

## **Successive Confirmations?**

*This article by the late Fr John Coventry, one of the co-founders of the Association of Interchurch Families, outlines some of the different perspective on Confirmation, and ends by posing a question and offering a possible solution for the children of interchurch families ....*

### ***Origins: a Complement to Baptism***

The apostolic Church signified the gift of the Spirit not only by baptising in water but by laying on of hands. Indeed, in some events recorded in Acts (e.g. in Acts 8: 12-17 Philip the deacon baptises many in Samaria, but then apostles come from Jerusalem to give the Spirit by laying on hands) there appears a tendency for the two rites to come apart and for baptism to be understood as forgiving sins, while laying on hands gave the Spirit. But Paul's writings make clear that baptism (into the death and the risen life of Jesus) gives the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, and John 3: 3-5 puts this beyond doubt. This became the traditional teaching of the Church.

Hence, Confirmation arose as a complement to Baptism, not at first regarded as a separate rite or separate sacrament, bringing out the gift of the Spirit in Baptism.

### ***The Significance of Confirmation***

As a separate rite in Church practice Confirmation has always in Catholic tradition been concerned with the gifts of the Spirit. As Baptism signifies *birth* into the Spirit-life of the risen Lord, so Confirmation signifies *growth* of that life and the development of the Spirit's gifts that will occur in the course of committed Christian living. Hence there is no purely theological reason for administering the sacrament at one age rather than another.

It was not until the Reformation, with its stress on justification by faith (alone), that the idea emerged that Confirmation was a moment of personal commitment to Christian faith and living of one baptised in infancy. This approach looks less to the gifts conveyed by the Spirit in the Church and more to the individual's personal response.

### ***Practice and Pastoral Questions***

In the Eastern Churches, Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist are all administered in infancy, and by the priest, so that pastoral problems do not arise. In the West, the practice developed for Confirmation to be episcopal, probably because of the instances in Acts where the function was performed by apostles. And chrism came to be used in addition to laying on of hands to signify the anointing by the Spirit. In a recent change of Canon Law, the parish priest may confirm in cases of need.

### ***Catholic Practice***

For long the Catholic practice was for Confirmation to follow First Communion, perhaps after some years (a practice arising from intervals between episcopal visitations), though the ancient practice was Baptism-Confirmation-Eucharist which preserved the tradition that Confirmation belongs with Baptism and is hardly separate from it. Recently Rome has taken steps to restore the ancient sequence.

For a child who makes (First Confession and) First Communion at the age of 6, this is the watershed when he or she begins to take responsibility for his/her own Christian practice. It is the time of commitment, a commitment subsequently renewed by successive and frequent Communions. Such a

child feels no need for any other special "moment of commitment", experiencing rather a continuous growth in the life of the Spirit; and hence reception of Confirmation at the age of 8 or later can lack impact and significance. This experience seems to argue that, whatever the order in which they are conferred, Confirmation and Eucharist should be kept close together and form a moral unity as a time of personal responsibility and commitment.

### ***Reformed Practice***

In the Reformed tradition Confirmation has remained the gateway to reception of the Eucharist and, with an eye to mature expression of faith, has been conferred in early or middle teens and preceded by instruction, in confirmation classes, in Christian belief and responsibilities. However, it is generally recognised that the age of 14 is not at all a good time for requiring firm personal commitment, and can lead to the situation where Confirmation marks the end of a young person's churchgoing. Hence the suggestion is made that the occasion should be delayed until 18 or even later. But in that case Confirmation would have ceased to be a sacrament of initiation, and for all Christians. Instead, a new sacrament for those ready to commit themselves to adult responsibility for the Church's life would have emerged.

### ***Confirmation, Membership and (Double) Belonging***

Membership is a canonical matter implying rights and responsibilities; belonging is a matter of building personal relationships.

In some Free Churches, while there is of course no episcopal Confirmation, there is a comparable ceremony whereby the young person becomes a member of the local Baptist church, or becomes a Methodist after having been baptised in infancy "into the Catholic church".

One matter was threshed out in the British Council of Churches in recent years. It was widely, if not universally, agreed that Confirmation does *not* grant or signify *membership* or full membership of a Church. In Churches practising infant Baptism, Baptism gives (full) membership, full rights and (with maturing age) responsibilities. Hence, if some young persons in interchurch families are looking to Confirmation as an act by a Church of recognising their membership, so as to gain dual membership, they are asking of Confirmation something that has not been part of its meaning. However, if the Church of England confirms a baptised person who wishes to join that Church from another denomination, it thereby confers membership of the Church of England. But this would not be so in the Roman Catholic Church, where a person would first be admitted as a member by a rite of Reception into Full Communion and then confirmed. In either case it is understood that the person is leaving one Church and joining the other.

### ***Successive Confirmations?***

There are no statements about joint Confirmation in Roman Catholic documents: it is simply not envisaged. Apart from the practical difficulties of getting two bishops to come to one sacramental occasion, when there is no available rite for such joint action, the idea raises the question of the validity of episcopal orders. It may well be too much, as things stand, to expect any Catholic bishop to perform a ritual that would ostensibly recognise Anglican episcopal orders. So perhaps the only direction in which to look is that of successive Confirmations. As with other interchurch questions, there is no full or satisfactory answer short of unity.