

The Sacrament of Confirmation

History

During the third and fourth centuries, concern for the integrity of the gospel in the time of persecution led to the development of a lengthy catechumenal process culminating in the celebration of the sacred mysteries during the Easter Vigil. During the vigil, the catechumens professed their faith and were baptized. Clothed in new white garments, they were presented to the bishop who confirmed them. They took their place in the assembly and completed their initiation by sharing in the Eucharist.

The rigors of the Catechumenate tested the sincerity of the candidates and, along with the prayers and support of the community, strengthened them in their faith. With the end of persecution and the growth of the church, the Catechumenate fell into disuse. In the East, the unity of the sacraments was preserved. Presbyters baptized, confirmed, and admitted infants to Eucharist. In the West, presbyters baptized infants, but bishops retained their prerogative to confirm. Distance and growing administrative concerns prevented the bishop from getting around his diocese to confirm. The completion of initiation-Confirmation and Eucharist-delayed.

Later, it became the norm to delay Confirmation and Eucharist until the age of discretion when children could ratify the profession of faith made for them at baptism. The age of discretion was variously interpreted and this, along with the problem of availability of the bishop, led to the practice of Confirmation at different ages over time.

In 1910, Pope Pius X lowered the age for the reception of First Eucharist. This reversed the order of the sacraments of initiation. The Second Vatican Council called for the restoration of the Catechumenate for adults. The rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, introduced in the United States in 1974 and mandated in 1988, restores the order and the unity of the sacraments of initiation for adults. The RCIA also provides an adaptation for use in the Christian initiation of unbaptized children who have reached catechetical age and restores the order and unity of the sacraments of initiation for them. Vatican II also calls for the revision of the Rite of Confirmation. Both the introduction to the 1971 Rite of Confirmation and Canon 891 postpone Confirmation to the age of discretion or even later.

Thus, we have two distinct orders for the initiation of children. For those baptized in infancy, completion of initiation is postponed to at least the age of discretion. For those who have reached to age of reason and were not baptized in infancy, what is prescribed for an adult is applicable; i.e. full initiation. (Canon 852)

If RCIA envisions a process of years for the preparation of adults for initiation, then a lengthy process for children is certainly in order. Vatican II and later catechetical congresses encouraged pastors to draw on the human sciences and read the signs of the times. These sciences have demonstrated the distinctiveness of both childhood and adolescence. Confirmation in adolescent years permits the recipients to place themselves more consciously in God's loving care as they pronounce their yes to God, with all the insecurity that characterizes the human condition. It also permits them to express their belonging to a larger community, and it permits the community to express its encouragement to them in its own act of faith.