When someone in the family is seriously ill, you need to have a clear sense of how the Church’s sacraments can offer peace and support.

So often in the past, we’d never call a priest for fear of frightening our loved one with the prospect of imminent death. The result was both depriving those we love of the comforts of their faith and giving the sacrament a false reputation. It also meant calls in the middle of the night to a family distraught with grief.

The problem is even older than our emotional discomfort with the reality of death. It began in the early centuries of Christianity when the sacrament of penance could only be received once in a lifetime. That meant that people often put off penance until death was very close, and since the sacrament of the sick presumed confession and reconciliation with the Church community, it also gradually became the sacrament for the dying. A mindset developed and I can even remember its consequences from my own days as a young priest in Elm Grove – only call the priest when there was no hope of recovery. That often meant waiting until the person was unconscious. It also deprived a family of the consolation experienced when gathered in prayer for and with the one we loved dearly.

The Second Vatican Council called us to reclaim the practice found in the New Testament, namely the invitation to call the priest in case of illness so that once again the anointing might be a sacrament for the sick (James 5:14).

Some things to keep in mind include:

- The sacrament is for anyone who is seriously ill or facing serious surgery. It may be repeated during a long illness or with the increasing infirmity of old age. It may be offered to a child over seven years of age.
- No emergency is necessary.
- The ideal manner of celebrating the sacrament is in the midst of family and close friends who join the Church’s prayer. Regular anointings in the parish church are very useful, especially with shortened hospital stays and fewer numbers of priests. Only an ordained priest can administer the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.
- The purpose of the sacrament is to unite the sick person’s ailments to the Lord’s passion and resurrection – in a sense to anoint the pain or discomfort and render it more Christ-like. It brings peace.
- Thus, the anointing of the sick is for the living. In fact, the Church does not permit anointing for anyone who has already died.

By contrast, the real “Last Rites” are simply and powerfully the administration of holy Communion with the special prayers for the dying. This Communion is called Viaticum, which means “nourishment for the journey.” It is a powerful prayer and brings great peace and consolation to someone facing her/his final travel into the embrace of God’s love.

Call your parish office if a loved one is seriously ill so that you can best determine which type of sacrament might be most appropriate. It may be helpful to cut out this article and place it in the family Bible for future reference.