

# WHY IS THE CONFIRMATION AGE BEING CHANGED?

**D**ear Father Kerper: I just heard that Catholic children in New Hampshire will now be confirmed in third grade instead of at age 16. Why this sudden change from the traditional practice? How can a third grader really understand the sacrament and make a commitment to the faith?

Thanks for your two questions, which many other Catholics in our diocese have asked, some even with a bit of panic. Perhaps a brief historical and theological overview will calm your anxiety and show how this drastic change may strengthen the Church.

First, you refer to the current practice as “traditional.” This makes perfect sense because almost every Catholic we’ve ever known received Confirmation after First Holy Communion, usually between ages 12 and 16. As such, we assume that all Catholics throughout the world did the same throughout the centuries. However, they didn’t. From earliest times, many people received the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist together at a single celebration. This practice continues within the Eastern Churches in full communion with the Catholic Church and among the Orthodox.

The “new” change, then, which seems so wild and dangerous, actually restores the ancient traditional order: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

## CONFIRMATION: FROM GIFT TO REWARD

Here’s how Confirmation got pushed into late childhood or early adolescence, the most common ages even today.

Up until 1910, Catholic boys received First Holy Communion at age 14 and girls at age 12. Confirmation, which was ordinarily required before Holy Communion, was received after age seven, the “age of reason.” Then, Pope St. Pius X lowered the age of First Holy Communion to seven, the same age as Confirmation.

When the Holy Father generously invited seven-year-old children to receive Holy Communion, some Catholics raised the same objection now used against Confirmation for young children: They’re too young to understand!

Perhaps. But this objection misses a crucial point of Catholic theology: sacraments are gifts of God rather than rewards for good behavior or knowledge. Moreover, sacraments confer God’s powerful grace on people, regardless of their age or level of knowledge.

The ancient Catholic practice of infant Baptism affirms this principle very forcefully. Early on, the Church discerned that babies, young children and even unconscious people can validly receive Baptism without an explicit request and without full knowledge of what the sacrament does. Some Christians, of course, vehemently denounced this practice, arguing that a person had to request Baptism freely and make a profession of faith. Babies, of course, can’t do such things.

How, then, do Catholics justify baptizing babies? Through the “organic spiritual bond” that they already have with their parents and with the entire Church, the Body of Christ. Moreover, the Church makes Baptism more widely available than any other sacrament because it’s needed for salvation.

For sure, the Church has always offered doctrinal preparation for adults and older children who seek Baptism, but no requirements are ever imposed on infants, people with severe mental disabilities, and anyone endangered by death. After all, Christ is the source and true minister of every sacrament who generously bestows these powerful gifts without charging anything.

The same “cost free” standard of Baptism applies to other sacraments as well. For example, an unconscious person can validly receive the Sacraments of Penance, Anointing of the Sick and Confirmation. These, too, are gifts.

Sad to say, many Catholics have forgotten the “gift quality” of Confirmation even though its form is very explicit. When a bishop or priest bestows the sacrament, he

says, “Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.”

During the past 100 years or so, the “gift” of Confirmation has evolved into a “reward” for completing “religious education.” Those who attend classes and complete a prescribed program obtain the “reward.” Those who don’t never get confirmed.

How did we switch from the original understanding of Confirmation as “gift” to “religious diploma”? Two events caused this distortion: first, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century; and second, lowering the age of First Holy Communion in 1910.

## THE PROTESTANT INFLUENCE ON CATHOLIC PRACTICE

Much of the Reformation had to do with changing the meaning of the sacraments. Martin Luther, John Calvin and their followers believed that Catholicism had grossly corrupted the sacraments, reducing them to empty rituals and sacred “things.” This Catholic distortion, the Reformers asserted, fostered superstition among Christians, thereby blocking access to the true biblical meaning of the sacraments.

Protestants developed a two-step corrective strategy: first, they recognized only Baptism and Holy Communion as genuine sacraments; and second, they abolished or redefined the other five.

The Protestant campaign of “redefinition” succeeded brilliantly with Confirmation. No longer a true sacrament, it gradually became a public ceremony at which “mature” children and young people simply reaffirmed their Christian faith. “Maturity” came to mean a comprehensive understanding of Sacred Scripture, Christian doctrine and Church history. This, of course, required much academic study. In effect, then, Confirmation became a “diploma” that a Christian earned, not a gift that one received from the Lord.

This “desacramentalized” post-Reformation version of Confirmation departed completely from the ancient Catholic – and Orthodox – understanding of Confirmation as the actual outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon the recipients, whether new-born infants or brilliant theologians.

Gradually, the Protestant view inadvertently and quietly influenced the Catholic Church,

especially after Pope St. Pius X lowered the age of First Communion. Suddenly, the Eucharist displaced Confirmation, which seven year olds had received for centuries. This drastic change in age reversed the order of Confirmation and Eucharist, therefore requiring a new catechetical curriculum, which now stressed Eucharistic doctrine over everything else. Confirmation was postponed. In some places, children were confirmed soon after First Communion; in other places they waited for up to 10 years!

This widening gap between First Communion and Confirmation required an explanation. Eventually “education for mature understanding” became the standard answer. Unfortunately, this response strongly affirms the “knowledge-based” emphasis of the Reformation rather than the “gift” approach of the ancient Church Fathers and Scholastics.

## WHAT DOES CONFIRMATION DO?

These competing approaches compel us to ask a crucial question: Does Confirmation actually “do” anything at all? As Catholics, we must answer “Yes!”

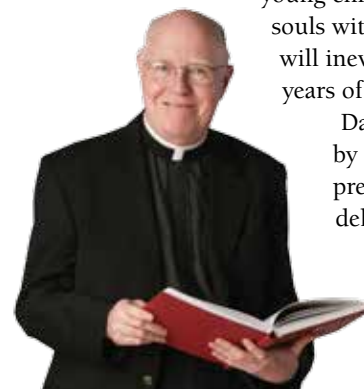
When a bishop or priest places his hand on someone’s head, anoints the person’s forehead with consecrated Chrism, and says, “Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit,” the Holy Spirit truly rushes into the person’s soul so powerfully that the person becomes permanently changed.

The Church uses the terms “character” and “indelible mark” to express this total spiritual transformation. In effect, confirmed Christians actually differ from the non-confirmed in that the Holy Spirit has entered and empowered them to live the Christian life that began with Baptism. Those who receive only Baptism remain “incomplete,” unfortunately lacking the “energy” that comes from the deeper unity with the Holy Spirit brought about by Confirmation.

In ancient times, the Church lavishly bestowed the Gift of the Holy Spirit on infants and children, often in conjunction with Baptism and Holy Communion. Today, however, many baptized Catholics never receive Confirmation, even after First Holy Communion. This situation, which was not the case in the early Church, is getting worse.

If we really believe that Confirmation does what the Church says it does, we should greet this decision to bestow the “Gift of the Holy Spirit” on young children with hopeful joy. Surely, pouring the power of the Holy Spirit into hundreds of young children and marking their precious souls with the “character” of Confirmation will inevitably do more good than many years of catechesis without the gift.

Dare we suggest that the loss of faith by so many young people happened precisely because Confirmation was delayed or never received? Now we have an opportunity to reaffirm our trust in the power of all God’s sacraments, especially Confirmation. Please pray that this well-considered – and very bold – change will produce much fruit among our children. ■



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