

Communion before Confirmation

The rules for Holy Communion have changed and we as a parish (and benefice) have changed. Gone is the age limit of 13 and although there are still rules about how to prepare people for communion, how to celebrate and record it, there is a clear change for we are now saying that *Communion is the right of all baptised, whatever their age or understanding.*

A Brief History

The practice of children having to be confirmed before receiving Holy Communion dates from the late thirteenth century. Teaching in the form of a Q and A Catechism was added in the Book of Common Prayer. It also included the term, 'desirous of being confirmed'. After the Reformation, Baptism became a simple and private service. A Bishop always administered Confirmation, so, with the ceremony attached to his visit, it became seen to be a more important event than baptism. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the centrality of Eucharistic worship and re-thinking about the nature of baptism as well as images of the church being people on pilgrimage together, has led to demands for baptised and believing children to be admitted to Holy Communion.

The Present Situation

The last thirty years has been a time of debate, exploration and experiment. The Dioceses of Manchester, Peterborough and Southwark started admitting children to Holy Communion twenty years ago. Children are admitted to Holy Communion by Anglican Churches in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and the USA. It is common practice in the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox traditions. Methodist and URC Congregations have been encouraged to give Holy Communion to children for some years and the Methodist Church is currently debating whether this should become a policy rather than an option.

In November 1996, the General Synod voted to allow children to be admitted to Holy Communion before Confirmation in certain circumstances. Three quarters of the Diocesan Bishops of the Church of England have agreed in principle to admitting children to Holy Communion. In Canterbury Diocese about twenty parishes have received the Bishop's permission to admit children and more than thirty others have the matter under review.

Common Questions

Why change at all?

The pattern produced by the reformers of Confirmation before Holy Communion dates from a time when everyone went to church and religion was a part of daily life. This experience of belonging was the basis upon which the faith was taught. This is no longer the case. Practice of religion is now largely an individual matter. During the last thirty years, the Eucharist has become the central Sunday service in many Anglican churches. Believing and baptised

children regularly join in the service but their exclusion from receiving Holy Communion can be seen to be unwelcoming, and a denial of their membership of the body of Christ.

A significant number of children are already receiving Holy Communion in Anglican churches. Either they belong to other denominations or part of the Anglican Communion, or have been part of experiments in their dioceses. In some cases their parents choose to share it with them.

How will children be accepted and who decides whether they are suitable?

The request to be prepared for admission to Holy Communion should be initially come from the child and his or her parents. Parental support and involvement is key to the process. The age of the child is not the main issue. Many young children have a vivid faith and can learn what it means to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, being prepared with friends of the same age or nurture group are forms of selection that children can understand.

Baptism is a pre-requisite. Children who have not been baptised may use this opportunity to ask for baptism for themselves, which can be part of the whole process. This is about grace, God's generosity to us and our response to him. Grace cannot be earned and is not a prize for being good. 'Difficult' children may be those who are in most need of this expression of God's love.

Will they understand what they are doing?

This is part of a continuous programme. Leaders and parents should help their children to grow in understanding the significance of Holy Communion as part of their teaching and ongoing nurture.

It is discernment of the sacrament that is important. This need not be a cognitive understanding or ability to articulate one's faith, but should include a sense of reverence and of meeting Jesus through the sacrament.

The parish should emphasise the importance of Holy Communion, though example, teaching, by valuing its children, and by providing high quality resources for their nurture.

What will happen to Confirmation?

Hopefully, confirmation will come to be seen as a sacrament in its own right rather than a procedure to be got through in order to receive Holy Communion.

The House of Bishops expects communicant children to be confirmed at a later time, many by the time they are eighteen. This can be seen as an adult affirmation of faith as well as definitive reception of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Laying-on of hands was often linked with 'sending out' in the early Church so Confirmation is very appropriate for youngsters who are leaving school, starting their first jobs or going to university.

So, confirmation is still important. Growing into the promises made on our behalf at Baptism is still important. Faith is as much a journey of change and growth as it ever was. But Communion is God's gift to us to keep us going along the way as we journey towards his heavenly banquet.

We cannot understand Communion for it is a mystery - something Jesus does not tell us to think about but to do. 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19). Communion is one of the four pillars of Christian life witnessed in Acts 2:42, 'They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' So we cannot wait for children to be old enough to understand and we certainly would never want to say God's grace is only for those with a certain IQ or reading-age. Nor is Communion something we are 'ready' for. The Eucharist is the means by which God changes us into his Image, the way he transforms us to be like him. No one can be ready for that. But thank God, he is ready for us!

One final suggestion; as you look at the children in church on Sundays or watch your own children, fidgeting, colouring, finding their own way through our services, do not ask yourselves, 'Are they ready for Communion?' Ask simply, 'What possible reason would God have for turning them away?'

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