

Confirmation has been called a sacrament in search of a theology. Many priests and catechists are often at a loss as to what to teach about it. If you ask most Catholics today what Confirmation is, the narrative goes like this:

When you are a teenager, you decide for yourself to be a Catholic and you receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the first time. Then, you become an adult in the faith and responsible for your own religion.

There is only one problem with this, however. It has nothing to do with the Sacrament of Confirmation, and generations of Catholics have now grown up with an understanding of the Sacrament far removed from what the Church teaches about it. It is time for us to reexamine this great Sacrament.

History of the Sacraments of Initiation

In the Ancient Church, there were three rites called Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. When adults came into the church, both then and now, all three sacraments were given at the same time. But as adult Christians had families, they wanted their entire families to be fully initiated Christians from the very start. Why deny any of your loved ones the saving grace of Christ? And so children, shortly after they were born, were given Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. In the Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Churches, with few exceptions, this is still the case. They have maintained the ancient discipline of the Church. Catechesis, or religious education, was received principally through the Liturgy and Preaching, and one-on-one spiritual direction with the clergy. There was more specific preparation for other sacraments, like Penance and Matrimony.

Originally, the celebrant of these sacraments was the Bishop. In the East, priests started to celebrate all of those sacraments of initiation in their parishes for their people. In the West, however, families chose to delay the anointing of confirmation until they could have the Bishop do it, in order to underline the communion of their family, not only with their parish church and priest, but with the Successors to the Apostles, the Bishops, who guaranteed unity in the local church. So, gradually, parents brought their children to the parish priest right after birth for Baptism and later to the Bishop for Confirmation. First Holy Communion was delayed as well, since it was the last of the Sacraments of Initiation. Often a child could be an adolescent before completing their Christian initiation.

When Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the wall of the church at Wittenberg in 1517, a movement called Protestantism started which would sever many Christians from the Ancient Church. While most Protestants agreed with the Catholic Church about what Baptism was, they all disagreed with her about what the Eucharist was. For them, the Mass was not the unbloody re-presentation of Calvary in ritual form in which bread and wine changed into the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, while retaining the appearances of bread and wine. For them, the Mass was merely a memorial meal, a sacrifice of praise. They disagreed with each other about where Christ was present at all in that meal, or to what extent. Likewise, all Protestants declared that Confirmation was not a sacrament instituted by Christ, but a rite, a "lesser sacrament" as the Anglicans called it, instituted by the Church. For the Catholic, sacraments are objective channels of grace instituted by Christ. For the Protestant, they are all about showing the believer's faith, and not all of them are instituted by the Christ.

All of a sudden, Catholics had to explain more clearly to their children why they rejected the novel teaching. Catechesis became more intimately connected to the sacraments, particularly to Confirmation and First Holy Communion. It became more systematic and organized, because Catholics had to defend

their faith against attacks by Protestants. Confirmation and First Holy Communion was delayed. Because it was delayed beyond the age of reason, it became clear that children could sin and thus risk making sacrilegious celebrations of the sacraments. So formation for Penance was tied to First Holy Communion, as well. As the education needed to be able to understand and defend the faith grew, more time was needed, and the sacraments were delayed later and later.

Pope St Pius X, however, saw that there were children who were ready to receive Holy Communion and actively participate at Holy Mass even if their religious education was not complete. He saw that children were capable of becoming great saints at an early age, if they were allowed to be as close to Jesus as possible. And so, in 1910 with the document *Quam singulari*, he declared that the age of reason at which a child could be eligible for First Communion should not be 12, as it had been for some centuries, but 7. This may have been a laudable move from the point of view of creating great child-saints in the Church, but it reversed the ancient order of the Sacraments of Initiation. Catechesis became almost intrinsically tied to the sacraments.

In the United States, Catholics built up an amazing system of parochial schools and programs for children who were not in those schools. But Catholics in this country often found themselves in a hostile environment for the faith. Confirmation, occurring later and later as part of a comprehensive religious education, began to be seen as preparing soldiers for Christ to be part of the Church Militant. It began to be seen as a sacrament of Christian maturity and responsibility, imparting a willingness even to die for the Faith as a martyr if need be. While such a vision of the sacrament is not contrary to the Church's teaching on Confirmation, that vision was influenced more by the historical path by which Confirmation was delayed and tied into the needs of a particular time and place to defend the integrity of the faith, and not by the Church's actual teaching on the Sacraments.

The Bishops of the world met at Vatican II (1962-5) to discuss how the Church could make her ancient reaching more accessible to the modern world. While much of what came out of and after that Council was positive, a new spirit and creativity took hold of religious education in the United States. Religious education became less about doctrine and defending the faith, and more about self-esteem and self-affirmation. Generations of American Catholics have now grown up with the same outlook on Confirmation as a previous generation, but without the same doctrinal and spiritual formation. This has led to a lack of seriousness about the sacraments.

What we are seeing now

What are we seeing now as a result of this crisis of faith? Fewer parents choose to marry validly in the Church because they have never been formed properly as Catholics in the faith. Their religious education has been seriously defective and not up to the task of defending the faith, not only from Protestantism, but rampant secularism. They have begun to see the sacraments as rites of passage at certain points of life. Baptism is for birth, First Communion is for early childhood, Confirmation is for adolescence, Marriage is for adulthood and Last Rites for death. They seek the sacraments not because they want what the sacraments stand for, but because of family custom and tradition, because their grandparents want their grandchildren to receive the same sacraments they did when they were younger. It is not seen as part of a living faith practiced in home and the world. Often religious education programs put fewer and fewer demands on families, thus creating a lack of seriousness about it. Priests and catechists are just happy that they come at all, and fear alienating these families by encouraging a more coherent practice of the faith.

In the meantime, the number of Catholics who have lapsed from the faith has increased. The number of Catholics who are unable to accurately explain the Church's teaching has increased. Pressure from non-Catholic Christians and atheists has led many to apostatize from the true faith.

What must we do?

So what can be done? Pope Benedict XVI has called for a Year of Faith to return to the basics of our religion. Many Bishops are restoring the ancient order of the Sacraments of Initiation and freeing them from catechesis. Many priests are calling for whole-family catechesis, where the entire family is involved in some kind of faith formation, and not just children preparing for sacraments. Parishes are becoming more serious about quantifying the practice of the faith in terms of Sunday Mass attendance and participation in the life of the Church as an integral part of discipleship formation.

While here at Prince of Peace, we are not yet ready to restore the ancient order of the Sacraments of Initiation and we are not in the place right now to totally re-envision how religious education is done in the parish, we do want to take the sacraments more seriously.

First of all, we must clarify what the Sacraments are and what they are not. They are not optional rites of passage which are done out of a sense of tradition or custom. They are necessary to salvation, and are the ordinary means by which Christ dispenses His graces which are necessary for our salvation and human flourishing. The Sacraments are encounters with a living God, and require a living faith. A child who receives a sacrament must be part of a family of disciples of Christ: their natural biological families at home, the domestic Church, and their supernatural spiritual family at Church. Children and their families must practice their faith: they must go to Mass every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation, go to Confession regularly, pray in the home daily, and be registered, active and contributing members of their local parish. Tolerating anything less risks losing the sheep to the wolves of false teachers and evil prophets, and endangering the souls of children and their families.

Second of all, we must restore the Church's teaching on the Sacrament of Confirmation to its central place in our religious education. Confirmation is not about our choice, but about God's gifts. It does not indicate one's personal choice to be a Catholic. A human being becomes a Catholic Christian by the Sacrament of Baptism, and nothing, not even the choice of free will to deny God, can ever change that fact. It is not a sacrament of maturity and responsibility where the gifts of the Holy Spirit are first received. Those gifts are received at Baptism. Confirmation strengthens those gifts and orients the life of the believer, now fully initiated into the Church, towards his mission to the world as a disciple of Christ. Confirmation is the sacrament of strength and mission, whether it is received at birth, at age 8, in 8th grade or after 80 years of life. It is also a sacrament of service and charity, which, by enflaming the child of God with love for Christ, impels Him to share that love in concrete ways in the social apostolate of the Church.

Third of all, parishes and religious education programs must encourage parents, who are the primary educators of their children, to ensure that the faith is living in their home. We must offer parents all the tools they need to develop that faith in their children, whether it be through Sunday Mass, classes for religious education at all levels or other parish social events.

The Catholic Faith is the answer to all of man's questions. It is revealed by God for the salvation of man. The Church is given to us as a gift in which we can live our faith. The Sacraments are those encounters of our living faith with the living God which make us who we are as children of God, every single one of us.

In this Year of Faith, let us learn more about this most precious treasure and do all we can to share it according to God's Plan, with the world.