“Circa Aetatem Discretionis”: A Proposal in Favor of Restored Order Confirmation

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The source for the title of this essay comes from canon 891 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which deals with the age of the recipient of the sacrament of confirmation. It states: “The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred upon the faithful at about the age of discretion (circa aetatem discretionis), unless the conference of Bishops has determined another age, or there is danger of death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause suggests otherwise.”

It will perhaps be helpful to note first what this essay is not and will not do: it will not examine the biblical or patristic evidence for the sacrament of confirmation, but will assume that confirmation is indeed a sacrament of the Church that finds its place within the mysteries of Christian initiation. There has indeed been much written upon the former, and the latter is affirmed by countless magisterial pronouncements.


The purpose of this essay is to put forth a canonical and theological argument for what has been commonly known as “restored order confirmation,” that is, to restore the logical order of the sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist. It is my hope that this proposal will make certain things clear: the place which confirmation holds in the process of Christian initiation; its integral connection to baptism; and its fundamental ordering toward the Eucharist. I am convinced that a renewal of the theology of the sacrament will lead to the following conclusion: that confirmation should be conferred upon the faithful in childhood, upon reaching the age of reason, before they have received their first Holy Communion. Further, I believe that the fruit plucked from this investigation is both consistent with the tradition and a faithful outworking of the universal call to holiness emphasized by the Second Vatican Council.

I. POINTS OF CONTACT IN THE MAGISTERIUM: LEO XIII AND ST. PIUS X

As a preliminary step in our investigation, it will be helpful to examine briefly the teachings of Pope Leo XIII and Pope St. Pius X on the reception of the sacraments of confirmation and the Eucharist, respectively. As the reigns of these two pontiffs span both sides of the turn of the 20th century, their teachings benefit our inquiry in two ways. First, both Leo XIII and Pius X address the sacraments of initiation explicitly, and refer specifically to the benefits they bestow upon the faithful with regard to the age of the recipient. Second, they have the historical advantage of preceding by many decades the numerous contentious debates about the liturgy and sacraments that occurred in the wake of Vatican II.

In a letter to the bishop of Marseilles, Pope Leo XIII praises the decision to ensure that young people receive the sacrament of confirmation “prior to their being refreshed by the divine banquet of the Eucharist (antequam divino Eucharistiae epulo reficiantur).” The pontiff goes on to criticize the custom of delaying confirmation and lays out the numerous benefits of the process the bishop has established:

We therefore greatly praise your proposal. For that custom which had grown strong where you are, and in other places, is congruent neither with the ancient and constant institution of the Church, nor to the welfare of the faithful. For the elements of cupidity are found in the souls of the young, which, unless they are eradicated most quickly, grow gradually stronger, captivate the inexperienced in things, and drag them headfirst into danger. On account of which, even from a tender age, the faithful have need “to be clothed with strength from on high,” which the sacrament of Confirmation was brought forth to bear. . . . Furthermore, adolescents who have been confirmed are made to take hold of precepts in a more impressionable manner, and afterwards of receiving the Eucharist in a more fitting way. . . . Hence we desire those things which have been most wisely established by you to be held faithfully and perpetually.  

Pope Leo’s statement against that custom of inverting the order of the reception of the sacraments, and delaying confirmation until well after the reception of the Eucharist, could not be stronger. In his words, it seems tantamount to a sacramental abuse that needs to be stamped out as contrary to the “ancient and constant institution of the Church.”

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5 Ibid., 516 (my translation).
Furthermore, it is not only contrary to the tradition (which would be weighty enough), but it is contrary “to the welfare of the faithful” for numerous reasons. The pope establishes three reasons in particular why the reception of confirmation at an early age would be beneficial: it would greatly assist in the quelling of concupiscence; it would allow the faithful to be more receptive to the teachings of the faith; and it would allow for a greater reverence and fittingness in the reception of the Eucharist. Not only is this argument theologicaally compelling, but it is anthropologically sound as well. Anyone who has had any experience with teenagers will be able to testify to the intensity of the sensitive appetite present there; the concupiscible and irascible powers are particularly assertive in youth, which is all the more reason that a prior reception of sacramental grace would be of great benefit. As the pontiff puts it, being confirmed would greatly assist young people in fighting the temptations both to lust and to indifference and hostility toward the precepts of the Church. Finally, in a matter with which we will deal more fully below, Pope Leo declares that it would lead to a more fitting reception of the Eucharist.

_Pope St. Pius X’s Decree Quam Singulari_

By means of the decree of the Sacred Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments _Quam Singulari_, Pope St. Pius X draws upon previous conciliar teaching to enforce the precept that the faithful are obliged to make their confession and receive Holy

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6 J. Clement Bennington concludes similarly: “It is with the dawn of reason that the struggle against temptation begins, and it is an injustice to deprive children for a number of years of that sacrament which is so adequate a weapon in the bitter struggle against the wickedness of the devil and against the illusions of the world and the flesh. Moreover, the beginning of the age of reason is the ideal time for the reception of confirmation not only because instruction adequate for a profitable reception can be imparted, but also because at that age children are not far enough removed from their baptismal innocence to have become tainted with perverse influences.” _The Recipient of Confirmation: A Historical Synopsis and a Commentary_ (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1952) 81.
Communion once they have reached the age of reason.\footnote{7} The decree then goes right to the heart of the matter at hand:

[\textit{T}]he faithful are obliged, as soon as they arrive at the years of discretion, to receive the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist at least once a year. However, in the precise determination of “the age of reason or discretion” not a few errors and deplorable abuses have crept in during the course of time. There were some who maintained that one age of discretion must be assigned to reception of the Sacrament of Penance and another to the Holy Eucharist . . . owing to various local customs and opinion, the age determined for the reception of First Communion was placed at ten years or twelve, and in places fourteen years or even more were required . . .

This practice of preventing the faithful from receiving—on the plea of safeguarding the august Sacrament—has been the cause of many evils. It happened that children in their innocence were forced away from the embrace of Christ and deprived of the food of their interior life; and from this it also happened that in their youth, destitute of this strong help, surrounded by so many temptations, they lost their innocence and fell into vicious habits even before tasting of the Sacred Mysteries.\footnote{8}

The inclination to deny the Eucharist to the faithful until they had reached a more mature age was owing to Jansenistic tendencies

\footnote{7} Sacred Congregation of the Discipline of the Sacraments, Decree on First Communion \textit{Quam Singulari} (8 August 1910) refers to canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council, and to the Council of Trent’s reaffirmation of the decree in its ninth canon on the Eucharist. The Lateran canon states: “All the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment (\textit{ad annos discretionis pervenerit}). . . . Let them reverently receive the Eucharist at least at Easter” (Denzinger–Hünermann, no. 812). The Tridentine canon states: “If anyone denies that each and all of Christ’s faithful of both sexes are bound, when they reach the age of reason (\textit{cum ad annos discretionis pervenerint}), to receive communion every year, at least during the Paschal Season, let him be anathema” (Denzinger–Hünermann, no. 1659).

to view the reception of the sacraments as rewards, rather than as efficacious remedies bestowing grace upon the faithful.

The age at which the document locates the age of discretion is “the time when a child begins to reason, that is about the seventh year, more or less.” Furthermore, “a full and perfect knowledge of Christian doctrine is not necessary . . . however, the child will be obliged to learn gradually the entire Catechism according to his ability.” It is clear then that the Magisterium has formally pronounced the obligation to receive the Eucharist from the time one begins to possess use of his reason, around seven years old. In light of the Leonine pronouncement on the ordering of the sacraments, and of the decree promulgated by St. Pius X on the reception of the Eucharist, a simple syllogism may follow: the faithful are obliged to receive the Eucharist once they reach the age of reason, about seven years old; the custom of postponing confirmation until after the first reception of Holy Communion is contrary to the “ancient and constant” custom of the Church; therefore, it is in keeping with the “ancient and constant” custom of the Church also to receive the sacrament of confirmation “around the age of discretion (circa aetatem discretionis).”

What has preceded this point in the argument is a short analysis of rather straightforward papal teaching on the matter; enough, in principle, to make a strong case for restoring both the order and the age of reception of the sacraments. What will follow is an in-depth canonical and theological argument which will ground the conclusion in the Tradition, and make positive steps towards renewing the theology of confirmation in light of the teaching of Vatican II.

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 I wholeheartedly concur with Gerard Austin when he notes that the “present separation of the three sacraments of initiation is more than just a departure from the early liturgical tradition. It is a theological impoverishment.” The Rite of Confirmation: Anointing With the Spirit (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1985) 128.
II. THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION: IN SEARCH OF A THEOLOGY?

It has often been noted in recent years that confirmation is “a sacrament in search of a theology,” with competing theological emphases jockeying for position on which is to take over as the preferred manner of explicating its meaning.12 If one were to take a poll of the average Catholic, even the faithful and Mass-attending sort, one would invariably receive a mixed bag of answers ranging from slightly different to downright contradictory. Is it the sacrament that completes baptism? Is it the sacrament that is a sign of Christian maturity? Is it a witness to the personal choice of making the faith one’s own? Though the sacrament of confirmation has seen a development in understanding from the time of the apostolic age, its significance has long since been explored and seen crystallization in the thought and work of St. Thomas Aquinas. Synthesizing the thought of both East and West, St. Thomas was able to lay out a rich theology of the sacrament of confirmation which both completes and confirms baptism, and is ordered to the Eucharist.

St. Thomas Aquinas on Confirmation

In the *Summa Theologiae*, the very order in which St. Thomas Aquinas treats of confirmation should be the first insight into his theology of the sacrament. First treating of the sacraments in general (qq. 60–65), he moves from baptism (qq. 66–71) to confirmation (q. 72) and then the Eucharist (qq. 73–83). Though his treatment of confirmation is quite short, and could perhaps be better developed, it is nevertheless rich in content. Reading Aquinas carefully, one finds three main lines of thought by which he approaches the sacrament: confirmation is spiritual growth and perfection, analogous to bodily growth and perfection; in confirmation the

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Holy Spirit is given for strength in spiritual combat; and confirmation brings an infusion of grace which both purges sin and carries the confirmand along to the perfection of eternal life.

In his relation of the sacramental life to bodily life, Aquinas states that “in the life of the body a certain special perfection consists in man’s attaining to the perfect age, and being able to perform the perfect actions of man.”¹³ In confirmation, then, “man arrives at the perfect age, as it were, of the spiritual life.”¹⁴ In baptism man is spiritually regenerated (corresponding to birth), in confirmation he is brought along the path to spiritual perfection (corresponding to growth), and in the Eucharist he is spiritually fed (corresponding to nourishment).¹⁵ What is most important to take into account, however, is the fact that Aquinas is here using an analogy, and not a strict one at that. Although the sacramental life is similar to the life of the body, it does not correspond in a purely temporal manner. As he states elsewhere: “Now the soul, to which spiritual birth and perfect spiritual age belong, is immortal; and just as it can in old age attain to spiritual birth, so can it attain to perfect (spiritual) age in youth or childhood; because the various ages of the body do not affect the soul.”¹⁶ Just as baptism can be given to the very elderly, effecting a spiritual birth in old age, confirmation can be given to the very young, effecting spiritual perfection in one’s youth.¹⁷

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¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1933) II, q. 72, a. 1, resp. (henceforth *ST*).
¹⁴ *ST* III, q. 72, a. 1, resp.
¹⁵ See *ST* III, q. 65, a.1.
¹⁶ *ST* III, q. 72, a. 8, resp.
¹⁷ In the early Church, what would become known as confirmation was given to all age groups indiscriminately: “In the first centuries of the Church the normal practice was to administer confirmation to both adult converts and to infants immediately after their baptism. That this was the ordinarily prevailing custom is revealed in the liturgical books of the early church, which describe the rite of initiation for both infants and adults as consisting of the reception of baptism, confirmation and Holy Communion.” Bennington, *The Recipient of Confirmation*, 17.
There are some who would argue that since Aquinas speaks of confirmation as spiritual perfection, he envisions it as being most fittingly conferred on those who have attained to a certain physical and intellectual maturity as well. Father Robert Christian, O.P. is of this mindset, stating that “while not holding rigidly to a physical age that invariably corresponds to the spiritual perfection of confirmation, Aquinas nevertheless envisages confirmation as a sacrament for the mature person, one who is prepared to come to the age of spiritual ‘virility.’” As proof of this he cites Aquinas’ description of the sign value of confirmation, that it is not a sign of the distinction between unbelievers and believers (as is the case in baptism), but between those who are spiritually grown up and those who are not. Fr. Christian concludes that this is the reason that a Thomistic understanding of confirmation entails its being conferred on the mature, since “one is more perfect as a fully functioning adult than one was as a child.”

This, however, is directly contradictory to the statement that Aquinas makes when he is actually discussing the question of the recipient of this sacrament. In article eight, the second objection brings this argument to the fore: “Further, by this sacrament man advances spiritually to perfect age. But perfect age is inconsistent with childhood. Therefore at least it should not be given to children.” This is Fr. Christian’s objection exactly. What is the answer Aquinas gives? “[E]ven in childhood man can attain to the perfection of spiritual age, of which it is written: Venerable old age is not that of long time, nor counted by the number of years (Wis 4:8). And hence it is that many children, by reason of the strength of the Holy Ghost which they had received, fought bravely for Christ even to the shedding of their blood.”

19 Cf. ST III, q. 72, a. 5, ad. 1.
20 Christian, “Midway Between Baptism and Holy Orders,” 163.
21 ST III, q. 72, a. 8, ad. 2.
view, downplaying the theological efficacy of grace and the infused virtues:

[I]t is congruent to confer this sacrament on those who are ready to act, and normally this means people of a certain physical, psychological, and spiritual maturity. It can be given in infancy, of course. . . . But because the sacrament relates one to others in an official way. . . . Aquinas’ doctrine shows a preference for deferring confirmation to an age when the duties pertaining to it can be undertaken. And this is in conformity with the long tradition of the Church. 22

Fr. Christian grants the ontological possibility of bestowing confirmation upon infants and small children, but brushes it aside as incongruent both with the “physical, psychological, and spiritual” status of the confirmand, and with Church tradition. This is simply false.

It is true that grace builds upon nature, but it is not strictly and univocally dependent on nature, and when one makes the spiritual dependent on the material, difficulties arise. 23 To elevate a natural

22 Christian, “Midway Between Baptism and Holy Orders,” 170. In his own study on the matter, Michael Kevin O’Doherty concludes the exact opposite from Aquinas’ position: “St. Albert the Great, Alexander of Hales, and St. Bonaventure . . . express a preference for the earlier age [of confirmation], arguing that though young children are not called to spiritual combat, they are fittingly forarmed by the grace of Confirmation. St. Thomas’ teaching is similar. It is noteworthy, however, that he eliminates the notion of futurity from the efficacy of Confirmation administered to children. The sacrament can be immediately efficacious in their case. All are capable of attaining to spiritual maturity; even the young may attain to spiritual perfection; many children, when strengthened by the Holy Ghost, have bravely shed their blood for Christ.” The Scholastic Teaching on the Subject of Confirmation (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949) 59.

23 Bennington, The Recipient of Confirmation, 86, hits the nail on the head when he notes that to delay confirmation in order to ensure a maturity that comes with age and education is to forego a spiritual aid in favor of a natural aid, surely an unwise mode of operation. Further, J. P. Kenny notes: “Putting off confirmation four or five years [from the age of reason] does not simply mean a delay in reaping its benefits; it probably means a lessening of its fruits. . . . Confirmation at the age of twelve
kind of causality above a spiritual one—for instance, to propose that catechesis in doctrine is as effective as the infusion of supernatural grace—is to mistake the order of how things really are. The practice of the early Church asserts the primacy of the sacrament over extensive pedagogy. Take, for example, the words of St. Ambrose, preaching to those who were newly initiated:

> Now time warns us to speak of the mysteries [i.e. the sacraments of initiation] and to set forth the very purpose of the sacraments. If we had thought that this should have been taught those not yet initiated before baptism, we would be considered to have betrayed rather than to have portrayed the mysteries; then there is the consideration that the light of the mysteries will infuse itself better in the unsuspecting than if some sermon had preceded them.  

This text of Ambrose clearly demonstrates that he did not even consider an inversion of initiation and mystagogy to be debatable. Later in his treatise, he states succinctly: “grace is capable of accomplishing more than is nature,” and regarding the Eucharist, he adds: “will not the words of Christ have power enough to change the nature of the elements?”  

To suppose that delaying the grace of the sacraments would ever be to anyone’s benefit is speculatively, practically, and historically irresponsible.

Confirmation is not given to those who have reached a certain level of maturity, as though the sacrament is confirming their natural growth, but the sacrament is given in order to impart the perfect age of the spiritual life. That is to say, echoing the words of

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Ambrose, it is not the physical and the natural that determines the spiritual, but the spiritual that elevates and perfects our nature. Furthermore, if confirmation is the sacrament of the fullness of grace, and as conducing to the perfection of salvation and being conformed to Christ, then what could justify withholding it for many years after one has been receiving the Eucharist? If Thomas is correct in saying that “confirmation is the sacrament of the fullness of grace,” and for “conducing to the perfection of salvation,” and that those who receive the sacrament “are conformed to Christ,” then what could possibly give rise to the opinion that the sacrament is dependent upon natural growth and maturity?

Another major area Aquinas takes as constitutive of confirmation is that of the strengthening by the Holy Spirit for spiritual combat. While the former aspect of confirmation (that of relating it to spiritual growth) is decidedly Western—seeing as the East has continued to hold to the tradition of conferring baptism, chrismation, and Eucharist at birth—the idea of confirmation ordaining one to spiritual combat is decidedly Eastern in origin. The idea is found as far back as the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. In *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, not only do we read that “the most divine consecration with the ointment [i.e. the chrism] completes the perfecting gift and grace of the divine birth” (and therefore is completely congruent with the theology of the sacrament which will become normative), but that the anointing with the sacred oil “called the initiate to sacred combat.” Aquinas takes up this theme precisely by insisting that “in this sacrament the Holy Spirit is given for strength in the spiritual combat.” In this light, confirmation is seen as the mark that a soldier receives to distinguish him from a civilian, or as a battle standard which one takes into combat.

26 *ST* III, q. 72, a. 1, ad. 2.  
27 *ST* III, q. 72, a. 1, ad. 3.  
28 *ST* III, q. 72, a. 1, ad. 4.  
30 Ibid., 7,8, trans. Luibheid, 257.  
31 *ST* III, q. 72, a. 4, resp.
This is where the two-fold orientation intrinsic to the sacrament is seen most clearly. Thomas takes this up when discussing the words by which the sacrament is conferred:

[Thomas says:] this sacrament is ordained not only to the sanctification of man in himself, but also to strengthening him in his outward combat. Consequently not only is mention made of interior sanctification in the words, I confirm thee with the chrism of salvation: but furthermore man is signed outwardly, as it were with the standard of the cross, unto the outward spiritual combat; and this is signified by the words, I sign thee with the sign of the cross.\(^{32}\)

This double orientation is imparted by virtue of the character that is imprinted by the sacrament, by which the confirmand is granted “a spiritual power ordained to certain sacred actions . . . [in order] to do those things which pertain to the spiritual combat with the enemies of the faith.”\(^{33}\) As such, the sacramental character of confirmation is given as a spiritual power ordained to a certain sacred action; confirmation is distinct from baptism in that the latter gives the power pertaining to the individual in himself, whereas the former gives the power pertaining to the individual oriented outward to the community of believers, the body of Christ, in that it ordains one to spiritual combat with the enemies of the faith, be they earthly or demonic. Though it certainly strengthens one against the enemy forces of the spiritual realm, confirmation seems especially to be ordered to the reality of martyrdom, in that it arms one against visible foes. In Thomas’ words, “to fight against visible foes, viz., against the persecutors of the faith, by confessing Christ’s name, belongs to the confirmed.”\(^{34}\)

One need only think of the event of Pentecost, of which confirmation is a sign: the apostles had been taught by Christ himself for years, yet only after the descent of the Holy Spirit and the bestowal of his gifts did they have the courage and strength to

\(^{32}\) \(ST\) III, q. 72, a. 4, ad. 3.

\(^{33}\) \(ST\) III, q. 72, a. 5, resp.

\(^{34}\) \(ST\) III, q. 72, a. 5, ad. 1.
proclaim the name of Christ publicly. It would, however, be a mis-
take to equate the mature adulthood of the apostles as the paradigm
for the preferred age of reception of the sacrament; simply because
the apostles were mature adults when the Holy Spirit descended
upon them does not mean that we should now wait for individuals
to be temporally mature as well. This is the claim of Fr. Christian
who argues that “the apostles’ public mission entailed being
empowered precisely as adults, already initiated into the life of
Christ and already nourished by the eucharist.”\(^{35}\) This is to fall prey
to a fallacy which would make the apostolic experience paradigm-
tic for the sacramental life, a method which no doubt he would
find problematic if applied to other areas of the sacramental order:
for instance, should the Church offer the Eucharist only to adult
males since it was only adult males to whom Christ offered the
Eucharist in its institution?

Finally, it is the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas that the sacra-
ment of confirmation brings with it an infusion of both sacramen-
tal grace and sanctifying grace, since “the Holy Spirit is not sent
or given except with sanctifying grace.”\(^{36}\) Sanctifying grace is not
bestowed simply to purge the confirmand of sin, but it also draws
man ever onward to his supernatural end: participation in the
divine life itself. Sanctifying grace “suffices to carry man through
every step as far as eternal life . . . [and] is given not only for the
remission of sin, but also for growth and stability in righteousness.”\(^{37}\) With the infusion of sanctifying grace, the sacrament con-
irms what is already found in the confirmand thanks to his bap-
tism; with the infusion of sacramental grace, it brings new graces
to the individual which are specified both by the nature of the
sacrament itself (the grace of strength for spiritual combat) and by
the nature of the individual person (graces specific to their state in
life, bestowed as God sees fit).

\(^{35}\) Christian, “Midway Between Baptism and Holy Orders,” 161.
\(^{36}\) \textit{ST} III, q. 72, a. 7, resp.
\(^{37}\) \textit{ST} III, q. 72, a. 7, ad. 1.
After presenting the theology of confirmation as found in St. Thomas Aquinas, it will now be useful to turn to the juridical witness of the Code of Canon Law by which the Church regulates its sacramental practice. Turning to canon law will allow us to move from the speculative to the practical, as we see how the Church’s theology is actually applied to the Christian life in her sacramental practice.

The Witness of Canon Law

A mere 17 canons cover the sacrament of confirmation (cans. 879–896): canon 879 gives a succinct summary of the basic teaching on confirmation,\(^\text{38}\) but it will be canons 889–891 that will be the prime area for our study. On account of their importance, and their brevity, it seems appropriate to quote them here in full:

Can. 889 §1. Every baptized person not yet confirmed and only such a person is capable of receiving confirmation.

§2. To receive confirmation licitly outside the danger of death requires that a person who has the use of reason be suitably instructed, properly disposed, and able to renew the baptismal promises.

Can. 890. The faithful are obliged to receive this sacrament at the proper time. Parents and pastors of souls, especially pastors of parishes, are to take care that the faithful are properly instructed to receive the sacrament and come to it at the appropriate time.

\(^{38}\) *Code of Canon Law*, can. 879: “The sacrament of confirmation strengthens the baptized and obliges them more firmly to be witnesses of Christ by word and deed and to spread and defend the faith. It imprints a character, enriches by the gift of the Holy Spirit the baptized continuing on the path of Christian initiation, and binds them more perfectly to the Church.” It is most interesting to note that even here, the canon states that those who are confirmed are still “continuing on the path of Christian initiation,” implying that confirmation occupies a place in the process of initiation which will be completed in the Eucharist.
Can. 891. The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops has determined another age, or there is danger of death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause suggests otherwise. 39

In summary, then, those baptized persons who are to be confirmed must meet the following four criteria: they must have reached the age of reason; they must be instructed in a manner that is suitable to them; they must be disposed properly; and they must be able to renew the promises made in baptism. Further, the faithful are obliged to receive the sacrament at the proper time, which is normatively defined as “at about the age of discretion (circa aetatem discretionis).”

Circa carries the sense of “around” or “round about” or “on either side.” The canon clearly envisions the normal situation being that in which a young child is prepared to receive the sacrament once they begin to approach the age of reason, commonly set at about the age of seven. It is all too obvious, however, that this is not the case for the vast majority of dioceses throughout the world. As has been noted by the commentators of the University of Navarre, “a review of the legislation of different bishops’ conferences reveals that the general tendency is to situate the most suitable age around twelve and fifteen years.” 40 They speculate that the rather universal tendency to delay the conferral of the sacrament is owing to pastoral reasons that would allow for extensive catechesis, but express their doubt that this will be looked upon in the future as a wise choice. 41

41 Indeed, they present a compelling argument by appealing to the example of Christ himself: “It is sufficient to recognize that every member of the faithful is called to live the Christian life in plenitude, by following the sacramental itinerary desired by Christ himself. It would not make sense to stop at the beginning of Christian initiation, or to jump from baptism to the Eucharist. It was the will of Christ,
Contrary to the pastoral justifications which are often made, the Navarre commentators argue from the basic principle that the efficacy of the sacraments are not dependent upon the minister or the recipient in the manner that catechesis would affect: “Such arguments question fundamental aspects of sacramental theology, such as the working of confirmation *ex opere operato* and its permanent efficaciousness as a sacrament that imprints character . . . the issue lies in making it clear that the sacrament is not received because the person is already an adult in faith, but precisely in order to become so.”

Consonant with the teaching of Pope Leo XIII and Pope St. Pius X, they make the case that delaying confirmation deprives the faithful of grace which is needed all the more in an increasingly secularized society which is hostile to the faith, and that the delay of confirmation results in the problem of the inversion of the order of the sacraments of initiation. In quoting another author, it seems to be their judgment that this inversion of the sacraments is really a kind of “theological poverty and decadence” that does not know “how to grasp the true initiating meaning of confirmation situated as a supplement to baptism and the portico to first communion.”

Once one has reached the age of reason, all the requirements canon law puts in place for the licit reception of confirmation—and this is a question about liceity, and not validity, since it could be validly conferred on a newborn—can legitimately be reached. A child of six or seven years old who has attained the age of reason is more than capable of receiving appropriate instruction, suitable to their age, and of approaching the sacrament with the proper disposition in order to renew the promises made when they were baptized and be confirmed. It is even possible that a child of

upon instituting the sacrament of confirmation, that the strengthening of baptismal grace by the Holy Spirit is channeled sacramentally. . . .” Ibid., vol. III, 542.

42 Ibid., vol. III, 549.
uncommon maturity could be confirmed at a younger age; the requirement is merely that the child has arrived at “about the age” of reason, leaving a lot of latitude in individual cases. Even though the canons leave in place the prescription allowing the local conference of bishops to decide on an age that lies outside that defined by the “age of discretion,” it is clear that this is envisioned as being outside the norm, and that in most circumstances the sacrament of confirmation should be conferred *circa aetatem discretionis*.

**Restoring Confirmation in Light of the Second Vatican Council**

In the wake of Vatican II, confusion has seemed to be the normal state of affairs, not least of all in the liturgy and the administration of the sacraments. A close reading of the council documents, however, proves that this has largely been a matter of implementation and interpretation, rather than commendation. In this light, I believe that approaching the conciliar texts with a more critical and discerning eye can point us in the right direction regarding our current study, two points being of particular importance. First, the need for the sacrament of confirmation to be revised so as to show forth its intimate connection with the rest of the sacraments of initiation. Second, the stress that the council placed on the universal call to holiness and the unique vocation of the laity.  

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, envisions a revision of the sacrament of confirmation with a view to highlighting the place it occupies in the whole process of Christian initiation: “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.”  

As a result

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45 “[The] changes in the discipline of confirmation . . . are not what one finds repeated most in the Vatican II texts; it is the specific ecclesial position of the confirmed that are stressed with greatest insistence.” *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, vol. III, 494.

46 Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963) no. 71. Austin, *The Rite of Confirmation*, 136, notes the following: “There is no solution to such undivided opinion as long as confirmation
of this desire the council expressed, Pope Paul VI issued an Apostolic Constitution promulgating the new Rite of Confirmation in 1971. Though not cited, the teaching of St. Thomas is abundantly clear in the very first lines of the constitution: “The sharing in the divine nature given to individuals through the grace of Christ bears a certain likeness to the origin, development, and nourishing of natural life. Born anew by Baptism, the faithful are strengthened by the Sacrament of Confirmation and ultimately are sustained by the food of eternal life in the Eucharist.”47 The new rite was issued “so that the unity of Christian Initiation may be shown in its true light . . . [and] that ‘the intimate connection which this Sacrament has with the whole of Christian Initiation may be more clearly set forth’”48 in order that the sacraments of initiation might be more closely associated.49

Not only does the constitution desire that the sacraments of initiation be more clearly associated, one with the others, but it explicitly sets out the order in which they are to be received:

In Baptism, the newly baptized receive forgiveness of sins, adoption as children of God, and the character of Christ. . . . Through the Sacrament of Confirmation those who have been born anew in Baptism receive the ineffable Gift, the Holy Spirit himself. . . . Finally, Confirmation is so closely linked with the Holy Eucharist that the faithful, after being signed by Holy Baptism and

is viewed only on its own terms. The context of confirmation must be the broader vision of the initiation sacraments. In other words, the mandate of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy must be taken seriously.”

48 Ibid., nos. 2–3.
49 Emphasizing the close association of the sacraments of initiation is a unique problem in the West. Louis Ligier points out that in the East this is not an issue: “Confirmation is not separated from baptism: the two sacraments are given together without a dissolution of continuity. . . . This is why the Maronites, after having been obedient to the Roman discipline for a long time, have since returned to their ancient tradition after Vatican II.” La Confirmation: Sens et Conjoncture Ecuménique Hier et Aujourd’hui (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1973) 266 (my translation).
Confirmation, are incorporated fully into the Body of Christ through participation into the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{50}

In light of this document, it seems abundantly clear that Pope Paul envisioned the sacraments of initiation being conferred in their proper order: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist. Here, as in the entire tradition heretofore, the sacraments of initiation are seen in the light of their being ordered toward the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{51} In baptism the faithful are cleansed from original sin and imprinted with the character that will admit them to the other sacraments—baptism is required in order to receive the character imparted in confirmation, and the two together make complete the initiation of the neophyte, whose incorporation into the body of Christ is perfected and ratified by the reception of Holy Communion. In the reception of the Eucharistic body of Christ, the faithful are made members of the mystical body of Christ.

In \textit{Lumen Gentium}, the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the sacraments of initiation are lauded as uniquely ordered to the Eucharist and to the manifestation of the priestly community of the faithful in their conformity to Christ:

Incorporated in the Church through baptism, the faithful are destined by the baptismal character for the worship of the Christian religion. . . . They are more perfectly bound to the Church by the sacrament of confirmation, and the Holy Spirit endows

\textsuperscript{50} Paul VI, \textit{Divinae Consortium Naturae}, no. 8 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{51} In their short treatise on confirmation, Boniface Luykx and Daniel Scheyven provide a succinct exposition of confirmation’s ordering toward the Eucharist: “The act of confirming itself leads, by an immanent finality, to the celebration of the Eucharist, the great work of the People of God and the active nucleus of salvation, which gives birth to the new People of the Covenant. Confirmation gives us a sacramental structure, [and] ontologically orients us toward the organic and concrete reality of the economy of salvation which, on the horizontal plane, converges towards the community of salvation (the People of God) and, in the vertical plane, towards the Eucharist as the vital center of this.” \textit{La Confirmation: Doctrine et Pastorale} (Bruges: Abbaye de Saint-André, 1958) 22 (my translation).
them with special strength so that they are more strictly obliged
to spread and defend the faith. . . . Taking part in the Eucharistic
sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life,
they offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along
with It.52

Baptism and confirmation are ordered to the Eucharist, the source
and summit of the Christian faith, and thus the reception of the
sacrament of confirmation before the reception of the Eucharist is
clearly manifest. Through the dignity of their being adopted chil-
dren of God, “everyone belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared
for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apos-
tle: ‘For this is the will of God, your sanctification.’ . . . Thus it is
evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank
or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the
perfection of charity.”53

Since every member of Christ’s faithful is called to holiness,
this obliges the entirety of the faithful to a consistent, pious, and
fruitful participation in the sacramental life of the Church. This
participation reaches its apex in the celebration of the holy sacrifice
of the Mass, and in the reception of Holy Communion, whereby
the faithful receive Christ himself, and are transformed into his
body. In order to take part in the Eucharistic celebration to the
fullest, the faithful need to be fully incorporated into the Church
through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. The univer-
sal call to holiness obliges the faithful to take seriously their call to
sanctify themselves and the world, and to glorify God in all things;
this is most fittingly and most effectively done when Christ’s faith-
ful have been given the abundance of graces present in all the
sacraments present in the Church.

52 Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen
Gentium (21 November 1964), no. 11.
53 Ibid., nos. 39–40.
III. CONCLUSION

In light of the theological tradition and the magisterial and conciliar teaching, the following conclusions may be offered:

1. The order of the sacraments of initiation must be kept intact in order to manifest their inherent unity, and that their reception might be most efficacious.
2. The sacrament of confirmation is of grave importance to the spiritual wellbeing of the youngest of Christ’s flock, since it is in youth that concupiscence and temptation are most apt to cause havoc in their lives.
3. The sacrament of the Eucharist must also be granted to the young, in order that they might be fortified against all sin and receive the grace which the blessed sacrament imparts.
4. Therefore, in light of the previous conclusions, it seems to be the most theologically fitting practice—and one which is in keeping with the ancient tradition of the Church—to admit children who have reached the age of reason to the sacrament of confirmation, before they have received their first Holy Communion.54

What is more, it is to be hoped that the widespread adoption of restored order confirmation could contribute mightily to the project of the new evangelization, and the restoration of Catholic heritage and culture.

Many Catholics have fallen away from the Church after having received confirmation as a right of passage, viewing it more as a

54 Bennington The Recipient of Confirmation, 78, notes the following important points: “Since it is clearly the mind of the Church that confirmation should precede the reception of first Holy Communion, it follows that any episcopal or conciliar legislation would be invalid if it denied the reception of confirmation to those who had not yet made their first Holy Communion. On the other hand, the Church has made it clear that it does not wish to exclude from the reception of Communion those children who have reached the age of discretion, but who have not yet been able to receive confirmation.”
graduation than an initiation: so many obstacles are placed in the way of true conversion and interiorization that it is no wonder why so many young adults have left the fold of the Church. How many vocations, that could have been protected and encouraged with the fortification of the sacrament, have been lost because of the lack of a strengthening grace in adolescence? Further, conferring confirmation upon young people could do wonders in reinvigorating and strengthening the family unit. The outpouring of grace in Christian homes would surely strengthen them against the attacks which daily increase upon the family, the foundational unit of society. Finally, it is possible that the implementation of restored order confirmation could be a large step in the right direction toward reconciliation with the separated Churches of the East, which have always kept the order of the sacraments intact.  

In the fourth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, in its discussion on the laity, the council fathers gave the following admonition:

> The laity have the right, as do all Christians, to receive in abundance from their spiritual shepherds the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the assistance of the word of God and of the sacraments. They should openly reveal to them their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which is fitting for children of God and brothers in Christ. They are, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church.  

Instructed by the council itself, it is my hope that the faithful everywhere allow themselves to be persuaded of the numerous blessings that would no doubt follow upon admitting young peo-


56  *Lumen Gentium*, no. 37.
ple to the sacrament of confirmation, and begin to request this for themselves. In keeping with the council’s teaching that the faithful are truly invited to reveal their needs and desires in freedom—especially in their need to receive the assistance of the sacraments—let this essay stand as my own contribution toward the common good, to the greater glory of God.

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