

# ENVY AND THE CONFIRMATION OF CHILDREN OF CATECHETICAL AGE

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Children from the catechumenate baptized at the Easter Vigil are to be confirmed on the same occasion, even if they are younger than the diocesan age of confirmation. Youth baptized in the Catholic Church as infants, their parents, catechists and others may be dismayed and downright envious that someone younger is able to celebrate the sacrament they have waited long to receive.

They raise many objections. Younger children cannot appreciate what it is to be confirmed. They won't have anything to prepare for when they get older. They won't fit in with their peers. It isn't right for them to be confirmed when their classmates have to wait.

Some parishes have taken it upon themselves to change the situation. There are priests who will not confirm children of catechetical age. They will baptize them at the Easter Vigil, even give them first communion that night, but they will withhold confirmation so that the children can be confirmed with their peers. Stories are told of bishops who have legislated the same procedure throughout their diocese. But this solution is not permitted by law.

This pastoral dilemma was unforeseen in the post conciliar restitution of the catechumenate. Consequently, the official documents do not offer much direction. This article will explain how we got into this mess and suggest some solutions for pastoral care.

## The mandate to confirm

The code of canon law explicitly commands priests to confirm the children of catechetical age whom they baptize. Canon 852 says, What is prescribed in the canons on the baptism of an adult is applicable to all who are no longer infants but have attained the use of reason. In treating the sacrament of baptism, the code distinguishes two groups by ages: infants and adults. The Church has two different liturgical books to accommodate these groups: the Rite of Baptism for Children and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). What separates one group from the other, according to the code, is the use of reason. Anyone with the use of reason is considered an adult as far as *baptism* is concerned. Adulthood is something different for marriage or holy orders. But the bar is considerably lowered for those to be baptized.

Canon 883/2 says: "The following have the faculty of administering confirmation by the law itself: . . . with regard to the person in question, the presbyter who by reason of office or mandate of the diocesan bishop baptizes one who is no longer an infant or one already baptized whom he admits into the full communion of the Catholic Church. A priest receives the faculty to confirm from the law itself. He does not require a special permission from the bishop; nor may

the bishop claim the authority to extend or restrict this faculty. Once the priest has an office or mandate that is, once he is appointed by the bishop as a pastor, parochial vicar, chaplain or to some other official function it is the law that gives the priest the faculty to confirm the adults he baptizes or admits into the full communion of the Catholic Church. This faculty is not restricted to an occasion like the Easter Vigil. If the priest receives a baptized Christian into the Catholic Church at some other time of year, or for exceptional circumstances baptizes an adult apart from the Easter Vigil, he still has the faculty to confirm. It comes from the law, not from the bishop and not from the Easter Vigil. As canon 852 clarified, one who is no longer an infant is one who has the use of reason. Note also that the faculty is granted for the one the *priest* baptizes or admits into full communion. If a deacon baptizes an adult at the Easter Vigil, there is no faculty for him or any priest to confirm that person.

Canon 885/2 says, A presbyter who has this faculty must use it for those in whose favor the faculty was granted. This may be the only instance in law when a faculty is granted and its exercise is obligatory. In the past it was forbidden for a priest to confirm in these situations. Now it is required. If an unbaptized child has the use of reason, the child is to be admitted into the catechumenate, and the priest who baptizes must also confirm that child.

## Why in the world?

Many people wonder why we must confirm the children of catechetical age who are baptized or received into the full communion of the Catholic Church. One answer is, The Code of Canon Law requires it. But that is a disappointing reason.

The code itself gives a better explanation. Canon 885/2 quoted above says the reason is for those in whose favor the faculty was granted. The code's interest is the spiritual wellbeing of the child. By the sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit, says the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) (1285), citing Vatican II's *Lumen gentium* and the Rite of Confirmation.

This is not a bad thing. In the conferral of confirmation, the bishop or priest prays for the coming of the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. . . the spirit of wonder and awe. Every child at any age would benefit from such gifts. It is for the child's advantage that the church confirms in this instance.

The meaning of confirmation is expanded when it is celebrated immediately after baptism. The conjunction of the two celebrations signifies the unity of the paschal mystery, the close link between the mission of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the connection between the two sacraments through which the Son and the Holy Spirit come with the Father to those who are baptized (RCIA 215). When a child is confirmed immediately after being baptized, the celebration expresses more clearly the heart of the paschal mystery.

## The meaning of confirmation

Although no official document of the Catholic Church will say it this way, the meaning of confirmation varies slightly depending on the occasion on which it is celebrated. What we

celebrate is not always the same thing, even though we use the same ritual with the same prayers and gestures. The CCC says, It is evident from its celebration that the effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost (1302). But the celebrations of confirmation fall into three different categories.

**Initiation:** Confirmation is sometimes celebrated immediately after baptism. This happens in the Roman Rite with those who have attained the use of reason, and also in the Eastern Churches, where the priest who baptizes infants confirms (or chrismates) them on the same occasion. In the Roman Rite, if an infant is in danger of death, the priest may baptize and confirm at the same time. In all these examples, confirmation is part of the initiation rites, and its meaning is explained by RCIA 215, cited above.

**Maturity:** On other occasions, however, the rite of confirmation comes long after baptism. If a child was baptized as an infant in the Catholic Church, confirmation is delayed. That is the verb found in the introduction to the Rite of Confirmation (11). It implies that confirmation belongs with baptism, but an exception is made for those baptized as infants. Whether the recipient is the age of 7, 17 or 70, the Church expects some maturing in faith after baptism. In the Easter Vigil initiation rites, confirmation signifies the unity of the paschal mystery, but this meaning is abandoned for those baptized as infants, who are confirmed much later for the purpose of signifying advancement in the spiritual life.

**Transfer:** When someone baptized in another Christian community is received into the full communion of the Catholic Church, he or she is also confirmed. The meaning of confirmation in this case is neither to signify the unity of the paschal mystery nor to show personal spiritual advancement. Rather, it is to highlight the transfer of this person from one ecclesial community into the full communion of the Catholic Church.

Consequently, the confirmation of an 8-year old baptized at the Easter Vigil has a slightly different meaning from the confirmation of a 16-year old by the diocesan bishop. The first is celebrating the full rites of initiation. The second is celebrating a renewal of baptismal promises at a later stage in the spiritual journey. Yet both receive the special outpouring [of] the Holy Spirit the apostles experienced at Pentecost (CCC 1302).

## **Caught by surprise**

Even though these distinctions were inherent in the renewal of the rites of initiation, the discrepancy in confirmation ages seems to have caught the Church by surprise. A survey of some pertinent sections of the RCIA indicates that Rome never realized that those being confirmed at the Easter Vigil might be much younger than those confirmed by the bishop.

Preliminarily, it will be good to note that the Code of Canon Law gives the age of confirmation this way: 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 (891). In the United States, the conference of bishops desired to determine another age, but they were unable to

reach consensus on a single age or even a narrow range of ages. Consequently the United States as a nation enjoys one of the world's widest ranges of ages for the conferral of confirmation: from the age of discretion to about the age of 16.

But when the RCIA was being composed, the writers never dreamed that 7-year olds might be confirmed in the same parish where 16-year olds were still in formation for the same sacrament.

To its credit, the Second Vatican Council made an extraordinary effort to extend the revised liturgy to the needs of children. Its fruits are seen in the Rite of Baptism for Children (1969), Funeral Rites for Children (1969), the Directory for Masses with Children (1973), Penitential Celebrations for Children (1979), and in the United States, Lectionary for Masses with Children (1992).

The RCIA also included a section on the Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age (252-330). Never before in the history of the catechumenate has such a document existed. It even coined a new term: catechetical age. This form of the rite of Christian initiation is intended for children, not baptized as infants, who have attained the use of reason and are of catechetical age (RCIA 252). The English translation of this sentence made one mistake. It translated the Latin words *aetatem discretionis* as use of reason. In the history of sacraments, age of discretion was used to describe the age at which one could distinguish right from wrong, and hence was ready to confess sins; whereas use of reason was used to describe the age at which one could distinguish ordinary from spiritual food, and hence was ready to share communion. The ages are approximately the same, but the age of discretion preceded the age of the use of reason. Thus, the RCIA added a new term to the mix, catechetical age, and equated it with the age of discretion, or the age when one can begin to distinguish right from wrong. At that age, one could prepare for the initiation rites; and one would logically celebrate them by the age of the use of reason. (See author's book, *Ages of Initiation: The First Two Christian Millennia*, The Liturgical Press, 2000.)

Children in the catechumenate should not be expected to know or do as much as adults. The Christian initiation of these children requires both a conversion that is personal and somewhat developed, in proportion to their age, and the assistance of the education they need (RCIA 253). Thus their conversion is in proportion to their age and they receive the education they need, but nothing beyond that is necessary. If they are equivalent in spiritual stature to those approaching first communion, they are ready.

In several places, however, the RCIA refers to a group of faithful children preparing for the sacraments. In this group are children baptized Catholics as infants, but who have not yet celebrated confirmation or first communion. The RCIA envisioned that the few children of catechetical age in the catechumenate would be preparing for initiation along with peers already baptized Catholics. For example,

- Since the children to be initiated often belong to a group of children of the same age who are already baptized and are preparing for confirmation and eucharist, their initiation progresses gradually and within the supportive setting of this group of companions (254/1).

- Along with the children, their godparents and their baptized companions from the catechetical group participate in the celebration of these penitential rites [(scrutinies)]. . . . In particular, these penitential rites are a proper occasion for baptized children of the catechetical group to celebrate the sacrament of penance for the first time (293).
- The [children in the catechumenate] should, if possible, come to the sacraments of initiation at the time that their baptized companions are to receive confirmation or eucharist (256).
- Baptized children of the catechetical group may be completing their Christian initiation in the sacraments of confirmation and the eucharist at this same celebration. When the bishop himself will not be the celebrant, he should grant the faculty to confirm such children to the priest who will be the celebrant (308).
- The celebrant should also pay special attention to any previously baptized children of the catechetical group who at this celebration will receive communion for the first time (329).

Thus, the RCIA envisioned that children baptized as infants would be preparing for first reconciliation, confirmation and first communion at about the same age, and that unbaptized children of catechetical age would join their period of formation. The rite seems unaware that some companions might not be confirmed until many years later.

The postconciliar Church never envisioned the pastoral dilemma of multiple ages of confirmation of older previously baptized children having to wait while younger unbaptized children hastened unobstructed to be confirmed.

## **Pastoral strategies**

The Code of Canon Law and the RCIA had one vision for the age of confirmation, but many dioceses have another. As a result, confirmation practice in the Catholic Church seems unfair. And the ones caught in the middle are parents, catechists and pastors none of whom have a direct voice in making changes.

There is no easy solution to the objections being raised, but here are several pastoral strategies:

1. Remember the child. The reason that a child of catechetical age is confirmed at baptism is the benefit of that child. That kid will have the gifts of the Holy Spirit throughout life, and that is cause for rejoicing, not resentment.
2. Invite the child. When the child reaches the age when his or her peers are preparing for confirmation, invite the child to join the sessions and service projects. This will deepen the child's personal experience of the Church and enrich his or her experience of the Christian community. The child may be eligible to serve as a sponsor for a peer if the baptismal godparent is unable to serve as the confirmation sponsor (cf. Rite of Confirmation 5).
3. Evaluate the diocesan guidelines. Each diocese in the United States may fix the age of confirmation within the range permitted to the bishops of the conference. If the discrepancy in ages is raising questions, perhaps it is time to lower the diocesan age for confirmation.

4. Read Matthew 20:1-16a. You can find it at #133 in the lectionary, the gospel for the 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A. It is the most hated parable Jesus ever told. A landowner hires laborers for his vineyard. Some start work at dawn; others at 9, at noon, at 3 and at 5. At the end of the workday, he tells the foreman to line up the laborers. He gives everyone full pay for one day, no matter how many hours each worked. Predictably, those who showed up at dawn grumble against the landowner. He replies, My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?

The most pastoral strategy we can offer is the challenge of Christian charity. The confirmation of children of catechetical age is not a time for envy. It is a celebration of the generous Spirit of God.

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