

## SOME CURRENT LATIN PRACTICES CONCERNING THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION: AN OCCASION FOR RAPPROCHMENT OF THE LATIN AND EASTERN TRADITIONS

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The author briefly presents the “different practices” regarding the sacraments of initiation, especially confirmation, the order of its administration, age etc., that were present in the Oriental and Latin Churches. She discusses to what extent the “restored order” of the administration of these sacraments, introduced, especially, by Vatican II, functions as an “ecumenical rapprochement” between the East and the West. Celebrating Confirmation in between Baptism and Eucharist is more appropriate as the gift of the Holy Spirit received in its fullness better prepares and leads one to the reception of the Eucharist whereby one is fully joined to the Body of Christ. She concludes the study by presenting the “theological arguments” that justify the introduction of new changes.

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Since the Second Vatican Council, reforms concerning the sacrament of confirmation have been introduced in the liturgy and in the law of the Latin Church. Some of these reforms explicitly mention ecumenical rapprochement as one of the reasons for changing the former practices. Therefore, in this paper we will examine in what aspects these new practices represent a rapprochement between the Latin and the Eastern traditions. We begin by giving a short description of the different practices, followed by a short overview of history. We will then describe the reforms introduced by the Second Vatican Council and how they were worked out in the life of the Church. The theological arguments justifying the new practices will also be discussed at the end.

### **I. *Status quaestionis* Concerning the Practices of Administering the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Latin Church**

Although some variations exist, we can mainly distinguish two different types of practices in the administration of the sacrament of confirmation. In many parts of the world, the young people who have been baptized in the infancy, receive first communion around seven years of age and the sacrament of confirmation a few years later. The age for confirmation varies from 11 or 12 to 18 or even 20 for some countries. These practices can mainly be found in Belgium, France, Germany, Austria, and in the German speaking regions of Switzerland, so mainly in Northern Europe, as well as in some regions of Canada.<sup>1</sup> Administering the sacrament of confirmation during adolescence reflects the transformation and growing maturity that young people undergo at this age. By confirming their status as beloved children of the Father, young people reengage with the Lord, which can in turn help them to construct their human and spiritual identity and to assume their responsibilities towards themselves, others, God, the Church, and creation. Of course, this aim requires a long and intense catechesis to guide the young people towards a personal and conscious faith.<sup>2</sup>

Viewing confirmation from this perspective seems to imply that it is a rite of passage into adulthood. The sequence of the sacraments of

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., F. -X. Amherdt, *La confirmation à quel âge ? Une pluralité d'options: leurs avantages et inconvénients*, in *Lumen Vitae* LXV, n° 1 (2010) 35-53.

<sup>2</sup>F. -X. Amherdt, *La confirmation à quel âge ? Une pluralité...*, 44.

initiation then is as follows: baptism, first communion, confirmation. Because confirmation cannot be repeated, positioning it as the final sacrament of initiation suggests that confirmation is a terminal point in the Christian life. This contradicts the notion that Christian initiation is only a beginning which opens the door to a further deepening of faith and Christian life in community. The theological arguments insisting on the personal engagement in faith are joined by arguments that seem to be mainly of a psychological and sociological nature.

According to another practice, the one about which this study is particularly concerned, confirmation is conferred before first Holy Communion. This practice is found in certain dioceses in the United States,<sup>3</sup> Canada,<sup>4</sup> England,<sup>5</sup> Australia,<sup>6</sup> and in some dioceses in Spain, such as Madrid, Toledo, Alcalé, Gatafe, and the military diocese, seem to go in the same direction.<sup>7</sup> Some areas of Italy and Portugal also administer confirmation according to this practice. Administering confirmation prior to first communion has some old roots in the Mediterranean countries, as we will see in the next section; in the Anglo-Saxon world it seems to be more recent. Lately, this practice has also been introduced in the dioceses of Dijon in

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<sup>3</sup>See, e.g. the dioceses of Phoenix (<http://www.ewtn.com/library/BISHOPS/ordsacinit.htm>), of Fargo (<https://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=13621>) and of Tyler ([http://www.americancatholicpress.org/JoAnne\\_Flores\\_Embleton\\_Sacrament\\_of\\_Confirmation.html](http://www.americancatholicpress.org/JoAnne_Flores_Embleton_Sacrament_of_Confirmation.html)).

<sup>4</sup> See the diocese of Regina: <http://www.archregina.sk.ca/catechetics-and-education/restored-order-sacraments-initiation>.

<sup>5</sup> See the archdiocese of Liverpool: <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2011/01/26/archbishop-puts-confirmation-before-communion/>. The diocese of Salford has also known this practice, but it seems to be abolished since the arrival of another bishop.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. in the diocese of Brisbane.

<sup>7</sup> The Spanish Episcopal Conference determined in a decree of November 25, 1983, that normally confirmation would be administered at about the age of fourteen, unless the diocesan Bishop fixed the age of discretion as mentioned in CIC, can.891. In a document on Christian Initiation from 1997, the Episcopal Conference noted many inconveniences concerning the practice of a late conferral of confirmation, however, without prescribing in a compulsory way another age for reception of this sacrament. See, [http://www.conferenciaepiscopal.es/documentos/Conferencia/iniciacion\\_cristiana.htm#891](http://www.conferenciaepiscopal.es/documentos/Conferencia/iniciacion_cristiana.htm#891).

France.<sup>8</sup> Children that have been baptized in infancy will receive the sacraments of confirmation and first Eucharist when they are in third grade, usually around the age of eight years, in Dijon at the age of 9 or 10. These two sacraments generally will be administered during the same celebration, with confirmation given immediately after the homily and followed later by first communion. In Dijon, confirmation will be conferred outside Mass at the beginning of the school year and with First Communion by the end. Meanwhile, the catechesis integrates preparation for both sacraments of Christian initiation. One of the arguments is that this sequence of the sacraments of initiation corresponds to the practice of the Early Church. Therefore, it is generally called the “restored order” (of the sacraments of initiation).

## II. Some Historical Observations

A short look at history makes us understand the origins of the differences between the Latin and the Eastern traditions as well as the still dominating 20<sup>th</sup> century practices in the Latin Church.

As is well-known, the relationship between baptism and confirmation has been discussed very often. The New Testament texts testify already of the difficulties to articulate baptism with water and the role of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes there seems to be an opposition between both of them, sometimes the gift of the Holy Spirit precedes or follows baptism. In spite of the variances within the rites of Christian initiation, it is clear that Christians were fully initiated during one and the same celebration. Afterwards, in the ancient Church, the diversity continues, but three different traditions can be distinguished. The Antiochian tradition, as described in the Acts of Thomas or in the Baptismal Catecheses of John Chrysostom, practices only one unction with Myron on the front (in Greek “sfragis” or seal), followed by three immersions and by Eucharist. In Jerusalem, according to the Mystagogical Catecheses of Cyril, the three immersions were followed by the unction with Myron, reputed to signify the gift of the Holy Spirit, and by the Eucharist. The Western Church practiced the pre-baptismal rites (exorcisms) followed by the threefold immersions and the post-baptismal rites, signifying the gift of the Spirit and accomplished by the bishop, and finally the Eucharist. The gift of the Holy Spirit is always considered

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<sup>8</sup> See, <http://www.catholique-dijon.cef.fr/img/blog/pdf/1073.pdf>. This policy will enter into force in the next school year.

as being a part of Christian initiation, but can be administered either during the pre-baptismal or post-baptismal rites.

Even if there exists a variety of rites, there always exists unity in that they are administered during one celebration.<sup>9</sup> During the first centuries, the Western Church stresses this unity in diversity in its liturgy and its theological reflections. The Church in the East seems to have given more importance to the unction with Myron than to the imposition of hands. By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, changes can be observed. Under the influence of pneumatological discussions, as for instance with the council of Constantinople of 381, as well as a greater importance given to the Pauline texts, especially Rom. 6, and also because of the reconciliation of heretics that took place through rites similar to the post-baptismal ones, the East adopts a post-baptismal unction with a pneumatological signification.

During the same period, the growing number of Christians and the introduction of child baptism made it logistically impossible for the bishop to administer the initiation rites to all new converts. This need gave rise to new practices. As per the new practice in the East, the priest's competency is extended so that he can henceforth accomplish the initiation rites; the bishop's connection to initiation is maintained only through the benediction of the chrism used during these rites. The Church in the West, on the contrary, continues to reserve confirmation to the bishop, permitting priests only to baptize and to administer the (first) Eucharist, while reserving the confirmation to the Bishop. It can easily be understood that this practice gave way to the understanding of confirmation as a sacrament administered on its own.

In the Western Church, the separation between baptism and confirmation led to a postponement of confirmation, but, initially, the delay between the two sacraments still was very short: baptism was celebrated at Easter and confirmation during the Easter octave that immediately followed. This practice still can be found during the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Gradually, the delays became longer. In 1240, the

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<sup>9</sup> Paul De Clerck, "Confirmation," in *Dictionnaire critique de théologie*, sous la dir. de J-Y. Lacoste, coll. Quadrige, Paris, PUF, 2002, 251-254, here 251.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Raban Maur, *De clericorum institutione*, I.II, c. XXXIX, in *P.L.*, t.CVII, col.164 or also Alcuin, *Epist. ad Oduinum*, in *P.L.*, t.CI,

council of Worcester obliged the parents to have their children confirmed at their birth; sanctions would be imposed if they were delayed longer than one year. But the synod of Worcester of 1287 allowed a postponement of confirmation for up to three years. With the idea of postponement was now accepted, the delays became longer and longer. The council of Cologne in 1280 established the age for confirmation at seven. Very soon in the Western Church, except in Spain,<sup>11</sup> it became a widespread practice not to confirm children before the age of seven. However, reception of the Eucharist before confirmation was not required. Therefore, the ancient sequence of the initiation sacraments normally has been maintained.

However, this changed with the decree “*Quam singulari*” promulgated by Pope Pius X on August 8, 1910. At the time, Jansenistic influences held that most people were unworthy to receive communion frequently and that children should prove themselves worthy for first Communion by attending an extended catechetical program up to the age of ten, fourteen, or even older. In response, the Pope standardized the age of first Communion and first penance at seven.<sup>12</sup> Normally, confirmation still had to precede first Communion, but it was not possible to realize it everywhere: bishops were simply unable to confer confirmation always in each parish before children of seven received their first communion. As a result, confirmation often was conferred after the first reception of the Eucharist.<sup>13</sup> Confirmation could be administered at very different ages: in certain countries, it was conferred between first communion and solemn communion, the last one being a sacramental that supposed a long catechesis and a kind of personal engagement in faith. But in this case first communion always was a prerequisite for receiving confirmation. In France and in certain other countries, it

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col. 614, both quoted by N. Iung, *Confirmation en Occident*, in *Dictionnaire de Droit Canonique*, t.IV, Paris, Letouzey, 1949, col.100.

<sup>11</sup> In Spain, the ancient practice of the first centuries has been maintained and is also put into practice in Latin America: children are confirmed by the priest immediately after baptism. See M. Hauke, *Die Firmung. Geschichtlicher Entfaltung und theologischer Sinn*, Paderborn, Bonifatius Verlag, 1999, 101-113; 350-353.

<sup>12</sup> Pius X., Decree “*Quam singulari*” August 8, 1910, in *AAS* 2 (1910) 577-583.

<sup>13</sup> J. Huels, *The Age for Confirmation*, in *More Disputed Questions in the Liturgy*, Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications, 1996, 167-178, here 169.

was customary to postpone confirmation even until after solemn communion. Because the bishop visited the parish to confer confirmation only every three, four, or five years, it could occur that confirmation was administered only at the age of fourteen or fifteen.<sup>14</sup>

Although widespread, these customs were contrary to canon law. The 1917 Code of Canon Law prescribed that it was convenient to delay confirmation till about the age of seven, but that it might be given earlier if a child was in danger of death or if the minister had a just and serious reason for confirming before.<sup>15</sup> The prescription of age was however not very precise: at *about* the age of seven. This certainly had to do with the prescriptions on the minister of the sacrament. The bishop is the only ordinary minister of confirmation. Under the 1917 code, a priest could administer confirmation as extraordinary minister only if common law allowed him to do so or if the Apostolic See conceded him the faculty by indult. Besides cardinals, the other ministers whom common law allowed to confer the sacrament were abbots and prelates *nullius*<sup>16</sup> and Apostolic Vicars and Apostolic Prefects. The last four categories of ministers, who are not always Bishops, can exercise this faculty obtained by the law itself only within the limits of their territory and during the time they exercised their office.<sup>17</sup> Because since bishop, as the only ordinary minister of confirmation, could not possibly administer it to everyone during their seventh year of age, the age for receiving the sacrament could not be fixed exactly at seven. The prescripts give the bishop the possibility to administer the sacrament of confirmation either at the age of seven or some years later, according to his agenda. It happened quite frequently that the bishop confirmed children of different ages who had received the first Communion

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<sup>14</sup> N. Iung, *Confirmation en Occident*, col., 102.

<sup>15</sup> J. Huels, *The Age for Confirmation*, in *More Disputed Questions in the Liturgy*, 170. CIC 1917, c. 788: Licet sacramenti confirmationis administratio convenienter in Ecclesia latina differatur ad septimum circiter aetatis annum, nihilominus, etiam antea conferri potest, si infans in mortis periculo sit constitutus, vel ministro id expedire ob iustas et graves causas videatur.

<sup>16</sup> These Abbots and Prelates were called *nullius* because they govern a territory that does not belong to a diocese, but they have jurisdiction over the clergy and faithful of this territory and several parishes can exist. See, CIC 1917, c. 319.

<sup>17</sup> CIC 1917, c. 782 §§ 1 - 3.

during one of the preceding years. For the same reasons concerning the agenda of the bishop, children in some dioceses were confirmed on a weekday afternoon, often without the presence of their parents. These inconveniences were some of the consequences of these prescriptions on the minister of confirmation.

### **III. Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Reform with Respect to the Sacrament of Confirmation<sup>18</sup>**

In its constitution on the liturgy, the Second Vatican Council spoke of Christian initiation in general as well as of the sacrament of confirmation in particular. In the antepreparatory comments and during the preparation of the Council, a certain number of *vota* concerned the discipline for administering confirmation, especially the age at which one was to be confirmed. The suggestions ranged from anticipating the age before the age of discretion to postponing it until after, mainly for reasons of a better catechetical instruction, to leaving the decision entirely to the discretion of the local ordinary. In January 1962, the Central Preparatory Commission examined favorably a schema of the Commission for the Discipline of the Sacraments proposing that children should generally be confirmed at the age of seven unless danger of death required administering it earlier, and then they should receive the Eucharist afterward. The Greek Melkite Patriarch, Maximos IV Saigh, objected strongly to inverting the proper sequence of initiation in that way, but this draft was never presented to the Council.

The draft that was finally submitted to the Council made no mention of the age of confirmation or the order in which the sacraments of initiation were to be administered, and the article speaking about the reform of the rite of confirmation had no explanatory paragraphs.

During the first period of the Council there were ten interventions regarding the age of confirmation, half of which were in favor of delaying the reception of this sacrament. Two bishops asked whether confirmation be united with baptism. The deaths of many children younger than seven in mission countries motivated the intervention of one, while the other argued that the oriental practice of joining the two sacraments was the correct one.

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<sup>18</sup> For this paragraph, we rely mainly on the article of M. Balhoff, *Age for Confirmation: Canonical Evidence*, in *The Jurist* 45 (1985) 549-587.



In its October 1963 response to the interventions, the conciliar Commission on the Sacred Liturgy responded to the interventions stating that the subject of age did not belong to the liturgical constitution but should be considered by the Commission for the Discipline of the Sacraments.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding the sacrament of confirmation, the final text of the constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium* establishes:

The rite of confirmation is to be revised and the intimate connection which this sacrament has with the whole of Christian initiation is to be more clearly set forth; for this reason it is fitting for candidates to renew their baptismal promises just before they are confirmed.

Confirmation may be given within the Mass when convenient; when it is given outside the Mass, the rite that is used should be introduced by a formula to be drawn up for this purpose.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the interrelationship between confirmation and the other sacraments of initiation is stressed without any mention of age or of the sequence of the sacraments.

In January 1964, Pope Paul VI constituted the Council for the Execution of the Constitution on Holy Liturgy (*Consilium ad exsequendam Constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia*) presided over by Cardinal Lercaro. Forty study commissions (*coetus*) were established to draft the particular rites and report to the Council. Two of these study commissions, *coetus* 22 and 23, had to elaborate the reform of the Roman Ritual,<sup>21</sup> including baptismal reform. Another, *coetus* 20, was in charge of the reform of the Roman Pontifical,<sup>22</sup> including confirmation. All these commissions first clarified general principles before determining the concrete rites and before resolving the individual disciplinary matters. *Coetus* 22 and 23 established two

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<sup>19</sup> M. Ballhoff, *Age for Confirmation: Canonical Evidence*, 556.

<sup>20</sup> SC, 71. Translation from [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

<sup>21</sup> The Roman Ritual, which reform has been initiated by the Council of Trent, was published in 1614. It contained the ceremonies for the celebration of the sacraments, except for Eucharist. It still was in force at the moment the Second Vatican Council assembled.

<sup>22</sup> The Roman Pontifical was the liturgical book, promulgated after the council of Trent, in 1596, containing all the ceremonies presided by the bishop. Therefore the ritual for confirmation was part of this book.

principles related to the age for confirmation: 1. the adult initiatory rite was exemplary in the baptism-confirmation reform and 2. the unity of initiation was paramount. In October 1964, the *Consilium*<sup>23</sup> approved these principles, establishing:

Reform of the Roman Ritual...should not begin with the order of infant baptism, but with that of adult baptism, for these reasons: 1° The council itself...first spoke of adult baptism and then only of infant baptism<sup>24</sup>. 2° In the case of adults is most clearly shown: (a) the character of baptism, in that it is a sacrament of faith...<sup>25</sup>; (b) the unity of Christian initiation<sup>26</sup>; (c) the coordination of baptism and the paschal celebration<sup>27</sup>. 3° The entire rite of infants, however reformed, will have its roots in the adult rite from which it will have been derived, and not vice versa.<sup>28</sup>

The sub-commission for reform of adult initiation, *coetus* 22, prepared its rituals from the end of 1964 until March 1966. It started its work on the rite for infant baptism only one year later. From November 1967 until April 1970, *Coetus* 20 on reform of the Roman Pontifical submitted its drafts to the *consilium*. Thus, the history of the drafting process clearly demonstrates that the rite for adults was developed first in order that the principles would be clear for the other rites: baptism of infants and confirmation when celebrated separately.

Concerning the age for reception of the sacrament, the first three drafts of the *Ordo Confirmationis* demonstrate that the *coetus* wanted to maintain the age of seven for confirmation celebrated separately from baptism.<sup>29</sup> The fourth and nearly the final draft made no

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<sup>23</sup> In order to avoid misunderstandings, we renounce using the English "Council" because it also can refer to the Second Vatican Council, and we therefore use the Latin "consilium".

<sup>24</sup> Reference was made to SC 66 and 67.

<sup>25</sup> Referring to SC 59.

<sup>26</sup> With reference to SC 71.

<sup>27</sup> See, SC 109.

<sup>28</sup> See M. Balhoff, *Age for Confirmation: Canonical Evidence*, 558.

<sup>29</sup> One of the members of the *coetus* wrote in article published during these same years that the sub commission saw no reason to deviate from the doctrine of the magisterium; that the objections presented were the same as

reference to moving confirmation to a younger or to a more advanced age. It is therefore all the more interesting that an exception was introduced into the text one month later.<sup>30</sup> Our author, M. Balhoff, concludes that the addition of the exception “suggests that the added norm was not systemic with the initiatory renewal – at least as seen by the principal actors in the study commission. Further, it suggests that the addition was in response to external pressures imposed on the reform process, rather than in response to the internal cohesiveness of such a pastoral practice within the broader scheme of the sacrament of initiation.”<sup>31</sup>

We now have to see how *Ordo Confirmationis* handles this question. Article 11 of the *Ordo* mentioned:

Adult catechumens and children who are baptized at an age when they are old enough for catechesis should ordinarily be admitted to confirmation and the Eucharist at the same time as they receive baptism... Similarly adults who were baptized in infancy should, after suitable preparation, receive confirmation and Eucharist at a community celebration.

With regard to children, in the Latin Church the administration of confirmation is generally delayed until about the seventh year...<sup>32</sup>

The article takes several situations into account: 1. the contemporaneous administration of the sacraments of initiation in the case of adults and of children baptized at an age when they are capable of being catechized; 2. adults baptized in infancy who subsequently ask for the other initiation sacraments: at first glance,

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those made against the communion of infants and that the theories circulating about confirmation as sacrament of adolescence were completely inconsistent according to the sub commission. See B. Botte, “Problèmes de la confirmation,” in *Questions liturgiques* 53 (1972) 5-6. For details on all these drafts and the stance of the sub commission, see M. Balhoff, *Age for Confirmation: Canonical Evidence*, 562-564.

<sup>30</sup> We will come to speak about this exception just below when presenting the elements of the *Ordo Confirmationis* on the age for reception of the sacrament.

<sup>31</sup> M. Balhoff, *Age for Confirmation: Canonical Evidence*, 562.

<sup>32</sup> Translation as quoted in M. Balhoff, *Age for Confirmation: Canonical Evidence*, 560. The author uses the one of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *Documents on the Liturgy 1963-1979: Conciliar, Papal and Curial Texts*, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1982, 305, n. 2520.

stress is only laid on a community celebration of confirmation and Eucharist, but the word “similarly” indicates a likeness to the first situation and seems to suggest also unity of the initiation sacraments, and when not the three of them, at least of confirmation and Eucharist; and 3. the case of children already baptized: confirmation ‘generally is delayed,’ which suggests a practice more than a norm, ‘until *about* the age of seven,’ which likewise indicates some flexibility.

Article 13 of the *Ordo Confirmationis* states:

Confirmation takes place as a rule within Mass in order that the fundamental connection of this sacrament with all of Christian initiation may stand out in clearer light. Christian initiation reaches its culmination in the communion of the body and blood of Christ. The newly confirmed therefore participate in the Eucharist, which completes their Christian initiation.

Here too, it does not seem clear immediately that the unity between confirmation and Eucharist requires that these sacraments be administered at the same time. The first sentence does not seem to have First Communion in mind. The second sentence can be understood as merely indicating that the Eucharist should occur after baptism and confirmation. Finally, the last sentence’s reference to participation in Eucharist, identified therein as the summit of Christian initiation, as completing the Christian initiation of the newly confirmed seems to suggest clearly that these two sacraments have to be administered at the same time or at least one soon after the other. In that case, Eucharist has to follow confirmation.

But art.11, which we have already partially presented, also contains an exception:

With regard to children, in the Latin Church (...) generally delayed until about the seventh year. For pastoral reasons, however, especially to implant deeply in the lives of the faithful complete obedience to Christ the Lord and a firm witnessing to him, the conference of bishops may set an age that seems more suitable. This means that the sacrament is given, after the formation proper to it, when the recipients are more mature.

Here we find the text added in the last month of the drafting process.<sup>33</sup> Concerning the age for confirmation, the rule is to confer this sacrament at about the age of seven; however, for pastoral reasons, it can be delayed to a later moment “when the recipients are more mature,” a moment for which no further qualifications seem to be fixed. This decision depends on the conference of bishops, which does not quite correspond to the requests, articulated during the preparing of the council, for the local ordinary to decide. In respect to the pastoral reasons, apart from the greater maturity, mention is made of reaching a more complete obedience and firm witnessing to Christ, as well as of the proper formation in view of this goal. According to one of the members of *coetus* 20, this does not mean that more maturity and more preparation was required for confirmation than for first communion. In the same way, he said, it could not be argued that the *Praenotanda* express a theology requiring testimony to Christ and therefore supporting a more mature age for confirmation. The basic rule is mentioned in n. 11 of the *Praenotanda* on unity of the sacraments of Christian initiation, with adults and children who will be baptized at an age when they can be catechized receiving the three sacraments at the same time. “To conclude, we can say that only particular reasons can lead episcopal conferences to set aside the general rule which urges seven years of age.”<sup>34</sup>

The Code of Canon Law promulgated in 1983 contains at least two canons important to our question. The first one is c. 842 §2, which establishes that the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and most holy Eucharist so converge that the three are required for full Christian initiation. This text, in fact, repeats an article of the General Introduction for Christian Initiation,<sup>35</sup> of which “the more important effect (...) is to add greater emphasis to the connection among these sacraments, that is, to “canonize” the principle upon which the initiatory reform was based.”<sup>36</sup> The second important canon is c. 891, which speaks about the age at which confirmation is to be received:

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<sup>33</sup> See, note 23.

<sup>34</sup> See, B. Kleinheyer, *Le nouveau rituel de la confirmation*, in *La Maison Dieu* 110 (1972) 51-71, as quoted by M. Balhoff, *Age for Confirmation: Canonical Evidence*, 565-566.

<sup>35</sup> *General Introduction for Christian Initiation*, art. 2.

<sup>36</sup> See, M. Balhoff, *Age for Confirmation: Canonical Evidence*, 571.

The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops determines another age or there is danger of death or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause urges otherwise.

This canon almost completely corresponds to article 11 of the *Ordo Confirmationis* quoted above. The only difference is that the *Ordo* utilized descriptive language (*generatim ad septimum circiter aetatis annum differtur*) while the canon has normative language (*conferatur circa aetatem discretionis*), adding some force to this discipline.<sup>37</sup>

The exemplary character of the adult rite of initiation is very clear elsewhere in the 1983 Code: the chapter on persons to be baptized treats adult baptism before child baptism,<sup>38</sup> and even the chapter on the celebration of baptism maintains this order of presentation.<sup>39</sup>

Regarding the relationship of universal law to particular law, a letter of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments published in 1999 gives an indication for interpretation.<sup>40</sup> In recourse to the congregation, the parents of an adolescent girl asked that the girl, because of her maturity and her progress in faith, be admitted to the sacrament of confirmation against the policy of the diocese of their domicile. The child in question was 11 years old, but the policy of the diocese was not to confer the sacrament of confirmation prior to the sophomore year or tenth grade of high school, which would mean about the age of 16. The bishop refused to dispense from the diocesan policy for two reasons. First, he conceded that the girl is well-instructed and that her parents are very good

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<sup>37</sup> M. Balhoff, *Age for Confirmation: Canonical Evidence*, 569.

<sup>38</sup> See cc. 865-866 on adult baptism, cc. 867-868 on child baptism.

<sup>39</sup> See for instance c. 851, 1° on the preparation of adults, 2° concerns the parents who want their child to be baptized. The same thing can be noted in respect to c. 857 §2 on the place of baptism: As a rule an adult is to be baptized in his or her parish church and an infant in the parish church of the parents unless a just cause suggests otherwise.

<sup>40</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Litterae Congregationis*, in *Notitiae* 400-401 (Nov. - Dec. 1999) 537-540; see also in *Communicationes* 32 (2000) 1, 12-14. The letter probably has been written in 1998. For a commentary, see, J. Passicos, *Rapports droit general et particulier. L'admission d'une fidèle adolescente au sacrement de confirmation. Une contribution diocésaine imposée aux paroisses confiées à des religieux*, in *L'année canonique* 47, 2005, 111-118, esp.111-114.

Catholics, but underlined the fact that “instruction is not the sole criterion for recognizing the opportune time for confirmation...The evaluation is a pastoral one which involves much more than just being instructed.”<sup>41</sup> Second, he indicated that the diocesan policy conforms to the legislation of the Conference of Bishops to which the diocesan bishop belongs, complementary to c. 891.<sup>42</sup> The Congregation responded to the first argument by stating that it is indeed true that a pastoral judgment is to be made, but it consists in the obligation of the sacred pastors to determine whether the elements required by the Code are present, namely, in this case, that the person to be baptized, has the use of reason, is suitably instructed and properly disposed, and able to renew the baptismal promises.<sup>43</sup> The dicastery concluded from the testimony of the family and the diocesan bishop that the girl satisfied all the canonical prerequisites for reception of the sacrament. In respect to the second point, the dicastery noted that complementary legislation of the Conference of Bishops must always be interpreted in accord with the general norm of law. It also recalled the provision of c. 843 §1, which legislates that sacred ministers may not deny sacraments to those who ask for them at the appropriate time, are properly disposed, and are not

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<sup>41</sup> *Id.*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* We presume from the terminology (sophomore year, high school) that the case concerns a diocese in the USA. The USCCB (at that time NCCB) indeed decreed in 1993 that the sacrament of confirmation in the Latin rite shall be conferred between the age of discretion, which is about the age of seven, and eighteen years of age, within the limits determined by the diocesan bishop and with regard for the legitimate exceptions given in canon 891. The decree was approved by the Congregation for Bishops for a five year period from July 1, 1994 through July 1, 1999. See J. Huels, *The Age for Confirmation*, in *More Disputed Questions in the Liturgy*, 172. This author concludes that the local bishop cannot refuse the sacrament on the basis of insufficient age, provided the child is at least seven, neither can he fix a minimum age different from that of the law of a higher authority. It might be that this decree was in force when the 11 year old girl asked for confirmation. If not, it probably was the next decree of the NCCB, that has been granted recognition by the Congregation for Bishops at May 9, 2001 and entered into force on July 1, 2002. This decree fixes the age for reception of confirmation between about the age of seven and sixteen years. See <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/canon-law/complementary-norms/canon-891-age-for-confirmation.cfm>.

<sup>43</sup> Reference is made to cc. 843, §1 and 889, §2.

prohibited by law from receiving them. "Since the girl possesses these requisite qualities, any other considerations, even those contained in the Diocesan Policy, need to be understood in subordination to the general norms governing the reception of the Sacraments. (...) Consequently, when a member of the faithful wishes to receive this Sacrament, even though not satisfying one or more elements of the local legislation (e.g. being younger than the designated age for administration of the Sacrament), those elements must give way to the fundamental right of the faithful to receive the Sacraments. Indeed, the longer the conferral of the sacrament is delayed after the age of reason, the greater will be the number of candidates who are prepared for its reception but are deprived of its grace for a considerable period of time."<sup>44</sup> The Congregation then concluded that the girl should be confirmed as soon as possible and asked the bishop to notify the Congregation of the agreement concluded with the family for the administration of the sacrament.

In our opinion, two elements are important to note here. First of all, the interpretation of c. 891 that completely subordinates particular law to universal law.<sup>45</sup> In respect to c. 891, it means that a hierarchy is introduced between the possibilities mentioned in the canon: conferring the sacrament at about the age of reason takes priority over any decision of the conference of bishops concerning another age. The second element concerns the pastoral judgment. According to the Congregation, pastoral judgment means that pastors have to determine if the prerequisites for reception of the sacrament, especially according to c. 843, are fulfilled. This last canon, however, leaves some room for interpretation. The first element, seeking the sacrament at the appropriate time, is relatively objective: because the appropriate time for reception of the sacraments is fixed in canon law or in the *Ordo*. But the same thing cannot be stated concerning a person's proper disposition, the assessment of which involves a subjective judgment. However, the prerequisites taken into account by the Congregation are objective and easily verifiable standards, such as being baptized,<sup>46</sup> having the use of reason,<sup>47</sup> being suitably

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<sup>44</sup> Reference is made to cc. 843, §1 and 889, §2.

<sup>45</sup> This is not new, because CIC, c. 135, §2 prescribes that a lower legislator cannot validly issue a law contrary to higher law.

<sup>46</sup> See CIC, c. 889 §1.

<sup>47</sup> CIC, c. 891.



instructed and properly disposed,<sup>48</sup> and being able to renew the baptismal promises.<sup>49</sup> The bishop's observation that 'pastoral evaluation involves something more than just being instructed'<sup>50</sup> seems to suggest that he had something other than these elements in mind. Nevertheless, the Congregation restricted "pastoral evaluation" to assessing the presence of the criteria formulated in the law. Perhaps the local Bishop also had in mind some theological principles. Let us, therefore, turn now to the theological background of confirmation.

#### IV. Theological Arguments for the Restored Order

New Latin practices restoring the ancient order of the sacraments of initiation were introduced primarily "to emphasize that Eucharist is *the* sacrament, which celebrates our *full* membership in the Body of Christ. It is the sacrament of ongoing growth and the sacrament of unity. The Church tells us that it 'culminates' the initiation process. When it comes last in order, it calls us to renew that baptismal covenant each time we come to the Table of the Eucharist."<sup>51</sup> It is clear that the traditional order according to which the Eucharist is the last sacrament to be received for completing Christian initiation also presents the Eucharist as the summit of it. Or considered from the perspective of confirmation: celebrating confirmation between baptism and Eucharist more closely safeguards the connection between baptism and confirmation and better expresses the role of confirmation as the completion of baptism. At the same time, the connection between confirmation and Eucharist is also clear: the gift of the Holy Spirit, given in all its fullness at confirmation, best prepares one to receive Eucharist and to be fully joined to the Body of Christ.

Considerations of the sacraments as such also play a role. Importance is given to the fact that sacraments are not earned or merited. Even if the Church stressed for a very long time that the

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<sup>48</sup> CIC, cc. 843 §1; 889 §2, 890.

<sup>49</sup> CIC, c. 889 §2.

<sup>50</sup> See above.

<sup>51</sup> See the website of the diocese of Phoenix concerning the Restored Order of Sacraments of Initiation: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/BISHOPS/ordsacinit.htm>. For what follows, we also owe much to this website.

sacrament of confirmation prepares for the *militia Christi*, the spiritual combat for Christ, thus underlining the engagement of the person and his/her capacities to witness,<sup>52</sup> confirmation does not depend upon age or knowledge; the grace that is conferred is a free gift. Confirmation should not be considered as the sacrament of adult commitment to the Church, faithful do not have to take a kind of exam. Sacraments are always a beginning and imply growing in faith, sharing in God's grace. In the same way, commitment is a life-long process and cannot be achieved in a single moment. It is expressed in full participation in the Eucharist and in the apostolic life of the Church.

On a catechetical level, the mystagogical character of catechesis will be better expressed: it helps to understand the signification of the sacraments of initiation throughout every stage of life as an apprenticeship of the entire Christian life. From a pastoral point of view, it will be clear that this sacrament is not reserved to an elite, but proposed to every member of the faithful. No one will be deprived of full Christian initiation, a risk that occurs when the sacrament is proposed at a later age.

Ecumenical arguments are also mentioned: the restored order corresponds better to the order of the initiation sacraments as celebrated in the Oriental non-Catholic and in certain Eastern Catholic Churches. In this field, we can also note the change of the formula for confirmation that Pope Paul VI introduced in 1971. The pope observed that the words of the rite completing baptism were not clearly determined until the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century. A Roman Pontifical from the 12<sup>th</sup> c. mentioned for the first time the formula that became usual afterwards: "I sign you with the sign of the cross and confirm you with the chrism of salvation. In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Pope Paul VI, referring to another formula having its origins in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century and that still is in use in the Byzantine Churches, established that this same formula, but with a slight difference, should henceforward be used to confer confirmation: "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> This was expressed in a Pentecostal homily by bishop Faustus of Riez, in the south of Gaule, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. See, Paul De Clerck, "Confirmation," 252.

<sup>53</sup> The Byzantine Churches uses a somewhat shorter formula: "Seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit". See Pope Paul VI, Ap.Const. "Divinae consortium naturae", August 15, 1971, promulgating the new *Ordo*

In the opinion of the pope, this formula better expresses the gift of the Holy Spirit itself and recalls the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. We note that the verb “confirm” as such does not appear any more in the formula for administering the sacrament and, in the same way, the indicative formula (“I sign”) has been abandoned.

## V. Conclusion

These current Latin practices of administering the sacrament of confirmation before First Communion present the advantage of maintaining the ancient sequence of the sacraments of initiation. Even if this restored order does not exactly correspond to the practice of some of the Eastern Catholic and other Oriental Churches, it nevertheless better expresses the significance of the sacraments and their effects. Confirmation appears as the completion of baptism and makes the transition to Eucharist. The Eucharist as such, by completing Christian initiation, really represents its summit. Full initiation of every member of the Church, necessary for the *synergia* with God, according to Orthodox theology, is pursued.<sup>54</sup>

The understanding of the sacraments not as a reward for successful catechesis but as free gifts of divine grace also seems to be more consonant with Eastern theology on these sacraments. The modification introduced by Pope Paul VI concerning the formula that has to be used clearly represents a rapprochement with the Eastern Churches. While it does not use the same formula used in the Byzantine Churches, it at least abandons the indicative form and the word “confirm,” which can be misunderstood as ratifying baptism or strengthened one for spiritual combat by supernatural means. Instead of it, the word “seal” is introduced in a more deprecatory formula. All these elements can be considered as small steps towards a rapprochement between the Latin and the Eastern traditions.

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*confirmationis*, in *Documents on the Liturgy: Conciliar, Papal and Curial Texts*, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1982, 769-770, n. 2505. See also Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 1300: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P3R.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P3R.HTM).

<sup>54</sup> See, M. Kunzler, *Ist die Praxis der Spätfirmung ein Irrweg ? Anmerkungen zum Firmsakrament aus ostkirchlicher Sicht*, in *Liturgisches Jahrbuch* 40 (1990) 90-109, here 107.