

Major and minor Sacraments

Within the Church of England (as within the Roman Catholic Church there are generally considered to be seven Sacraments. The two major Sacraments are those ordained by Jesus himself, Baptism and Eucharist.

The other five have grown in the church. Certainly the idea of seven Sacraments was taught by Peter Lombard a 12th Century theologian, and affirmed by the Council of Trent in 1546. Marriage was the last to gain sacramental status, although marriage itself, as an institution, goes back the farthest.

The other five Sacraments are:

Confirmation

Ordination

Marriage

Reconciliation (or Confession)

Unction (anointing of the sick)

The sacraments also divide in another way; those that are repeatable and those that only happen once. The repeatable ones being: Holy Communion; Reconciliation and Unction. Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination and Marriage (?)

Confirmation:

In the book of Acts we read that Baptism with water was followed by the laying on of hands, which was associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8.4-17). This completed the initiation into the Church. Originally the initiation into the church would have been one event, or only separated by a few days as in the passage from Acts. The two parts became separated, possibly because with infant Baptism the people wanted something to mark out someone taking the responsibility for their own faith and marking this out. The laying on of hands is done by the Bishop at Confirmation whilst the Baptism is done by the priest. The oil used at Confirmation (and sometimes as a second anointing at baptism) is oil that has been blessed for that purpose by the Bishop. In the Orthodox church these rites have not been separated, the baby is baptised and anointed with oil blessed by the Bishop at the one service and is then given Holy Communion from the beginning.

Marriage

Marriage is something that has existed for thousands of years so in making a Sacrament of it the Church really took an existing institution and brought it into faith, giving it a blessing. In a sense it is different from the other Sacraments in that it is between husband and wife, with the priest just there to bless the marriage. Over the years the emphases have shifted as is seen in the introduction to a marriage service where the ordering of the purposes of marriage changes.

BCP:

Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this Congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee;

and is commended of Saint Paul to be honourable among all men: and therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.

First, It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

Thirdly, It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can shew any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace.

Common Worship:

In the presence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
we have come together
to witness the marriage of *N* and *N*,
to pray for God's blessing on them,
to share their joy
and to celebrate their love.

Marriage is a gift of God in creation
through which husband and wife may know the grace of God.
It is given
that as man and woman grow together in love and trust,
they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind,
as Christ is united with his bride, the Church.

The gift of marriage brings husband and wife together
in the delight and tenderness of sexual union
and joyful commitment to the end of their lives.
It is given as the foundation of family life
in which children are [born and] nurtured
and in which each member of the family, in good times and in bad,
may find strength, companionship and comfort,
and grow to maturity in love.

Reconciliation (or Confession)

If Baptism is for the washing away of sin there then became a problem in the early Church about post-baptismal sins. Forgiveness of sins was very important in Jesus' ministry on earth and there are passages in the \gospels where it can be considered that Jesus passed that ministry on to the Apostles and thus to the whole Church. John 20.23 –'

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Matthew 16.19 Jesus tells Peter –‘I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’

It obviously became a practice in the early Church as we find in the letter of James 5.16 - Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

The Church of England provides a service for the Reconciliation of a Penitent. Confession can be made formally or informally, usually with some advice given by the priest and ending with absolution given by the priest.

The teaching of the Church on this is summarised as “All may, none must, some should”. So within the Church of England there is a broad spread from those who would never choose to make their confession before a priest, to those who might do it on occasion if seriously troubled by guilt on a matter, to those who make it a regular part of their spiritual discipline and find it a very helpful practice.

Unction (Anointing of the sick)

When the Bishop blesses oils on Maundy Thursday he blesses 3 oils, the Oil of Catechumens (or oil of Baptism), the Oil of Chrism for Confirmation (and Ordination) and the third oil is for the Anointing of the Sick (or Infirmatum). We read in the letter of James “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.”

We now tend to send for the doctor if we are sick, but the Church also provides a ministry of healing, not as an alternative, but alongside the medical profession.

50 years or so ago people used to speak of “Extreme Unction”. The priest was sent for to anoint the dying person and sometimes these people did survive, otherwise it was seen as a healing of them with God. Ideas have changed.

We find many services of healing; and laying on of hands and prayer for healing is something that can be done by the laity. However there is also the opportunity for people to be anointed by a priest with the oil blessed for that purpose. This may be sought by people who are facing an operation, who are physically ill in some way but it is also for spiritual healing: the healing of that person with themselves and with God.

Ordination

Ordination is that service where the person, having been selected by the Church recognising God’s call to him or her, has hands laid on them by the Bishop (in the case of Deacons) and the Bishop and other priests in the case of priests. Priests are then anointed with the Oil of Chrism.

We find the laying on of hands with prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit to enable the person to do the task to which they were called in the Bible e.g.

Acts 13.1-3 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Priests and Deacons have a specific role within the Church which is summarised in the Declaration in the Ordination Service:

Deacons

Deacons are called to work with the Bishop and the priests with whom they serve as heralds of Christ's kingdom. They are to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, as agents of God's purposes of love. They are to serve the community in which they are set, bringing to the Church the needs and hopes of all the people. They are to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.

Deacons share in the pastoral ministry of the Church and in leading God's people in worship. They preach the word and bring the needs of the world before the Church in intercession. They accompany those searching for faith and bring them to baptism. They assist in administering the sacraments; they distribute communion and minister to the sick and housebound.

Deacons are to seek nourishment from the Scriptures; they are to study them with God's people, that the whole Church may be equipped to live out the gospel in the world. They are to be faithful in prayer, expectant and watchful for the signs of God's presence, as he reveals his kingdom among us.

Priests

Priests are called to be servants and shepherds among the people to whom they are sent. With their Bishop and fellow ministers, they are to proclaim the word of the Lord and to watch for the signs of God's new creation. They are to be messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord; they are to teach and to admonish, to feed and provide for his family, to search for his children in the wilderness of this world's temptations, and to guide them through its confusions, that they may be saved through Christ for ever. Formed by the word, they are to call their hearers to repentance and to declare in Christ's name the absolution and forgiveness of their sins.

With all God's people, they are to tell the story of God's love. They are to baptize new disciples in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and to walk with them in the way of Christ, nurturing them in the faith. They are to unfold the Scriptures, to preach the word in season and out of season, and to declare the mighty acts of God. They are to preside at the Lord's table and lead his people in worship, offering with them a spiritual sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. They are to bless the people in God's name. They are to resist evil, support the weak, defend the poor, and intercede for all in need. They are to minister to the sick and prepare the dying for their death. Guided by the Spirit, they are to discern and foster the gifts of all God's people, that the whole Church may be built up in unity and faith.