



Review of Recent Literature on Confirmation

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Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo, 1988).

Aidan Kavanagh OSB, professor of liturgics at the Divinity School of Yale University, has written a provocative and convincing book on the origins of confirmation. He begins by pointing to the place and function of liturgical dismissals in the early church. The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (215) contains the earliest allusion to such a dismissal rite following baptism. The dismissals following the Service of the Word, penance, or any other discrete liturgical action usually were associated with a prayer and the imposition of hands by the bishop. These *missae* sealed off one service from another, and the concluding dismissal of the eucharist eventually gave its name to the whole service, i.e., the mass.

Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* (AT), in its earliest text (the Verona edition), has the first reference to what is later called "confirmation." Immediately following baptism and the presbyteral anointing with oil, the bishop says a prayer over the neophytes: "Lord God, you have made them worthy to receive remission of sins through the laver of regeneration of the Holy Spirit, etc." This is not an invocation of the Holy Spirit; it is a dismissal rite. After the prayer comes laying on of hands together with oil on the forehead, followed by the kiss of peace. Nothing is added to baptism. "What the Verona text of AT 21 describes is a bishop performing nothing more than a *missa* (dismissal rite)."

By the end of the fourth century, however, a pneumatic (Spirit) emphasis began to develop, centering on the chrismation (anointing with oil) after baptism. Pope Innocent I (d. 417) is the first to suggest that the Spirit is given in the post-baptismal anointing, and this only by the bishop. There is no laying on of hands. "It belongs solely to the episcopal office that bishops consign and give the

Paraclete Spirit," writes Innocent. Although Tertullian earlier associated the post-baptismal hands with the Spirit, Kavanagh believes this is not conclusive.

Why did Innocent make this change? Perhaps he was simply reflecting a tradition already in place, but under the circumstances he felt it was necessary to buttress the office of the bishop whose authority was being challenged, especially in Gaul. Innocent's appeal to Acts 8 is "new, selective, and awkward," and his innovation is "propaganda...bending liturgy to serve theology and current pastoral needs." Thus began the unfortunate practice of separating baptism from the old *missa* structure, so that an entirely new rite was introduced requiring its own theology. Kavanagh points out that there is no confirmation rite in Eastern usages, but a pneumaticized

postbaptismal chrismation by the presbyter, just as we find it in AT.

There is a three-stage origin for modern confirmation. The first stage is AT 21 with its dismissal rite. Stage two is Innocent's ascription of episcopal prerogative in conferring the Holy Spirit through post-baptismal anointing in a rite now separated from baptism; it is based upon a new interpretation of Acts 8. The third stage develops especially in Spain and Gaul and involves the bishop's disciplinary oversight. Whereas presbyters (or laypersons) could baptize, it was the sole right of the bishop to "confirm" the baptism. Separating confirmation from baptism in Gaul widened chronologically the theological breach between baptism and the giving of the Spirit, a process which was complete by the ninth century. It was Faustus of Riez (d. 490), condemned posthumously for Pelagianism by the Second Council of Orange in 529, who coined the word confirmation and gave it a rationale. "In baptism we are born anew for life, after baptism we are confirmed for battle (*confirmamur ad pugnam*); in baptism we are washed, after baptism we are strengthened (*post baptismum robaramur*)."

In his section on "Reform of Confirmation," Kavanagh insists that we restore the original sequence: baptism-confirmation-eucharist. Above all, the church should stop offering first communion before confirmation, as in so doing the latter rite is completely set adrift with no relation whatever to its intended purpose. "The liturgical norm is clear: the sacraments of initiation are regularly and ordinarily celebrated together beginning with baptism and culminating in eucharist." Separating them or altering their sequence requires "serious reason or grave cause." He writes that confirmation, far from being a sovereign and self-contained sacrament, is held in being by two powerful and overlapping gravitational fields, baptism and eucharist, and should come between them. In saying this, he is reflecting the thinking of both Vatican II and the revisions of canon law which followed the council.

Confirmation in the Roman rite may be conferred by a presbyter who has been delegated for this task, using oil blessed by the bishop. If confirmation is to be restored to its rightful place immediately following baptism, it follows that the minister of one should preside at the other. Vatican II also underscores the chrismation at confirmation and not merely the imposition of hands. Kavanagh suggests that if the church needs a formal celebration of puberty or the reception of one's driver's license or the recognition of a program of religious education, a paraliturgical rite can be developed without misusing confirmation to cover all of these.

Gerard Austin, *Anointing with the Spirit: The Rite of Confirmation*
(New York: Pueblo, 1985).

The first section of this book by Gerard Austin OP provides a brief history (40 pages) of confirmation, beginning with New Testament precedents. He suggests that baptism itself was a conferral of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Spirit accompanied the water-bath and other times it preceded or followed it, but they can never be totally separated. For Paul the seal of the Spirit is a gift tied up with baptism and not a post-baptismal gift. Austin rehearses the familiar data from Hippolytus and Innocent I in addition to the First Council of Orange in 441 which leaves it an open question whether confirmation was the imposition of hands or the chrismation. He refers to the sermon by Faustus of Riez, in which confirmation stresses human effort and involvement, whereas baptism was passively received. (This is probably part of Faustus' Pelagian outlook.) Another ingredient in the early history of confirmation is the reconciliation of schismatics and

heretics, the idea being that though the heretical baptism was properly done, the Spirit was not received. Once an individual returned to the orthodox church, the baptism was not repeated; but readmission came through the imposition of hands (in the West) or chrismation (in the East).

By the eighth century the church suffered a severe disintegration of the rites of initiation. First came a separation of confirmation from baptism, caused by the insistence that confirmation be performed only by a bishop. The next blow was the separation of communion from baptism. Up until 1215 infant communion was universal in both East and West, but with the coming of communion under the bread only, infants in the West were excluded. So confirmation became a later rite associated with fortitude, strength for battle, and renewal of one's baptism. Austin points out that the Eastern churches have an emphasis on the Spirit, and that there is really no confirmation rite by itself. The Western churches have emphasized christology and have separated baptism, confirmation, and eucharist into three separate christological observances, with minimal attention to the Spirit. The trinitarian controversies of the fourth century had a great influence on these sacraments, especially on the role of the Spirit. Not only was the third article added to the Nicene Creed in 381, but the Eastern churches brought pneumatology to bear on the rites of initiation, and thereby kept all three sacraments together.

Thomas Aquinas exerted a lasting influence on the church with his belief that confirmation, like baptism and orders, imprints a character. Basically he repeats the military metaphors of Faustus about being strengthened and empowered for battle with the world.

Next Austin describes and analyzes the new rite of confirmation used in the Roman church since Vatican II. There still appears to be some lack of clarity among Roman scholars on the interpretation of the council and of the new issue of canon law in 1983. It is certain that the chrism is at least as significant as the hands, and possibly more so. On the minister of confirmation, the council said that the bishop is the "original" minister, whereas the new canon law says the bishop is the "ordinary" minister. The age of confirmands traditionally has been seven, but episcopal conferences may choose an age which seems appropriate. American bishops tend toward a later age, associating confirmation with the end of a time of instruction, with first communion occurring at a much earlier time. This, as

Kavanagh points out as well, "provides the potential for undoing that valiant attempt to restore the unity of the three sacraments of initiation."

Next Austin reviews the new rites of confirmation in the Episcopal and Lutheran churches. He offers a brief history going back to the earliest Books of Common Prayer in the Episcopal church, where confirmation was retained as a sacrament, but was associated with instruction and first communion, and reserved to the bishop. "None shall be admitted to the holy communion until such time as he be confirmed," or "until he can say the catechism" (1552). The ratification of baptismal promises was not added until 1662. (He mentions that the earliest example of confirmation serving as a prerequisite for first communion is from John Peckham, archbishop of Canterbury in 1285.) The Episcopal church today has the sacramental seal in a post-baptismal chrismation as part of the baptismal service; confirmation is associated with making a mature public affirmation of faith and commitment to one's baptismal responsibilities, with the imposition of hands by the bishop. There is no set age, and children may be admitted to first communion prior to confirmation.

Austin writes that the Lutheran understanding “is essentially the same as” the Episcopalian, but also that “confirmation marks the completion of the congregation’s program of confirmation ministry.” Unlike the Episcopal rite, the Lutheran is not a sacrament, and it can be conferred by any parish pastor. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* adds the seal with the chrism immediately following the water-bath, but *Lutheran Worship* omits the chrism. Austin points out that during a major portion of Lutheran history, confirmation was not universally observed with a ceremony. Luther referred to the rite of confirmation as monkey business (*Affenspiel*), fanciful deception (*Lügenstand*), and mumbo jumbo (*Gaukelwerk*).

In guidelines for a solution of today’s problems with confirmation, the author makes the following suggestions: accentuate the birth event and not only death; rid the church of the notion that unbaptized infants are condemned; preserve the unity of the paschal mystery by not insisting on the bishop’s presence at confirmation; maintain that baptism and eucharist are still the chief sacraments; accent the communal nature of confirmation; assert that baptism is complete in itself and does not require any augmentation; and follow baptism immediately with confirmation and eucharist.

Paul Turner, *The Meaning and Practice of Confirmation: Perspectives from a Sixteenth Century Controversy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

Paul Turner, a Roman Catholic priest of the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, examines the meaning of confirmation through a study of the post-Reformation controversies concerning it waged by Robert Bellarmine, Martin Chemnitz, and John Calvin. He begins with an outline of Luther’s views, taken primarily from the *Babylonian Captivity*, in which the Reformer insists that confirmation is not found in Scripture, is not commanded by God, and carries no promise of grace. John Eck responded by quoting Acts 8 and 19 as well as the councils of the church. The thoughts of Philip Melancthon and Martin Bucer are cited before the author rehearses the decisions of the Council of Trent. “The classic struggle between Scripture and tradition is especially evident in the confirmation controversy where

these are the fundamental principles which guide the conflict: The Catholics accepted it as a sacrament because of its tradition, the Reformers rejected it because of Scripture.” That the Reformers kept confirmation at all is due to their polemic against the Anabaptists. “By keeping confirmation, the Reformers had a convenient method of responding to demands that those to be baptized have faith.”

The author next introduces the protagonists, beginning with John Calvin, who opposed the Roman understanding of confirmation, using the traditional scholastic categories. Confirmation is not a sacrament because it lacks a command and a promise; the Apostles’ imposition of hands was variously used; oil as the matter of confirmation is not apostolic, and its form is not scriptural; the effects ascribed properly belong to baptism; reserving the presider to the bishop is Donatistic. Each of these objections is presented with extensive quotations from Calvin.

The *Examen concilii Tridentini* of Martin Chemnitz is the primary source for presenting that theologian’s understanding of confirmation. His fundamental accusation, after rehearsing

Luther's objections to lack of biblical command or promise, is that the Roman church's theology of confirmation raises the question: Why did the Reformers keep confirmation at all? He suggests that it was Erasmus' influence on the need to educate and examine children, and it was a convenient reply to the Anabaptist practice of associating instruction with baptism.

Robert Bellarmine became the chief polemicist for the Roman church at the turn of the seventeenth century. In his disputations with the "heretics of this time" he divided fifteen controversies among four tomes. As to confirmation, he devotes most of his efforts to the principles of promise, sign, and command, which he says he has in common with the Reformers. He shows what he calls the result of the command, but not the command itself. He describes two effects of confirmation: it strengthens the soul against the devil and inscribes one in the army of Christ. The effects of baptism are forgiveness of sin, grace by which one is justified, and the imprint of the baptismal character. Bellarmine relies heavily on the authority of tradition.

The largest section of Turner's book is devoted to sources and methods, including a chart of 446 entries of authorities used by the protagonists as their arsenal in the dispute. The book contains 234 pages of four parallel columns, citing the ancient authority (Scripture, church father, or council) in column one and the use of these authorities by Calvin, Chemnitz, and Bellarmine in the remaining columns. This section is followed by an analysis of the controversies, and then by a description of current practices. He provides a good summary of the practice of confirmation among those who use the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, in which confirmation is described as an educational ministry. In the author's own conclusions he offers the hope that today's churches may learn from past controversies and find a larger degree of theological convergence regarding confirmation. "Because we share a common history, the decisions we make about the practice of confirmation are statements about the interpretation of that history."

Arthur Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964).

All three of the foregoing books were written by Roman Catholic authors. Although their treatments are balanced and betray no partisan spirit, it may be useful to call attention to a book published over twenty-five years ago by Arthur Repp. It was this volume which more than any other initiated a review of confirmation among contemporary Lutherans. Repp points out that Luther simply ignored the rite in favor of an emphasis on instruction in order to facilitate self-examination before receiving communion. The idea of catechetical instruction preceding the rite is actually from Erasmus whose views influenced Bucer and through him the Anglicans and Lutherans.

Repp delineates six different major types of confirmation in Lutheran history. The catechetical type was to prepare children for reception of communion, but catechesis was also conducted regularly from the pulpit for the entire congregation. The period of instruction was usually not concluded with a ritual. Indeed, in large sections of Lutheranism there was no confirmation ceremony until the nineteenth century.

The hierarchical type reinstates the ritual for the purpose of making a confession of faith and a vow of obedience to the church. Repp believes Bucer borrowed this from the Anabaptists, and his Order of Church Discipline in 1539 authorized "the first confirmation in the modern sense in Lutheran history." This is the first formal association of confirmation with first

communion in Reformation churches. Chemnitz followed the hierarchical pattern in his suggestion that in confirmation the children were renewing their baptismal vows which others had made for them when they were infants, and they now became full members of the church. A third type is called sacramental, in which the Holy Spirit was conferred through the imposition of hands and the candidate received a fuller membership than had been given in baptism. Again, this was from Bucer, who denied that it completed baptism, but Repp shows from the prayers and ritual that, in fact, this was its purpose.

The traditional form of confirmation contains elements of the other types, such as instruction and first communion, but in various places it was reserved to the bishop or done with his permission and with the imposition of hands. The rationale for this type was simply that this was the way it had been done before. Under this heading Repp describes the considerable controversy among Lutherans on the meaning and place of confirmation, indicating that every territory or city had its own patterns. There was no Lutheran consistency in theology or practice.

The last two types are labelled pietistic and rationalistic. Under Philip Spener confirmation became associated with a personal conversion, a covenant of faith, and a public testimony. This form was strenuously opposed by many clergy who found in it the seeds of works-righteousness. The rationalist type minimized the sacraments and replaced them with long sermons, examinations, and catecheses. The vow became central in the rite. "You have sworn! God has heard it! He will judge you not only in the far-off eternity but now already!" Confirmation also became associated with civic and economic privileges, gaining employment, going to school, and gaining full rights as citizens.

Repp describes the history of confirmation among Lutherans in the United

States. Henry Muhlenberg spoke of "renewing a broken baptismal covenant" through the "awakening" of confirmation. The frontier found a large variety of practices and theologies. Most often public examinations preceded the rite, and under the influence of pietism, the ceremony was associated with "conversion" and "awakening of the heart." Confessional Lutheranism revived with new immigrants in the 1930s, and traditional confirmation gradually became the norm even where there had not been a Lutheran confirmation before. Repp concludes his study with a discussion of the age of confirmation, educational frame, objectives, and the congregation's ministry to youth. He also offers a detailed analysis of the Lutheran confirmation service as it was observed in the 1960s. The book contains a useful 18-page bibliography.

Frank Klos, *Confirmation and First Communion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1968).

Another resource which has been helpful for Lutherans in their discussion of confirmation is this study produced by a commission of the former American Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church in America, and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. During the early 1970s most Lutheran congregations in the United States had the opportunity to study this readily accessible material with headings entitled: "Spotlight on Confirmation," "Climate for Change," "A Checkered History," "Luther and Lutheranism," "Word and Sacraments," "The Church and Its Mission," "Admission to First Communion," "Building a Functional Definition," "An Age for Confirmation," and "Evaluations and Decisions." Largely as a result of the intensive study

prompted by this book, questions surrounding confirmation and first communion have been ventilated, resulting in considerable variety in today's practice. Many have found the definition offered by this report to be useful: "Confirmation is a pastoral and educational ministry of the church that is designed to help baptized children identify with the life and mission of the adult Christian community and that is celebrated in a public rite."