

Catholic Last Rites (Reconciliation & Penance, Anointing, Viaticum, Blessings & Prayers)

You may be wondering, “What are the **Last Rites**, and who can receive them?”. In this article, we will be covering which sacraments make up the last rites, when and how they are performed, and who can receive the rites.

Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person. [James \(5:14-15\)](#)

What Are the Last Rites?

The Last Rites are a collection of prayers and sacraments that are administered to a person who is in grave danger of dying. Jesus gave us the seven sacraments – Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony – to help guide us into the light of the Lord.

Baptism and Confirmation are vital for welcoming the love and wisdom of the Heavenly Father into our lives. The Last Rites incorporate the Sacraments of Confession, Anointing of the Sick, and Eucharist, with the prayers of Apostles’ Creed, and Our Father.

Who Can Perform the Last Rites?

A Priest’s primary duty is to take care of the spiritual needs of their congregation. Just as birth and marriage are crucial parts of a Catholic’s life, so too is their inevitable death.

Attending to the spiritual needs of the dying is one of the most important duties of a Priest. Baptism, Confirmation, and Marriage are all Sacraments that an individual Catholic could choose for themselves. None of us can choose when its time for us to enter Heaven, only by God’s will can we be called, and a Priest must prepare for this.

Why Are The Last Rites Important?

It is due to God’s will that we are born, and we die. The Last Rite can be used to help provide Catholics with the spiritual strength needed for both physical and spiritual recovery, at times when we may be at the brink of death.

When a faithful Catholic faces imminent risk of dying or is on the verge of death, the Last Rites can be administered to offer them a final chance to be absolved of their sins in preparation for entering heaven, to denounce their sinful ways, and face their individual judgment to avoid hell.

Are the Last Rights Only Performed At the Hour of Death?

While it may be the case that most people will not ask for their Last Rites until death is all but assured, it nevertheless remains a fact that the Last Rites can be performed much earlier.

Many Priest actually find it to be quite troublesome when families often wait till the last minute before calling upon them. Sometimes it may be too late, and the Priest might not arrive in time to perform the rites before the family member dies.

For this reason, Priests would rather perform the last rights when there’s still plenty of time left.

If a practicing Catholic is in danger of death from sickness, illness, old age, or about to undergo a high-risk operation; they may request to have their Last Rites performed to help with their recovery, or to ask God to help ease their suffering during their final journey.

Who Can Be Given the Last Rites?

Essentially speaking, only the living can be anointed, and as such, the Last Rites are reserved for the dying, and not the deceased. If a Catholic was to have passed away before a Priest could administer the Last Rites, the Priest could instead choose to recite a prayer for their Pastoral Care of the Sick ritual book.

For the living, a practicing and faithful Catholic who is in good standing with the Church can be granted a full Last Rites service. Depending on who is receiving the Last Rites, and what their current state of mind and body is at, will determine how the Last Rites may be performed.

Non-Catholics and absent Catholics can be granted the Last Rites as well, the process will not involve the Holy Communion, however. As long as they are able to consent to it, soldiers of war, death row inmates, the young, and the old, of all walks of life, are able to request that the Last Rites be performed for them.

Do All Christian Faiths Practice Last Rites?

Last Rites is primarily a Catholic tradition that is administered to the dying. The other Christian denominations may pray for the dying person, or wait until they have been called to heaven by God before praying for them.

What Happens if the Person is Not Capable of Requesting the Last Rites For Themselves?

Family members of the dying person can request that the Last Rites be performed for them on their behalf. The Priest will confirm that the person is a practicing Catholic before leading them in an Act of Contrition, and the Apostles' Creed prayer, before anointing them with holy oil.

The Last Rites Service

The entire Last Rites process can be broken down into three core segments:

- Reconciliation and Penance
- Anointing of the Sick
- The Viaticum

1) Addressing the Dying: Before they will begin, the Priest will speak with the dying person to not only comfort them but to also see to their individual spiritual needs. In doing so, the Priest will be able to determine if the person will be capable of participating in the Last Rites ceremony on their own, or if the Priest will need to lead them.

This is where the Priest will also determine which rites this individual may be entitled to receive. If they were an active member of the community, faithful to the Lord, and within good standing with the Church, the Priest would be willing to provide them with all the sacramental rites.

If the person is a non-Catholic, someone who has been excommunicated, or is no longer a practicing Catholic, the Priest may adjust the rites accordingly. They may even offer to perform a baptism for the individual, or they may only be willing to offer Confession and the Anointing of the Sick. It is not the Priest's role to pass judgment, only to help guide them through their final journey.

2) The Beginning of the Last Rites: The priest will make the Sign of the Cross. If the recipient is a non-Catholic, unconscious, or unable to speak for themselves, the Priest will lead them in an Act of Contrition. For practicing Catholics that are able to speak, the Priest will move on to Confession instead.

3) Reconciliation and Penance: The Sacrament of Confession is an essential part of the Last Rites. By taking confession on their death bed, a dying person can be absolved of their sins by the Priest. In doing so, the confessor will receive the sacramental grace of Confession.

4) Apostles' Creed: The Priest will now lead their charge in the prayer of Apostle's Creed. They even ask them to renew their Baptismal promises and Baptise a willing non-Catholic.

5) Anointing of the Sick: The sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is reserved for the most serious of situations. Some who is suffering an illness such as cancer, or are going in for a dangerous operation; can be given the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, even if there is a good chance for their recovery. By the grace of God, the anointing could be received to help them through their difficult journey. If the illness was to return after their recovery, the Anointing of the Sick could be performed again if requested.

Alternatively, if they are gravely ill, very old, or if there is a high probability of them dying from a terminal illness or disease, then the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, would be used to ask the Lord to help ease their suffering during their last days on earth, and for them to pass away peacefully, without any pain or suffering.

The Priest will then anoint the recipient with holy oil if they are Catholic, or chrism if they are non-Catholic.

6) The Viaticum: Before the Sacrament of Eucharist is offered, the Priest will lead this person in the Our Father prayer. If they are Catholic, conscious and able to swallow, the priest will offer them their final Holy Communion, the Viaticum, which means "with you on the way".

7) Final Blessing and Prayers: The Priest will conclude the Last Rites by offering blessings and reciting prayers that they feel will be applicable to the recipient's specific situation.

Final Thoughts

If you find yourself in a situation where your life is in grave danger, and death could be close, whether it is due to illness, or a dangerous procedure that is needed to save your life, speak with your priest early on, and address your concerns.

They can help to advise you on what would be the best approach to take when preparing for the inevitable. They may advise you to regularly take part in Confession and Holy Communion as part of your preparations.

If you are to undergo treatment or will need to have an operation or two, they might recommend that you receive the Anointing of the Sick at each stage of the process, especially if the risks of dying get higher with each new procedure.

SCRIPTURE CATHOLIC <https://www.scripturecatholic.com/catholic-last-rites/>

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (CCC) - Chapter Two: The Sacraments of Healing.

Article 4 The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation 1420-1498. Article 5 The Anointing of the Sick 1499-1532 (Viaticum, the Last Sacrament of the Christian 1331, 1392, 1517, 1524-1525).

Online CCC at: <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/>