

A note on Ordination as a "Sacramental act"

I was not too sure which part of the statement I was expected to discuss and so I decided to dwell more specifically on #15: ordination as a "sacramental act". How does this statement accord with art. 25 of the 39 articles of Anglican tradition? Art. 25:

"There are two sacraments ordained by Christ Those five commonly called sacraments of the Gospel ..." Lat: *Quinque illa vulgo nominata sacramenta a Deo institutam non habeat.*

The question I want to raise concerns what is meant by "sacramental act"? This needs clarification because of the ambiguity which inheres in the term both theologically and historically.

1. Are we to understand "sacramental act" as "significant ceremony" to use Richard Hooker's language or do we mean a sacrament in the proper sense on par with Baptism and Holy Communion?

2. According to our tradition a Sacrament is one "ordained by Christ". In this case none of the 5 so called sacraments fall under this rubric. To quote Edgar C. S. Gibson: "It will be found that each of the other rites (i.e. the five sacraments so called) fails to answer to the restricted definition" (The Thirty Nine Articles, 604). E. J. Bicknell admits that "the negative reason covers all five" (Theol. Introd. to 39 Articles, 458f). He makes the point that "theologically", to settle for 7 sacraments "was quite arbitrary". This is how he sees it: "In the widest sense sacraments are as wide as the world. A blade of grass may be a sacrament. Nature itself is a sacrament." The Homily on sacraments makes it plain that though "the Ordering of Ministers hath his visible sign and promise", yet it is not a sacrament; "although there are retained in the C. of E. besides these two (i.e. Baptism and Eucharist) certain other rites and ceremonies yet no man ought to take these for Sacraments in such signification and meaning as the Sacrament of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ..." (Homilies Appointed to be read in Churches in the time of Queen Elizabeth, 377f).

In the wider sense, of course, ordination can be claimed to be a "sacramental act", although the concrete element is missing, for the laying on of hands is an action which lacks the physical nature of sacrament. But this is not so in the Roman tradition.

3. The Council of Trent reaffirmed the 7 sacraments as vere et proprie sacramenta and anathemized those who reckoned fewer or more. On this score Vatican II has not changed its mind": the sacerdotal office of priests is conferred by the special sacrament through which priests by anointing of the Holy Spirit, are marked with a special character and are so configured to Christ the Priest, that they can act in the person of Christ the Head."

There is a footnote to this text: "The ministerial priesthood derives from a special sacrament conferring a distinctive consecration, by which the priest's manhood is sealed by the Holy Spirit and is made like Christ, the Priest. Thereby he is empowered to act in the person of Christ, precisely as the Head of the Mystical Body" (Vatican II, 535). This would imply a transformation equal to transubstantiation of the Eucharistic elements.

Richard Hooker, a most level-headed Anglican, was faced with the accusation on the part of the Puritans that the Church is given to the multiplication of sacraments. The reference is

specially directed to the rite of the Laying on of hands. Though Hooker holds to the principle that ordination conveys indelible character he avoids the term "sacramental act" and tells the Puritans that "other significant tokens are only as sacraments, yet no Sacraments." He quotes their own literature to prove his point. (Ecclesiastical Polity, IV, II, 4).

It seems to me that there is some justification for the criticism on the part of The Catholic Standard & Times (Philadelphia) that the document "passes over in relative silence the controverted question of the validity of Anglican orders Silence gives the impression that pressing concerns are resolved - and they are not."

The ambiguity of the expression "sacramental act" lends itself to misinterpretation on both sides. For this reason I would urge a footnote which would explain in what sense the phrase is to be understood.

Personally, I do not believe in precise definitions but in view of the history attaching to the subject this happens to be a crucial issue.

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