

The 3Cs: Confession, Communion, Confirmation —what order?

ADULT CATECHUMENS receive Sacraments of Initiation in catechetical and logical order: **Baptism, Confirmation, first Holy Communion**, as do the infants in Eastern Rites, whether Catholic or Orthodox. In the Roman Rite, children who have the use of reason, i.e., those about 7 years, in Grade 2 of schooling are *obliged to receive three sacraments*: **Confirmation** (canons 890-891), **Confession** (canons 914, 989) and **Communion** (canons 913-914). Clearly, there must be some pastoral adjustments...

FOUR ALTERNATIVES

- **PLAN A:** Confession, Confirmation, Communion separated by a month or two, but all in Grade 2. (Some put Confirmation before Confession.)
- **PLAN B:** Confession in Grade 2, then even next year, Confirmation during a Mass of First Communion.
- **PLAN C:** Confirmation in Grade 2; Confession in Grade 3; Communion in Grade 4. (Some put Communion before Confession.)
- **PLAN D:** Confession & Communion in Grade 2, Confirmation in Grade 6 at age 11 or 12.

Before Pope St Pius X, children made their First Confession after turning 7 years old, even as late as 10, and they received Confirmation **before** their First Holy Communion. The latter was deferred till the age of 10, or even 12 or 14. In 1910, Pope St Pius X *restored* First Confession and First Holy Communion to the age of reason. Previously, in 1905, he had restored frequent or daily Holy Communion. He seems not to have provided an age for Confirmation.

AUSTRALIA

Until the mid-1960s, children were confirmed in 4th, 5th or 6th grades depending on the Bishop's three yearly visitation; i.e. this ensured that everyone was confirmed *before* leaving the parish primary school. In the late 1960s, Bishops began coming for Confirmation every year. The only children not confirmed were in Year 4, so by default this became the age for Confirmation. But a number of parish priests managed to defer Confirmation till Year 6.

CONFIRMATION in Canon Law

By the mid-1970s some Bishops began confirming in Grade 2, i.e., at age 7. They quoted canon law:

Canon 889 no. 1: Every baptized person who is not confirmed, and only such a person, is capable of receiving confirmation; no. 2: Apart from the danger of death, to receive confirmation lawfully a person who has **the use of reason** [emphasis added] must be suitably instructed, properly disposed and able to renew the baptismal promises.

Canon 890: The faithful are bound to receive this sacrament **at the proper time** [emphasis added]. Parents and pastors of souls, especially parish priests, are to see that the faithful are properly instructed to receive

the sacrament and come to it **at the opportune time** [Emphases added].

Canon 891: The Sacrament of Confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful **at about the age of discretion** [Emphases added], unless the Episcopal Conference has decided on a different age, or there is danger of death or, in the judgement of the minister, a grave reason suggests otherwise.

Comment: 'the age of discretion' seemingly means 'the age of reason' (cf. canon 97 §2) as in canon 889 no. 1 on Confirmation and in canon 914 on First Confession and Communion. This is unchallenged.

CONFIRMATION in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC)

CCC §1307: For centuries, Latin custom has indicated 'the age of discretion' as the reference point for receiving Confirmation...

CCC §1310: To receive Confirmation one must be in a state of grace. **One should receive the Sacrament of Penance in order to be cleansed for the gift of the Holy Spirit** [Emphasis added]. More intense prayer should prepare one to receive the strength and graces of the Holy Spirit with docility and readiness to act.

CCC §1309: "*Preparation* [italics in original] for Confirmation should aim at leading the Christian toward **a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit — His actions, His gifts, and His biddings — in order to be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of Christian life** [emphasis added]. To this end catechesis for Confirmation should strive to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, the universal Church as well as the parish community. The latter bears special responsibility for the preparation of confirmands."

First COMMUNION in Canon Law

Canon 913 no. 1: For Holy Communion to be administered to children, it is required that they **have sufficient knowledge and be accurately prepared, so that according to their capacity they understand what the mystery of Christ means, and are able to receive the Body of the Lord with faith and devotion** [Emphasis added], no. 2: The blessed Eucharist may, however, be administered to children in danger of death if they can distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food and receive Communion with reverence.

Canon 914: It is primarily the duty of parents and of those who take their place, as it is the duty of parish priests, to ensure that children who have reached **the use of reason** [Emphasis added] are properly prepared and, having made their sacramental confession, are nourished by this Divine Food as **soon as possible** [Emphasis added]. It is also the duty of the parish



priest to see that children who have not reached the use of reason, or whom he has judged to be insufficiently disposed, do not come to Holy Communion.

CONFESSION in Canon Law

See **Canon 914**, above.

Canon 988 no. 1: The faithful are bound to confess, in kind and in number, all grave sins committed after Baptism, of which after careful examination of conscience they are aware, which have not yet been directly pardoned by the keys of the Church, and which have not been confessed in an individual confession. No. 2: The faithful are recommended to confess also venial sins.

Canon 989: All the faithful who have reached *the age of discretion* [Emphasis added] are bound faithfully to confess their grave sins at least once a year.

ALL THREE SACRAMENTS

Canon 777: In a special way, the parish priest is to ensure, in accordance with the norms laid down by the diocesan Bishop, that:

No. 1 an adequate catechesis is to be given for the celebration of the sacraments;

No. 2 children are **properly prepared for first Confession and first Holy Communion, and for the Sacrament of Confirmation** [Emphasis added; also note the order], by means of catechetical formation over an appropriate period of time;

No. 3: children who have made their first Holy Communion, are given a richer and deeper catechetical formation;

PASTORAL PREFERENCES

PLAN A has practical difficulties:

(1) preparing Grade 2 children for Confession, Confirmation and Communion all in one year;

(2) The Bishop might come for Confirmation any where between March and November; (schools could not cope with the first or last month of the school year).

So despite some theoretical desirability, **PLAN A** is not usually a practicality.

PLAN B has its own special pastoral disadvantage in preparing for two new sacraments on the one day! This is in addition to the pastoral disadvantage it shares with **Plan A** of preparing for three Sacraments in the one year.

Suppose the Confirmation-Communion at the one Mass is a year after the First Confession? This violates canon 914. In a way, it would also violate **against the Divine Law** by deferring Holy Communion after having reached the age of reason: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man... you will not have life in you," John 6:54. See Pope St Pius X, in *Quam singulari*, 1910, which quotes the Council of Trent which in turn quotes the Lateran Council.

Suppose the Confirmation-Communion is in Grade 2 and the First Confession deferred to Grade 3. This violates canon 914, that First Confession precede First Holy Communion. Whatever be the psychological arguments about the capacity or incapacity of the child to commit mortal sin, this remains the discipline of the Church and, what is more, it has been reiterated repeatedly in the face of ongoing disobedience. Note how the ..term 'Confession' neatly excludes General Absolu-

tion which would postpone confession till later on...

For similar reasons, Confession must precede Confirmation: "To receive Confirmation one must be in a state of grace. One should receive the Sacrament of Penance in order to be cleansed for the gift of the Holy Spirit." (CCC §1310, cf. §1319.) The second sentence would apply to those already in the state of grace.

PLAN C violates canon 914 and the proposal of CCC §1310, as in the last two paragraphs.

CONCLUSION

PLAN D is practical and quite in accord with *Canon Law, Ritual* and CCC, because the age for Confirmation and whether or not it precedes First Communion are indeed negotiable.

- Canon 891 on Confirmation says 'about' the age of discretion, but there is no 'about' in Canon 914 on First Confession and Communion, but rather, 'as soon as possible'. **Therefore these are more urgent than Confirmation and should not be deferred if there is a conflict about which has to come first.**

- Canon 777 groups Confession with Communion, and then adds Confirmation. It would not do this if Confirmation was a pre-requisite for First Communion.

- Similarly, converts baptized as non-Catholic in their infancy do not observe the ideal sequence.

- Also, canon 912-914 require Baptism and Confession before Communion, but do not mention Confirmation.

- Similarly, Canons 959 and 988 require Baptism before Confession, but do not require Confirmation.

- The Introduction to the *Bite of Confirmation* (1971) no. 11 says: "For pastoral reasons, however, especially to strengthen the faithful in complete obedience to Christ the Lord and in loyal testimony to Him, **episcopal conferences may choose an age which seems more appropriate so that the Sacrament of Confirmation is conferred at a more mature age after appropriate formation.**"

- Although the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference has not explicitly set an age for Confirmation (canon 891), custom "acquires the force of law" (canon 26) and justifies the choice of those Bishops who keep the age of Confirmation in their dioceses at age 11 or 12.

- Although Confirmation might ideally be conferred before First Communion, it requires Confession to precede (CCC 1310). Moreover, in Australia, a later Confirmation makes possible a remedial catechesis that is not otherwise supplied. It gives parish priests an opportunity to catechize children in primary schools that priests would not otherwise have.

- Changing religious practice too often appears to trivialize religion, especially at times of liturgical and doctrinal chaos. Is it partly that 'archeolatry' criticised by Pius XII in 1947, *Mediator Dei* §§61-65?

- There is nothing in the *Vatican II, Ritual* or *Canon Law* (to which CCC refers) mandating Confirmation before Communion. Rather, both *Ritual* and *Canon Law* provide for its deferral to a later age.

- It is better psychologically and pedagogically for Penance and Holy Communion to be at seven because these will be repeated and the candidate will "grow into them".

- Finally, no pastoral gain from early Confirmation has yet been observed.