

# **CONFIRMATION**

## **Explanation to Parents**

**Rev. Msgr. Michael J. Henchal**

The change in the age for confirmation, moving it back to the time of first communion, has come for a series of reasons. Some of those reasons are historical and theological. Some of those reasons are related to ecumenical concerns. Some of the reasons are what I will call pastoral, but you might think of as practical. I would like to review those reasons with you so that you can better understand not just the rationale for the change in the age but better understand the sacrament your child is about to celebrate.

### **History**

In the beginning, the sacrament of confirmation was always celebrated, for both adults and infants, at the time of baptism. That is, at the same ceremony they would celebrate the three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation and Eucharist, in that order. Indeed, if you have noticed, that is exactly what we do with nonbaptized adults and older children who become Catholics through the Rite of Christian Initiation. At the Easter Vigil, they celebrate the three sacraments.

The practice began to change as the Church grew and moved out of the cities into the countryside. In the West, 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 a tour of his diocese each year to confirm all those who had been baptized that year, including infants. But 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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.”

But the bishops were not solely to blame. 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 well. The delay of confirmation had started as a result of practical difficulties and circumstances, some of them deplorable. However, these pastoral compromises soon began to be regarded as the norm. People figured children are no longer confirmed until a later age, so there must be a 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 but was not even desirable for children. This notion was then pushed to its

logical conclusion only in our own lifetimes. Although the Church in its 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 into a “rite of maturity” or of passage to adulthood, something it had never been in Church history.

### **Theology**

The sacrament of confirmation offers the candidate the abiding gift of the Holy Spirit that completes and perfects baptism. Candidates are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is by that 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 and in order to deepen our union in Him, we celebrate the Eucharist and receive the Body of Christ. 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. 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 confirmation look like a reward for completing a whole series of tasks. Rather than the free gift of God, it came to be seen as something we earned.

### **Ecumenism**

The Churches in the East have maintained from the very beginning the practice of confirming infants at the time of baptism. One of the issues that has arisen in our ecumenical discussions with the East has been that of confirmation. A theology, an explanation of what confirmation is, which does not include their uninterrupted practice of 2000 years, is not going to be ecumenically acceptable. If you make confirmation a sacrament of adolescence or the sacrament of personal recommitment to the baptismal promises, how do you explain 2000 years of history of the sacrament in the East and over 1000 years of history and practice in the West?

### **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 the Church. By confirming at the time of first communion we make it very clear that confirmation is not an ending but a beginning, not graduation 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. Some young people realized that this was not the time in their lives when they ought to be making permanent commitments and some of these decided not to be confirmed. Sometimes confirmation 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.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion about the right age for confirmation will no doubt continue around the country for many more years. Some dioceses will continue to confirm in high school. Others will choose the age of reason, at the time of first communion. Already there are those who are advocating 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. And that is not the age that makes the difference. It is the Spirit of God, which is a Spirit of love, which God lavishes upon us, often in spite of ourselves, that, sharing in this Spirit, we might love one another.