

## REFLECTIONS ON THE AGE OF CONFIRMATION

WILLIAM J. LEVADA

*Archdiocese of San Francisco*

**F**ULLY TEN YEARS after the promulgation of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, the American Catholic bishops finally achieved in 1993 a consensus of sorts about the age of confirmation. Canon 891 determines that "the sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops determines another age or there is danger of death or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause urges otherwise."

In actual practice the age of confirmation has varied widely in the Church, both historically and geographically, for the faithful who were baptized as infants. In the Eastern churches, confirmation or chrismation has traditionally been united with the sacrament of baptism and formed a single rite usually administered by the priest. In the Latin churches of the West, the sealing of the gift of the Spirit through confirmation was reserved to the bishop in a separate rite.

However, the practice in the Latin West has not been uniform. In many Spanish-speaking countries, it was customary for the bishop to confirm two- and three-year olds presented for confirmation in the cathedral. In Italy, confirmation was often received on the same day as first Communion, but not at the same ceremony; first Communion was received at the morning parish Mass, confirmation in an afternoon ceremony concluding with Benediction. In the countries of northern Europe and English-speaking countries generally, confirmation was received after a separate catechesis during the last years of elementary school; more recently, under the influence of the catechetical movement, this age was sometimes deferred into mid-adolescence or later.

In its directive regarding the age of confirmation, the 1983 Code of Canon Law takes into account this variety of pastoral practice by allowing episcopal conferences to determine an age other than "at about the age of discretion," presumably on the basis of a collective judgment that some other age would have a pastoral advantage for the people of that nation or culture. Some reflection on Canon 891 might be helpful.

In establishing a "norm," the canon is generous in recognizing the variety of pastoral practice. The norm is based on the Catholic understanding of "sacrament": in order for those who have reached the age of reason to receive a sacrament, proper dispositions (which would normally entail the appropriate preparation) are required. Canon 889.2 indicates the conditions: "Outside the danger of death, to be licitly confirmed it is required, if the person has the use of reason, that one be suitably instructed, properly disposed and able to renew one's baptismal promises."

It seems reasonable to conclude that church directives do not intend to abolish the practice of the confirmation of infants or of children who have not reached the age of discretion, where that is judged by the competent authorities to be pastorally appropriate. The same might be said about the confirmation of adolescents. The determination of canon 891 that confirmation be administered "at about the age of discretion" represents the age at which the conditions for the fruitful reception of the sacrament can presumably be fulfilled. But one can also infer another criterion from the canon: prudent pastoral judgment will see the advantage in determining collectively the appropriate age for the conferral of the sacrament, so that pastoral and catechetical resources may be more effectively directed toward disposing and preparing the faithful for the reception of the sacrament.

In the survey of several other episcopal conferences' decisions about canon 891, conducted by the U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy in preparation for the 1993 discussion and vote by the American bishops, I noted that most of the northern European bishops' conferences had already determined an age older than the "age of discretion" in accord with the customary pastoral practice of their region.

In the discussion of this issue at various times over the years between 1983 and 1993, the American bishops failed to achieve any consensus about the appropriate age for confirmation. Some favored a later age (16 or 17) which would allow for a more mature catechesis. Others did not want to abandon their customary practice of confirming eighth graders, or sixth graders, or fourth graders, which had prevailed in their dioceses for years. Still others, influenced by the opinion of some liturgists, wanted to institute a new practice (or as some might present it, restore a more "ancient" tradition or practice) of conferring the sacrament of confirmation before first Communion, so as to conform to the "sequence" of the sacraments of adult initiation.

For example, Robert Duggan, a liturgist and pastor in the Archdiocese of Washington, not only insisted on confirmation "in sequence," but also was highly critical of the NCCB Committee on the Pastoral Practices' proposal regarding the age for confirmation in the U.S., suggesting at one point that the Committee should not "ask their brother bishops to weasel out of a difficult decision with such a blatant end-run around Rome's clear call to establish a unified pastoral practice throughout the dioceses of the United States." At another point he expressed this judgment: "[A]fter 20 years of practices differing from parish to parish and diocese to diocese, after years of differing theologies and differing catechetical approaches, what we are left with is a pastoral chaos whose toxic effect has become increasingly obvious to all."<sup>1</sup>

At the 1993 meeting the American bishops adopted a proposal which tried to accommodate the variety of practice and desires of the bishops

<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Duggan, "The Age of Confirmation: A Flawed Proposal," *America* 168 (June 5–12, 1993) 12–14, at 13 and 12.

in the matter and determined that the age of confirmation should be between seven and eighteen, at the prudent judgment of the diocesan bishop. This determination was submitted to the Holy See for approval, and the required *recognitio* was given for a period of five years, beginning July 1, 1994. Thus, the solution achieved after so much delay is only a temporary one, suggesting that further discussion of the matter is not only timely but necessary, since the question presumably will return to the agenda of the episcopal conference at least by 1999.

While I thought the 1993 solution was the best we could do at the time, given the impasse which had developed over determining the appropriate age for confirmation, I do not think it is ultimately a satisfactory one. In my judgment, the issue of uniform pastoral practice for the good of the people has not been adequately dealt with in our approach to the age of confirmation. For example, the ongoing catechesis of youth has not yet been addressed realistically. It would seem important that a pastoral plan for such catechesis be developed before or concurrently with the introduction of a new practice regarding confirmation. Such a pastoral plan would need to pay attention to the divergences in practices now spreading in the United States, so that in dioceses (and/or parishes) where confirmation is conferred at a younger age (i.e. "about the age of discretion"), guidelines might be developed to provide for the proper catechesis for confirmation for persons from other dioceses and parishes where confirmation is delayed.

The survey report provided by the NCCB Committee on Pastoral Practice in 1993 indicates a widespread variance both in theological understanding of the sacrament and in catechetical and pastoral practice. I think we bishops ought to give this matter ongoing serious attention, together with theologians, liturgists, and above all pastors, with a view to providing the appropriate guidelines and support materials which—no matter what the age determined in the particular diocese—will ensure the benefits of a pastoral practice grounded in an adequate theological understanding of confirmation.

One key point in today's discussion of the age of confirmation (and therefore of a comprehensive pastoral practice for that sacrament in the U.S. today) revolves around the contention that, since confirmation is one of the three sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist), it violates the "sequence" of the sacraments of initiation when confirmation is postponed to later childhood or adolescence. Some would further find in the directive of canon 891 an implication that supports this "theological" sacramental perspective.

No doubt the restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), culminating in the reception of the three sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil, has reinforced the sense among liturgists and sacramental theologians that the sequence of these sacraments should be respected, even when the recipient of the sacrament(s) may not be an unbaptized adult. But the point is sometimes overlooked that the restored RCIA is much broader than a sequence of sacraments: it entails

a dynamic of conversion marked both by ritual and intense catechetical efforts—the catechumenate. The purpose of this entire order or catechumenate is to prepare for and help elicit the act of faith, which is both personal and communal (ecclesial) and which is intrinsically linked with the sacrament of baptism. The Church has solemnly taught the necessity of both the act of faith and of baptism for salvation.

#### TOPICS FOR THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL REFLECTION

There are several aspects, theological and pastoral, of the sacrament of confirmation which I think should be taken into account in a broader discussion leading to a renewed pastoral practice for this sacrament. My efforts here do not attempt to provide an adequate, scientific theological examination of these aspects, but rather offer points of orientation for discussion about some of the issues which might be considered.

The first of these aspects which needs further consideration is the early development in the Church of the practice of infant baptism. I take it as a given that this practice is normative; the *Instruction on Infant Baptism* provides a thorough and authoritative discussion of the question.<sup>2</sup> I want to highlight a point made by this Instruction, when it responds to the objection made by some to the practice of infant baptism. Since the baptism of infants does not correspond to the New Testament sequence of preaching, conversion, faith, and sacrament (so the objection), it should be postponed in favor of having everyone make an obligatory catechumenate in preparation for baptism. The Instruction reminds us of the constant teaching of the Church: the sacrament of baptism causes the grace of forgiveness and infuses the virtue of faith, the faith of the Church. It is necessary for salvation and should not be denied to infants who will be progressively educated in the faith.

The objection is not without foundation, even though it arrives at the wrong conclusion. It is not the practice of infant baptism which should be abandoned. Rather, in its pastoral practice, the Church should consider how the experience of preaching, conversion, faith, and sacrament (which is the pattern for adults entering the Church shown in the New Testament, and developed in the catechumenate of the early Church) might be made available as an ordinary part of the Church's pastoral practice for those baptized as infants.

The principal point I want to make in examining the practice of infant baptism is this: while we should accept with the restored RCIA that the norm for adults entering the Church is the catechumenate, culminating in the reception of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist at Easter, the ancient tradition of infant baptism suggests that the Church recognized a different practice for those born into the “household of the faith.” In its varied practice for those baptized as infants,

<sup>2</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Pastoralis actio (Instruction on Infant Baptism)*, October 20, 1980.

the Church (at least in parts of the West) has deferred the reception of the other sacraments—penance, confirmation, Eucharist. If the original reason for this deferral was to permit the bishop to exercise his role as ordinary minister of the sacrament of confirmation, subsequent developments indicate an increasing attention being given to the elements of education and preparation for the sacraments, both of confirmation and of first Eucharist. Perhaps one could speculate that this theological development, far from being a derogation from a preferred ritual practice of adult initiation, is owed to a desire to ensure that the personal faith of the believer baptized in infancy might be better engaged—and that precisely in connection with these fundamental sacraments of initiation.

A second aspect which deserves further theological and pastoral reflection is the role of the bishop as the ordinary minister of the sacrament of confirmation. In the early centuries of the Church, so far as indications permit one to conclude, it was the bishop who preached the instructions given to the catechumens and neophytes, and who with the assistance of priests and deacons, administered the sacraments of initiation at Easter. There is an allusion to this as the normative practice even in today's church law. Without prejudice to the customary teaching that the ordinary minister of baptism is the bishop, the priest and, since the restoration of the diaconate, the deacon (canon 861), canon 863 says that "the baptism of adults, at least those who have completed fourteen years of age, is to be referred to the bishop so that it may be conferred by him, if he judges it expedient." For prudent pastoral reasons (e.g. physical impossibility!), bishops today customarily confide the administration of the baptism of adults (and their confirmation at the Easter Vigil) to parish priests. Except for the catechumens baptized at the cathedral, the bishops' role in the RCIA is given prominence at the Rite of Election and perhaps at other moments.

In the developments in the early Church, however, I take it that at least two different practices emerged. In the Eastern church, in parishes distant from the cathedral, the priest was authorized to confer all of the sacraments of initiation even for infants. The presence of the bishop was symbolically represented in chrismation through the use of the chrism blessed by the bishop and sent throughout the diocese for use in the sacramental rites.

In parts of the Western church, on the other hand, the anointing with chrism in confirmation was separated from baptism, and reserved to the bishop to be conferred personally in a later, distinct sacramental rite. An early witness to this tradition is the letter of Pope Innocent I to the Bishop of Gubbio (Italy) in 416:

As for the signing of infants [with chrism], it is clear that it may only be done by the bishop. For, though the presbyters are priests of the second order, yet they do not have the fullness of the pontificate. That this pontifical authority of confirming or of conferring the Spirit the Paraclete is proper only to the

bishops is clearly shown, not only by the Church's custom, but by the passage of the Acts of the Apostles which affirms that Peter and John were directed to confer the Holy Spirit to those who were already baptized [cf. Acts 8:14-17]. For it is allowed to presbyters when they baptize either in the absence of the bishop or in his presence to anoint with chrism those who are being baptized, though only with chrism consecrated by the bishop, but not to sign their forehead with the same oil, which is reserved to the bishops when they confer the Spirit the Paraclete.<sup>3</sup>

Early witnesses to the practice of confirmation are few, and interpretations of them vary. Aidan Kavanagh has argued that confirmation as a distinct rite developed from an ancient practice of solemn liturgical dismissal, and finds in Pope Innocent "a good example of bending liturgy to serve theology and current pastoral needs."<sup>4</sup> But theology and pastoral needs are intimately linked with liturgy throughout the history of the Church, as the oft-cited principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* shows. Is Kavanagh's the best or only interpretation of Innocent, or is there evidence of another dynamic at work?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives this popular theological explanation:

Although the bishop may for grave reasons concede to priests the faculty of administering confirmation, it is appropriate from the very meaning of the sacrament that he should confer it himself, mindful that the celebration of Confirmation has been temporally separated from Baptism for this reason. Bishops are the successors of the apostles. They have received the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders. The administration of this sacrament by them demonstrates clearly that its effect is to unite those who receive it more closely to the Church, to her apostolic origins, and to her mission of bearing witness to Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, throughout the Western Church, the practice of permitting priests to confirm was considered an expedient, requiring some excusing, even grave, cause. I draw this conclusion: Whatever one may reason to about the sequence of the sacraments of initiation, it would not seem to be warranted to suggest that the practice of the Western church was a kind of derogation of the practice of administering all the sacraments of initiation to infants. The development of the practice of confirmation as a sacramental rite distinct from baptism seems to have other roots—in the example of the apostles in Acts 8, and in the role of the bishop as the minister par excellence of Christian initiation.

A third aspect which merits attention, although less connected to the meaning of confirmation, is that of the timing of first confession. My own view that the Church takes a moderate, rather than absolute,

<sup>3</sup> H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzger, ed., *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (37th ed., 1967) 215.

<sup>4</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo, 1988) 63.

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1994) no. 1313.

view regarding the sequence of the reception of the sacraments of initiation is reinforced by the traditional practice of insisting on initiation into the practice of confession as a requirement for the reception of first Communion. I will not address here various interpretations of canonical requirements which have led some to try to find loopholes in this practice. I take it that this rule forms part of the traditional practice by which the Church expects all its baptized members to begin the regular reception of the sacraments of penance and Eucharist as the normal sacramental living of the Christian life, from the age of discretion on. I would presume it to be obligatory for those being prepared for confirmation at about the age of reason to follow this required pastoral practice for first confession/first Communion in the Latin Church, a practice which the Holy Father has reiterated more than once in his *ad limina* discourses of the past years.

The Church's discipline, which indicates confession to be the first of the sacraments to be received at the age of discretion, is not a vestige of some out-of-date practice which interrupts the sequence of the sacraments of initiation. It is rather an illustration of what the Church's pastoral practice has always required regarding the reception of the sacraments: proper preparation and proper dispositions. This regulation is less a judgment about an individual child's need for sacramental absolution than about the Church's recognition of the need for forgiveness and its availability in the sacrament of reconciliation as fundamental to Christian living. Nor does the reception of penance before first Eucharist (or confirmation and first Eucharist) violate the spirit of the sacraments of initiation, especially considering the beautiful tradition of penance as "second baptism."

It is interesting to note that even before the reform of Pope St. Pius X that lowered the age for the reception of Holy Communion to those who had just reached the age of discretion (from the previously customary practice of first Communion at about age 14), it was customary to introduce children to the practice of receiving the sacrament of penance regularly at an earlier age, even though they would not receive Communion for several years. To me this indicates yet again the attention the Church's pastoral practice has traditionally given to the "psychological" elements in the Christian life, to the dynamics of ongoing conversion as an essential ingredient in the life of faith.

During the admittedly sparse discussion of confirmation in recent years, I have not heard any suggestions that the Church reexamine the decision of Pius X by having Eucharist follow confirmation in later childhood. Nor am I advocating this. But the practical difficulties of catechetical preparation for confirmation for seven-year olds is remarked anecdotally by pastors who often find that the meaning and significance of confirmation is overwhelmed in practice by combining it with first Communion.

In addition, earlier catechetical experts raised the question about the intrinsic difficulty of communicating a theology of the Holy Spirit

which is essential to the meaning of confirmation to seven-year olds. While the Bible stories about Jesus relate to the child's world of reference and provide a basis for teaching a basic theology of Eucharist, the less tangible character of the theology of the Spirit prompted earlier commentators to recommend deferral of the sacrament of confirmation to a later age in order to permit a necessary and adequate catechesis.

The pre-Vatican II discussion about this aspect of confirmation was summed up succinctly by the noted U.S. canonist T. L. Bouscaren, who referred to the response of the Holy See to the bishops of Spain and South America about retaining the practice of confirming children before the age of discretion: "The custom may be retained, but the faithful should be taught the meaning of the universal law: confirmation is to be preceded by a catechesis which has proved to be so salutary." Bouscaren commented, "By this reply it is evident that there is taken for granted a catechesis [for confirmation] which goes far beyond what is demanded for first Communion."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the well-known liturgical and catechetical expert Josef Jungmann recounted the contrasting opinions about the age of confirmation discussed at the 1928 Munich Catechetical Congress:

One school of thought argued that confirmation, as "the completion of baptism," should follow as soon as possible upon the reception of baptism, and that for the child's religious development the grace of the sacrament should be secured early on. The other school would defer the administration of this sacrament to the time when childhood, and religious instruction, come to an end, and the child goes out to confront the world for the first time, so that this important transition might have the religious blessing of the sacrament. And this for two further reasons, firstly because confirmation is not necessary for salvation and hence essentially of lesser urgency; secondly because as an "anointing," a strengthening, an equipment with the weapons of the Holy Ghost, it fits in well with this stage of the youthful development.<sup>7</sup>

#### SERIOUS ONGOING DISCUSSION NEEDED

It is not my intention to draw a definitive conclusion about the theology of confirmation from these random observations. It is rather my hope to show that serious discussion about the meaning of confirmation, and the Church's pastoral practice of confirmation, should necessarily continue. Indeed, such reflection would probably be well advised before bishops and pastors introduce changes in current practice. I offer two reasons for suggesting this.

The first is practical. Many bishops and pastors have called attention to the importance of a uniform policy regarding confirmation so that the Catholic faithful can gain a better understanding of the importance

<sup>6</sup> T. L. Bouscaren, *Canon Law Digest* 1 (1931) 348, cited in Josef A. Jungmann, *Handing on the Faith: A Manual of Catechetics* (Freiburg: Herder, 1959) 343.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 342–43.

of the sacrament and be supported by church policy and practice in ensuring that their children receive confirmation. This would certainly be helpful in a society such as ours in which people are so highly mobile and in which catechetical efforts are dissipated by many competing influences. I take it the rationale of canon 891 also supports such a uniform pastoral practice. The wide variation in pastoral practice from diocese to diocese makes it difficult for publishers and religious educators to develop the most effective catechetical resources for the preparation for confirmation. When the option is further given to local parishes to choose the age for confirmation, the problems of confusion and lack of resources are only compounded.

My second reason has a different basis. Many have praised the advantages seen in the renewal of the catechumenate for those entering the Church. The "neo-catechumenal" movement has even consciously structured its development of the faith life of the Christian community around this model. In my view, the catechumenate model offers a rich potential for bringing its benefits to the Christian community at large by making the preparation for confirmation (of adolescents or young adults, for example) a catechumenal experience.

I offer this suggestion not simply to salvage the long-standing practice of delayed confirmation in the Western Church, but also to assist in understanding why this practice has enjoyed its privileged place in so many Latin churches. The reception of confirmation at later age allows the faithful to engage the dynamic of conversion and faith which is an intrinsic part of the experience of the adult convert. The practice of infant baptism does not allow for this dimension, albeit in order to provide for other essential purposes.

If one is not bound to a proper sequence of the sacraments of initiation for those who receive infant baptism, it would seem to make good sense to see the time of childhood and early adolescence as a kind of catechumenal period, preparing children for the completion of their initiation at the time when they are able to make a mature, personal act of faith. At such an age they are ready to assume that witness of evangelization and service which corresponds to the gift of the Spirit, a Spirit who sent the apostles forth at Pentecost, anointed to be "other Christs" in the world. Confirmation would then complete or seal the process of initiation begun with infant baptism, around the time these young people were preparing to leave their family to take their place as active Christians in the world.

A catechumenal experience which would lead our young people to a genuine commitment of faith and an apostolic sense of mission in and for the world is a pastoral practice which many recognize is much needed. Confirmation well prepared for and well celebrated has achieved this at times in the past. With the new model of the catechumenate, I think it could be achieved with potentially even greater success in the future. But confusion about the meaning of the sacrament, and even lack of unity in our pastoral practice—a unity which

canon 891 implicitly recommends that the bishops of a country undertake—both work against the possibility of returning confirmation to its proper role of making the vitality and energy of the Holy Spirit more consciously present in the lives of all the faithful.

Critics of the practice of infant baptism, both at the time of the Reformation and more recently, have often advanced the absence of the personal, “psychological” dimension associated with the act of faith as a reason which argues against the practice. But Catholic practice has always insisted that the faith of the Church into which infants are baptized requires that this faith be developed into a personal act through a progressive catechesis. It seems to me that placing the age of confirmation in later childhood/young adulthood better accommodates this necessary development than would a new practice of confirming seven-year olds. As William O’Malley notes: “St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that what differentiates confirmation from baptism is that, while baptism empowers one to receive the other sacraments, confirmation provides a power to profess one’s faith in words.”<sup>8</sup> Even Melanchthon, one of the first generation of Protestant Reformers, who did not accept confirmation as a sacrament, did recognize its usefulness as a solemn confession of faith.

Some lament that the practice of delayed confirmation has negative ecumenical implications, considering the Eastern practice of conferring all three sacraments of initiation on infants. No doubt this is true. But we should also consider—perhaps especially in the U.S.—the ecumenical situation of Reformation communities like the Baptists, who reject altogether the practice of infant baptism as unbiblical, or Lutherans and others who maintain the practice of confirmation of adolescents. Could not confirmation as the completion of infant initiation, at a time when personal faith and conversion to the Lord Jesus are possible, be seen as ecumenically more sensitive to the traditions coming from the Reformation which are so prominent in the U.S.?

It is understandable that the liturgical renewal which has recovered the RCIA and the Easter Vigil for the Latin Church would find the practices of delayed confirmation and even infant baptism to be anomalies and seek a new practice under the rubric of restoration. But the issues are more complex than some realize. Might we not see in the Western practice of delayed confirmation a genuine development of sacramental doctrine and practice which providentially provides a focus on the moment of Pentecost, the “apostolic” moment which underlies the vision of the Second Vatican Council’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*, as well as the emphasis on the new evangelization which has been the theme of the pontificates of Paul VI and John Paul II?

Perhaps by analogy one could look to just such providential develop-

<sup>8</sup> William O’Malley, S.J., “Confirmed and Confirming,” *America* 172 (June 17, 1995) 17.

ments in religious life in the history of the Church. The monastic charism has focused primarily on the liturgical and contemplative dimension of the Church. But later the apostolic communities of religious life brought to the Church a new witness of the gifts of the Spirit in mission and evangelization. So, too, it is clear that the theology of the sacrament of confirmation is well served by the liturgical emphasis on the anointing with chrism as a consecration for participation in the Church's worship. But perhaps it is just as important a key to understanding the anointing of the Spirit sent by Jesus to see it as consecration for mission, and to ritualize this essential dimension of church by a more effective pastoral practice for the sacrament of confirmation.

I would like to hope that these reflections might offer a useful contribution to an ongoing and serious theological reflection on the nature of confirmation, and especially on our pastoral practice, which will truly be helpful to our people and the Church. I also hope that these remarks may provide a better understanding of and sympathy for the practice of the vast majority of the churches of the West. The development of a richer, more uniform pastoral practice for confirmation as the completion of the sacraments of initiation for those baptized as infants—prepared for by a catechumenal experience which enhances the commitment of faith and the apostolic sense of evangelization and service in the world, and accompanied by the active sacramental life of the reception of penance and Eucharist—strikes me as a highly desirable goal.