

THE QUESTION OF CONFIRMATION

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The Association of Interchurch Families has built up considerable shared experience of the early years of marriage and family life. Partly as a result of this, but also because of the changing climate among the Churches, actually getting married and baptising the children are no longer quite the problems they were. Today the questions of schooling and first communion are more relevant and the question of confirmation is also beginning to loom large. This paper concentrates on confirmation with some reference to the other two questions. From the nature of the case, it will be largely a discussion of the meaning of confirmation, since members of the Association have as yet little practical experience to pool together. And the Churches in these islands are in the same position, since the inter-church experience of confirmation is practically nil.

It is, however, very important to think about the nature of confirmation so as to be prepared for the future, most especially in the face of views which are damaging to our hopes for Christian unity. I mean, for example, the view which assumes that confirmation makes a person once and for always a member of one particular denomination and that therefore it could be seen as sealing for ever the *status quo* of division. But if confirmation is to be seen as in some significant sense the 'seal of the Spirit', then it can have no divisive meaning. The Spirit will have no part in division. How the Churches use the rite is another matter. To this main point I will return.

I should add this preliminary point: throughout this paper the present position is assumed whereby confirmation is seen as the completion of initiation as a Christian, but is separated from baptism by a period of years. In other words, the paper is written primarily with catholic views – those of Roman Catholics and the catholic wing of Anglicanism – in mind. For it is here that the main problems occur. If 'confirmation' (or its equivalent) is seen as an adult act of commitment, as in the protestant tradition, then we are in the area of free independent choice and the difficulties are fewer. On the other hand, it may be that the catholic practice will eventually change and confirmation be reunited sacramentally with baptism in infancy (with possible adult commitment later, on the protestant pattern). But this is not going to happen in the foreseeable future, so it will not be discussed here.

Emergence of Confirmation

First for some background. Confirmation has been called a 'rite in search of a theology' or explanation. This is because it emerged rather late in the Church's life. Originally, as far back as we can for certain trace forms of ritual for Christian initiation into the Church, that is to say as far back as about AD 200, this ritual of initiation was a single but complex process and it was geared to adults. After the relatively long period of instruction, adults (younger and older) were prepared for the initiation ceremony which took place at the Easter Vigil Service once every year. Using the symbolism of darkness and light, those about to become full members of the Church renounced Satan by turning from the darkness of the West to the light of the East, which symbolised the rising Sun of Justice. They professed their faith and then, proceeding to the baptistry pool, stripped, and after an anointing were immersed in the waters of death and life and emerged to newness of life in Christ. They were sometimes anointed again, then clothed in a white garment of innocence and processed as a group into the church where the community received them with joy. Presiding over the assembly was the person symbolising unity in the community – the bishop – who in most churches signed each of the newly baptised with the cross, either with or without special oil, as the seal of the Spirit of Christ who was received in initiation as an active presence and energy. Then all together celebrated the Easter eucharist, the living symbol of community.

But times changed; this complex rite of initiation primarily meant for adults was changed and adapted chiefly for infants. This was partly due to the growth in influence of the belief that all are born in a state of sinfulness called original sin and so it was thought good to baptise infants as soon as possible. Also the Church increasingly produced its own candidates for initiation from Christian families, while the proportion

of converts to Christianity dropped. But once the rite of initiation became a rite for children, practical problems arose. Initiation took place more frequently than once a year; the bishop could not play what was still seen as an essential role as president at all ceremonies, and so different compromises were reached. The eastern Church entrusted (and still to this day entrusts) the whole rite of initiation to the local priest, and the bishop's participation was limited to the blessing of the special oil, the chrism. Babies in the East receive baptism, chrismation and the eucharist, usually in the form of a drop of wine on a spoon, all together, and babies in arms receive communion subsequently when their mothers go up to communion. In the West, the bishops' insistence on having a larger part than this eventually prevailed, with the effect that babies are baptised, but chrismation (and communion) are delayed. The chrismation (eventually called **confirmation** and given the status of one of the sacraments) was thus administered by the bishop when he could get round his diocese to do so, and this gradually came to mean that confirmation was administered to children around the age of seven to ten years. Subsequently the Reformers, in their protest against sacramental abuses, abandoned confirmation as not being a scriptural sacrament. Those Churches of the Reformation, however, which practise infant baptism have increasingly made use of a rite of commitment as an adult in the Church or local congregation. Meanwhile the Catholics tended to put communion earlier on the grounds that children of five or six could 'discern the body of the Lord'. This account, of course, leaves out the rise and influence of movements advocating believers' baptism, not because they are not important, but because at present few Association members are of that tradition.

The point of sketching briefly the history of the development of confirmation and its meaning is to underline that it has no one obvious place or meaning for Christians, once the unified rite of initiation of adults was abandoned. There are many things kept in view and it is impossible to give them all equal emphasis. Let me pick out the main ones which arise out of the account I have given. The first is that initiation into the Church is *one* thing; baptism into Christ, and the gift of the Spirit as sealing the initiation, are two 'moments' of one reality: confirmation is the completion of baptism. This will be most important when we look, a little further on, at the significance of confirmation for interchurch families. Then, secondly, there is the realisation that confirmation (or the act of commitment which may have replaced it) is, in fact, a word of God, an initiative of the Spirit. We can do nothing valuable for salvation, least of all take the fundamental step of committing ourselves to the community which is called 'Body of Christ' without an invitation, an initiative, on the part of God, which invitation gives what it asks. We must take the action of the Spirit seriously in our Churches and in our membership of them. Thirdly, there is certainly to be recognised the element, and the necessity, of commitment on the part of a mature faith to respond to the invitation of the Lord. To sum up, we need to keep baptism and 'confirmation' together and related to the eucharist as the full process of Christian entry into the Church, the Body of Christ; we need to take seriously the action of the Spirit throughout our lives, but especially as coming through our baptism and 'confirmation' in some central way; and we need to take seriously the need for adult commitment in faith for the exercise of full membership of the Church. And all this, with (for most Churches) the retention of infant baptism!

If we now look at the place of confirmation in interchurch families, we might look at the goal in view, the process of which confirmation provides the completion, and some chief aspects of confirmation which flow from the conclusions already drawn about the rite.

The Goal for Interchurch Families

Although some parents may find the option of one Church alone for their children the best solution for them personally, the goal for many more is that of fully grown-up young people who feel themselves to belong to the Christian tradition and to be home in at least two of its concrete forms, the Churches of both their parents. At the stage of young adulthood, the difficulties in this area diminish (at least until the young people start having families of their own!), if we have educated them in the degree of autonomy and freedom which we trust we ourselves possess, in the conviction that the life of both Churches enriches the family, while disunion is a problem created by the Churches for the couples, and not by the couples for the Churches. For they can be committed and yet decide for themselves on a large range of issues and practice, even though the structures are firmly denominational. Mobility (moving away from home) can

help this process. This may be the best practical goal in the circumstances of division, and it should not be unrealisable. But we cannot pass on to the next point without admitting the danger, and the pain, of ill-success, especially if or when the children seem to throw over the whole Christian commitment, at least for a time, under the pressure of the scandal of division. The opposition and sectarianism they have experienced may well be a major cause. I do not think that parents should be too hard on themselves in this case – they have at least tried. But to return to the hoped for goal: confirmation should be the seal (if not the last obstacle!) to the process of growth towards autonomy as a fully committed Christian. This goal would suggest a later rather than an earlier age for confirmation and indicate that the Association should support moves in the Roman Catholic Church towards a later age as is often to be seen at present. Such a shift would also avoid difficulties over a peer group at the age of nine or twelve in the Roman Catholic school or parish going forward to confirmation and the interchurch child being the odd one out.

The Process of Growth

But there is a long process stretching from birth to adulthood until this goal is reached and is sealed by confirmation. It will not, I think, be out of place to look, if not at the whole process, at least at some basic guidelines for interchurch families. And a first guideline is the *unity of the interchurch marriage* as a cell of the Body of Christ made visible in the membership of the two Churches. The marriage and family represents a unity of Christian love which does not yet exist in the Churches. Therefore the effectiveness of this guideline depends on the strength of the domestic Church, i.e. of the family-as-Church for prayer together, for instruction in Christian faith (at all times but especially at certain times like the making of first communion or of being confirmed), and for recognising that the goal for the Churches themselves is not uniformity or the submersion of the many in the one, but a creative unity which transcends what each is at present. Confirmation as the fullness of Christian commitment can literally, as the name implies, strengthen people to work towards the goal outlined above. For in the situation as it is at present, there are bound to be anomalies, for the formal structures of the Churches cannot envisage a unity which already exists in the interchurch family. The greatest pressures are those experienced from the local community (or rather communities) and their pastors if these do not have a deeply-felt ecumenical outlook. Surmounting these often requires a great readiness to be different and stand simply and humbly by what one believes.

A Second Guideline

A second guideline is the pursuit of the maximum 'duality' possible, the *maximum experience of two-churchness* that circumstances allow. As regards schooling, instruction and Christian life may be adequate if the atmosphere is open in the religious school, primary or secondary, of whichever denomination. But if it is closed and narrowly one-church, then it may be better to send children to the state school and combine this with home instruction (and how one learns by having to teach!), especially for first communion. The Churches' pastors have the responsibility to see that instruction is given, but it is the parents' right and duty to do it, either themselves or through others. This question arises first in time in the Roman Catholic Church and it may be that to follow through the principle of maximum duality and the keeping of options open, first communion in the Catholic Church should be made at this age, since those in good standing in one Church are welcome in non-Roman Churches. But this depends on the family keeping its own integrity and independence as a family, and I hesitate to underline this possibility being myself a Roman Catholic, though it is not for that reason that I put it forward. But whatever one plans, the children's wishes must also play a part and may well be decisive.

Aspects of Confirmation

How are we to look at confirmation from the viewpoint of interchurch families? The conclusions already drawn above can help us here.

[1] Confirmation is the completion of baptism, and it should follow the same sort of 'logic' as baptism. Baptism is the celebration of the entry of the person into the Church; confirmation is the completion of that entry. There is one baptism and so there is one confirmation, for there is one unitary initiation into the Church. Baptism is a common inheritance which all Christians share, an inheritance which unites us; confirmation is the fullness of the sign of that common inheritance. And so the thinking which has gone

into the development of the view on interchurch baptism should be applicable to confirmation also. This involves the reflection that baptism, although it is one, cannot in fact be simply baptism into the one Christ, for Christ, who is inseparably one with his Body, the Church, exists as one yet divided. Baptism is therefore fundamentally one, but is lived out in divided visible forms, i.e. in the different Churches. So interchurch baptism would best be described as baptism of the child into the Church as it exists in the two Churches of the parents. Applying this to confirmation, confirmation would best be described as completing the initiation of the child into the Church as it exists in the two Churches of the parents. So all the experience the Association has gained in trying to realise this theology of baptism in practice should be mobilised to implement two-church confirmations and the mutual recognition of confirmation as is done already with baptism. This will involve pressing for dual registration and the sharing of the ceremony of confirmation by ministers of both Churches. If the bishops find this too embarrassing, then perhaps they could be persuaded to delegate priests to perform the ceremony in their stead as can be done in other circumstances.

There is, to be sure, at least one difference between baptism and confirmation which can be and will be erected into a difficulty against this conclusion. Confirmation is called the fullness of initiation and this will be said to involve the 'churchness' of the Churches more fully. This, for the Catholic Church, will involve questions of ministry and orders. But on the one hand, baptism involves the Church fully – just because confirmation may be called the fullness of initiation, this does not imply that anything essential is 'missing' from baptism and it is already possible to recognise the one baptism. On the other hand, if the Catholic Church is to take the recognition of the other Churches as 'sister Churches' seriously, it will have fully to recognise their ministries also one day, though this must be a mutual act. There are, of course, legitimate differences and disagreements that still divide us and prevent the mutual recognition of ministries at this time, but the seeds of unity have been sown by the Spirit and in the interim it is right for a body like the Association to do all in its power, in theory and in practice, to hasten the process.

[2] Confirmation is the seal of the Spirit's action, simply in consequence of its being the fullness of initiation into the Church, the Body of Christ which lives in the power of the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is at all times a gift of unity and love, not of discord. This applies to confirmation. It is essentially a unified and unifying moment, for the Spirit will have nothing to do with division. Thus to regard confirmation as the irrevocable step confirming someone definitely in a particular denomination is to regard it as a rubber stamp on division, quite the contrary of the Spirit's purpose, and no part of the traditional theology of confirmation. In the present sorry state of disunity, many live out their lives as fully-fledged Christians in one particular Church, but our initiation itself is a dynamic force, is the power of the Spirit, pushing us to overcome division and not rest content with things as they are. Confirmation, then, is an active means to create unity, committing us more fully, not less, to overcoming division.

[3] Confirmation, again as the fullness of incorporation into the Church, involves serious commitment to Christ in the Church or congregation. It does not seem likely or possible that one single form of initiation will ever universally commend itself to all Christians. The variety of values to be witnessed to is so great. But the Churches of the West which practise infant baptism seem more and more agreed on the need for seeing confirmation or its equivalent as an event for older young people, as an act of commitment (preserving the values of the protestant tradition) while not denying the gift of grace in the Spirit (as in the catholic tradition). Nor does this element of commitment (as said above) imply an exclusive membership of one denomination. Far from it. It rather has essential overtones of a movement towards unity, and unity not only in the future. Confirmation is a seed of unity sown already in the present and its conferring is meant to create growth towards ever greater unity.

In working to implement these, and better, insights, the Association will need more of the same faith in, and commitment to, unity which is shown by its efforts in the area of marriage and baptism. But the energy is there; it flows from the mutual commitment of the members to love one another in the power of Christ's unifying love.