

# CONFIRMATION AT THE TIME OF FIRST COMMUNION

## An Explanation for Parents



Many Catholics in the United States outside of Maine are unfamiliar with the practice of confirming children in elementary school. Celebrating the Sacrament of Confirmation at the time of first holy Communion is actually rooted in the life of the early Church as well as being the decades-long practice in the Diocese of Portland. This practice is based on history and theology. Other reasons for celebrating this way relate to ecumenical concerns and practical, pastoral issues. Reviewing the reasons behind the practice gives a better understanding of the sacrament your child is about to celebrate and the rationale for celebrating Confirmation at a younger age.

### History

In the beginning of the Church, the Sacrament of Confirmation was always celebrated at the time of Baptism whether the person was an adult or a baby. That is, they would celebrate the three sacraments of initiation -- Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist -- at the same ceremony and in that order. This is exactly what we do today with unbaptized adults and older children who become Catholics through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). They celebrate the three sacraments in a single liturgy, usually the Easter Vigil.

The early practice began to change as the Church grew and moved out of cities into the countryside. In the West (churches in communion with Rome), they wished to preserve the practice of the bishop administering the Sacrament of Confirmation. So, at first, where it was not possible for the bishop to be present for the baptism of each adult and child, he would go on an annual tour of his diocese to confirm all those who had been baptized that year, including infants. Over time things got more complicated. For one thing, it became increasingly difficult for bishops to make this tour of large rural dioceses every year. And, sadly, bishops in some cases became rather lax. St. Boniface, writing about the situation of the Church in Germany in the 8th century, reports that in many instances dioceses were without resident bishops or the bishops they had “were drunken or lazy or served in the army.”

The delay of Confirmation started as a result of practical difficulties and circumstances, some of them deplorable. But the bishops were not solely to blame for the shift. Parents were also negligent. Despite sometimes dire penalties which some dioceses tried to impose to compel parents to bring their children for Confirmation when a bishop was available, it simply did not happen. Gradually, the popular understanding of the sacrament changed as these pastoral compromises that resulted in delays began to be regarded as the norm. People assumed that because children were no longer confirmed at an earlier age there must be a theological reason why we should not confirm them until a later age.

A theology of Confirmation began to develop that said that Confirmation was not only unnecessary for children, it was not even desirable. Only in our own lifetimes has this mistaken notion pushed to its logical conclusion of favoring confirming teens. Although the Church in her official teaching and laws has consistently and repeatedly said that Confirmation should be celebrated at the age of reason, that is about age 7, many parishes pushed the age later and later. Confirmation was turned

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into a “rite of maturity” or of passage to adulthood, something it had never been in prior Church history.

#### **Theology**

The Sacrament of Confirmation offers the candidate the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit that perfects Baptism. Candidates are sealed with sacred chrism as a sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are bound together in the one Body of Christ in the Church. We come to share in the very Spirit that was in Jesus and in the gifts that enable us to live as Jesus lived in the midst of the world. Because we are one Body in Christ we celebrate the Eucharist and receive the Body of Christ in order to deepen our union in Him. The Eucharist is the culmination of our initiation into the Church and the way in which we recommit ourselves each week to the one Body, to one another and to Christ. The Sacrament of Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life and builds on and strengthens the graces received in the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of Confirmation.

Understood this way, it is an anomaly to have someone celebrate first Communion who has not yet been confirmed. Why would you celebrate the Eucharist with someone who has not yet been fully initiated into the Body of Christ? If the Eucharist is the culmination of initiation, why would you demand more preparation for Confirmation than you require for first Communion? By imposing very demanding requirements for Confirmation we tended to make the sacrament look like a reward for completing a whole series of tasks or a primarily intellectual course of study. Rather than the being a free gift of God, Confirmation came to be seen as something we earned. The Western practice of Confirmation at a later age focused on human actions rather than on the gracious action of God in the sacrament.

#### **Ecumenism**

The Churches in the East have always maintained the practice of confirming infants at the time of Baptism. Confirmation has been a stumbling block in our ecumenical discussions with the East. A shared theology (an explanation of what confirmation is) which does not include their uninterrupted practice of 2000 years is ecumenically unacceptable. How do you faithfully explain 2000 years of history of the sacrament in the East and over 1000 years of history and practice in the West if you make Confirmation a sacrament of adolescence or the sacrament of personal recommitment to the baptismal promises?

#### **Pastoral Practice**

There are many pastoral problems with the delayed age of Confirmation. In some areas, as few as half of those celebrating first Communion are later being confirmed. Many adult Catholics have never been confirmed. Demanding programs of preparation for Confirmation sometimes have the effect of driving young people away instead of inviting them into the life of the Church. Those who stick it out often experience Confirmation as graduation, graduation not merely from further religious instruction and formation but, in too many cases, as graduation from participation in the Church. By confirming at the time of first Communion we make it very clear that Confirmation is a beginning, not an ending, not graduation from but initiation into a life of continued growth in faith.

In addition, an emphasis on personal commitment has exactly the opposite effect from what is intended. Sometimes Confirmation preparation programs use the language of recommitting one’s baptismal promises in a way that is out of synch with the actual experience of young people’s lives.

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Some young people realize that adolescence is not the time in their lives when they ought to be making permanent commitments so decide not to be confirmed.

#### **Conclusion**

The discussion about the right age for Confirmation continues around the United States. Some dioceses are likely to keeping high school or middle school as the typical age for Confirmation. Others will choose the age of reason, at the time of first Communion. There are those who advocate an even more “radical” solution than ours, namely we should follow the practice of the Eastern Churches and confirm infants at the time of their Baptism.

In all of this, it is important to keep before us what really matters. Sharing in the Spirit of God is the primary consideration, not the age one receives the Sacrament of Confirmation. The Spirit of love God lavishes upon us, often in spite of ourselves, works in and through us as the Church that we might love one another.