

THE CASE FOR CONFIRMATION AT A LATER DATE

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The Present Situation

In most dioceses of New Zealand, the confirmation of persons who were baptised as infants takes place at around 14-17 years of age. In all our dioceses it takes place after first Holy Communion.

Liturgists and canonists are increasingly calling for confirmation to come before first Holy Communion. They emphasise that it is a sacrament of initiation (not of adult commitment) and that the original order was baptism - confirmation - eucharist.

Currently, they seem to have the field to themselves. Rashly, perhaps, I dare to argue for confirmation at a later age.

Focusing on "age" is not intended to imply that this aspect of the sacrament is the aspect most in need of attention. The theology of initiation, the catechesis of initiation, and the people's experience of the community into which they are being initiated, are all matters which need attention.

Canon 891 provides that confirmation should take place at around the age of discretion unless the Bishops' Conference decides to allow for a later age.

C.891's provision for later confirmation is based on the Rite of Confirmation, S.C. Divine Worship, 1971:

With regard to children, in the Latin Church the administration of confirmation is generally delayed until about the seventh year. For pastoral reasons, however, especially to implant deeply in the lives of the faithful complete obedience to Christ the Lord and a firm witnessing to him, the Conferences of bishops may set an age that seems more suitable. This means that the sacrament is given, after the formation proper to it, when the recipients are more mature (n.11).

Those who urge a return to early confirmation describe this text as an "exception clause" (one thinks of the famous *excepta fornicationis causa*.) They see it as "highly

problematic”, and even as “an inconsistency”. And so they resort to querying how it got there. It wasn’t in the earlier draft, and the bishops who “lobbied” for its inclusion were not members of the group responsible for the revision. (1)

I suggest that this official provision allowing for later confirmation is an embarrassment only for those who make two unsubstantiated assumptions, namely (1) that there is some antithesis between “maturity” and the Church’s theology of initiation; (2) that the unity of the sacraments of initiation is preserved only by the original sequence of baptism - confirmation - eucharist. In my view, both these assumptions are at least debatable, which is why I feel entitled to argue the case.

The Reform

Either position (earlier or later confirmation) must respect the fundamental principles of the liturgical reform relating to initiation. These include the following:

- confirmation is a sacrament of initiation; Christian initiation is the only locus for a good theology of confirmation. Less appropriate “theologies” of confirmation as well as unsatisfactory catechesis and practices relating to confirmation, result from failure to see confirmation as part of the process of initiation.
- The reform is intended to better show the unity between the sacraments of initiation. This is something deeper than merely insisting on the original sequence of baptism - confirmation - eucharist. I shall return to this point.
- The process of adult initiation is to be regarded as the theological norm in the sense that the process of initiation for children and young people is to be an adaptation based on the adult process - not vice versa.

The Separation of Baptism and Confirmation

We are all indebted to those whose historical research has undergirded the recent reforms.

It is true that the separation of confirmation from baptism has been a confused and confusing chapter of the Church's practice and theology. But I wonder why so much effort goes into labouring the point that the original sequence was baptism - confirmation - eucharist. At the end of the day it has to be acknowledged that history bears witness to the Church's power to separate the times for baptism and confirmation. And the present law is testimony to the fact that it is in principle possible to change the sequence without prejudice to the unity of these sacraments.

Pastoral Reasons for Deferring the Confirmation of Children baptised in Infancy

The ultimate justification for deferring confirmation can only be appropriate pastoral reasons. To dispose of the sacrament in this way is simply to apply the principle sacramenta propter homines.

C.842 speaks of the inter-relatedness of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist. Together they constitute full Christian initiation. The actual sequence baptism - confirmation - eucharist is theologically important and must be shown forth in the case of adults (c.866), and in the case of young persons who have been baptised after reaching catechetical age (cf RCIA nn.281, 284).

But those liturgists and canonists who conclude from that premise that the same sequence should apply to children who are baptised as infants are neglecting a very important difference. Treating the adult process of initiation as the theological norm cannot be reduced to merely imitating the sequence. One of the other components of the adult process is that it takes account of the human response. Adapting the rite of initiation of children, therefore, requires that some regard be had for the place of the human response.

This is acknowledged very plainly even in the case of children who are being both baptised and confirmed after reaching catechetical age:

The Christian initiation of these children requires both a conversion that is personal and somewhat developed, in proportion to their age, and the assistance of the education they need. The process of initiation thus must be adapted both to their spiritual progress, that is, to the children's growth in faith, and to the

catechetical instruction they receive. Accordingly, as with adults, their initiation is to be extended over several years, if need be, before they receive the sacraments. Also as with adults, their initiation is marked by several steps.... (Rite of Christian Initiation; Children who have reached Catechetical Age, n.243).

The case for taking account of the human response in regard to children who were baptised as infants is, if anything, a fortiori. They are the ones who did not have the opportunity to think about initiation at the time of their baptism, and of course were too young to do so at the time of their first Holy Communion. And so to span out the process of their initiation, allowing for the development of their human response, is even more fitting.

The only real question is how far apart from infant baptism should confirmation be placed, bearing in mind that we must also maintain the unity of the sacraments of initiation?

Clearly, children are capable of a response appropriate to their age at “around the age of discretion”. But if we are serious about the reality of human growth and development, we are faced with the fact that the human response is enhanced by greater awareness of what one is being initiated to - of what it really means to belong. It is to be expected that some of this greater awareness should take place after initiation; one grows into it. But in today’s circumstances especially, some of this greater awareness is desirable before initiation.

The importance of this factor has been obscured by arguments which presuppose a false antithesis between a theology of initiation on the one hand and personal commitment and maturity on the other. Certainly, the sacrament cannot be limited to considerations of psychological maturity and much less can it be reduced to the recipient’s expression of faith. However, the need to enhance the recipient’s understanding of initiation does not have to be based on exaggerated or erroneous claims about commitment or maturity. It can be based on a good understanding of what initiation itself involves.

“Grace Builds on Nature”

To take the human response into account, and to defer Confirmation on this basis, is not in conflict with the priority that belongs to grace, or with the nature of initiation.

Initiation, at whatever age, is always first and foremost an act of God and the Church; it is really God's and the Church's "commitment" to us, more than it is ours to God and the Church. Grace does not cease to be grace just because it "builds on nature".

Some of the Objections

Those who argue for earlier Confirmation emphasise that the original sequence of baptism - confirmation - eucharist was in place for a very long period of the Church's history.

But there is more to history than its dates. History also shows that during that same long period people's personal decisions were strongly directed and supported by social conventions, and even in some important matters were actually pre-empted by the assumptions and practices of tutelage. All that has changed. The Western world and the Church have emerged into an era in which the exercise of personal responsibility and participation in the decisions that affect one's life are now much more important considerations. Grace builds on nature as it is, not as it used to be.

(This does not have to lead to treating confirmation as an option which people can "take or leave". It is possible to respect freedom while guiding it by clear expectations and supportive structures.)

Perhaps the most cogent argument in support of the original sequence baptism - confirmation - eucharist is based on the theology of eucharist. Through the eucharist we participate in the eschatological banquet of the kingdom, and so it is said to be anomalous to do so before one fully belongs to the eschatological community. On the contrary, however, far from any anomaly, what is happening is that the Church is joyously and lavishly anticipating that eventual full belonging. So, Pius X was right after all, even though for the advocates of Confirmation before first Holy Communion he is one of the chief bogies. (The Church's practice of "anticipating" is wider than our present subject. I wonder if it doesn't belong to the profound nature and mystery of the Church as the presence "already now" of what is "not yet").

Insofar as eucharist in these circumstances is in anticipation of full belonging the unity between the sacraments of initiation is preserved notwithstanding the different sequence.

It is sometimes argued that the tendency of young people to drop out of the practice of the faith for a while will be exacerbated if they feel trapped or herded into confirmation classes during the age when they are bucking the system. Of course, it doesn't follow that earlier confirmation will prevent this problem. It is surely more to the point to ensure that those who do drop out will have had memorable experiences of their faith - something to remember with pride and to come back to eventually. And the chance of making their confirmation that kind of experience is much more likely at an older than an earlier age.

I have found that young people from the same secondary school will often attend the confirmation liturgy at three or four parishes in order to be with their peers for the occasion. And in parish after parish, parents go out of their way to express their delight in the experience of their teenager's confirmation; they invariably and enviously add: what a pity we "were done" so young.

It is sometimes suggested that other non-sacramental rites need to be invented for the purpose of young adult commitment. Let us acknowledge that better use needs to be made of the liturgical seasons and feasts for the renewal of our initiation. But the point here being made that it is precisely people's belonging to Church and therefore their initiation into it that needs to loom large and positively in their personal experience. Other rites of commitment would come after initiation.

The advocates of earlier Confirmation also make much of the fact that the 1983 Code extends the occasions when priests have the faculty to confer the sacrament. However, the Church's intention in this regard is to ensure that Confirmation can follow baptism in the circumstances of adult initiation and of children of catechetical age. It is not the Church's intention to create a situation in which the bishop is no longer the principal, or even the "ordinary", minister. (2)

The early Roman practice of delaying Confirmation until a bishop could be involved played a significant part in the eventual separation of Confirmation and Baptism. Some advocates of Confirmation before first Holy Communion call this the “degeneration” of sacramental initiation. (3) They acknowledge that the role of the bishop in Confirmation has ecclesiological significance. “The tradition of the West has effectively taught us that you cannot say you are initiated into the Church until you have had contact with the bishop. In fact, for the sake of this ecclesial value, the Church in the Roman tradition has been prepared to suffer a rupture in the unity of the rites of initiation.” However, they hasten to reassure us that the reform is intended to “loosen the hold of the bishop over Confirmation for the sake of the unity of the sacraments of initiation.. (4)

Here again, the supposed incompatibility between significant values is traceable to the mere assumption that only the original sequence is consistent with the required unity. Given, on the other hand, that unity and sequence are not the same concepts, and given the pastoral importance of these other values, could not the Roman practice which led to delaying Confirmation have been the seeds of a significant pastoral and doctrinal development, notwithstanding some subsequent aberrations? And is it not true especially today that people need to experience their relationship with their bishop in the matter of their Catholic identity - and therefore at the time when they take this further step into the Catholic community?

It is surely ridiculous to argue, as some do, that requiring a bishop for confirmation appears to diminish the importance of baptism and eucharist because a bishop is not required for these two sacraments. (And, so what if more is being demanded for confirmation than is being demanded for eucharist?) (5)

Preparation for Confirmation and the Optimum Age

The sacraments are liturgy, and not merely stages of a religious education programme. Preparation for confirmation cannot be equated with religious instruction. It does indeed involve formation - in the mysteries of faith - which includes some catechesis.

Responsibility for preparation does not properly belong to our Religious Education offices; it belongs to the parishes, aided by our Diocesan Liturgy personnel, Diocesan Religious Education personnel, and Catholic Secondary Schools working together. Nevertheless, it is not the school community that the candidates are being initiated into, and so the focus both during preparation and above all in the celebration of the sacrament, should be the parish, the eucharistic community. The occasion should be one when the parish, not just family and friends, is gathered - preferably on a Sunday or feast day.

It seems to me that the optimum age is relative to the time when the parish is best able to fulfil its complex responsibility, i.e.

1. To provide for the candidates' awareness of what it means to belong to the Catholic faith and to share the Catholic Church's mission;
2. To provide on-going opportunities for renewing and deepening the belonging and the mission entered into through the sacraments of initiation;
3. To provide a catechesis based on baptism and orientated to a deeper Eucharistic life, which includes mission.

Conclusion

If we take the original sequence or baptism - confirmation - eucharist as some kind of major premise, the Western Church's tradition can only appear to be an aberration, and restoring the original sequence, regardless of other considerations, must be a main aim of the reform. It's all very logical. But it misses the point.

The original experience of the Church was adult initiation. It involved the sequence baptism - confirmation - eucharist, but in the context of adult faith. This is the major premise and theological norm. The need for adaptation arises from the practice of baptising infants. The Church anticipates (brings forward) their belonging. But it also has regard for the role of personal faith, including ongoing catechesis. However, it is at

least consistent with the process of adult initiation (our theological norm) to span out the initiation of those whose initiation commenced with infant baptism. To provide for this spanning out as per Canon 891 is not some kind of oddity. It actually encompasses a wider range of ecclesial and pastoral values than does infant confirmation, while remaining consistent with the theology of initiation and with the fundamental unity of the sacraments of initiation.

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Footnotes

- (1) cf Brady, P. *Liturgy*, Auckland, vols 15, 16 (1991)
- (2) Regarding terminology, cf observations of Austin, G. *The Rite of Confirmation, Anointing with the Spirit*, Pueblo, 1985, p.53
- (3) Referred to by Huels, J.M., *Disputed Questions in the Liturgy Today*, Chicago, 1988, p.11
- (4) Elich, T. *Confirmed in the Faith*, Liturgy News, Brisbane, March 1990, p.8
- (5) *Pace*, Austin, G. op. cit. p.53.

