



## ST. STEPHEN'S CHURCH

---

Cedar Run Episcopal Parish, *The Rev. Dr. Peter R. Gustin, Rector*

### *The Adult Class*

*April 30, 2023*

### *The Sacraments*

#### **Sacrament Overview**

Mention the word sacrament to any self-respecting southern Episcopalian and you're likely to get stoney silence, or, for the more skittish, a shudder or two. With few exceptions, southern Episcopal churches tend to be "evangelical," or "low-church," which places more emphasis on the Word than on the sacraments, more emphasis on the readings and sermon than on Communion. In the southern Church weddings and funerals are less likely to include the Eucharist. (Visit any historic, especially Colonial church, and you'll most likely see an elaborate elevated pulpit, and what looks like a TV tray as the Altar, which of course in Virginia, is a "holy table:" it should have legs and not be a solid piece.)

The reasons for this are mostly historic: the Episcopal Church began in Virginia in 1607 and had very few clergy. The Diocese of Virginia invented vestries as a way "to conduct the temporal affairs of the church" between rare visits by Church of England clergy. Thus, Morning Prayer became the norm for worship and remained that way until the 1979 Book of Common Prayer designated the Holy Eucharist as the "principal act of worship" in the Church. Until then, in many (of not most) churches, the Eucharist was celebrated usually only once a month.

When the Episcopal Church was organized as a separate, self-governing entity from the Church of England in 1785, we had nearly 200 years of non-sacramental lay leadership and resisted "taking orders" from clergy, especially bishops elected or imported from northern dioceses where the Church was "higher" and more sacramentally oriented. Needless to say, the War between the States, with Richmond as the capital of the Confederacy and William Meade as the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America, helped to seal Virginia's place in the larger Church as one of the "lowest" dioceses in the country. (Oh the stories I could tell you about Bishop Meade! He was a holy character!)

It would not be until the election of the Rev. Peter James Lee of Chapel Hill, NC, was elected as the 12<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Virginia in 1984, that a “broader-Church” perspective was introduced to the diocese. Before then, nearly every bishop had been elected from within the diocese and maintained the diocesan aversion to all things suspected of being “Romish,” “Papist,” or “Pompous.”

### **The Sacraments Themselves**

While the Roman Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments, the Episcopal Church recognizes two great “Sacraments of the Gospel:” Baptism (Matthew 28:19) and the Eucharist (the Last Supper). It also recognizes five additional sacramental rites as means of grace but not ordained or commanded by Jesus Himself. The sacramental rites include Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders, Reconciliation of a Penitent, and Unction (Anointing of the Sick).

Note once again the spirit of Virginian revolt against external authority here: The Church may tell us that we must be Baptized and that we must, at least occasionally, receive Holy Communion, but it may not tell us that we must be confirmed, married, ordained, or anointed with oil. (We should note at the same time, however, that the canons, the laws that govern our Church, require vestry members and lay Chalice bearers to be Confirmed.) The Church most certainly may not tell us when, and under what circumstances, we are to confess our sins to a priest.

The Anglican view of sacramental rites is that “all may, some should, none must.” I wish I could find the origin of that quote, but I cannot.

### **What They Are**

“Sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive grace” (1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, Catechism, page 857.) Grace is “God’s favor toward us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills” (*BCP* page 858).

### **How They Work**

We express a need or desire for certain grace; the priest performs an action or two that transmits the grace we desire; and we receive and give thanks for that grace. (That, at least, is the Pete version of how they work. Grown-ups make it way more complicated.)

### **What They Do**

The sacraments themselves, don’t really do much: it’s the grace they impart that does all the heavy lifting in our lives. See “What They Are,” above.

## Questions for Consideration/Discussion

1. The first question seems rather obvious to me: Why do we need clergy to administer sacraments?
2. Here's a fun game: See if you can match the sacrament to the grace it confers: if we're going to talk about grace, we may as well go all the way and articulate the three traditional types of grace: sanctifying, actual, and prevenient (Latin: "going before")

<b>Sacrament</b>	<b>Grace</b>
Baptism	A. Absolution: Forgiveness of Sins
Holy Eucharist	B. Strength, Perseverance
Confirmation	C. Various Gifts of the Holy Spirit
Matrimony	D. Authority
Holy Orders	E. Spiritual Healing
Reconciliation of a Penitent	F. Sanctifying Grace (Clean Slate)
Unction (Anointing of the Sick)	G. Actual Grace (Day-to-Day Living)
	H. Prevenient Grace (Clearing the Way for the future; grace for what comes ahead)

A final note: Items C and D are more technically "gifts" (charisms)\*, but for our purposes we can lump them in with the various types of grace God sends our way.

\* Dang. Sorry to get so technical, but we're all grown-ups, so we may as well do this correctly and not be slap-dash about it. We want to distinguish between "charism" (gift, think of a person with charisma) and chrism. They sound sort of alike, but they're different. Chrism is oil for anointing (the word Christ comes from chrism, anointed one) that can only be "made" by a bishop. In the Diocese of Virginia, the bishops consecrate tons of chrism and distribute it to the clergy when they gather during Holy Week for the renewal of their ordination vows. Our chrism is kept in the aumbry, the wooden cabinet on the wall near the Altar. We always use it for Unction, and occasionally trot it out for Baptisms, but not often. Babies tend to hate it.

Charisms are gifts, usually from the Holy Spirit, that are bestowed whenever the Holy Spirit is invoked in a special way. The vestments and hangings for these sacramental rites are most often red for the Holy Spirit.