

Benedict XVI and the sequence of the sacraments of initiation

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Pope Benedict XVI has invited the curia and the conferences of Catholic bishops to examine the relative effectiveness of the two sequences of confirmation and first communion.¹ Confirmation precedes first communion throughout the Eastern rites and in the cases when the three sacraments of initiation are administered together in the West; for example, when a priest baptizes catechumens at the Easter Vigil. Although there are instances in the Roman Rite when children baptized in infancy receive confirmation prior to their first communion, the reverse order more commonly prevails. Benedict writes, “Concretely, it needs to be seen which practice better enables the faithful to put the sacrament of the Eucharist at the centre, as the goal of the whole process of initiation.”²

At first, it appears that Benedict has reached a proleptic conclusion by establishing as the criterion for this examination the centrality of the eucharist. On the other hand, this criterion can be easily explained by the context of this statement. *Sacramentum caritatis* is the pope’s apostolic exhortation following the synod of bishops convened to discuss the eucharist. In one section, the Holy Father draws attention to the relationship between the eucharist and the other sacraments of the Catholic Church. In most cases the connections are complaisant. The eucharist perfects the gifts received at baptism.³ Catechesis on the eucharist requires a call to penance.⁴ The anointing of the sick includes an opportunity for viaticum.⁵ Jesus bracketed the eucharist and orders at the Last Supper.⁶ As the sacrament of charity, the eucharist has a special alliance to marital love.⁷ Confirmation, though, is another matter. Here a disconnection emerges. “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.”⁸

Benedict therefore argues that “attention needs to be paid to the order of the sacraments of initiation.”⁹ The variations in sequence are matters of pastoral practice, not of dogma. So by authorizing an examination of current practices, the pope anticipates that “the faithful can be helped both to mature through the formation received in our communities and to give their lives an authentically eucharistic direction, so that they can offer a reason for the hope within them in a way suited to our times (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15).”¹⁰

When the bishops of the United States met in Washington DC in November 1998, the age of confirmation landed on the agenda. Bishop Emil Wcela of Rockville Center reported on a

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* (Sc), 22 February 2007.

² Sc 18.

³ Sc 17.

⁴ Sc 20.

⁵ Sc 22.

⁶ Sc 23.

⁷ Sc 27.

⁸ Sc 17.

⁹ Sc 18.

¹⁰ Ibid.

conversation he had had with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

[Bishop Wcela] said that he had "asked Cardinal Ratzinger if there was any movement in Rome toward a theological or general, universal understanding of what the Sacrament of Confirmation meant. He said...the time was not yet ripe - not mature yet for a decision". Bishop Wcela remarked that without definitive guidance on this issue, bishops are left with the conflicting advice of liturgists, catechists, and sacramental theologians.¹¹

Apparently, the pope now believes the time is ripe. This is a unique development in the history of confirmation in the Latin Rite. Prior to this time a variety of practices has co-existed, legislation has been enacted, and rationale has been given. But no pope has ever requested a survey of these data to unify the praxis, and no pope has offered an evaluative criterion. This has now been done.

It may prove helpful to survey the recent history of the sequence of confirmation and first communion. The entire history of this sequence is complicated and often misconstrued. But a glance at the last 150 years or so will suffice to show where the matter currently stands. The main reason for focusing away from the earlier history is that first communion ceremonies arrived on the scene rather late. They did not become widespread until well into the 17th century, and the age for first communion was settling in around 12 or older. At the same time, the age of confirmation fluctuated quite a bit. Seven was becoming the minimum age, overturning the time-honored yet rarely-observed practice of Roman Rite bishops confirming the infants they baptized. There was never a maximum age for confirmation; many people even went unconfirmed throughout their lives. Consequently, there was no consistency between the sequence of confirmation and first communion, nor was there any awareness that these deferred rites pertained to initiation. By the 19th century, a number of church councils addressed the issue in a search for consistency.¹² This background is illuminating because it is precisely from bishops that Pope Benedict is asking for an examination.

In the mid-19th century, several councils of French bishops legislated that first communion should precede confirmation. For example, the Council of Tours argued that this sequence would permit confirmation to bear more fruit.

In order that the faithful may obtain more abundant fruit from the confirmation they have received, we decree that no one may be admitted to this sacrament until he or she comes to first communion, unless of course a grave reason argues otherwise in the judgment of the bishop.¹³

The Council of Avignon recognized the universal custom of confirming after the age of 7, but preferred the local custom of waiting until after first communion, several years later.

¹¹ NCCB Report. <http://www.adoremus.org/1298-NCCBReport.html> (site accessed on October 22, 2007).

¹² For this history, see my book *Ages of Initiation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000).

¹³ Council of Tours (1849) 7:2. Labbé (Philippe) and Cossart (Gabriel), *Sacrosancta Concilia* (Paris: 1671), 7:1264. For all these translations, see chapter 11 of *Ages of Initiation*.

In the Latin Church the custom has been in force for a long time that confirmation not be conferred before age seven, and in the province of Avignon, this sacrament may not be administered to children until after their first communion; the fathers of the council agree that this usage must be retained, although certain cases may be excused by the judgment of the bishop.¹⁴

The Council of Sens believed that older children would bring more intelligence and belief to the celebration of confirmation, which would then bear more fruit for them.

We considered it profitable that children generally not be admitted to confirmation until after first communion, trusting that proven then to have more intelligence, doctrine, and piety, they will therefore receive more certain and abundant fruit.¹⁵

In Rouen, candidates for confirmation were expected to have been fittingly instructed, and prepared themselves through sacramental confession and communion.

People may not be admitted to the sacrament of confirmation except those who have been sufficiently taught the rudiments of the faith, have already received holy eucharist, and who according to the precept of the last council of Rouen, have prepared themselves piously for the anointing with a previous sacramental confession.¹⁶

The Diocese of Auch followed suit, establishing its preference that candidates not come for confirmation until they had previously shared first communion.

According to the current discipline of our province, they are not admitted to the sacrament of confirmation who are not equipped with the use of reason and have not been taught the rudiments of Christian doctrine. Indeed, according to the same discipline, and by which the confirmed may better retain the memory and fruit of confirmation, we decree that only those should ordinarily be presented for this holy anointing who have become sharers of the body of Christ, unless limitations of time and situations suggest otherwise.¹⁷

France was not alone. A Council in Prague concurred with these preferences. It interpreted confirmation as a time to instruct people to fight for the faith.

Although the sacrament of confirmation may be administered to everyone after baptism, it is however less fitting that this be done

¹⁴ Council of Avignon (1849) 4:3, 2. Mansi 25:1089.

¹⁵ Council of Sens (1850) 3:3. Mansi 44:230.

¹⁶ Council of Rouen (1850) 15:2. Mansi 44:45.

¹⁷ Council of Auch (1851) 77. 44:617f.

*before children acquire the use of reason. For confirmation has been ordained for this in the first place, that we may be found instructed in its power and prepared when we must fight for the faith of Christ. No one prudently judges children who lack the use of reason to be fit for this kind of battle. Children who have obtained the use of reason, for whom the riches of receiving this sacrament are rather frequently offered, should not easily be brought to the mysteries of holy chrism without reasonable cause before they have been admitted to first communion.*¹⁸

Back in France, the Diocese of Mende spelled out the practical reasons for deferring confirmation: It kept children engaged in religious education.

*It is often good and useful not to admit children to confirmation immediately after first communion, in order to keep them longer in catechism class and thus to complete their religious instruction.*¹⁹

A catechetical manual by Felix Dupanloup reveals the practice of celebrating confirmation and first communion together, but expresses a preference that the celebrations be separated. At the time, he thought that a week of special sessions was enough.

*There are parishes where confirmation closely follows first communion. If it is on the same day, or on the next day, it seems to us, in general, much to be regretted; the preparations for these two sacraments cannot be kept sufficiently distinct, and there is a risk of the children confusing everything, and understanding nothing rightly. But seven or eight days afterwards is quite another thing; the special preparation for confirmation is then possible.*²⁰

These arguments are similar to those heard today: Confirmation should come long after first communion because children can better understand the meaning of the sacrament, which can therefore offer them more fruit. Perhaps because of its semi-pelagian cast, this argument met constant resistance from Rome – even in the 19th century.

Shortly after Florian-Jules-Félix Desprez was ordained a bishop and appointed to the new diocese of La Réunion, he convoked a council that considered, among other matters, the age of confirmation. The council agreed to a practice that Desprez knew from his home diocese of Cambrai: confirmation followed first communion.

¹⁸ Council of Prague (1860) 3. Mansi 48:269f.

¹⁹ Statutes of Mende (1863). See Levet, R. "L'age de la confirmation dans la législation des diocèses de France depuis le Concile de Trente," *La Maison Dieu* 54 (1958):118-142.

²⁰ Felix Dupanloup, *The Ministry of Catechizing* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1868), p. 411.

The pastor will only need to present to us for confirmation those persons who have made their first communion or who should make it within the course of the year.²¹

However, when this statute was read by the Sacred Congregation of the Council in Rome, a change was requested because of historical precedence and the teachings of the Roman Catechism and a previous pope.

Since for a long time a lower age has been required for admittance to the sacrament of confirmation than for admittance to first communion, as the Roman Catechism offers in "Confirmation", (number 18) and as Benedict XIV teaches in "Diocesan Synod" (book 7, chapter 10, numbers 2 and 3), it is proposed to you that the doctrine reported (article 22, p. 19 in the Synodal Acts) be reformed accordingly, so that the first place may be for conferring confirmation, and then, at an opportune time, for supplying first communion.²²

The First Vatican Council was planning to take up the matter. Although a statement on this question was never promulgated, the words from the schema are noteworthy. It calls the sequence of confirmation before first communion a "perpetual practice" and the reverse order "absurd".

Since in some places a custom contrary to the perpetual practice of the church has grown up, in which confirmation is administered by an absurd order only to those who have already been admitted to the most holy sacrament of the eucharist, we wish this to be corrected completely; especially since one who has already begun to fight against the enemy should not be kept from armor. It should be clear, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, that many in the age of childhood have fought bravely for the sake of Christ because of the strength of the Holy Spirit they have received.²³

Rome also intervened in the final statement of the Council of Algiers. The bishops proposed keeping their custom of having confirmation follow first communion:

According to the praiseworthy custom of this province, children may not be confirmed before they arrive at the years of discretion and have already been admitted to first communion, so that they may receive the sacrament with greater piety and benefit.²⁴

²¹ Synodal Statutes of La Réunion (1853). See Levet, p. 131.

²² Sacred Congregation of the Council "Cum longe minor" 19 November 1854. *Collectanea S. Congregationis de Propaganda Fide* (Rome: Typographia Polyglotta, 1907), 1:588, N. 1105.

²³ Vatican I, Schema of the Decree on Confirmation. Mansi 53:743.

²⁴ Council of Algiers I (1873, proposal). See Levet, p. 132.

But the final version shows a more tolerant practice because of Rome's preference:

*Children are not confirmed before they arrive at the years of discretion, so that they may receive the sacrament with greater piety and benefit.*²⁵

Pope Leo XIII sent a letter to Bishop Joseph-Jean-Louis Robert of Marseilles, approving his decision to celebrate confirmation before first communion. Because this had not been previously legislated in France, Robert had requested clarification from the pope, who obliged with high praise.

We praise your proposal to the greatest extent. For that opinion which had grown strong there and in other places corresponded neither to the old and constant intent of the church, nor to the advantage of the faithful. For the beginnings of cupidity are in the souls of children. Unless they are erased as early as possible, they gradually grow stronger, entice those inexperienced in matters, and lead to great danger. Therefore the faithful, even from the tender years, have a need "to be clothed with strength from on high," which the sacrament of confirmation was born to produce. In it, as St. Thomas Aquinas rightly notes, the Holy Spirit is given for the strength of the spiritual fight and humanity is advanced spiritually to a mature age. Moreover, adolescents having thus been confirmed become more conformable to understanding precepts, and more fit for receiving the eucharist afterwards, and they grasp more abundant benefits from what they receive.

*Therefore we desire that the things which have been decreed wisely by you be kept faithfully and perpetually.*²⁶

The faithful and perpetual observance of the sequence of these sacraments was not to be. In 1910 *Quam singulari* famously lowered the age of first communion to 7, without addressing its sequence with confirmation. Confusion resulted. The Synod of Laval modified the previously held practice of requiring communion before confirmation and said "at the age at which children begin to take communion, they may also be confirmed."²⁷ The Statutes of Limoges said, "It is very desirable that all children presented for confirmation already have been admitted to communion."²⁸ But twenty years later these were revised: "It is very desirable that children admitted to communion have been presented for confirmation."²⁹

In 1932 the Sacred Congregation on Sacraments made the most direct statement from any Roman congregation, and for the first time linked confirmation to baptism.

²⁵ Council of Algiers I. See Levet, p. 132.

²⁶ Leo XIII, "Abrogata quae" 22 June 1897. *Codicis iuris canonici fonts*, ed. Peter Gasparri, (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1925), 3:515f.

²⁷ Synod of Laval, 1913. See Levet, p. 136.

²⁸ Statutes of Limoges, 1927. See Levet, p. 138.

²⁹ Statutes of Limoges, 1948. See Levet, p. 138.

*It is truly opportune and more conformable to the nature and effects of the sacrament of confirmation, that children should only approach the sacred table for the first time after the reception of the sacrament of confirmation, which is, as it were, the complement of baptism and in which is given the fullness of the Holy Spirit (St. Thomas, III, q. 72, art. 2). However, these same should not be considered prohibited from the same table before they are admitted, if they had attained the years of discretion, even though they were not able to receive the sacrament of confirmation previously.*³⁰

The Second Vatican Council introduced a number of revisions to the sacrament of confirmation. The rite opens with a decree from the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship that states, "In the sacrament of confirmation. . . the initiation in the Christian life is completed."³¹ However, every other statement from the council, and even the ordering of chapters in the Code of Canon Law, places confirmation between baptism and first communion. The Rite of Confirmation foresees the possibility that the children celebrating this sacrament will also receive first communion: "If the candidates for confirmation are children who have not received the eucharist and are not admitted to their first communion at this liturgical celebration or if there are other special circumstances, confirmation should be celebrated outside Mass."³²

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, "Although Confirmation is sometimes called the "sacrament of Christian maturity," we must not confuse adult faith with the adult age of natural growth, nor forget that the baptismal grace is a grace of free, unmerited election and does not need "ratification" to become effective."³³

Surveying this history, one can see two tendencies. One, from local gatherings of bishops, favors the deferral of confirmation for its catechetical and inspirational value. Another, from Rome, favors the celebration of confirmation before first communion because of its historical and traditional value. Other arguments for celebrating confirmation before first communion could be advanced: to draw the practice between the Latin Rite closer to the Eastern Rites of the Church, to unify the theology of the sacraments of initiation, and to release the tension over the age of confirmation in pastoral practice in the West.

Pope Benedict, however, has laid out a new criterion: which practice better enables the faithful to put the sacrament of the Eucharist at the center, as the goal of the whole process of initiation. Now that the Roman Catholic Church has had some years of experience with the restored catechumenate, with deferring the age of confirmation, and with weathering the struggles of this sacrament, perhaps the time is indeed ripe for a decision to be made.

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³⁰ Sacred Congregation on Sacraments, 30 June 1932 (AAS 24, 1932), 271.

³¹ Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, Decree (Prot. N. 800/71). See *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, A Pueblo Book (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 471. However, Pope Benedict XVI cites John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Dominicae Cenae* (24 February 1980), 7; and the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5; to state in Sc 17 that "The Holy Eucharist, then, brings Christian initiation to completion and represents the centre and goal of all sacramental life."

³² Rite of Confirmation 13. See *The Rites*, p. 484.

³³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 1308.

