



I. Catechetical Background

The sacraments of Christian initiation—baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist—lay the foundations of every Christian life. “The sharing in the divine nature given to men through the grace of Christ bears a certain likeness to the origin, development, and nourishing of natural life. The faithful are born anew by Baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation, and receive in the Eucharist the food of eternal life. By means of these sacraments of Christian initiation, they thus receive in increasing measure the treasures of the divine life and advance toward the perfection of charity.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 1212)

Peter [said] to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS, a division of Bayard, Inc.

One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200, New London, CT 06320;

(860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411; www.twentythirdpublications.com

Copyright © 2021 Jayne Ragasa-Mondoy and Deacon Modesto Cordero. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission of the publisher. Write to the Permissions Editor.

Cover art: ©Shutterstock.com | ISBN: 978-1-62785-596-9 | Printed in the U.S.A.

For centuries the Church has celebrated the sacraments of initiation in a particular order to emphasize Eucharist as the completion and culmination of the sacraments of initiation. The baptism of the disciples culminated at Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In the same way, through apostolic tradition, our baptism culminates in confirmation.

The Church has also determined the age of reason as an appropriate time for the completion of Christian initiation. Understood to develop at about age seven, the age of reason identifies a stage of human development at which, through age-appropriate catechesis, a person may begin to form a fundamental disposition—an openness and capacity—for God to build upon the Spirit given at baptism so that he or she may assume increasing responsibilities as a Christian disciple. The catechumenate—the process outlined in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*—provides a pathway for unbaptized persons who have attained the age of reason to help them grow in awareness to God’s call to conversion and ways to respond to that call.

Although Confirmation is sometimes called the “sacrament of Christian maturity,” we must not confuse adult faith with the adult age of natural growth....St. Thomas reminds us of this: “Age of body does not determine age of soul. Even in childhood man can attain spiritual maturity: as the book of Wisdom says: For old age is not honored for length of time or measured by number of years. Many children, through the strength of the Holy Spirit they have received, have bravely fought for Christ even to the shedding of their blood.” (CCC 1308)

We often hear the sacraments of initiation referred to in the past tense: “I was baptized; I was confirmed; I received Holy

Communion” as though relegating them strictly to historic events. The truth is, each day our sacramental lives are to be a present-tense declaration: I AM baptized; I AM confirmed; I receive Holy Communion and I AM in communion with the Catholic Church.

Restoring the sacraments of initiation to their original order, then, allows children even at the age of reason to live “present tense” as fully initiated Christian disciples. Properly prepared, children are open and ready to receive the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the apostles did at Pentecost. They come to believe that ordinary bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, who nourishes us in the Eucharist. They profoundly place their trust in God with a childlike innocence (as God asks of us all). Equipped with the grace and gifts given freely to them by Christ, they are fully present in the world as the body of Christ, ready to profess their faith and share their gifts with others in age-appropriate ways.

REFLECTION

“Age of body does not determine age of soul. Even in childhood man can attain spiritual maturity” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh III, 72, 8, ad 2*). Children often evidence spiritual maturity in their understanding of God. In what ways have you experienced this?

II. Historical Perspective

Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. (Acts 2:3-4)

The history of the order in which the Church has conferred the sacraments of initiation is rich and complex. This brief synopsis is an invitation to study our “family history,” as it were, through delving more deeply into the history of the sacraments instituted by Christ for the sake of our salvation.

In the early Church, baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist were celebrated in a single celebration for entire households, presumably persons of all ages. These new Christians gathered in communities to pray, receive instruction, and share in the eucharistic meal. This unity of baptism, chrismation (with *myron* consecrated by a bishop and conferred by a priest), and first Holy Communion remains in practice today in the Eastern Churches, both Catholic and Orthodox.

For the Latin Church in the West, the completion of baptism by confirmation was reserved to the bishop until around the eighteenth century, when the Vatican first allowed priests to confirm in missionary territories. Back in the early Church, however, the challenges of traveling great distances from one Christian community to another caused a temporal separation of confirmation from baptism. By the later Middle Ages (c. 1100—1500), while confirmation was permitted to be conferred at the age of reason, first Holy Communion was delayed until a child reached adolescence or older. The appropriate age or stage of life when a baptized child is ready and properly disposed to receive confirmation and Eucharist continues to be debated. Yet the Church consistently speaks favorably of the traditional order:

Regarding Confirmation

- In 1897 Pope Leo XIII issued a directive for the sacrament of confirmation to be conferred at the age of reason.
- Following the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI spoke about the proper placement for the sacrament of confirmation

when he wrote: “The faithful are born anew by Baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation, and finally are sustained by the Food of Eternal Life in the increasing measure the treasures of divine life and advance towards the perfection of charity” (Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation *Divinae Consortium Naturae*, 1971).

Regarding Eucharist

- By 1215 A.D. the Fourth Council of the Lateran promulgated Canon XXI, which made it obligatory for the faithful to participate in sacramental Holy Communion (and penance) upon attaining the age of reason.
- The Council of Trent, held between 1545 and 1563, confirmed this decree.
- Pope St. Pius X promulgated that children who had attained the age of reason were to receive first Holy Communion, stating: “The age of discretion (reason) for receiving Holy Communion is that at which the child knows the difference between the Eucharistic Bread and ordinary, material bread, and can, therefore, approach the altar with proper devotion” (Sacred Congregation of the Discipline of the Sacraments, Decree on First Communion *Quam Singulari*, August 8, 1910).

REFLECTION

“It must never be forgotten that our reception of Baptism and Confirmation is ordered to the Eucharist. Accordingly, our pastoral practice should reflect a more unitary understanding of the process of Christian initiation” (Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist *Sacramentum Caritas* 17, February 22, 2007).

How are the words of Benedict XVI reflected in the way your students and families are prepared for the sacrament of confirmation?

III. Canonical Rationale

The sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the Most Holy Eucharist are interrelated in such a way that they are required for full Christian initiation. (Code of Canon Law c. 842 §2)

Let's take a look at few canons from the current *Code of Canon Law* and what they have to say about the order of the sacraments of initiation. Note that the sacraments are presented in the same order as received by the elect during the Easter Vigil:

- Baptism: Canons 849–878
- Confirmation: Canons 879–896
- Holy Eucharist: Canons 897–958

Canon 842 §2 states the sequence of the sacraments of initiation in a particular order: “The sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the Most Holy Eucharist are interrelated in such a way that they are required for full Christian initiation.”

Canon 879 speaks about the importance of the sacrament of confirmation in relation to baptism: “The sacrament of Confirmation strengthens the baptized and obliges them more firmly to be witnesses of Christ by word and deed and to spread and defend the faith. It imprints a character, enriches by the gift of the Holy Spirit the baptized continuing on the path of Christian initiation, and binds them more perfectly to the Church.”

Canon 891 regarding the age for the conferral of confirmation: “The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops has determined another age, or there is danger of

death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause suggests otherwise.”

Canon 897 regarding the Eucharist: “The most August sacrament is the Most Holy Eucharist in which Christ the Lord himself is contained, offered, and received and by which the Church continually lives and grows. The Eucharist sacrifice, the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord, in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated through the ages is the summit and source of all worship and Christian life, which signifies and effects the unity of the People of God and brings about the building up of the body of Christ. Indeed, the other sacraments and all the ecclesiastical works of the apostolate are closely connected with the Most Holy Eucharist and ordered to it.”

Indeed, as all sacraments are to be ordered to Eucharist, one might argue that *ordering* the sacraments of initiation to culminate in the reception of first Holy Communion (not confirmation) upholds the theology of our “most August sacrament.”

REFLECTION

The *Code of Canon Law* c. 891 states that the sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred “at the age of discretion” but adds “unless the conference of bishops determines another age or there is danger of death.” Effective July 1, 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops decreed that confirmation should be conferred in the U.S. between the age of discretion and age 16, with the limits decided by the local bishop.

Through this brief examination of the canons, what new insights have you gained?