

WHY CONFIRM BEFORE FIRST COMMUNION?

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Since the Second Vatican Council that is during the last fifty years, the Sacraments of Initiation in the Catholic Church have undergone extensive scrutiny and revision of practice. The adult catechumenate has been restored, and revised rites of infant Baptism and Confirmation have been published. Setting the scene for this revision of Confirmation, the Council wrote:

The rite of Confirmation is to be revised, and the intimate connection which this sacrament has with the whole of Christian initiation is to be more lucidly set forth.

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 71

Prior to the mid-1990s children baptised in infancy continued to receive Confirmation several years after First Eucharist. This meant that Confirmation's "intimate connection ... with the whole of Christian initiation" was not evident and Confirmation was sometimes seen as the candidate making an 'adult' commitment or a reward for participation in a program. This created a significant difference between what occurred through the journey to full initiation in the catechumenate and the stages of initiation of those baptized as children.

With this in mind, and along with other bishops particularly in Australia and the United States, Bishop Denis Browne and introduced in this diocese of Auckland a revision of **the order of the Sacraments of Initiation - Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist.**

Thus, the reception of first Communion will be the climax of the Sacraments of Initiation into the Catholic Church. Full participation in the Mass will be seen, as it really is, the:

centre and culmination of the whole life of the Christian community.

Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, 30:2

... the other sacraments ... are linked with the holy Eucharist and are directed towards it. For the Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is Christ Himself our Passover and living bread. The Eucharist shows itself to be the source and the apex of the whole work of preaching the gospel. ... The faithful, already marked with the sacred seal of Baptism and Confirmation, are through the reception of the Eucharist fully joined to the Body of Christ.

Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 5

Historically the sacrament of Confirmation has not always been seen as part of initiation. It certainly was in the early centuries, when the anointing with chrism and the laying on of hands were integral parts of the sacramental action which began at the font and reached its highpoint at the Eucharist table. Moreover, it was identified with Easter, the traditional time for initiation.

In many areas of the Church, especially east of the Mediterranean, this pattern has continued up to the present, for children as well as adults. In these places adults and infants are still initiated into the Catholic Church through the unified celebration of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

A different custom developed in Rome and other western countries where the Roman form of worship, the 'Roman rite', became established. Here much value was placed on the direct involvement of the bishop in the act of anointing and laying on of hands. As the Christian population grew, this element of initiation - what we now call the sacrament of Confirmation - became separated from the rites of Baptism and Eucharist, as it took bishops months - indeed years - to get round to confirming all the new Christians. Coupled with this,

the developing doctrine of original sin and high infant mortality caused people to want to have their babies baptised soon after birth, and so Easter initiation became less common.

Thus, Confirmation gradually lost its sense of connection with initiation. Since people in the Middle Ages did not have access to historical records to help them understand the sacrament's original meaning, they gave it meaning according to their own practice and experience. And so, Confirmation became, for instance, a sacrament to strengthen Christians emerging from childhood as 'soldiers of Christ', or to mark a stage reached by young people in their knowledge of Church doctrine.

In response to the Reformers the Council of Trent (1545-63) restored Confirmation to its position between Baptism and Eucharist, but because these sacraments were dealt with as stages in a process of education, First Eucharist was not received until the early teenage years.

In 1910 Pius X, seeking to revitalize the Church, decided that young Catholics should be able to receive Communion earlier to ensure they had greater access to the grace and strength of the Eucharist. He brought First Communion back to the age of discretion, but, since no one still really understood Confirmation as an initiation sacrament to be received before Eucharist, Confirmation once again found itself out on a limb, with people having to give it a meaning of its own.

Different understandings of Confirmation have given rise to celebration at different ages. One recent approach has seen Confirmation as the occasion for making the faith of one's Baptism one's own. This approach is understandable given Vatican II's stress on the dignity of Baptism and the personal responsibilities of the Christian in today's world. Such a focus on personal commitment and maturity in faith, strengthened by the Spirit in the sacrament, has been widely welcomed because of its recognition of young people in the life of the Church, and the opportunities it has offered them. But Vatican II's vision of Confirmation within Christian initiation (the result of 20th century rediscoveries of the history of the sacraments) was still not being realised, hence the Auckland decision.

While it may appear to be a decision about Confirmation, it is more than that. It allows much deeper insight into Eucharist as the completion of initiation and the summit of the Church's life.

Since Vatican II we better understand the place the Eucharist holds in the life of the Church and the active role each Catholic must have both in the community celebration and in the Spirit-led living out of the Eucharist in everyday life.

The sacraments are ways in which Christ still works among us, leading us in the worship of God, making our faith grow, and helping us live according to his Spirit.

We are being given an opportunity now to look again at the process of initiation in our Church, to reappraise what it means to be Catholic and to realise that our children and young people are able. to be fully Catholic too and take part actively with us in the life of the Church.

Preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation is much more a matter of experience and example than of theoretical knowledge. In preparation parents are well placed to be what the Church sees them to be - the first and most important educators of their children in the faith. They are especially well equipped if they themselves have been baptised, confirmed and enter fully into the Church's weekly worship and a Spirit-led life.

