

PETER

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RESTORED ORDER: Sacraments of Initiation

By Father Daren J. Zehnle

Confirmation through the ages

With the recent renewed interest in products relating to family trees, many Americans are learning more about their ancestors, but they might be surprised that a study of genealogy can teach us something about the sacrament of confirmation.

My great-grandfather, George Zehnle, received the sacrament of confirmation in 1888; at the time, he was 16 years old. A few years later, his younger brother, Fred, was confirmed in 1894; he was 13. Two boys from the same family were confirmed at significantly different ages, even within the same celebration. When George was confirmed, so was his younger brother John, who was then only 14; when Fred received the sacrament of confirmation, so did his older brother August, who was then 15.

My own family is but one example among many that shows in recent decades (which, for the church, includes the 1880s and 1890s), there has not been, in practice, anything that might be considered a standard age at which the second sacrament of initiation is administered, despite what the Holy See has said about this. A look at our genealogies can help us address the question of why some of our children will soon be confirmed significantly younger than their older siblings.

While we are accustomed to thinking about the sacrament of confirmation as following the first reception

of the Eucharist, often separated by several years, this is, in the life of the church, something of a novelty. Up until 1849, when bishops in France began administering the sacrament of confirmation after the first reception of the Eucharist, Catholics always received the sacraments of initiation in this order: baptism, confirmation, and then the Eucharist. Practically speaking, children often received confirmation about the age of reason and their first holy Communion between the ages of 11 and 15. This explains why my great-grandfather and my great-uncles received confirmation at a later age, whereas my great-great-grandfather would have been confirmed about the age of 7.

This is all a way of showing that the age at which the sacrament of confirmation has been received in our recent memories is not the age at which it was received for more than 1,800 years. When the French bishops broke with this tradition, they said they did so for a greater period for catechesis. Just five years later, the Holy See instructed the French bishops to restore the sacraments of initiation to their proper order.

Because the church had been slow in restoring the sacramental order, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in 1963 said, "The rite of confirmation is to be revised and the intimate connection which this sacrament has

with the whole of Christian initiation is to be more clearly set forth" (*Sacrosanctam Concilium*, 71). Later in the Council, the same Fathers said in 1965, "Those under instruction are introduced by stages to a sharing in the Eucharist, and the faithful, already marked with the seal of Baptism and Confirmation, are through the reception of the Eucharist fully joined to the Body of Christ" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5). Perhaps, then, restoring the proper order of the sacraments of initiation is a good idea, both because it will connect us with our ancestors and because, as Pope Leo XIII wisely noted in 1897, "young people who are confirmed are rendered more susceptible to observing the commandments, and more prepared for receiving afterwards the Eucharist, and are able to draw greater benefits from what they receive. For which reasons it is our desire that the provisions you have so wisely restored should be faithfully observed in perpetuity."

By restoring the reception of the second sacrament of initiation — confirmation — to the age of reason, our children will receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to prepare them not simply for an extended period of catechesis, but for a lifetime of catechesis and formation in discipleship which will allow them to share more fully in the life of Christ. ✠

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