



Rummaging through the Boxes of Vatican Council II

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The Council renewed and revised the sacred rites of the Church; but the revised rite of viaticum never really made it off the printed page and into the pastoral practice of the Church.

Some things just get lost: keys, books, glasses, drivers—ordinary and everyday scatterings in our hurried and harried lives. Other “things” lost are deemed more precious and therefore irreplaceable: a wedding ring, an old photograph, long ago letters, a faded friendship.

Recently, for example, I was invited to the house of this man for a dinner party, and during the subsequent tour of his home, I noticed a worn, scraggly remnant of a teddy bear neatly placed on the pillows in the center of his bed. I smiled as I glimpsed a treasure more valuable than the art and furniture of this beautiful home, and a tragedy if ever lost. (I also smiled at the seeming incongruity of this tiny teddy bear belonging to this 6'6", 200+ pound multiple triathlon champion!)

A few years back I was rummaging through some old boxes and to my amazement I came across a college graduation card with an uncashed check dated June of 1975. I suspect that the money is lost for good since I think that both the checking account and the lives of these friends of my parents have both since closed!

Is it any wonder that with all of the persons, places, and things that surface and surround us in our lives that some things just get lost?

Well, it should come as no surprise then that in our rummaging through the sacramental life of the Church in our care for our sick and dying that we have found an uncashed check from the Second Vatican Council. Imagine all of the persons, places, and things that sur-

rounded and surrounded that unprecedented worldwide gathering for the renewal of the Church of Christ—imprinted in four constitutions (Church, Divine Revelation, Sacred Liturgy, and Church in the Modern World), nine decrees (Instruments of Social Communication, Ecumenism, Eastern Catholic Churches, Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, Priestly Formation, Renewal of Religious Life, Apostolate of the Laity, Ministry and Life of Priests, and the Church's Missionary Activity), and three declarations (Christian Education, Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, and Religious Freedom)—all this in 103,014 words and 992 footnotes!*

Even in a Church, some things just get lost.

The Council renewed and revised the sacred rites of the Church, including the rite of viaticum, but that revised ritual never really made it off the printed page and into the pastoral practice of the Church. My conversations with the participants at the eight symposia last fall, coupled with subsequent discussions with priests, bishops, and theologians, attest to truth of this amazing discovery.

This reality came home to me when I realized that I don't think I used the rite of viaticum myself in the 11 years of my parish ministry. And I, and my classmates, were in the bosom of the post-Vatican II Church (seminary from 1971 to 1979) energized and excited with a powerfully renewed Church of the People of God with meaningful ritual, ancient in its apostolic roots and modern in its contemporary color and language.

But in practice we took the oils with us and made little distinction between rites for the sick and rites for the dying. I remember thinking on some level that well, this anointing is in preparation for the “final healing”—death, so even intuitively I knew from my thought processes that I was administering a balm for healing to someone who well, really wasn't going to get healed—except of course death. An intellectual stretch, I would say.

Had I known that the Church did have “last rites”! Remember we disparaged that phrase: “No, it is not extreme unction, no, it's not the ‘last rites,’ it is the Church's prayer for healing.” We would seek to reassure the frightened woman preparing for surgery or the petrified man undergoing chemotherapy, and would anoint these seriously ill with their still suspicious looks, then go to the next room with the same oil and anoint “papa” who was unconscious and breathing his last breaths.

Had I known that the Church did in fact have “last rites,” what a different pastoral practice I would have exercised in my ministry, and empowered others of the People of God to exercise in their ministry as well.

A funny thing happened on the way to these fall symposia last summer. Unbeknownst to me, I was beginning my needed practicum in the rites of the Church for her sick and dying.

In July, my friend Artie's dad, Arthur, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I happened to be visiting Boston at the time and so I went to the hospital to visit this beautiful man of faith. Upon entering his room, he smiled with obvious surprise and delight at my unexpected visit. He then shrugged his shoulders, still smiling, “Father Joe, what can you do? (Pause) I am at peace. I have lived a wonderful life, I have my faith.”

We visited and I prayed with him and Evelyn, his wife of 57 years. Knowing that I was going to be home over Labor Day weekend I arranged to gather to celebrate the Eucharist with Arthur and his wife, his only son, his two daughters, the grandchildren, and a great grandchild.

Arthur had made a decision not to undergo any radiation or chemotherapy, but rather to live well with a plan for palliative care. In the seven weeks since I had seen him, he had done pretty well enjoying quality time with his family and returning to some of the regular routine, though he had lost 25 pounds and was noticeably weaker.

In my own semiconscious, ever-present dilemma over the sacrament of the anointing, I found myself offering this sacrament with the following “qualification.” I said, “Arthur, I would like to offer you the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. As you know this is the Church’s sacrament for healing. (Pause) We know that you will probably not be healed of this illness, unless of course there is some miracle. But if you would like to receive this sacrament, I think what we are asking God is to give you the strength and healing you need for this last part of the journey.”

He was terminally ill, but he was not as yet dying.

I will never forget his instant response. “Yes, Father Joe, that I do need.” So we gathered as family and Church and we prayed, invoked the coming of the Holy Spirit with the laying on of hands—of the priest, then of the priestly people—and anointed him with oil. As always for me, through my eyes of faith, a quiet and calm descends by the presence of Christ in that sacramental encounter.

And so I returned to Milwaukee from Boston for all of a day and then off to the races: Santa Clara, Philadelphia, Albuquerque, Chicago, Minneapolis, Seattle, Worcester and Baton Rouge. All the while I am living and breathing this experience of prayer, study, and discussion of viaticum. All the while I am reflecting on my own experience in priestly ministry, and equally importantly, my own experience of projecting what I would want if I was dying.

I love the Eucharist. The Eucharist, as the documents of Vatican II declared, is “the source and summit” of the Church’s life. The Eucharist is central to our week, our Sabbath. The Eucharist is celebrated in all of the significant moments of our life—and our death.

Then how can we not have this food for the journey, the food we have had for the whole journey of our lives, now at the critical moment of the final turn in the road of this same journey.

I thought, and said, with a lot more passion than I realized, “If I am dying, conscious or not, don’t come near me with oil, give me the Eucharist, the food for this final passage of my life.”

I heard the normal grumbling of thunder from some of the symposium participants in the approaching storm of change. “It’s not practical.” “You can’t give Communion to people who cannot take anything by mouth.” “By the time someone acknowledges that he or she is dying, they cannot receive.” On and on the darkened voices blew up their protest.

And then I find myself passionately advocating that if as Michael Drumm says, “at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., the Church declared that Viaticum is the sacrament appropriate to the dying,” then we need not to focus on

“what we cannot do,” but rather with some creative imagination “what we can do.” If this is in fact the Church’s sacrament for the dying, then we have obligation to make this sacrament available.

It’s now Worcester, the last symposium (Baton Rouge will, of course, take that honor later thanks to Hurricane Isidore). I have called my friend Artie. He tells me that hospice came in this past week, and that his Dad is becoming weaker and that he has not been out of bed the last two days. I am presiding at the Eucharist on that Saturday morning at the Worcester symposium, and I decide to reserve the Eucharist to bring to Arthur in my plan to visit him that evening (an hour and half drive).

The day is spent on studying and discussing viaticum. The night will be spent practicing and praying viaticum. During the long drive I am touched by the irony of it all, really, the grace of it all. I am pondering the fact that this may be the first time I have ever celebrated viaticum as viaticum. I am kind of marveling, feeling embarrassed almost, that I who thought I was so liturgically astute could have missed this sacramental rite in this form.

The beautiful words of the prayers in and of themselves create a calm, a peace, an acceptance of what is happening in this moment of painful loss in crossing; and of abundant hope in rising.

My brothers and sisters,
before our Lord Jesus Christ
passed from this world to return to the Father,
he left us the sacrament of his body and blood.
When the hour comes for us to pass from this
life,
and join him, he strengthens us with this food
for
our journey and comforts us by this pledge of
resurrection.

I am touched by this sacred, intimate moment of the three of us at the table, hungry and becoming satisfied, hurting and becoming comforted, frightened and becoming calmer. What beautiful ritual, I think.

Two days later, while I am still in Boston, I receive a call at my brother’s. Arthur has just died. I grab my green ritual and go to his home 15 minutes away, and there continuing the “last rites” of the Church, we pray the commendation of the dead.

Upon reflection, I realize the grace that I had in being there at the key moments of ritual in a three-month journey for my friend Arthur and his family. I experienced firsthand the continuous rite in this one pastoral relationship: a visit to the sick, the rite of anointing, the rite of viaticum, and the commendation of the dead. I experienced in one pastoral relationship the Church’s care at all the bends in the road in sickness and in dying.

Most especially, I realized that this food for the journey—viaticum—has sat tucked away in a card all these years.

Even in a Church, some things get lost. More importantly, do you too realize what we in our rummaging through these years have now found?

* Abbot, Walter, M., SJ. General Editor. The Documents of Vatican II. New York: Corpus Books, 1966, p. ix. ▼

*If I am
dying,
conscious
or not,
don't
come
near me
with oil,
give me
the
Eucharist,
the food
for this
final
passage
of my life.*