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Preparing Children for the Sacraments: Some Controversies and Suggestions

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Most Catholics receive Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist while they are still children under parental authority. Usually, of course, the process of preparing young people to receive these three sacraments of initiation (Canon 842 § 2) proceeds smoothly. At times, however, misunderstandings and even conflicts can occur between parents and pastors or catechists over a child's sacramental preparation. This article will address some of the controversies which can arise and will suggest some resolutions of those issues based on the objective requirements of canon law.



Before addressing specific questions on children's reception of the sacraments, it is necessary to understand the Church's general attitude toward the reception of sacraments by the faithful. Briefly, Church law prizes and protects the right of Catholics to participate in its sacramental life. While recognizing the minister's obligation to prevent unworthy participation in the sacraments, the canons firmly foster the reception of the sacraments wherever possible.

Evidence for this conclusion is found as early as Book II of the 1983 Code, entitled "The People of God," which opens with a remarkable series of canons outlining the fundamental rights and duties of the faithful in general and of the laity in particular. Prominent among those provisions are Canon 213 which asserts the faithful's "right to receive assistance from the sacred pastors out of the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the Word of God and the sacraments" and Canon 212 § 2 which recognizes the faithful's "right to make known their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires to the pastors of the Church."

Even standing alone, these two canons are clear affirmations of the faithful's rights in regard to accessing the sacraments. But when these same provisions are read in the light of Canon 18 (which calls for the narrow interpretation of any Church rules restricting the faithful's exercise of their rights) it is easy to see that a significant presumption in favor of the faithful's rights to sacramental participation is being established very early in Church law.

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Turning next to Book IV of the Code, where most of the canons specifically regulating sacramental issues are found, though still before discussing specific norms on particular sacraments, Church law restates that “sacred ministers cannot refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from receiving them” (Canon 843 § 1). Once more, the obvious implication is that Church ministers are supposed to be at the service of the faithful seeking sacraments. Not at their beck-and-call, certainly, but at their service, surely.

Finally, it is important to realize that the supreme authority of the Church (i.e., Rome) reserves to itself the right to determine what is required for valid and licit celebration of the sacraments (see Canon 841, as well as Canons 837-838). This does not mean that there is no place for flexibility and local adaptation in sacramental matters. There most certainly is. But it does mean that the fundamental rules on sacramental participation are determined by universal canon law and not by local diocesan or parish policy-makers, however wise or well-intentioned they might be. With these points as background, we are now ready to examine some of the issues raised regarding reception of the sacraments by children.

Baptism

Parents are bound to see to the baptism of their children within “the first weeks after birth” (Canon 867 § 1), while pastors, for their part, are to provide parents and sponsors with “proper instruction on the meaning of the sacrament” (Canon 851, n. 2). In general, parishes correctly tend to be stricter in requiring baptismal preparation for parents who are presenting their first child for Baptism or when the parents are not otherwise known to be active in parish life (e.g., faithful about weekly Mass attendance).

Understandably, canon law does not specify exactly what material needs to be mastered by parents and sponsors prior to presenting their child for Baptism. But a clue as to how much (or how little?) might be required is found, I think, in Canon 868 § 1, n. 2, which states that for the licit baptism of a child there is required (beyond parental consent) a “founded hope that the child will be raised Catholic.” Most observers would agree, that it is not much of a juridic requirement, especially when the canon goes on to state that only if such a hope is “altogether lacking” can the baptism be, not denied, but delayed for a time according to diocesan policy.

On the other hand, the “founded hope” requirement is generally considered to be more than sufficient grounds for a pastor to delay a child’s baptism because of, say, the parents’ irregular marriage situation. Although the child’s right to baptism will eventually outweigh the parents’ duty to rectify their marital status, resulting in conferral of the sacrament, pastoral evidence is clear that many couples do correctly address their own status in the Church as part of the preparation for their child’s baptism. Touching another matter, canon law does not require baptismal sponsors, known popularly as “godparents,” but the practice is strongly encouraged (Canon 872). A sponsor may be of either sex, or there may be two sponsors of opposite sexes, but not two sponsors of the same sex (Canon 873). Sponsors must be practicing Catholics, generally over age 16, and cannot be the parents of the one to be baptized (Canon 874 § 1). Non-Catholics cannot serve as baptismal sponsors, although they may be admitted as official witnesses to the Baptism (Canons 874 § 2).

Most of the other common baptismal questions (e.g., acceptable baptismal names, Sunday Baptisms, or ordinary minister of baptism) are concisely addressed in the Code, especially in canons 850-860, and so need not be addressed here.

Confirmation

For the valid reception of confirmation, it is only required that the confirmand be baptized (Canon 889 § 1). For the licit reception of Confirmation, however, a confirmand must be “suitably instructed, properly disposed, and able to renew one’s baptismal promises” (Canon 889 § 2). As was true in the case of baptism, the Code does not attempt a catalogue of facts which, however usefully, should be mastered by confirmands. Certainly, however, more than was required for baptism should be required for Confirmation. But this fact can lead to a problem, especially for pastors and catechists.

Parish staffers know that for most of the young people, the reception of Confirmation will be the last time those children will have any formal contact with their parish until, perhaps, it’s time for them to marry. There are temptations, therefore, to try to stretch out the preparation periods for as long as possible and to involve the confirmands as much as possible in other aspects of Church life and mission. Notwithstanding the potential benefits which can be obtained with extended preparation, however, such an approach walks, and occasionally crosses, the narrow line between challenges to faith growth and obstacles to same.

For example, some parishes require over 100 classes (weekly classes for two years) before the reception of Confirmation. But that same parish, often entirely in accord with diocesan policy, might require only four classes for Marriage preparation. Clearly, something is out of balance here.

Other Confirmation preparation programs require young people to participate in a “social awareness” service project designed by parish or diocesan staff. While many such projects are completely innocuous and of real benefit to participants and recipients, others entail specific risks to participants, (risks based on, say, travel required, locale of service, materials used, and so on), which risks confirmands and their parents may prudently elect not to assume.

A few parishes require parents, as a condition to their children’s reception of Confirmation, to consent to their children’s participation in over-night, mixed-sex retreats, at parental expense, and with a prior parental waiver of liability in favor of the parish or diocese. Obviously, parents and children might object to such activities on any number of reasonable grounds.

In the end, however, nothing in Canon 889 § 2 requires service projects or week-end retreats prior to receiving Confirmation. For that matter, as many diocesan administrators have learned, those so-called waivers of liability for service projects and retreats are not always what they used to be. Parishes making use of them should consult with diocesan legal counsel before assuming the effectiveness of such waivers in case of trouble.

It is, of course, wholly within the authority of dioceses and parishes to offer opportunities for things like Christian service and retreat experiences to those preparing for various sacraments. That does not change the fact, however, that the primary requirements for valid and licit sacramental participation are set forth in the Code of Canon Law, whose

provisions control in case of conflict. As long as the voluntary nature of any additional activities is made clear, and there is recognition that young people's eligibility to participate in the sacramental life of the Church is not based on their decision to take part or to refrain from taking part in such activities, things can progress very well.

Determining the proper age for Confirmation presents yet another type of problem. Most American dioceses delay Confirmation until late grade school or even high school. There is evidence that such delays result in the failure of many Catholics ever to receive Confirmation. Without trying to air fully all sides of this debate, it should be noted that at least some of the delays in the conferral of Confirmation are open to canonical objections.

Canon 891 states that Confirmation is generally to be administered at about the age of discretion, which age is understood to be seven (see Canon 97 § 2). There are, however, three exceptions to this rule, two of which exceptions, "danger of death" and "grave cause," were more often understood to support administration of Confirmation earlier than the age of discretion. But the main exception to requiring administration of Confirmation at the age of discretion lies in Canon 891's phrase "unless the conference of bishops determines another age" for reception of the sacrament.

In contrast to what is allowed under Canon 891, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) did not determine another age for the reception of Confirmation. Instead, it purported to authorize diocesan bishops to determine the age at which the Sacrament of Confirmation is conferred in their dioceses. This would be fine, except that the 1983 Code did not authorize bishops to establish various ages for reception of Confirmation among their dioceses, although it would have been very easy to draft Canon 891 that way (see, for example, Canon 874 § 1, n. 2).

There is, however, almost no canonical way that concerned parents, pastors, or catechists can officially push for a clarification of this matter especially since (to make a long story short) the Holy See, after some hesitation, has basically approved the NCCB's action until the summer of 1999. Therefore, the age for reception of Confirmation will basically depend on diocesan policy. With, I suggest, one important proviso: parents, pastors, and catechists should be open to and supportive of the rights of young people to petition for Confirmation at an earlier age than that observed in the diocese.

Recalling the Code's many provisions defending the general right of the faithful to access the Church's sacraments, and recalling that it is the <child's> sacramental life that is in question here—not the pastor's programs—reasonable accommodation (see Canons 843 § 1, 885 § 1 & 214) should be made to welcome younger children qualified for the Sacrament of Confirmation when they ask for it. Special note: if Baptism is conferred on a child above the age of reason, Canons 883 & 885 combine to require the conferral of Confirmation at the same time, regardless of diocesan policy perhaps calling for later conferral of the sacrament. As was true of Baptism, there is no strict requirement that Confirmation sponsors be used (see Canon 892), but the practice is a long-standing one and is to be encouraged. A confirmation sponsor may be of either sex, and it is hoped that one of the confirmand's original baptismal sponsors will accept the role of Confirmation sponsor (Canon 893).

First Communion

Vatican II's beautiful description of the Eucharist as the "summit and source of the Christian life" is repeated in Canon 897 which opens the 1983 Code's regulation of this sacrament. But perhaps because of the unique importance of the Eucharist in the lives of the faithful, canon law was, it seems, not content to rest on its earlier assertions of the rights of the faithful to approach this sacrament, and instead it states quite specifically: "Any baptized person who is not prohibited by law can <and must> be admitted to Holy Communion" (Canon 912, my emphasis).

While two canons (cc. 915 & 916) address the sad question of who is prohibited by law from receiving the Eucharist, two other canons (cc. 913 & 914) consider issues related to the initiation of children into the Church's Eucharistic life. The very fact that these two issues are treated separately suggests that pre-Eucharistic children are not considered among those "prohibited by law" from receiving the Eucharist (else they should have been listed in Canons 915-916), but rather that they too enjoy the right of Eucharistic access, a right to be honored by those in authority over them in such a way as to enhance their sacramental participation "as early as possible" (Canon 914).

Most parishes make a real effort to offer first Communion catechesis to young people. There is, nevertheless, no doubt that parents are, and are recognized as, the primary agents responsible for the education of their children for first Holy Communion. Canon 914 opens with the word "<Parentum>" and clearly declares them as having the primary place in the Eucharistic education of their children. If that were not enough, Canons 226 §2, 793 § 1, 835 § 4, and 1136, each taken from very different sections of the 1983 Code, weigh in heavily on behalf of parental primacy in the education of children, almost as if the point cannot be stressed often enough in an age veering toward social collectivism and bureaucratic supremacies. Even parental negligence in this area, which obviously happens and which should be addressed by pastors and catechists in accord with Canon 529 § 1, cannot be used as an excuse to disregard the integrity of the family unit, the family which Pope Paul VI so insightfully called "the domestic Church."

Does any of this, though, relegate pastors (or catechists) to being functionaries for First Communion?

Not at all. Canon 914, which recognizes parental primacy in the education of children for the Eucharist, also reminds pastors "to be vigilant lest any children come to the Holy Banquet who have not reached the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed." Canon 913, I think, sheds some light on just how pastors should make that assessment.

Canon 913 states that children should be able "to understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity and receive the Body of the Lord with faith and devotion." Such a canon is much easier to apply in real life than it is to explain in the abstract, but a few points seem clear.

First, the content of children's belief, not necessarily the process by which they acquired that content, is what is important. For example, there is no canonical requirement that children be enrolled in a parish religious education program in order to be admitted to the Eucharist, even though a good case can be made that parishes should, as most already do, offer such programs for parents who wish to use them on behalf of their children. On the other hand, mere completion of a parish catechetical program is not

proof that a child has interiorized the information which the catechist tried to impart. An individual assessment of each child's Eucharistic understanding needs to be made.

Second, there is no canonical requirement that children wait until a certain time of the year to make their first Holy Communion, even though they and their parents are free to wait for such a parochial "theme Sunday" if they wish. Moreover, if parents and children wish to be part of a special first Communion liturgy, they should attend those preparation sessions designed to make such liturgies run smoothly.

Third, children and their parents, regardless of the method of sacramental catechesis chosen, need to give pastors a reasonable opportunity to assess a young child's readiness to receive the Eucharist in accord with their duties under Canon 914. Obviously, in making such arrangements, busy pastors and busy parents should be respectful of the demands on each other's time. And if a pastor (though not a catechist in this regard) concludes that a certain child is not ready to be admitted to the Eucharist, the reasons for that denial should be clearly explained to the child and the parents. Pastors and parents can then consider what is the best way to proceed under the circumstances.

Conclusion

Sacramental preparation periods are times of special grace and expectation. No one wants to see them turned into an arena for a contest of wills between parents and pastors, or catechists, and in most cases, of course, this does not happen. When it does occur, however, it behooves all involved to step back from the situation and to reassess more precisely what is, and what is not, required in sacramental preparation. If that is done carefully and honestly, then, I suggest, most instances of disagreement can be resolved by recognizing that the Church's expectations for sacramental participation have already been set out in canon law and are applicable without regard to the preferences of parental or parochial figures.

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