

Confirmation in Faith and Service

Confirmation is often referred to as a sacrament in search of a theology because the age at which it is celebrated seems to depend more on local practice than on any specific Church directives. Canon Law is as close as you will get on the subject:

The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred at about the age of discretion [typically around seven], unless the Episcopal Conference has decided on a different age.[!]

The age at which candidates are confirmed is important because that will determine the content and aims of whatever preparation is provided prior to the sacrament being celebrated. The current age of celebration in this country tends to be typically (but not exclusively) in the mid-teens; back in 1957, when I was confirmed, the general practice was to confirm at age nine or ten. But we need to go much further back in history in order to understand why there is such a disparity of practice.

In the early years of the Church, adult baptism was the norm (though infants too were baptised). This allowed for a suitable period of catechesis in the faith and of preparation for the sacraments before people were received into the Church. It also meant that they - catechumens - would celebrate at the same time what were considered the three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation and Eucharist.

Reception into the Church would take place at the Easter Vigil Service when the whole community would be gathered. In those days Christian communities were still small enough that they could all meet in a single church in the presence of their bishop who was the spiritual leader of that community. Before the catechumens could actually enter the main body of the church, they would first be baptised by total immersion and so, after first being anointed with the *oil of catechumens*, they would then go down one by one into the pool of water to be baptised by the priest. Still soaking wet, they would then be led to the bishop who would lay his hands on them and then anoint them again, this time with the *oil of chrism* (olive oil scented with balsam) as his “confirmation” of the fact that they had been validly baptised and were now Christians. It was, in that sense, his ratification of their conversion. They would then be welcomed with songs of celebration as they processed in to join the congregation to celebrate their very first Mass at which they would receive communion for the first time. Thus all three sacraments of initiation were celebrated together.

Over time, and for various reasons, that practice gradually changed. To begin with, the Christian church grew to the point that faith communities could no longer fit into one church to celebrate together. On an occasion such as Easter it

obviously also meant that the bishop was no longer able to be present at every reception of catechumens into the Church and so, as a result, the three sacraments of initiation had to be celebrated at different times. There was also a change in general practice to infant baptism and, while babies could be confirmed, clearly they couldn't yet receive holy communion. This meant not only that the three sacraments began to be celebrated some years apart, but also that the order in which they were celebrated changed: baptism first, communion next (after Pope Pius X decreed that children as young as age seven could receive their first communion)(reception of the Eucharist had historically been the final step, the summit of the process of initiation), and then confirmation (the bishop "confirming" what baptism had begun).

This is the order in which, typically, those sacraments continue to be celebrated even though it runs counter to what is stated in the catechism:

The sacraments of Christian initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist [note the order] – lay the *foundations* of every Christian life. The faithful are born anew by Baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation, and receive in the Eucharist the food of eternal life. They thus receive in increasing measure [again a reference to the sequence] the treasures of the divine life. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 1212)

Perhaps it is history and tradition that has been allowed to square the circle.

As I said above, the age at which confirmation is celebrated has an important influence on the content of catechisis in preparation for the sacrament. With hindsight, how we were prepared for the sacrament as nine and ten year olds was quite bizarre. The emphasis was on 'the Church militant', which the *A-Z of the Catholic Church* defines as "a designation of the condition of Christians in this world, who are still 'fighting' against evil on their way to the Vision of God, to join the Church Triumphant". Fighting, or perhaps we might say striving, to establish the kingdom of God on earth is a concept we understand, but does a ten year old? The one thing that stuck in my mind was that we were being prepared to become "soldiers for Christ", which echoes that same theology but, again, how much sense did that make to a ten year old? And to that end – and I think this is the explanation – we were told that the bishop would give each of us a slap on the cheek (actually usually a gentle tap) presumably to test our resolve and our readiness for combat (again, ten year olds?)

In this regard I will always remember my involvement in a parish preparation course for fourteen or fifteen year olds during my time in Portland, Oregon. This was in the late 1970s and the practice of bishops slapping candidates' cheeks had stopped after the Vatican Council. We therefore made no mention of it during the course because it no longer happened. At the last minute the diocesan bishop fell ill and was unable to celebrate the Mass of Confirmation

and so a local retired bishop stepped in to take his place. Seemingly no one must have updated him over the years and so when he came to the first candidate and gave him a totally unexpected and rather healthy tap on the cheek - I was afraid we might have a fight on our hands! He confirmed each bemused candidate in the same way, leaving us with a little bit of explaining to do afterwards.

Looking back at my own preparation for confirmation, I have to be honest and say that I remember absolutely nothing of what we were taught other than having to choose a confirmation name (and needing to answer questions about them in case the bishop asked) and that whole militant “soldiers for Christ” thing. I certainly don’t remember any mention of confirmation completing the process of initiation into the Church. Having said all of that, whatever the sacrament meant to me, or did for me, I never stopped practising my faith and eventually became a priest so I guess something must have worked!

With the changes to the Church’s approach to confirmation that took place post-Vatican II, it became a sacrament of personal commitment to our faith and in that sense, therefore, a completion of the process of initiation which began at our baptism. And if it was being celebrated with mid-to-late teenagers (as seemed to be typical at the time) there was now a much greater opportunity to incorporate the elements of mature choice and personal commitment into their preparation for the sacrament. Many of the programmes that have developed over the years seem, appropriately, to include a review of the candidate’s sacramental life to-date as they prepare to take this next step, and the place of faith in their lives, a faith to which they are about to renew their commitment.

More recently there has been a move to restore the correct order of the three sacraments, possibly along the lines of the Diocese of Salford experiment in which baptism and confirmation are celebrated together, with first communion following at around age seven or eight. One of the drawbacks to this is that it leaves something of a sacramental vacuum precisely at a time – in the teen years - when there are typically so many challenges to a young person’s faith. Having said that, theologically confirmation was never meant to be some sort of teenage religious rite of passage, though there are some elements of that in what we have said above. Perhaps we need to come up with some sort of specific spiritual outreach to our young people to target those difficult years of challenge to their faith, but the Church would say that that isn’t what the sacrament of confirmation is about.

My personal feeling is that, if we were to establish mid-to-late teens as the recommended age for confirmation, then we could aim to achieve two things at the same time: we would be completing the process of initiation into the faith (albeit it delayed and in the “wrong” sacramental order) – which is what the

sacrament *is* about - and also involving our young people in a process of spiritual introspection and commitment which is part of that journey and, at the same time, hopefully strengthen and encourage them through any challenges to their faith that they may be experiencing in those difficult teen years. That's kind of the theology we've been working with for the best part of forty years now, and it's difficult to contemplate abandoning it as if it was wrong. In fact I can see no contradiction with what the catechism says:

Preparation for Confirmation should aim at leading the Christian toward a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit – his actions, his gifts, and his biddings – in order to be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of Christian life. To this end catechesis for Confirmation should strive to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, the universal Church as well as the parish community. (para 1309)

And just thinking for a moment about that aspect of “assuming apostolic responsibilities”, it makes no sense to approach confirmation from the mature Christian commitment point of view and then not actively look for (and for the Church or parish to provide) an opportunity to put it into practice. What is it we are committing ourselves to in the sacrament? It surely can't just be our personal faith relationship with God. There's a whole parish out there, indeed a whole body of Christ - the Church - into which we have been baptised and confirmed, waiting for our involvement in all kinds of pastoral and spiritual areas of service and ministry. Saint James writes:

Take the case of someone who has never done a single good act but claims that he has faith. This is the way to talk to people of that kind: 'You say you have faith and I have good deeds; I will prove to you that I have faith by showing you my good deeds – now you prove to me that you have faith without any good deeds to show.' [2 v 14 & 18]

To take up such works of service, as well as to assume in spiritual terms our membership of the body of Christ into which we have now been fully initiated, we have at our disposal the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are given in confirmation.

It is evident from its celebration that the effect of the sacrament is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost.

Confirmation unites us more firmly to Christ; it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us; it renders our bond with the Church more perfect; and it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para's 1302 & 1303)

This understanding of the effects of the sacrament would seem to suggest that it is better celebrated with those of an age when they can fully understand and

accept the purpose of what they are doing in asking to be confirmed – and, indeed, their preparation for the sacrament should be a matter of free choice and not something that is possibly forced on them by the Church, the parish, or their parents simply because they are of the age. It has to be their choice because it is their faith commitment and the completion of their initiation into the Church.

The fact that so many of our young people today are choosing not to be confirmed, or are not actively asking if they can be, could – at least in theory – present them with a problem later in life. Certainly, and this should make sense to us, *a person who has not received baptism cannot validly be admitted to the other sacraments* (*The Code of Canon Law*, CC.842). The canon then goes on to say: *The sacraments of baptism, confession and the blessed Eucharist so complement one another that all three are required for full Christian initiation.* It doesn't say so in as many words, but the implication is that a person should be fully initiated into the Church before they may receive any of the other sacraments of the Church. It would be like expecting to use the facilities of, let's say, a health club when you are not a fully paid-up member. The Church, however, impose a general prohibition in that sense.

In fact prior to receiving first holy communion, children are expected to make their first confession. So the sacrament of reconciliation becomes an immediate exception to the theoretical rule. It would be the same with the Sacrament of the Sick, which wouldn't be refused to anyone because they had never been confirmed. That only leaves two other sacraments and it's here that the Church does impose a prohibition. Canon 1033 states that *only one who has received the sacrament of sacred confirmation may lawfully be promoted to orders.* In other words for someone to be ordained they must have first been confirmed – no exceptions.

And on the subject of marriage Canon 1065 says that *Catholics who have not yet received the sacrament of confirmation are to receive it before being admitted to marriage, if this can be done without grave inconvenience.* However “grave inconvenience” is understood or defined, it would seem that the exception has become the rule and typically there is no requirement that Catholics first be confirmed before being married. Perhaps it is presumed that they have enough to do preparing for the sacrament of matrimony (and given all their wedding arrangements) without requiring participation in yet another programme to prepare for, and to celebrate, confirmation. Rightly or wrongly if it hasn't already happened, then (even though there would be time if the couple has approached the Church as far in advance as they should) it tends not to do so.

For a final word, let us return to the catechism:

Very early [in the history of the Church] the better to signify the gift of the Holy Spirit, an anointing with perfumed oil (*chrism*) was added to the laying on of hands. This anointing highlights the name ‘Christian’, which means ‘anointed’ and derives from that of Christ himself. This rite of anointing has continued ever since, in both East and West. The Eastern Churches call this sacrament *Chrismation*, anointing with chrism. In the West, the term *Confirmation* suggests that this sacrament both confirms baptism and strengthens baptismal grace. (para 1289)

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