

CONFIRMATION CLASS

Session Thirteen—The Minor Sacraments

1. Last week, we looked at the “major” Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. In the Church’s understanding, these two Sacraments are a necessary and normal part of every Christian life. Baptism begins the Christian life, and the Eucharist sustains and nourishes it.
2. This week, we look at the five “minor” Sacraments of Confirmation, Penance, Unction, Matrimony, and Holy Orders. The Church calls these the “minor” Sacraments because they are administered to some but not all Christians, as the occasion arises, and they are not considered necessary to every Christian life in the same way that Baptism and the Eucharist are.
3. The five minor Sacraments are sometimes also referred to as “Sacramental Rites” (*Book of Common Prayer, 1979, page 860*).
4. The following pages contain notes on each of the five minor Sacraments, following the outline:
 - (a) Outward and Visible Sign
 - Matter (what is done)
 - Form (what is said)
 - (b) Inward and Spiritual Grace (Gift)
 - (c) Authorized Minister
 - (d) Eligible Recipients
 - (e) Repeatable?
5. Remember: when we say that a Sacrament is “valid” we mean that it may be *absolutely* relied upon to convey the grace that it signifies—regardless of whether we “feel” anything at the time.
6. A Sacrament is valid if it is administered with the correct form and matter, by the authorized minister, to eligible recipients, with the intention of “doing what the Church does when it administers this Sacrament.”

THE FIVE MINOR SACRAMENTS

1. Confirmation

(a) Outward and Visible Sign

- Matter (what is done)

The Bishop lays hands on the candidate's head and prays for the candidate.

- Form (what is said)

Prayer said by the Bishop when laying on hands (see Prayer Book, page 418).

(b) Inward and Spiritual Grace (Gift)

Strengthening the gifts of the Holy Spirit to empower the candidates to fulfill the baptismal vows to which they are now recommitting themselves.

(c) Authorized Minister

The Bishop.

(d) Eligible Recipient

A baptized person who has not already been confirmed.

(e) Repeatable?

No. Once confirmed, always confirmed.

(In the Episcopal Church, we receive but do not re-confirm those confirmed by a bishop in another Church. See the words used in the Prayer Book on page 418 "for Reception.")

2. Penance (Confession, or Reconciliation of a Penitent)

- (a) Outward and Visible Sign
 - Matter (what is done)
A person (the “penitent”) privately confesses his/her sins to a priest; the priest offers counsel and pronounces absolution (forgiveness)
 - Form (what is said)
See the words used in the Prayer Book, pages 448, 451.
- (b) Inward and spiritual grace (gift)
God forgives the penitent’s sins and strengthens him/her not to sin again
- (c) Authorized Minister
A bishop or priest
(Only a bishop or priest has authority to pronounce absolution in the name of God and the Church, and only a bishop or priest is bound by “the seal of the confessional”—i.e., is absolutely forbidden ever to reveal what has been heard in a confession.)
- (d) Eligible Recipient
A baptized person, who is sorry for his/her sins, and who intends to amend his/her life
- (e) Repeatable?
Yes!
 - The Episcopal Church’s rule concerning Confession is “none must, all may, some should.”
 - We should make our confession if we are feeling guilty about a sin we have committed and cannot relieve our consciences by confessing directly to God in private prayer, or by participating in the General Confession in the Eucharist.
 - Some Episcopalians find it helpful to make their Confessions regularly as an aid to spiritual growth—for example, before the major festivals of the Church year, such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost.

3. **Unction (Anointing of the Sick)**

(a) Outward and Visible Sign

- Matter (what is done)

A priest or bishop anoints the forehead of a sick person with specially blessed oil and says a prayer for healing.

(Any Christian may lay hands on a sick person and pray for healing, but the Sacrament of Unction always includes an anointing by a priest or bishop.)

- Form (what is said)

(See the prayers in the Prayer Book on page 456.)

(b) Inward and Spiritual Grace (Gift)

- Healing of body or soul.

- This healing may or may not include a physical cure, which is not necessarily the same as healing.

- True healing repairs and strengthens our relationship with God during times of illness or injury

(c) Authorized Minister

- A Bishop or priest.

(d) Eligible Recipient

- A baptized person.

- We can pray for healing for anyone, but only those who are baptized can validly receive the Christian Sacraments.

(e) Repeatable?

Yes!

(Before the second half of the twentieth century, this Sacrament was sometimes known as “Extreme Unction” because it was administered only *in extremis*, i.e., when death was imminent. But now it is administered at any time of serious illness or injury, or before an operation.)

4. Holy Matrimony (Christian Marriage)

(a) Outward and Visible Sign

- Matter (what is done)

Two people commit themselves in the presence of God and his Church to live together in a lifelong monogamous union, and the priest blesses their union.

(The exchange of rings is optional.)

- Form (what is said)

(See the vows in the Prayer Book on page 427)

(b) Inward and Spiritual Grace (Gift)

- The two people receive the grace necessary to fulfill their wedding vows

- Their union becomes a sign to the community, the Church, and the world of the union between Christ and his Church

(c) Authorized Minister

- Perhaps surprisingly, the “ministers of the Sacrament” are the couple themselves; by exchanging their vows, they “marry each other”

- A bishop or priest normally officiates

- Where permitted by civil law, a deacon may officiate, but only a bishop or priest may bless the rings and the couple

(d) Eligible Recipients

- Until a few years ago, only a man and a woman could be married in church, but now the Episcopal Church provides weddings for same-sex couples.

- The Church’s traditional practice was not to permit remarriage of divorced persons in church while a former spouse was still alive, but now the Bishop may give permission for such remarriage.

- The couple must have a marriage license from the state.

- In the Episcopal Church, one of the two people must be baptized.

- In the Episcopal Church, the officiating minister must be satisfied that the couple is ready to be married before allowing the wedding to proceed. (A priest has the right to refuse to officiate at any wedding.)

- The Episcopal Church fully recognizes the legal validity of civil marriages. In some cases, it may be more appropriate and honest for a couple to have a civil ceremony than to be married in church

(f) Repeatable?

No, the marriage is “until we are parted by death” ... but:

- A widow or widower is free to remarry, since death has now dissolved the former marriage

- A divorced person may remarry in church with the Bishop’s permission (which is neither automatic nor guaranteed).

5. Holy Orders

(a) Outward and Visible Sign

- Matter (what is done)

The Bishop lays hands on the person's head and says the prayer for ordination.

- Form (what is said)

See the words in the Prayer Book, pages 521 (1st paragraph), 533 (last paragraph), and 545 (2nd paragraph)

(b) Inward and Spiritual Grace (Gift)

The person being ordained receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit for ordained ministry and is made a bishop, priest, or deacon of the Church

(c) Authorized Minister

A bishop

- In the Episcopal Church, the bishop must be in the Apostolic Succession (sometimes also called the "Historic Episcopate"), i.e., the unbroken chain of laying-on-of-hands believed to go all the way back to Jesus' apostles
- At least three bishops must participate in the laying-on-of-hands when ordaining a bishop
- The priests present join the bishop in laying on hands when ordaining a priest
- The bishop alone lays on hands when ordaining a deacon

(d) Eligible Recipient

A baptized person who has satisfied the Church's requirements for ordination

- Only deacons can be ordained as priests
- Only priests can be ordained as bishops
- There is thus one Sacrament of Holy Orders with three "degrees"—deacons, priests, and bishops

(e) Repeatable?

No. One cannot be ordained more than once to the same degree of Holy Orders

- The Episcopal Church does not re-ordain clergy who have been validly ordained in other Churches by bishops in the Apostolic Succession (e.g., Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox). When such clergy desire to enter and exercise their ministries in the Episcopal Church, they can be received and licensed but not re-ordained
- Clergy from denominations without the Apostolic Succession need to be re-ordained if they want to exercise their ministries in the Episcopal Church

ASSIGNMENT

First, please read the preceding notes on the Five Minor Sacraments carefully, note any questions you have, and be prepared to discuss this material in class.

Second, the orders of service for all five Minor Sacraments are given in *The Book of Common Prayer, 1979*. Using your Prayer Book, find the page numbers on which each of the following services begins:

1. Confirmation Page _____

2. Confession (Reconciliation of a Penitent) Page _____

3. Unction (Ministration to the Sick) Page _____

4. Matrimony (Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage) Page _____

5. Holy Orders
 - a. Ordination of a Bishop Page _____

 - b. Ordination of a Priest Page _____

 - c. Ordination of a Deacon Page _____

Third, choose one of these services that you find the most interesting, and read all the way through it in the Prayer Book. Then, answer the following questions:

- Which service did you pick and why?

- What did you learn from reading it that you did not know before?

- Did reading it raise any new questions you would like to discuss?