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The New Rite of Confirmation: A Festive Occasion

Second instalment of our comparative study of the extraordinary and modern Rituals.

Parents and teachers who attend the traditional form of the Mass are also very attached to the traditional form of Confirmation. There are reasons for this. The traditional sacrament of Confirmation is characterized by a sober and serious rite. The presence of the bishop makes it that much more solemn: he ▫speaks▫ of himself in highly eloquent terms. The new Confirmation, however, presents itself as a festive occasion▫and in this setting, which borders on secular festivity, it is and indeed is meant to be brutally new.1 One might even say that from the point of view of liturgical style it is the new sacrament in its pure state: the new ceremony formally innovates from end to end, as if on principle. Translations into the vernacular languages accentuate this, as they are veritable ▫adaptations▫ of the Latin ceremony, particularly in the adaptation for France and French-speaking countries (with the approval of the Congregation for Divine Worship), where the innovating genius of the *Centre National de Pastorale Liturgique* surpassed itself.

It is worth remembering that in this sacrament, which like Baptism and Holy Orders imprints a character, an indelible mark, upon the soul, the sacramental grace conferred is qualified by the key notion of an augmentum, an ▫increase,▫ of a supernatural passage to adulthood. As was once granted to the Apostles on Pentecost, here also there is a full outpouring of the Holy Ghost (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1302). Baptism is thus confirmed: there is an analogy with entrance into adulthood▫from a natural point of view▫as into the ▫perfect▫ age which allows one to perform every human act.

Because the conceivers of the new rite wished to adapt as far as possible to what they reckoned to be the state of mind of present-day children and teenagers, they put together a particularly festive and fully adaptable ceremony. This is further brought out in the vernacular translations, which are veritable adaptations of the Latin ceremony, especially in France and French-speaking countries.2 It is worth noting that this ▫festive spirit▫ literally has exploded these last few years in a certain number of Confirmations, weddings, and first Communions, with unbridled music and song, rhythmic hand-clapping and synchronized bodily movements of the celebrants and faithful, and dance-step processions.

The ceremonies of the traditional rite of Confirmation

- ▫ A general laying on of hands on all of the confirmands.
- ▫ The sacrament itself is conferred through an anointing of holy Chrism with laying on of hands, while the minister says: ▫N., I sign you with the sign of the cross, and I confirm you with the chrism of salvation, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.▫ (In the Greek Church, the baptized person is confirmed by being anointed on the forehead, eyes, nostrils, mouth, ears, chest, hands, and feet, somewhat as in the traditional anointing of the sick).
- ▫ After this, the bishop gently strikes the confirmed person on the cheek, as a sign of peace, saying, as for the kiss of peace, Pax tecum.

The holy chrism used for the sacrament is made of olive oil (representing the fullness of the Holy Ghost conferring strength) mixed with balsam (symbolizing the good odor of virtue of Christ).

The main prayer of this relatively short ceremony is that which accompanies the collective laying on of hands on the candidates for confirmation: ▫Almighty, everlasting God, Who hast vouchsafed to regenerate these Thy servants by water and the Holy Ghost, and hast given them remission of all their sins; send forth upon them from heaven Thy sevenfold Holy Ghost, the Paraclete. R: Amen. The Spirit of wisdom and understanding. R: Amen. The Spirit of counsel and fortitude. R: Amen. The Spirit of knowledge and piety. R: Amen. Fill them with the spirit of Thy holy fear, and sign them with the sign of the cross of Christ in mercy unto eternal life. Through the same Jesus Christ . . . in the unity of the same Holy Ghost, God, world without end. R: Amen.▫

In the new Confirmation: a maximum number of options.

[Translator▫s note: the following description of the new rite of Confirmation applies specifically to the ritual approved for use in France. In the USA, the regional application of adaptations or options might differ in various respects.]

. There are two greeting formulas to choose from, depending on whether the Bishop greets the assembly (▫He may use these or similar words: ▫May God our Father . . .▫▫) or the catechist (▫He may use these or similar words . . .▫), in which case the bishop answers the catechist (▫He may use these or similar words . . .▫).

. The penitential preparation too has two forms, each of them adaptable at will (▫Mention of events in our lives in which we may have resisted the action of the Holy Spirit, with an invocation, for example: . . .▫).

. The opening prayer may follow any of three possible forms, the first of which has six options, the second being a dialog and the third a litany.

. The candidates may respond to the minister▫s call in diverse manners: by rising, by answering out loud, by taking a step forward; the list is not exhaustive.

. Then the profession of faith too may be expressed in six possible forms, each with its own sub-possibilities and free choices (▫To introduce the profession of faith, the bishop may, as at the Easter Vigil, quote a lengthy scripture passage. He may also say, in these or similar words: . . . . This expression on the part of the assembly may take several forms, or the bishop may say: . . . .▫)

. Free explanations are introduced: ▫It is generally desirable for a short catechesis to accompany the sacramental rites. It may be given either by the commentator as the rites unfold, or by the bishop ahead of the whole ceremony or at each of the rites. For the laying on of the hands, for example, he may say: . . . .▫

. The collective laying on of hands has only two possible forms, but they are preceded by invitations to prayer for which diverse options are given, or that may be freely composed.

. The sign of peace (whereby the bishop touches the confirmed person▫s cheek) may be replaced by another ▫friendly gesture.▫

. After the chrismation or the Mass following it, the ceremony ends in a liturgy of thanksgiving and intercession, for which six options are proposed, each with varying guidelines (▫One may for example say: . . .▫).

. In the last place comes the bishop▫s blessing, preceded by invocations in the form of a litany, with the possibility of adaptations.

The French guidelines, printed in red in the new Ritual (the equivalent of the old **rubrics** that described the ritual gestures precisely) draw the ceremony towards a mood of warm and convivial modern festivity: ▫The bishop expresses his joy at meeting all those present in this church, and at presiding over this assembly. He introduces himself and very briefly explains how Confirmation is specific to his ministry. In a few words he may say what he has heard about the sacramental preparation of the individuals before him▫; ▫The bishop makes a sign of peace (mention the gesture used here). At the same time he invites those who have been confirmed to continue on their path in trust and joy since the Holy Spirit is with them▫; ▫Sometimes those to be confirmed present themselves in teams, each of which is accompanied by the person acting as sponsor for the team.▫ One is left to suppose that this team sponsor is in fact the confirmation sponsor of each of

the candidates in the small group.

The prayer formulas seem intended for a children¤s party: ¤And that is why, at the very beginning of our celebration, I greet you, the youngest amongst us, as well as you who accompany them: Peace be with you¤; ¤God our Father has done so many wonders for us! We can count on Him¤; ¤Our simply being here must already fill Thee with joy. But we want to tell Thee that we too are happy.¤ Minister: ¤Jesus wants to be your friend. How about you¤do you want to live as Jesus¤ friends?¤ Children: ¤Yes.¤ Minister: ¤Even when it¤s hard and you want to say no to his Word?¤ Children: ¤Yes.¤

Adaptation even affects the expression of faith. If the last form of the profession of faith is chosen, it is the candidates themselves who work out the liturgical text: ¤The bishop invites the candidates to express their faith with the short texts they have carefully crafted during their catechetical preparation.¤ The term ¤carefully¤ is hardly reassuring.

Form and matter: novelty for the sake of novelty

After much discussion, the changes affected even the form (the words by which the sacrament is given) and, to a certain extent, the matter (the element used, in this case holy Chrism, and the gesture used to apply it)

. The form: the wording of the sacrament has been modified in the direction of the Byzantine rite¤s wording (Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Divinae consortium naturae*, 15 August 1971). Indeed the Greek form has: ¤The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit,¤ *Signaculum Doni Spiritus Sancti*. It is implicitly deprecatory, in the manner preferred by Oriental Christians (¤Be baptized in the name of the Father etc.¤ instead of ¤I baptize you etc.¤). The new formula as set by Paul VI interprets the Byzantine form of the sacrament as: *N., accipe signaculum Doni Spiritus Sancti*, ¤N., receive the seal of the Gift of the Hly Spirit.¤ The official English translation has: ¤N., be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

. The matter (element and gesture):

- The element applied was traditionally the holy Chrism, oil mixed with balsam consecrated on Maundy Thursday by the bishop; it was olive oil. This seemed obvious; some writers, such as Saint Thomas, explained that it was the oil *par excellence*.3 But the *Ordo* of 3 December 1970 for blessing the holy oils and confecting holy Chrism decreed that the matter proper for the sacraments was ¤olive oil or, according to circumstances, *pro opportunitate*, other plant oil, *oleum e plantis*¤ (#3).

- As for the gesture used to apply the element, the reformers were in favor of keeping the chrismation alone and suppressing the concomitant laying on of the hand (the bishop puts his right hand on the confirmed person¤s head and, with his thumb, applies the holy Chrism on the forehead in the shape of a cross). The only laying on of hands to remain¤according to the experts¤was the ancient collective laying of hands upon the candidates. The Ritual of confirmation (1888 and 1961 Pontifical) said: *Dum hoc dicit* [¤*Signo te signo crucis*¤], imposita manu dextera super caput confirmandi, [*episcopus*] *producit pollice signum crucis in frontem illius*, ¤When saying ¤I sign you with the sign of the cross,¤ the bishop, with his right hand placed upon the candidate¤s head, draws the sign of the cross on the latter¤s forehead.¤ The 1973 rite only says: *Episcopus, summitate pollicis dexter¤ manus in chrismate intincta, ducit pollice signum crucis in fronte confirmandi, dicens*¤ ¤The bishop dips his right thumb in the chrism and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the one to be confirmed, as he says: ¤N., be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit¤.¤ Paul VI, in the Apostolic Constitution *Divinae consortium naturae* (15 August 1971), hesitates: ¤the anointing with chrism on the forehead . . . is done by the laying on of the hand.¤ The French ritual, however, bluntly states that the ¤the gesture of chrismation *no longer includes the concomitant laying on of the hand* on the candidate¤s head.¤

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Historically, especially in France, Archbishop Lefebvre¤s Confirmation tours, which gathered up to several hundreds of children in any available venue turned makeshift chapel, were among the ways in which the traditional liturgy spread. These confirmations gave recognition to the catechesis dispensed in these chapels and thus contributed to the symbolic structuring of a Saint-Pius-V universe. It even happened that certain curial Cardinals, when asked, granted permission to parents to have their children confirmed by Archbishop Lefebvre or one of his successors.

The rate of children being confirmed in the west today is pitifully low. At the same time, the tendency of simply turning Confirmation into a joyful celebration has grown ever stronger. Since the early 2000s the trend has been for Masses to feature songs accompanied by percussion orchestras, hand-clapping, and dance movements. After Communion services with conga lines, children□s dances around the altar, and costumes and makeup, hardly less wild Confirmations are now put on, which bring out the deritualization of the ceremonial. Yet even when the ceremony keeps within the bounds of what is officially set down, its insufficiencies are glaring. It is therefore easy to understand the increasing success of traditional Confirmations, which now are officially allowed and which most bishops agree□or are resigned□to celebrate.

1. *Ordo confirmationis* (editio typica 1971).

2. *La c□l□bration de la confirmation. Nouveau rituel*, (Chalet-Tardy: 1976; approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship on 3 March 1976), 1992 ; Rituel de la confirmation (Chalet-Tardy, 1996, 2003).

3. *Summa Theologica,* III p, q. 72, a 2, *ad tertium.*