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Confirmation in the Church Today

BY THE EDITOR

THE difficulties and complications attaching to a discussion of the question of Confirmation result very largely from the fact that it is, as Professor G. W. H. Lampe in his important book *The Seal of the Spirit* has said, "a rite for whose administration we cannot find direct Scriptural instructions" (p. 80). This being so, it is imperative that Confirmation, in common with other traditions and ceremonies of the Church, should comply with the liturgical principle expressed in Article XXXIV, "that nothing be ordained against God's Word".

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The New Testament passages which have been adduced in connection with Confirmation are few in number, and we may look at them briefly. First of all, however, it should be emphasized that in the New Testament there is no suggestion that Baptism is in itself inadequate or incomplete, as though needing to be followed by some other ceremony. Thus on the Day of Pentecost the 3,000 persons who "received Peter's word" were baptized, but there is no mention of any other rite having been administered (Acts iii. 41). The same was the case with individual converts such as the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts viii. 36), Lydia (Acts xvi. 15), the Philippian jailer (Acts xvi. 33), and also Cornelius and his household (Acts x. 47f.).

There are, it is true, certain passages in which through the laying on of the Apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was apparently bestowed on persons who had previously been baptized. In Acts viii. 14ff. we read that when the Apostles at Jerusalem heard of the way the message had been received in Samaria they sent Peter and John who, after prayer, laid their hands on the converts so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. If, as some have wished to maintain, this was the invariable apostolic practice and it was by this means that the gift of the Holy Spirit was regularly conferred, then, as Professor Lampe observes, "it is exceedingly odd that, in all the space which he devotes to baptismal teaching, St. Paul never once alludes to it," and, further, "that the performance of the rite is not one of the many ministerial charismata described by St. Paul in 1 Cor. xii. 4-10" (p. 67). Indeed, in the case of Cornelius and his household the descent of the Spirit *preceded* the administration of Baptism (Acts x. 44). Acts xix. 1-7 describes how, when Paul came to Ephesus, he found a dozen disciples there who had been baptized with the Baptism of John (the Baptist) but who not only had not received the Holy Spirit, but had not so much as heard that there was a Holy Spirit. He thereupon baptized them into the name of the Lord Jesus, and when he had laid his hands on them the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. In Acts ix. 17f. Ananias, laying his hands on Saul of Tarsus, explains that he had been sent by the Lord Jesus in order that he might receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit; and it was only *after* this that Saul was baptized.

Thus we see that even in those instances where the laying on of hands takes place, no fixed pattern emerges. The laying on of hands may precede or it may follow baptism, but more often it seems not to have taken place at all. That it was by no means indispensable for the reception of the Spirit is apparent, for example, from the case of Cornelius.

How can this absence of pattern be explained, knowing, as we do, that St. Luke was a careful writer who cannot be dismissed as a muddle-head? Space does not permit a discussion here of the various theories and interpretations that have been advanced, some of them dictated by pre-judgment of the issues involved; but we agree with Professor Lampe that the conferment of the Holy Spirit in Samaria, in Cæsarea (Cornelius=first Gentile convert), and Ephesus (which became the centre of the Gentile mission) may best be understood as a sort of repetition of Pentecost, visibly demonstrating that the outpouring of the Spirit was upon Samaritan and Gentile as well as Jewish believers. In this respect it seems significant that, as in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts ii. 4), the bestowal of the Spirit was followed in the Cæsarean and Ephesian episodes by speaking with tongues and prophecy.

Another instance in the New Testament Church of the laying on of hands is that of the commissioning of the seven deacons (Acts vi. 1ff.). Here, as at Samaria later, the laying on of hands is preceded by prayer; but there is no mention of a descent of the Holy Spirit, for, presumably, these seven had been among the 3,000 on whom the Spirit had descended on the Day of Pentecost—indeed, Stephen at least is described as a man full of the Holy Spirit prior to the laying on of the Apostles' hands (Acts vi. 5).

A consideration of the evidence leads Professor Lampe to conclude that the laying on of hands in these New Testament passages is "a sign of association in the apostolic or missionary task of the Church," a token of "incorporation into the apostolic ministry," "a commissioning for active service in the missionary enterprise" (pp. 76, 78). This interpretation would seem to accord well with what St. Paul says to Timothy about the laying of his own and of the presbytery's hands on him (2 Tim. i. 6, 1 Tim. iv. 14), and again with his admonition to Timothy to lay hands hastily on no man (1 Tim. v. 22).

The somewhat cryptic allusion in Heb. vi. 2 to "the teaching of baptisms (R.V. mg.: washing—βαπτισμῶν, not βαπτισμάτων) and of laying on of hands" (ἐπιθέσεώς τε χειρῶν), if it refers, as the context seems to suggest, to a ceremony granted to converts in general, would, says Professor Lampe, "be a highly significant piece of symbolism . . . marking their fellowship with the brethren in the active tasks of Church life" (p. 78)—a gesture of welcome into the community of believers. Whether the rite of Confirmation as now practised may legitimately be explained as a development from this root will depend in the main on the particular doctrine that we associate with Confirmation. It must be remembered, however, that not until the latter part of the second century is there any evidence at all of a regular rite of Confirmation in the Church. The most that can be said is that early Christian pictures in the Roman catacombs suggest that the officiant

held his hand on the candidate's head *at the time of the Baptism*. In the absence of any more precise information, it is of course impossible to draw conclusions from evidence of this kind; but at any rate it leaves us still without any indication of the existence of a second and supplementary rite distinct from Baptism.

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We find a different situation, however, when we come to the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, which may be taken to reflect the practice in the Church of Rome at the beginning of the third century. In the process of preparation and initiation described here, there are several layings on of hands. Thus the catechumens, who are required to submit to a three-year course of preparation, at the end of each instruction pray together, in separation from the congregation of baptized worshippers, and then the instructor lays his hands on them with prayer before dismissing them. The baptismal service itself takes place at cockcrow on Easter Day, and on the eve of that festival the bishop lays his hands on the catechumens for the purpose of exorcizing all evil spirits from them. He further shuts the door, so to speak, after the departing evil spirits, by sealing the foreheads, ears, and noses of the candidates with the prophylactic sign of the Cross. Following their renunciation of Satan and all his works, the candidates are then anointed with the "oil of exorcism". They are thereupon baptized with three immersions (or affusions?). A presbyter then anoints them with the "oil of thanksgiving" and leads them to the congregation, where the bishop lays his hand upon them with prayer, anoints them with "holy oil" in the name of the Trinity, seals them on the forehead, and gives them the kiss of peace.

This involved ceremonial seems far removed from the simplicity of the New Testament. Nevertheless, it is interesting to notice that it forms a *unity*: there are not two distinct and separate rites. The later separation between Baptism and the laying on of hands no doubt came about largely as a result of the notion that, while Baptism was ordinarily administered by a presbyter, the imposition of hands should be reserved to the bishop. As the Church grew, Baptisms would more and more frequently take place in the absence of the bishop and would thus tend to divide what had formerly been one into two different ceremonies, held at different times and possibly in different places. This in turn leads to doctrinal adjustments.

Cyprian, in the middle of the third century, finds a parallel or precedent for two separate ceremonies in the account in Acts of the sending of Peter and John to pray and lay their hands on the Samaritan converts, who had previously been baptized, so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Thus the unfortunate conception began to gain currency that the receiving of the Holy Spirit was associated, not with Baptism, but with the laying on of hands, or Confirmation. Baptism tends now to become a mere preliminary to the rite of Confirmation. The attempt is even made (for example, in the anonymous third century *De Rebaptismate*) to justify this radical distinction by interpreting John iii. 5—"except a man be born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"—to mean by "water" Baptism, and by "the Spirit" the laying on of the bishop's hands

whereby the Holy Spirit was supposedly conferred. "The chief lesson that the study of the Fathers has to teach us on the subject of Baptism and Confirmation," says Professor Lampe, "is that, from the time when the Pauline teaching had given way to a conception which associated the gift of the indwelling Spirit with external rites rather than with the believer's faith-union with Christ, the thought of the early Church was at least as muddled as our own is today" (p. 185).

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As we consider the contemporary situation in which we are placed, it is, surely, plain that there is need for a careful rethinking of the whole question of Confirmation. This must be done, primarily, in subservience to the authority of the teaching of the New Testament. We must go back farther than the writings of the patristic authors of the third century, otherwise the complexities, aberrations, and confusions of their practice and teaching will lead us only deeper into the maze of contradictions in which so many are lost at the present time.

The question may even be asked whether, in view of the frailty of the evidence and the conflict of voices, Confirmation ought to be retained by the Church at all. In response to this question, however, Bishop Jewel, that great Anglican theologian of the sixteenth century, gives a clear affirmative: "The use and order of Confirmation rightly used is profitable and necessary in the church, and no way to be broken" (*Treatise on the Sacraments*, Parker Society edition, p. 1125). The operative words are, of course, "rightly used." Our Reformers, indeed, regarded Confirmation in the light of *infant* Baptism as the normal practice in a Christian community, and it is in this light that it takes on particular significance. Thus Jewel defines Confirmation as "so called because that which was done on our behalf in Baptism is ratified and confirmed" (*ibid.*). The dignity of a sacrament is denied to it because "Christ did not command it: He spake no word of it" (p. 1126). The Roman Catholic doctrine that the matter of Confirmation is episcopally consecrated oil, and the form the consignation of the candidate by the bishop with the sign of the cross, with the words, "I sign thee with the sign of the cross and confirm thee with the oil of salvation," is repudiated. "It agreeth not with our Christian faith to give the power of salvation unto oil," comments Jewel. ". . . It is no fit instrument, without commandment or promise by the word, to work salvation" (*ibid.*).

Least of all did the Reformers wish Confirmation to be esteemed at the expense of Baptism, as though it were more honourable because it was administered by a bishop and bestowed more than was promised in Baptism. "Whosoever is baptized," says Bishop Jewel again, "receiveth thereby the full name of a perfect Christian, and hath the full and perfect covenant and assurance of salvation: he is perfectly buried with Christ, doth perfectly put on Christ, and is perfectly made partaker of His resurrection" (*ibid.*).

So also the Book of Common Prayer speaks of the purpose of Confirmation as "a ratifying and confirming", "openly before the Church," of those promises which were made on the child's behalf in Baptism, and as a solemn undertaking by those who present themselves for Confirmation that "by the grace of God they will evermore

endeavour themselves faithfully to observe such things as they, by their own confession, have assented unto". The bishop prays that God will "strengthen them . . . with the Holy Ghost the Comforter, and daily increase in them (His) manifold gifts of grace". Then, laying his hand on each candidate in turn, he says: "Defend, O Lord, this Thy child with Thy heavenly grace, that he may continue Thine for ever, and daily increase in Thy Holy Spirit more and more, until he come unto Thy everlasting kingdom". The significance of the laying on of the bishop's hands is indicated in the Collect of the Confirmation Service as being "to certify them (by this sign) of (God's) favour and gracious goodness towards them".

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In the proposed new form of service (as set forth in the *Report on Baptism and Confirmation* of the Liturgical Commission) for the ministrations of Confirmation to those who have previously been baptized as infants, there is evidence of a change of doctrine. The Old Testament Lesson is Joel ii. 28ff., in which the promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh is given. The Lesson for the Epistle is taken from Acts i. 3ff., in which our Lord promises His disciples that they will shortly be baptized with the Holy Spirit. The Gospel is John xiv. 15ff., where again our Lord promises His disciples that the Father will give them "another Comforter . . . even the Spirit of truth". In his Homily, moreover, the bishop announces that he will pray "that the same Spirit, who was given to the Apostles by the Lord Christ at Pentecost, may be given to these persons by the same Christ at the prayer of His Church, when they receive the laying on of hands". It would, in fact, seem that their Baptism is conceived of as having been only an *anointing* of the Spirit, in some quasi-external sense, but not as having guaranteed or sealed the *indwelling* of the Holy Spirit.

Now, it is not unfair to conclude that this new form of service is founded upon the presupposition that Baptism is but *water-baptism* whereas Confirmation is *Spirit-baptism*. If this is so, then Confirmation is something very much more than Baptism, for if the Spirit is fully, pentecostally (!), given only in Confirmation, then He can be no more than partially or externally present at Baptism. To derogate from the value and dignity of Baptism in this way has no warrant in the New Testament. Indeed, were the presupposition we have mentioned correct, it would surely require the clearest possible sanction of the New Testament.

In the form of service proposed by this same *Report* for the ministrations of Baptism and Confirmation to those who are of age to answer for themselves this implicit derogation of Baptism is still noticeable. It is a very low view of Baptism that makes possible the prayer, in the *immediately following* Confirmation, that God will send down the Holy Ghost the Comforter upon those who have just been baptized. It is, however, in line with the explanation given in the Introduction that "the Commission has aimed at emphasizing the centrality of the prayer for the coming of the Spirit".

The *Report* is to be applauded for envisaging, in the case of adults, the administration of both Baptism and Confirmation at one and

the same time. For the two to be separated by an interval of time is (except in unusual circumstances) both confusing and harmful. The adult convert who has made public confession of faith in Baptism may justifiably demand what deficiency there is in his Baptism and why he should be required to wait until he has been confirmed before being admitted to the sacrament of Holy Communion. In the case of adult Baptism, indeed, the Prayer Book rubric (which is also incorporated into the rubrics of the *Report*) would seem to regard the ensuing Confirmation ("so soon after his baptism as conveniently may be") as little more than a ticket of admission to Holy Communion ("that so he may be admitted to the Holy Communion").

In the case of those who are baptized as adults it is, we suggest, desirable to regard and accordingly to formulate the service of Confirmation as the official act of welcoming and commissioning them into the ranks of the Church Militant here in earth by the bishop, who is the chief shepherd and father in God of the Church in his own particular district. "If", says Professor Lampe, "Confirmation were restored to its ancient place as an integral part of an adult believer's initiation, its purpose would be primarily to convey the blessing of the bishop to a new member of his flock, and a commission to take his place as an active partner in the Church's apostolic task" (p. 316).

We must, moreover, always be very careful about linking the operation or the impartation of the Holy Spirit to any external ceremony. The Holy Spirit is not bound. He filled John the Baptist from his mother's womb (Luke i. 15); He descended in pentecostal power upon Cornelius and his household *before* they were baptized; He came upon the Samaritan believers *after* they were baptized. These, however, were abnormal events, adapted to the inaugural acts of Christ's Church. It is important for us to recognize that in the normal course of established Church life the Christian sacraments presuppose the *prior* operation of the Holy Spirit. The infant children of believing parents are baptized not in order that they may be brought into relationship with the Holy Spirit's activity, but because they are *already*, in accordance with God's covenant, within the sphere of His grace. And believers who, having been baptized in childhood or in later years, come forward for confirmation do so not because they are strangers to the power of the Holy Spirit, but because that very power has *already* by God's grace been imparted and brought them to salvation, through faith in Christ Jesus.

Let those who hold a different, *ex opere operato*, view remember the sobering testimony of the statistics now available, which reveal that the great majority of those who are baptized and confirmed lapse entirely from the fellowship of the Church. The outward form without the inward grace is significant of superstition or of judgment, or both. The original pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit is, in every age, precisely what makes possible the inward response of faith, and makes real to every believing heart the presence and power of the glorified Saviour. This truth, however, is not incompatible with praying for the strengthening with the Holy Spirit, day by day, of those who believe in Christ; for all progress in the Christian life is the result of the sanctifying and deepening spiritual work of the Third Person of the blessed Trinity.