One of the values of Igbo reconciliation is that the interpersonal relationship which is damaged is restored in the process. We can think of reconciliation ritual of *Igba ndu* among Igbo Christians. The relevant structures, like the role of the community, word, rite, participation and healing celebration, speak volume for them.⁴¹

Besides, the image of the Church as “a family of the people of God” paints a true picture of the Christian community, leaning on the step towards inculturation. A true picture of the Church emphasizes care for others, solidarity and warmth in human relationships, acceptance of others, dialogue and trust, avoiding all ethnocentrism, clericalism, parochialism and excessive individualism. In the spirit of the African Synod of 1994, the African society could be made better by first transforming *ecclesiola in ecclesia* (the individual family within a given society). The family that the Synod of 1994 had in mind was obviously the African family that functions with shared responsibilities and cooperation.⁴² Pope Francis rightly averred that,

Christian families should never forget that faith does not remove us from the world, but draws us more deeply into it...Each of us, in fact, has a special role in preparing for the coming of God’s kingdom in our world.⁴³

The Pontiff further stated that,

Families should not see themselves as a refuge from society, but instead go forth from their homes in a spirit of solidarity with others. In this way, they become a hub for integrating persons into society and a point of contact between the public and private spheres.⁴⁴

This image of the Church as a family should be promoted in Onitsha Archdiocese and indeed the contemporary world to build a domestic Church and by extension from the fundamental foundation of society. The man healed of the evil spirit was asked to go back to his family and tell how much God has done for him (Mark 5:1-20).

Very significantly is the practical implication. It re-echoes Archbishop Valerian M. Okeke’s foreword to the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Second Onitsha Archdiocesan Synod couched in the declaration of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy by Pope Francis. That the Christian assembly should be rich in mercy, bless and direct their good intentions, live and share the Good News as demanded by the New Evangelization.⁴⁵ They should not just be seen to be celebrating these rites and rituals of the sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick, but should celebrate them according to the spirit of liturgy and dynamics of liturgical celebration, so that as the slogan of what the Church believes holds sway: “the law of prayer fixes the law of faith” (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). The celebrations of the sacraments, no doubt, are replete with rituals that require active participation to convey them as the sacraments of reconciliation and healing which have deep implications for the Church today, since “*salus animarum, suprema lex*” (salvation of soul is the supreme law). And they must not be conducted in an indecorous manner, unbecoming of liturgical worship where order and

⁴⁰ Is it not possible to integrate the use of traditional Palm Oil (*akwu ojukwu*) as the anointing oil for the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick? Luckily, John Echemazu, CSSp, a Catholic Priest, who studied in the Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA), Port Harcourt, Nigeria beautifully and scholarly defended a thesis in this regard.

⁴¹ For further reading, see Eugene Elochukwu Uzukwu, “Reconciliation and Inculturation: A Nigerian (Igbo) Orientation” in *African Ecclesial Review*, Volume 25, Number 5, October 1983, 275-279; Lambert Bartels, “Reconciliation and Penance: A View from Ethiopia” in *African Ecclesial Review*, Volume 25, Number 4, August 1983, 221-225.

⁴² John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa (The Church in Africa)* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995) no. 43.

⁴³ Pope Francis, *Address at the Meeting with Families in Manila* (16 January 2015): AAS 107 (2015), 178.

⁴⁴ AL no. 181.

⁴⁵ *Instrumentum Laboris* p. ix.

decorum are the moving principles. We cannot simply abuse them by importing foreign practices, dress code, postures, gestures and mannerisms, especially when they are at variance with sacred liturgical rites. In the words of Hilary Okeke, “Nothing therefore should stand in the way of the liturgical celebration that is worthy, orderly, smooth, beautiful and spiritually-enriching.”⁴⁶ Both the ministers and recipients of the sacraments must be in a good state of mind and body towards the celebrations, since to have its full effects, those who come to them must have proper dispositions, tuning their minds and voices in prayer form to cooperate with the heavenly grace.⁴⁷

Conclusion

We have been able in this present essay to affirm that discussion on Penance and Anointing of the Sick is surely not new in Church circles today. Many concerned agents of New Evangelization see them as pastoral options that must be explored for reconciliation and healing in any given context. If the Gospel message that we preach in season and out of season is to have any impact on the lives of our people today, there must be commitment and renewal guided by proper liturgical principles and decorum. It is obvious, however, that abuses in the celebration of the sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick occur in the Church in Africa and is symptomatic of “real falsification of the Catholic Liturgy”.⁴⁸ This writer is of the opinion, nonetheless, that “*Abusus non tollit usum*” (Abuse does not destroy use/utility). Thus, the paper enumerated the use of the sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick as sacraments of reconciliation and healing. The reformed liturgy of the Second Vatican Council challenges us that for the liturgy to produce its full effects, “it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain.”⁴⁹ Sacramental celebrations must be carried out in a dignified, devout and attentive manner (*digne, attente et devote*). Everything that has to do with the celebrations of the sacraments must manifest the faith of the Church, and should realistically be celebrated with reverence, gusto and devotion.

Finally, this essay serves as a wake-up call, and an opportunity for all. This can be an opportunity to recommit ourselves to a robust evangelization that forms the Christian life and spirituality. Only through faithfulness to the liturgical laws and practices in the sacraments and sacramentals of the Church will the Christian faithful stand to gain. The worshipper is only “participating in the work of God”⁵⁰ which inevitably calls for respect and decorum which the sacred actions demand. If not, one loses the merits of the sacraments. It was the point of emphasis that some people are not given proper care and spiritual nourishment by the priests. It is time for our liturgical and sacramental celebrations to go beyond the boundary of the four walls of the Church and extend to the members of the Church who cannot be present in such celebrations. The Catholic Church in Africa must seek for new and more effective ways to express the forgiving love of Christ and imitating the care of Christ Himself for the sick in body and spirit, while still challenging its members to live up to the value of the Gospel in the spirit of the New Evangelization.

⁴⁶ Okeke. *Marriage and the Family in the Light of Faith* 67.

⁴⁷ See Emmanuel C. Anagwo, “Christian Wedding and the Challenge of Liturgical Decorum in Nigeria” in *African Christian Studies*, Vol. 31, No.3, September 2015, 89.

⁴⁸ RS no. 169.

⁴⁹ SC no. 11.

⁵⁰ CCC no. 1069.

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Penance/Reconciliation heals our sinfulness. But this Sacrament of Anointing is healing in a special sense: it brings Christ's compassionate loving healing to bear on those suffering serious sickness (cf. Biblical Verses. Mark 6:13 They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. 13. Background/History NEW TESTAMENT TIMES. This association minimized the use of the sacrament for the sick as it was more and more reserved just for the dying. Vatican II stated Extreme Unction, which may also and more properly be called Anointing of the Sick, is not a sacrament intended only for those who are at the point of death. Sacrament of Extreme Unction or Anointing of the Sick. Sacrament of Holy Orders. Sacrament of Matrimony. Sacraments of the Catholic Church. See the Seven Sacraments. Penance is something different. A baptized person who sins again, sins against God to whom, since his baptism in the name of the Most Holy Trinity, he belongs. He also betrays the Church of which he is now a member. Thus, the new atonement assumes the character of a legal trial, with accusation, sentence and satisfaction. More and more, however, penance has withdrawn from the public domain and today only the private administration of the sacrament is still in use. The development of the system of confession shows that misunderstanding easily arises above the nature of penance. Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. The forgiveness the priest speaks in the name of Jesus. absolution. When we express our sorrow for our sins and having offended God. Contrition. Which holy oil is used for the anointing of the sick. oil of the sick. What part of the body does the priest or bishop anoint. hands and forehead. Jesus continues his ministry of healing today through the Sacrament of the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Anointing of the Sick. Through the Anointing of the Sick, Those who are old, weakened because of old age, or dying are joined to Christ and receive strength, courage. Other sets by this creator.