

To Be Revised, Adapted, Restored: The Rite of Confirmation Since the Council

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Time Travel

The bishop arrives at the parish church. He vests in a cope, dons his miter, holds his pastoral staff, and then goes to a special chair arranged for him in front of the altar. He faces the people, and they stand while he sits. He tells them that only a bishop may confirm.

He needs to be on top of a few other matters. If you've been confirmed once, you cannot be confirmed again. A sponsor cannot be a parent or spouse and cannot be unconfirmed. Neither the confirmand nor the sponsor can be excommunicated or interdicted or bound by serious crimes or not taught the rudiments of the Christian faith. Adults should have confessed at least their mortal sins before being confirmed. Confirmation forms a spiritual relationship between the bishop, the confirmand, each parent and the sponsor - effectively meaning the confirmand could never marry his or her sponsor. Only the bishop can permit a sponsor to present more than one or two confirmands. Confirmands ought to be fasting, and they should have brought a clean linen cloth, with which their forehead will be bound until the chrism dries or is wiped away. Confirmands cannot leave until the end of the entire ceremony. Infants being confirmed are held in the right arm of their sponsors. Adults and older children place their foot over the right foot of the sponsor. That's why men sponsor men and women sponsor women.

All this appears in the liturgical book the bishop is about to use.

When he is satisfied that everything is in place, the bishop washes his hands, takes off the miter, rises, faces the confirmands, who kneel down with their hands joined, joins his own hands and says, "*Spiritus Sanctus superveniat in vos, et virtus Altissimi custodiat vos a peccatis.*" They answer "*Amen*".

The bishop makes the sign of the cross over the group while they exchange some verses from the psalms and a liturgical greeting. Then he extends his hands and prays for the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit to come upon those to be confirmed.

The bishop sits down as the confirmands come to him one by one and kneel, hands joined. If there is a large number, they kneel around the sanctuary in rows, and the bishop goes to them. When he finishes one row of confirmands, they leave and the next row moves up.

The bishop asks each sponsor the name of his or her confirmand, dips his right thumb in chrism, and traces the cross on the confirmand's forehead four times while saying, "*N., Signo te signo Crucis: Et confirmo te Chrismate*

salutis: In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.” The confirmand answers, “*Amen.*”

Then the bishop lightly slaps the confirmand on the cheek, saying, “*Pax tecum.*”

When everyone has been confirmed, the bishop dries his thumb with bread and washes and dries his hands. The water and the bread are thrown into the sacrarium. The choir sings, “*Confirma hoc.*”

The bishop and everyone exchange a few more psalm verses and a greeting. Then the confirmands kneel while he prays for them and blesses them with the sign of the cross. He sits down, puts the miter back on, and announces to the sponsors that they should instruct the children about the moral life - doing good and avoiding evil - and that they should teach them the creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Hail Mary. End of ceremony.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, confirmation was short on words and long on ritual. Most people remember the bishop and the slap. They may not remember the white cloth because chrism could have been dabbed away with cotton. They won’t remember standing on their sponsor’s foot because that was replaced with another gesture: the sponsor rested his or her hand on the confirmand’s right shoulder.

The Second Vatican Council

When Pope Paul VI introduced the new rite of confirmation with its Apostolic Constitution, he said the rite was being revised with two goals in mind. First, he wanted to “make [it] more suited to the understanding of the faithful.” Second, citing the council’s constitution on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, he desired that “the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of Christian initiation [might] stand out more clearly” (71).

Vatican II called for the rites to be revised, adapted and restored. This can be seen in several passages from the constitution on the liturgy. For example, “The Council also desires that, where necessary, the rites be revised carefully in the light of sound tradition” (SC 4). “Provision shall also be made. . . for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions, and peoples” (SC 38). “Zeal for the promotion and restoration of the liturgy is rightly held to be a sign of the providential dispositions of God in our time, a movement of the Holy Spirit in his Church” (SC 43).

With regard to confirmation, “restoration” refers best to its intimate connection with Christian initiation. The council restored the catechumenate in stages, which affected confirmation. In the early church, candidates for initiation completed a period of catechetical formation and liturgical ceremonies (the catechumenate), and afterwards the bishop baptized, confirmed and gave them first communion at the Easter or Pentecost Vigil. By the middle ages, though, adults were being baptized by priests at any time

during the year, in an elaborate ceremony that collapsed the liturgical stages of the ancient catechumenate into one rite. Their baptism made them eligible for communion. Only the bishop could confirm, so the confirmation of these adults was deferred just as that of infants was. After Vatican II restored the catechumenate, the candidates for initiation received baptism, confirmation and first communion at parish Easter Vigil services. This was made possible when the council granted priests the faculty to confirm those adults and children of catechetical age whom he baptized. Consequently, the council “restored” confirmation to its place in the initiation of catechumens.

However, the council kept the bishop as the ordinary minister of confirmation for those baptized as infants. Usually the parish confirmation event is similar to the one before Vatican II: the bishop visits to confirm. In the Eastern rites of the Church, the priest confirms all those he baptizes - even infants. The council could have adopted this as another type of “restoration”, but it chose instead to maintain the longstanding custom in the West. This essentially created two different kinds of confirmation, one a part of initiation and celebrated immediately after baptism, and the other “connected” to initiation but detached by a longer period of maturation in age and faith.

The rite of confirmation specifies several “adaptations” that may take place (16-18). These occur at various levels. The conferences of bishops were allowed to adapt the formularies for the renewal of baptismal promises in accord with the circumstances of the candidates for confirmation. For example, children could be asked to renounce warfare or drug abuse. Conferences of bishops were also allowed to use a different sign of peace - either to each individual or to all the newly confirmed together. For example, if it seemed inappropriate for a bishop to embrace a child, he could shake hands or bow.

Other adaptations were permitted to the minister of confirmation. An individual bishop could make these decisions without the approval of the entire conference. He could introduce explanations into the rite to help the candidates understand it. He could alter the existing texts into a kind of dialogue - if that helped the children being confirmed.

Although the rite does not explicitly list the age of confirmation in its chapter on adaptations made by conferences of bishops, age has had a tremendous impact on the celebration and understanding of this sacrament. The range of ages in the United States alone is quite broad - from the age of discretion to about age 16. Especially in dioceses that adopted the upper age limit, confirmation is often understood as a personal appropriation of faith, a kind of rite of becoming a Catholic, even though the historical, liturgical, canonical and catechism texts never support that interpretation.

The connection between confirmation and baptism was never very clear before the council. Paul VI wanted it made clearer, but the connection has remained obscure for at least two reasons. First, the Church retained the custom of deferring the confirmation of those baptized as infants. Second,

some dioceses pushed the years between baptism and confirmation so far apart that it is hard to defend the concept that they both pertain to initiation. Paul VI had tried to overcome this dichotomy by recommending that the baptismal godparent also serve as the confirmation sponsor (cf. RC 5), but very few Catholics even seem aware of this, as most children being confirmed choose some other adult for the role. Paul VI also incorporated the renewal of baptismal promises into the confirmation ritual to show its connection to baptism. This helps, but it is not as powerful a connection as the celebration of all the rites of initiation at the same occasion, as customarily happens with catechumens at the Easter Vigil. At the time of the council, the church was not ready for a more radical adaptation of the sacrament.

The Revised Rite

Most of the changes to confirmation fall under the rubric of “revision”. The revisions to the rite of confirmation were substantial.

- Confirmation ordinarily takes place during mass. This shows “the fundamental connection of this sacrament with all of Christian initiation” (13). Initiation “reaches its culmination in the communion of the body and blood of Christ.” Some children may receive their first communion at the confirmation mass.
- Confirmation always includes a liturgy of the word, even when it is celebrated outside of mass. Prior to the council, there were no scripture readings associated with this sacrament at all. Today the lectionary includes a wide array of choices.
- The canonical concerns have been eliminated from the liturgical text. Many of them no longer apply, such as the prohibition of a spouse serving as a sponsor.
- The candidates are presented. After the liturgy of the word, someone - clergy or lay - may call the names of all those to be confirmed.
- A sample homily is given. Some bishops use it; others adapt it; still others combine it with another talk of their own.
- The candidates renew their baptismal promises. The traditional promises are expanded with an additional statement of belief about the Holy Spirit. After the bishop affirms that this is the community’s faith, everyone answers “Amen” or sings a song.
- The candidates and the bishop stand for the administration of the sacrament. The candidate no longer kneels while the bishop sits. In addition, even though the sponsor may still assist by telling the bishop the candidate’s name, the candidate may tell the bishop his or her own name.
- The formula has changed. Without question this is the single most significant revision to the rite of confirmation. Formerly, the bishop

said, somewhat juridically, “N., I sign you with the sign of the cross and I confirm you with the chrism of salvation in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Today, he says something completely different: “N., be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.” Paul VI wrote in the Apostolic Constitution, “The sacrament of confirmation is conferred through the anointing with chrism on the forehead, which is done by the laying on of the hand, and through the words: Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.” The words are so essential for the validity of confirmation that only the pope may change them. The new formula is closer to the words used in the Eastern rites, especially in the Byzantine Catholic Church. They express more clearly what God is doing, not what the bishop is doing. They proclaim that confirmation is a gift.

- The significance of the imposition of hands is strengthened. However, the imposition is still only an extension of hands over the entire group while the bishop prays for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The significance would have been even stronger had the revised rite called for the bishop to lay hands on each confirmand prior to the anointing. Paul VI implies that the handlaying is done together with the anointing - a bishop places his right hand on the head of the confirmand while his thumb anoints the forehead.
- The slap is eliminated. In the former ritual the bishop slapped the confirmand while saying, “Peace be with you.” Today he says the same words, and the confirmand responds, “And also with you.” The slap originated from a medieval ceremony of knighthood, as a sign of one’s readiness to defend the State. It was adapted for confirmation in the 13th century. Its meaning had been lost and the symbol seemed totally at odds with the text it accompanied.
- Sample general intercessions are included. As always, these are completely variable.
- The rite includes additional prayers and blessings.

All these revisions were intended to help people understand the rite and to make its connection with initiation clearer.

Some other customs have endured, even though they were not foreseen in this revision. Some bishops continue to ask confirmands catechism questions during the ritual, as if confirmation is a kind of graduation from religious education, and the liturgy is the final exam. Nothing in the rite supports this interpretation, but the custom continues in some places.

Many confirmands in the United States continue to choose a name by which they will be confirmed. Some of them research saints or choose the name of some other hero. Typically, the name is used in the formula, but never again. No one calls the candidates by this name on the day of confirmation or at any other time in their life. Only the bishop does so in the

very words that confer the sacrament. The liturgy never envisioned this happening. Even the pre-Vatican II rite of confirmation never referred to taking a special confirmation name. The custom seems unique to the United States; it is unheard of in many other countries. Confirmation names never appeared in any of the discussions leading up to the publication of the revised rite, and they appear in no universal liturgical, canonical or catechetical document. Obviously, the baptismal name is preferred for conferring this sacrament.

To make the most of the revised rite, local celebrations should keep the meaning as clear as possible. Confirmation has more to do with initiation than maturity. A younger age is better than an older one. The baptismal godparent makes the best confirmation sponsor. The baptismal name makes the best confirmation name. Preparation for the sacrament will fittingly include reflection on the scriptures, the significance of the bishop, and the renewal of baptismal promises. Then the meaning of confirmation will become clearer.

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