

DOCTRINE 7: THE SACRAMENTS INFORMATION SHEET

“no particular outward observance is necessary to inward grace ... God’s grace is freely and readily accessible to all people at all times and in all places” (The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine, Appendix 4, p. 296.)

The Salvation Army is almost unique in its views on the Christian sacraments. Whilst there are a number of different views on the sacraments amongst the churches, only The Salvation Army and the Quakers take the view that they are not at some level necessary for the Christian life. Recruits coming from other churches may need to spend some time praying through whether this will be an issue for them before becoming soldiers in The Salvation Army.

The Catholic and Orthodox perspective on the sacraments (or the mysteries as the Orthodox call them) is that, although they rely on material substances and physical acts, they convey God’s grace to us. This theology is based on their understanding of the Incarnation, that God became flesh. If that is so, then they conclude that things in the material world can be conveyors of spiritual graces. The Catholic and Orthodox believe the sacraments are both a sign and an instrument of God’s grace.

Protestant churches in contrast typically see the sacraments as being symbols or signs only. It is this Protestant view that The Salvation Army’s perspective builds upon in saying that since they are only signs or symbols, they are therefore not necessary to salvation. Early Salvationists saw that some people get attached to the outward symbols and rituals without having experienced the inward grace of conversion and transformation. Not celebrating the sacraments was instituted to emphasise the importance of every person experiencing for themselves the conversion and transformation which the sacraments signify.

The traditional seven sacraments are:

- **Baptism** – in water signifying the identification of the believer with Christ in his death and resurrection, this is administered to infants by sprinkling for the Catholics, and immersion by the Orthodox, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

In the Protestant churches there is some variation as to how Baptism is practised. The Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian and Reformed churches all practise infant baptism. This is typically done by sprinkling of water from a baptismal font. Baptist, Church of Christ and Pentecostal churches do not baptise infants, but wait until a person is old enough to understand what they are doing. These churches typically baptise by full immersion.

The Salvation Army does not practise water baptism, as it considers the baptism of the Spirit to be the only baptism necessary for salvation. The International Spiritual Life Commission said on this matter, “there is one

body and one Spirit... 'one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all' (Ephesians 4:5, 6). All who are in Christ are baptised into the one body by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12, 13)" (*The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine*, p. 296). Dedication services for infants are available but do not include baptising the child.

- **Confirmation (or Chrismation)** – in the Catholic tradition a child is confirmed when they are a bit older. It is their opportunity to confirm the baptismal promises made on their behalf when they were baptised. In the Orthodox tradition, Chrismation is performed immediately after baptism with the anointing of oil. Confirmation is also part of the Anglican, Lutheran and Methodist traditions. Confirmation is also used to welcome adult members into some churches particularly if they have been baptised in other churches.

The Salvation Army's practise of the swearing in of new soldiers (junior soldiers if they are children) is similar to the confirmation processes of other denominations. However, *The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine* emphasises that the ceremony itself is not the encounter of becoming a Christian, but rather only "a witness to the life-changing encounter with Christ which has already happened" (p. 296). The swearing in ceremony makes reference also to the soldier's baptism into Christ by the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion.

- **Holy Communion (or the Eucharist)** – Holy Communion is the meal that Jesus established at the Last Supper when he said to his disciples, "This is my body" and "This is my blood", "do this in remembrance of me". Catholic and Orthodox Christians believe that at the communion table the bread and wine are transformed by the Holy Spirit into the actual body and blood of Christ. Taking the elements then is a way of feeding on the life of Christ. They take John 6:53-55 literally where Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for *my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink*" (NRSV). You will hear Catholics talk about the "real presence of Christ" in the Eucharist.

In contrast, Protestant churches tend to see communion as a symbolic act by which we remember Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. The bread and wine/grape juice are not transformed by the Holy Spirit, they remain just what they are. The Salvation Army does not practise Holy Communion but affirms "every Salvationist's freedom to share in communion services conducted in other Christian gatherings" (*The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine*, p. 296). Instead, The Salvation Army "rejoices in its freedom to celebrate Christ's real presence at all meals and in all meetings" (p. 300.) The Army sometimes practises the Love Feast, placing significance on the simple meals that Jesus shared with his friends, and shared by the early church, and remembering Jesus' sacrificial love.

- **Confession** – Catholics confess their sins to their priest. Depending on the kind of sin, the priest prescribes acts of penance that can help to shorten the person's time in purgatory (a place which isn't heaven, but isn't hell,

where sinners can pay the price for their sin so they can at a later stage go to heaven). In contrast, because the Orthodox do not believe in purgatory, any acts of penance are designed to help the person learn how not to repeat the sin. The priest then pronounces absolution, telling the person that God has forgiven them.

Confession is not typically practised in Protestant churches as a formal ritual. Members are more likely to confidently discuss issues with their pastors in an informal setting. Christians are encouraged in the New Testament to “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another” (James 5:16 NRSV). This is something that can also happen at the Mercy Seat where counsellors meet with people who come forward to pray. Confession is not seen as a sacrament.

- **Marriage** – In the traditional perspective marriage is a sacrament designed to reveal to the world the love that exists between Jesus and the church. Ephesians 5 talks about this mystery, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church” (verses 31-32 NRSV).

Whilst The Salvation Army does not formally hold to a sacramental view of marriage, the promises made when Salvationists marry under the flag deeply reflect the sacredness of marriage in the context of faith:

“We do solemnly swear that, although we enter into this marriage for reasons of personal happiness and fulfilment, we will do our utmost to ensure that our married status and relationship will deepen our commitment to God and enhance the effectiveness of our service as soldiers of Jesus Christ in The Salvation Army.

We promise to make our home a place where all shall be aware of the abiding presence of God, and where those under our influence shall be taught the truths of the gospel, encouraged to seek Christ as Saviour, and supported in the commitment of their lives to the service of God.

We declare our intention to be to each other, by the help of God, true Christian examples and, through times of joy, difficulty or loss, to encourage each other to ‘grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’”

Marriage by two Salvationists in uniform is a reaffirmation of the pledges made when becoming soldiers.

- **Ordination** – In the Catholic, Orthodox, and some parts of the Anglican churches, ordination is seen as a sacramental sharing in the priesthood of Christ. In these traditions there is a three-fold order of ministry; bishops, priests and deacons. Ordination to anyone of these roles is seen as being set apart to function in the priesthood of Christ. Ordination is accomplished through the laying on of hands by one or more bishops. For the Catholics and Orthodox, this is known as the apostolic succession—that each generation passes on the priesthood to the next. Each generation is also then able to trace their ordination back to one of the Apostles. Priests in these settings officiate over the Eucharist, and are seen to be making present the sacrifice of Christ to the Father.

Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalist churches take a different view on ordination. Martin Luther taught that any vocation in life was a holy order, and so did not believe that ordination made priests any different from lay people. Other Protestant groups do not take the sacramental view on ordination as they believe that Christ's sacrifice was once for all, and so there is no need for us to re-offer that sacrifice through the Eucharist back to God, which is the special role that priests play in sacramental traditions. This links back to our earlier discussion of whether communion is the literal body and blood of Christ or just a symbol. Without the place of the Eucharist in the sacramental traditions, it isn't necessary for the clergy to share in Christ's priesthood.

In The Salvation Army, new officers are commissioned each year. They play different roles within the organisation. Some serve as Corps Officers, some in social programs, some in leadership roles at a divisional or territorial level. They make a special covenant with God to serve him as officers of The Salvation Army. Another distinctive of The Salvation Army is that married officers are usually commissioned together. Ministry is seen as equally the role of men and women. The sacramental churches more often take the view that the priesthood belongs only to men.

- **Last Rites / Extreme Unction** – In the Catholic church last rites was the process for preparing someone to die. Since Vatican II it has gone by the name of the sacrament of the sick as it is not restricted to those who are dying. It includes penance, anointing of the sick and administration of the Eucharist. Anointing of the sick comes from James' instruction "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" (James 5:14 NRSV). The Orthodox church also practises anointing the sick for the healing of body and soul for those who are not dying. The Orthodox also have special orders of prayers for people before, during and after they die.

In the Protestant tradition some churches have special prayers or services that can be said for the dying; however, they do not see it as a sacrament. Protestants with a charismatic or Pentecostal perspective often practise anointing the sick. Salvationists fervently pray for the sick and the dying, this may be accompanied by anointing with oil, at their discretion. Army chaplains are also available in some hospitals to be with and pray for the dying.

Hopefully this overview of the traditional sacraments and the differing views within the Christian tradition, along with The Salvation Army view, has helped to cast light on why TSA does not participate in the sacraments. There are, however, some sacraments that have parallels in TSA practice, such as the similarity between confirmation and the swearing in of soldiers.

In the end the position of The Salvation Army is that "Christ is the one true Sacrament, and sacramental living - Christ living in us and through us - is at the heart of Christian holiness and discipleship" (*The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine*, "A Statement on Holy Communion", p. 300).