

## The Sacraments of Initiation

# The Sacraments of Initiation

"What", you may be asking, "are the Sacraments of Initiation"? 'Sacraments of Initiation' is the term that refers to those three sacraments which, from the earliest days of the Church, have been closely associated with and which have been the means of welcoming - initiating - new members into the community of the Church, and thus into the life of God who is Father, Son and Spirit. The Sacraments of Initiation are therefore BAPTISM, CONFIRMATION and FIRST COMMUNION). Since these are the sacraments by which we ourselves were welcomed into the sharing of the life of God in our Church; since they are the sacraments by means of which we welcome the children of our parish into our community; since they are the sacraments by which we welcome adult members into our Church at Easter; and since there has been a change in the order of the celebration of the sacraments of Confirmation and First Communion in our diocese (and many other dioceses) I thought it would be good to reflect on these sacraments and their interrelationship. In this booklet I would like to especially address the subject of the *order* of these sacraments and why this order has been restored to its original form in our diocese of Broken Bay (and indeed in an increasing number of dioceses). So, before moving on to address each of these sacraments in turn we need to be clear what this change was.

Until recently (and yet only *since* the beginning of the 20th century!) the sacraments - in the case of children - were celebrated in the order of Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation. As we look at these sacraments in themselves, *and in their interrelationship*, hopefully it will become clear (i) that this order was a temporary feature (only a century old) that arose through a particular historical hiccup; (ii) that it removed a sense of the interrelationship between these sacraments - indeed it was impossible to see *any* interrelationship: they simply each stood on their own in isolation. You might ask yourself whether you ever thought of them as a *group*, as "the sacraments of initiation"? And (iii) the meaning of Confirmation accordingly became very confused.

### Baptism

The first sacrament of initiation, indeed the first sacrament of all, is baptism. By baptism, through God's grace, we are first incorporated into Jesus - we become sharers in his life. Baptism makes us sharers in the death and resurrection of Jesus - the New Testament reading at the Easter Vigil (the pre-eminent occasion for the celebration of baptism) tells us : "When we were baptised in Christ Jesus we were baptised in his death; in other words, when we were baptised we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might lead a new life" (Romans 6: 3 - 4).

BAPTISM  
 CONFIRMATION  
 FIRST COMMUNION

Baptism then begins that life of union with Jesus – however, if we are united with Jesus then we are also united with his Body, and his Body, St Paul tells us, is the Church. So baptism is a sacrament of initiation into the community of the Church. Jesus is inseparable from his Body and to be baptised is to be united to that Body. This is why it is so incongruous when sometimes a family may ask for a "private" baptism - that is, for their baby to be baptised in its "own" ceremony without any other children being baptised. Baptism is by its very nature a community event *par excellence*. Indeed ideally baptism should be celebrated within the Sunday Mass, in the presence of the entire community into which the child is being welcomed.

## Confirmation

If baptism is the first sacrament of initiation, Confirmation is the second. But why? In the early Church it took some time before Confirmation was even recognised as a *separate* sacrament to baptism. This in fact brings us to the heart of understanding Confirmation: its near inseparability from baptism. In the early Church, after a person was baptised they were clothed in a white garment (as is still done) as a sign of their new life in Christ, and then they were 'chrismated' - that is, anointed with the oil of chrism. Chrism was a precious oil, made fragrant by the addition of perfume, and used to signify that people or things were 'consecrated' - literally, set apart as holy and of great dignity. Hence rulers were anointed with chrism; a church is anointed on the walls and on the altar with chrism when it is dedicated by the bishop. The early Christians believed that when a person was baptised and 'clothed with Christ' they were effectively 'anointed' by the Holy Spirit: the Holy Spirit was literally poured out upon them. And so, as a sign of this anointing with the Holy Spirit that accompanied baptism the early Church literally anointed the newly baptised with chrism.

Now, as pointed out above, this 'chrismation' following baptism was not originally seen as a separate sacrament - it was merely an integral part of the baptism liturgy, making explicit that the person who was incorporated into Jesus through baptism was given the Holy Spirit to confirm and strengthen them in their discipleship and to unite them in a living way with the Father and the Son. Perhaps the most important thing to be learnt from this bit of history is the integral and intimate relationship between baptism and confirmation - a relationship that is very much obscured when First Communion intervenes and comes in between baptism and confirmation.

The reason why, with time, in the evolving faith of the Church, the chrismation (anointing with the oil of chrism) following baptism came to be understood as a distinct sacrament to baptism itself was largely due to the growing practice of infant baptism. Originally of course only *adults* were baptised into the Church as they were converted to Christian faith. In this case the sacraments could be celebrated as a *unity* in the one celebration (as they still are for adults at the Easter Vigil) and since the chrismation immediately followed the baptism (as the person emerged still dripping from the font!)

there was little to provoke any development in understanding it as a separate sacramental action. As the Church grew, however, and more of the populace became Christians there were less new adults seeking to join the Church, but those who were Christians wished to initiate their children into the Church community - at least partly, even if the full initiation would have to wait until they were older. Thus the practice of baptising infants began. This however led to the question - what about the remainder of the rites of initiation: the chrismation and the first sharing in the Eucharist? In the Eastern Church the solution (which continues till the present day in the Eastern [both Orthodox and Catholic] Churches) was to chrismate (confirm) the child at baptism and to give them a small particle of the Eucharist (although they did not again receive the Eucharist until they were at a sufficient age to appreciate it). This practice evolved from their conviction that the rites of welcome were an inseparable unity.

In the Western (Catholic) Church the custom came to be that the child was baptised, but the chrismation and the first sharing in the Eucharist were delayed until the child reached an age at which they could have a reasonable understanding of what these actions were about. This practice evolved from the conviction that some maturity and understanding were necessary before full initiation into the Church community.

Both practices therefore reflect a reasonable conviction about the nature of the rites of welcome, looked at from two different perspectives. The Western practice, however, of separating the chrismation from the baptism by a space of some years re-affirmed the growing understanding of the chrismation as a separate sacramental action.

Thus, the chrismation was eventually recognised in the evolving faith of the Church as a separate (though very much *related*) sacrament to baptism. We could digress for a moment here and reflect on this aspect of the Church's faith *evolving*. There can be a tendency to assume that the Church's faith is one monolithic whole, given in one moment for all times and cultures. While there is certainly a truth that the core faith of the Church does not change, the Church's understanding of, and penetration into the mystery of its faith is a never ending task. The Church is after all made up of human beings, and human beings live in a particular time and culture and have all the limitations that go along with being human! As Catholics we believe that the Holy Spirit dwells in the Church and guides us. Putting these two things together leads us to the realisation that growth in the understanding of the Christian mystery, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is what the Church is all about.

And so it was that the Church came to understand the chrismation as a distinct sacrament, a distinct gifting by the Holy Spirit, for a distinct purpose in the Christian's and the Church's life. This sacrament of Confirmation was clearly seen to be very much related to baptism - it *confirmed* what happened there. Baptism incorporated the person into Jesus; re-made them, re-created them into the likeness of Jesus, filled them with the very life of God: as such, it is of course a gift of the Holy Spirit. Confirmation was a further gifting by the Holy Spirit, but now to *strengthen* the new-born Christian in their discipleship, to bond them more deeply to the Church community - a bond that would be fully achieved in their first (and subsequent) sharings in the Eucharist.

## The Meaning of the Sacrament of Confirmation

This little excursion through history has hopefully brought us to a clearer understanding of the sacrament of Confirmation:

\* at the level of the individual Christian - it confirms and strengthens the baptised Christian to follow the Jesus whose life they have come to share through baptism.

\* at the level of the Church (or communal) dimension (because all sacraments are Church events, not private events) - it bonds the person more deeply to the Church community, a bond which began in baptism and which will only be fully realised through the sharing in the Eucharist.

### That Mix-up with Confirmation!

The final question then that we need to face regarding the sacrament of Confirmation is twofold: when and why did the sacrament of Confirmation come to be celebrated *after* First Communion, and why did it come to be understood as the sacrament of *adult commitment*? Let's begin by tackling the first question.

Until the early part of *the 20th century* the Church had retained the traditional and proper order of the sacraments of initiation - even for children. This is important to note - sometimes the recent restoration of the traditional order is seen as an innovation, a needless change from the 'way things have always been'. A simple look at history shows that this is not the case, and at any rate it sidesteps the real question: what *should* the order be? However, even if the traditional order of the sacraments was still in place even at the beginning of the 20th century, the *age* at which those sacraments were celebrated was very different to now: both were celebrated when the children were between twelve to sixteen years of age. The Pope at the time - Pius X - for very pastoral reasons desired that young people should not have to wait so long to receive the Eucharist. In doing so he focussed on what was the bare minimum - that they had reached the 'age of reason' and could discern the difference between the Eucharist and ordinary bread. With that criterion he decided that children from the age of seven could receive their First Communion. It's interesting to note that there was criticism of this move from those who felt the children were too young and could not really be truly prepared for Eucharistic Communion. History repeats itself! Often people argue the same thing about Confirmation but do not bat an eyelid at children receiving the Eucharist at the age of seven - after all, that is how 'it has always been'!

Anyway, to return to the point - the age for First Communion was lowered, but the age for Confirmation was not addressed in this change. The result was that First Communion 'dropped under' Confirmation and two thousand years of tradition (and theology) regarding the order of the sacraments was obscured. We could ask why this happened and the reason must surely to some extent lie in the theology and spirituality of the Eucharist which was prevalent at that time. For the previous few hundred years

eucharistic spirituality (and indeed the liturgy itself) had grown increasingly individualistic - Holy Communion was seen almost entirely as a personal meeting between the individual and Jesus (just as the whole Mass tended to be privatised - "me at 'my' Mass"). In such a climate Pope Pius X's whole focus was on the child's first personal meeting with Jesus in the Eucharist. The dimension of the Eucharist as the sacrament which builds the communion of the Church was not high on the agenda.

The Second Vatican Council has helped us to recover a more holistic understanding of the Eucharist and to realise that the spirituality of the Eucharist which pervaded the Church over the last few hundred years was not well focused: it stressed one aspect of the Eucharist (personal meeting) to the almost total exclusion of the other (sacrament of community) - an aspect which is founded in Scripture and in the entire early history of the Christian Church.

Thus the present move to understand First Holy Communion as not just one sacrament in isolation, but as a part of the trio of baptism - confirmation - eucharist is really a healthy restoration of a proper and holistic understanding of the place of the Eucharist in the life of the individual and in the Church. The move of Pius X had the unfortunate effect of obscuring the aspect of the Eucharist as a sacrament of *initiation*. The full meaning of the Eucharist is lost when it comes before Confirmation - how can it be the sacrament of final welcome into the community (via the invitation to come and share at the Lord's table) if there is still something to come (that is, Confirmation)? And where does that leave Confirmation? How can we make any sense of its place in the life of the individual and the Church? This brings us of course to the second of the two questions raised a few paragraphs back: why did Confirmation come to be understood as 'the sacrament of adult commitment'? It is to this question that we will now turn.

Divorced from its proper place in the intimately linked trio of baptism-confirmation-eucharist, Confirmation became 'a sacrament in search of a theology'. Since Confirmation was originally not even seen as distinct from baptism, its meaning is, as we have seen, very closely linked to baptism. However, once it was removed from its proper context in the trio of the sacraments of initiation it became hard to see its meaning and popular 'theologies' of Confirmation began to develop in an attempt to make sense of its place in the life of a Christian. And once again it was a sacrament caught up in the individualistic spirituality of the age - it came to be seen as the Holy Spirit coming to *me* to make *me* a 'soldier of Christ'; it was all about *me* making *my* adult commitment. Since it came *after* First Communion people tried to make some sense of it as a *final* sacrament of initiation (which, of course, it is not). It's so important to remember that this theology of Confirmation, with which we're all so familiar, is a twentieth century theology (not the 'way it's always been') as we struggled to make sense of Confirmation divorced from its place in the trio of the sacraments of initiation.

The point of course is that no sacrament can be *defined* in terms of what *I* do - sacraments are gracious acts *of God*; they are celebrations *of the Church community*. Naturally they all require a response from the individual - they are not magic - but we

can't define a sacrament as the sacrament of *my adult commitment*. Like all sacraments Confirmation draws its essence from what *God* does and how that affects a person's relationship with the Christian community. Confirmation, then, is the sacrament of God's gracious gift of the Holy Spirit empowering us to live the call of baptism and drawing us closer into the community of Spirit-filled Christians. Naturally that requires a response - and not only at the moment of confirmation but for the rest of our lives. We shouldn't merely say "I was Confirmed", but "I *am* (and *always will be*) a confirmed person. Thus, as already mentioned, the Orthodox Churches and the Eastern Catholic Church (eg the Maronite Rite) celebrate confirmation at the same time as baptism - as with baptism itself, it is expected that as the child grows it will grow also in responding to the grace of *God* which is the essence of both baptism and confirmation. Thus to confirm children at the age of seven is no violation of the nature of Confirmation. It is not a sacrament of 'their adult commitment to Christ' - it is a sacrament of *God's* grace, and that can be offered to us in any age or season of life. The children may not understand *everything* about Confirmation - but then who, at any stage of their life can understand all the implications of the mystery of God? They will be *confirmed Christians* for the rest of their lives. All that is necessary at the time of their Confirmation is that they understand their Confirmation at the level at which they are - as they grow older they must (as we all must regardless of the age at which we were confirmed) grow in their response to the Holy Spirit in their lives, in their understanding of what it means to be a confirmed Christian. It is therefore similar to the changed situation, commencing at the beginning of the 20th century, with children receiving First Communion at an early age. Prior to that time a very thorough understanding of the Eucharist was required of 14- 16 year olds before their First Communion; Pius X simply asked that children of age 7 be able to distinguish the Eucharist from ordinary bread (a huge difference in expectations) – he presumed that as they grew older the children would be led into a deeper and deeper appreciation of the Eucharist.

Given this renewed understanding of Confirmation *as a sacrament of initiation* there is accordingly a new way of preparing children for Confirmation. It is of course not to be presented as a time of making an adult commitment to Christ. The children's preparation simply focuses on helping them to understand the two essential aspects of this sacrament:

- \* that they are to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to strengthen them to live more like Jesus (the Jesus whose life they share because of baptism). They are reminded that this was what happened to the apostles - that at Pentecost the apostles received the Holy Spirit to strengthen them as followers of Jesus;
- \* that this Holy Spirit joins them more closely to their Church community, and that they will become full members of that community at their subsequent First Communion.

Thus: the gift of the Spirit to strengthen them to follow Jesus; a deeper welcome into the Church. That's all that's asked of children as they prepare for Confirmation at an earlier age.

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## **First Holy Communion**

It is First Communion which is the final sacrament of initiation. Having been baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus and infused with his life, having been confirmed and strengthened by the Spirit to live the life of the baptised we are then invited to become full members of the community of Christ's disciples by sharing at the Table of that community and receiving the body and blood of the Lord. The New Testament speaks eloquently of the unity that is to bind Jesus' disciples together. We are not to be merely individuals who follow Jesus but a community, a Church, who love one another just as we love Him. Let's look at St Paul's vision of the Christian community which he expresses in his Letter to the Ephesians: "...The Church...is His Body, the fullness of Him who fills the whole creation" (1:22-23); "...in Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far apart from us have been brought very close, by the blood of Christ. For He is the peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier that used to keep them apart...This was to create one single new humanity in himself out of the two of them and by restoring peace through the cross, to unite them in a single Body and reconcile them with God" (2:13-16); "This mystery ... means that pagans now share the same inheritance, that they are parts of the same body" (3:5-6); "Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together. There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called together into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all" (4:3-6). Clearly for St Paul the Church as the body of Christ is very important, indeed all important. And he links that body of Christ which is the community with the body of Christ in which the community shares at the Eucharist: "The blessing cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break is a communion with the body of Christ. The fact that there is only one bread means, that though there are many of us, we form a single body" (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

In Christian faith then the phrase 'the body of Christ' has a double meaning and the two meanings are related: we are called to be the Church, the Body of Christ; and we are built into this Church and bonded with it through the Body of Christ in which we share in the Eucharist. Our first sharing in the eucharistic body of Christ - First Holy Communion - is the completion of our initiation into the body of Christ which is the community of faith. It only makes sense then that First Communion is the final sacrament of initiation, coming after Confirmation.

First Communion is of course hopefully the first of many communions. It is the one sacrament of the three sacraments of initiation which can be repeated - though of course it is only First Communion which is strictly a sacrament of *initiation*. Nevertheless every time we share in the Eucharist something of that first initiation is recalled - it is the sacrament in which we share each and every week so that we can constantly be drawn together as the body of Christ. The Eucharist brings us together *as the body of Christ*, to receive the body of Christ that we might grow ever closer as the body of Christ. As such, each week it renews that bond which was first sealed by our First Communion. The

great St Augustine himself expressed the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church community when he said:

'You are the body of Christ, and his members.  
It is your mystery which lies on the table of the Lord.  
At Communion you hear the words 'The body of Christ'  
and you answer 'Amen'.  
So, be the body of Christ  
that your Amen may be true.'  
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### **A Final Reflection**

Hopefully this little work has explained the basis for the custom in our diocese (and an increasing number of dioceses) to restore the sacraments of initiation to their proper order. However an objection may still be raised - that nevertheless the children are too young to understand the meaning of the sacraments. This is a valid point and there are two replies that can be made:

- in the first place, as was pointed out above, the children are not being asked to make an 'adult commitment' - they simply need to grasp the two aspects of Confirmation outlined previously : that is, that they are being welcomed as a closer member of the Church family and that as such they are receiving the Holy Spirit to help them to live more like Jesus.

- secondly, it's important to remember that seven is the *minimum* age at which the children can be Confirmed. They don't have to celebrate this sacrament at this age - all that the Church asks is that the proper *order* of the sacraments is respected. Parents can, and indeed *should*, discern whether their particular children are sufficiently mature at the age of seven to celebrate Confirmation, and then First Communion. It may well be that they decide to postpone the celebration of these sacraments for a year or even more - there is certainly no pressure that the children must celebrate these sacraments as soon as they turn seven! So in a sense it's a two way decision: parents have the right as the primary educators of their children to discern *when* their children are ready to celebrate the sacraments; but the Church as a whole has a responsibility and a right to ensure that the sacraments are celebrated appropriately and in their proper relation to one another.

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The sacraments of initiation then are joyful sacraments of welcome whereby the community of the Church reaches out and embraces new members by the outpouring of God's grace. Step by step these sacraments introduce us into our relationship with Jesus and with the Church and then build on that relationship. May we, who have received this grace of welcome, continue to treasure the grace God gives us and the Church to which we belong by our joyful celebration of the weekly Eucharist.