

these passages alone whether baptism or confirmation is being thought of, though in patristic times a distinction began to be made between the sealing in baptism and the perfecting of the seal in confirmation.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the sacrament of Confirmation produces an effect which is meant to last throughout the whole course of a Christian's life. He can draw upon the grace it gives for every activity of a public nature where his faith has to be professed. In this way confirmation leads naturally on to the sacraments we have yet to consider, since in receiving them we do precisely profess our Christianity before the whole Church. Though it cannot be called the gate to the other sacraments in the same strict sense that baptism can, it ought normally speaking to precede them. Without question a wider understanding of its meaning and appreciation of its grace would have a tremendous effect on the practice of Catholics throughout the Church.



## GROWING UP IN CHRIST

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**A**LTHOUGH religious instruction occupies a separate place in the curriculum of a Catholic school, and although we pay special attention to this class no one believes that religious instruction, and still less training, is finished when the religious knowledge period is over. Every practising Catholic in England must have heard, perhaps oftener than he cares to remember, the argument for staffing Catholic schools with Catholic teachers, that religion must penetrate all departments.

<sup>1</sup> The patristic evidence is given in ch. 6 of Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology* (London, 1956).

It is a truth which, rightly, Catholics take for granted, and equally surely it is a principle which experienced Catholic teachers put into practice with little or no reflection and with a skill that sometimes seems infallible. As children reach the age of thirteen or fourteen this becomes a more important matter, for they are arriving at the critical years of change from childhood to manhood, and the Sacrament of Confirmation which they may have received recently or some years previously acquires considerable importance. It is when dealing with children in their teens that teachers begin to use the word 'responsibility'.

A boy of fourteen is beginning to move out of a world where he found himself the centre, or rather where he did not find it necessary to look far beyond himself and his actions with their immediate results. Consequences, certainly far-reaching consequences, did not much trouble the horizons of his behaviour. So far he has been told to be thoughtful about other people, to do this and that because it gives pleasure to other people, but for the most part these things have all been individual deeds; there has been no thought of a programme, still less of a life which will be systematically directed to a purpose other than his own personal satisfaction. He may begin to have ambitions other than to be a fireman or engine-driver. Of course, if he does decide to become a doctor he is not conscious of a desire to alleviate human suffering, he is probably more interested in medical experiments and the whole thing may look like a boy playing with a pet kitten. But the fact remains that there is here now some quality of persistence which was not there in his earlier years, and which is associated with that important attribute of responsibility and self-reliance which we connect with the Sacrament of Confirmation.

About this time it is only natural for him to feel pulled in different directions. He is truly growing into a man; without being very clearly aware of it he wants to assume responsibilities and yet he is not fitted either by experience or stability for this. Obviously a wise teacher or parent will offer some scope for these energies. He can be left to choose his own clothes, within reasonable limits and with discreet guidance. In a school perhaps he can take a fair load of the direction of his class's end-of-term play. If the teacher drops a few general hints about grouping on the stage and so forth there is every chance that one of the fourteen-

year-olds will take control and the others will, perhaps to their own surprise, find themselves co-operating and giving additional suggestions. Obviously all the accepted responsibilities either in the school or the home will come under this head: keeping a helping eye on the new boys, looking after the younger members of the family and so forth.

But from time to time there will be a 'catastrophe'. He meets a situation which demands quick reactions and he has not sufficient experience to ensure the right reaction. He fails through sheer inexperience. At this time he is more upset than anyone else by the calamity; usually it is not a calamity at all, but to him it is the end of the world. Then it is essential that the parent's or teacher's reaction should be healthy. First of all, however concerned we may be because, say, the barrel of altar wine has been left running by the sacristan, we must not magnify the incident. Sometimes, indeed, prudence may demand that we minimize it. For instance, I once heard of a fire in a sacristy which caused considerable damage to the fabric of the building and cost several hundred pounds. The cause of the fire seemed to be that a boy sacristan of sixteen had inadvertently dropped lighted charcoal in the waste-paper basket. The priest in charge of the church took great care that this boy never learnt the result of his actions, but also took care himself to keep a closer eye on him in the future. The policy of the police about arson in some parts of the country is an interesting application of this principle. In districts where they are troubled by forest fires caused by children they make a clear distinction between the boys who cause fires through playing with matches or magnifying glasses and boys who cause them through smoking and dropping matches. The latter set of boys are not often prosecuted and the reasoning of the police seems to be that a boy who plays with matches or a magnifying glass in the woods is doing something that every boy should recognize as dangerous, whereas the boy who is smoking and inadvertently drops a match is indulging a grown-up habit which he has not yet perfectly formed and at which he is inept and therefore the blame, if any, is limited.

On the other hand it would be equally unwise to try to ignore the consequences of a boy's actions. He is usually the first to see quite clearly the trouble he has caused and if he is in every other way a healthy person he will want to face the music; that is not

to say that he will want to be caned or given some childish punishment (though this is not always out of place), but his innate sense of justice will prompt him to make some sort of reparation. Usually adequate reparation is impossible, but to pretend that no damage is done, when in fact he has burned out the television tube, is not only an insult to his native intelligence but a lie. Let him see the harm he has done, accept that fact and also accept the fact that the grown-ups in the situation are prepared to shoulder the main burden of repair and content to take what little reparation he can offer. This after all is, in miniature, the state of affairs grown-ups all face when they go to confession. We cannot hope to make *adequate* reparation for our sins; all we can do is in virtue of the merits of Christ, and it is our job to accept meekly, though not complacently, our limitations in face of the infinite mercy of God. In a paradoxical fashion he will learn to grow up in so far as he learns this sort of dependence which does not make a man either complacent or over-acquiescent but stiffens his determination to be more self-reliant.

This of course can only grow out of his confidence in grown-ups. This is an entirely different thing from the hero-worship in which most boys indulge and which in itself is harmless enough. In general, hero-worship is as valuable as the hero. If in addition to being a good cricketer he is a good man there is every chance of hero-worship growing into something more lasting; but before this is possible the hero and the worshipper must share a common life. If the hero always remains in the players' pavilion, even if he remains on a pedestal of holiness, his power is limited. But if he is a man who goes to Mass and Communion with his boys, who goes to confession like them, who says his night prayers with them, then there is real common ground; not only do they share humanity, they share a much greater thing, the sonship of God. Once this common bond is established, and it needs to be established daily, the boy will have the right sort of confidence in his teacher or his father, and the real work of religious instruction and formation and the human implementing of the work of the Holy Ghost in confirmation, will be carried on outside religious knowledge classes and outside school itself.

Naturally one asks how much of all this should be discussed with the boys themselves, how much should they be made aware of the methods of their parents and teachers. In general very little:

It is rarely a good thing to discuss any method of education with the subject; he is already self-conscious enough and this might make life unbearable for him. Before long he will see himself just as a case, a problem or an experiment; he will either turn into an introvert obsessed with his own symptoms or he will become quite callous and stop up all the springs of human spontaneity, enthusiasm, warmth and generosity in himself. That is if he is told too much about how his teacher wants to help him. It is a very different story if he learns about how the Holy Ghost helps him, in other words if he learns of the immense supernatural resources laid up within himself as a result of the sacrament of Confirmation.

Very often in his early teens a boy feels that the demands made on him by teachers or parents are beyond his capacities. It is not simply that too much is asked of him. When he complains that it is too much he is sometimes right; for instance the long exaggerated prayers that have been imposed in some schools and about which the Pope spoke some time ago. But that is a different matter. The more common complaint is that he is asked to do what he calls the impossible; usually this means that it is something he has never done before, and as everyone knows, boys are the most conservative of creatures who want no change whatsoever. However it is usually at about seventeen or eighteen that they begin to dig in and feel they ought not to have to take the initiative. In their earlier teens they will make an impetuous rush all unprepared to tackle the job, whatever it may be, building a boat, or starting a debating club. Then when difficulties begin to arise they are tempted to abandon the scheme. It is just at this point that they need to invoke and employ the help of the Holy Ghost. The teacher is often tempted to step in himself and use his experience and even take the tools out of their hands and do the job for them. That would be quite useless, but the boy might very well begin to reflect on the manner of his growing up and discuss not his teacher's ways and methods, but the methods of the Holy Ghost, and the inexhaustible resources that he himself can tap because he is a confirmed Christian. Obviously the teacher or parent will do a little discreet manoeuvring and drop a few hints from his own experience, but the last thing he must do is to take the tools from the boy's hands, still less step in to do the Holy Ghost's work.

At this point, if not at any other, the boy will discover something about God manifesting his will in the events and circumstances of his daily life. And it is a very good thing for teachers too to reflect on this. Nowadays we commonly speak of fourteen-year-old children being the ones who most need the help of the grace of Confirmation, and there are even those who think poorly of the practice of administering Confirmation much before this age. Certainly there is something to be said for emphasizing the fact that Confirmation means the initiation into full adult Christian life with its responsibilities and duties. On the other hand we need to think twice about this, especially if our experience has been chiefly among children who live in more sheltered circumstances, perhaps in a boarding school. Most of these children do begin to face the responsibilities of adult Christian life at about the age of fourteen. But in England at any rate there is a considerable number of children who have to take up these responsibilities abruptly, two, three or even four years earlier. Among the working classes there are still children of eleven who have to assume quite a heavy responsibility for the care of their younger brothers and sisters on the way to and from school; and if they do not have to do that they have to look after them in the couple of hours or so between the end of school and their mother's returning home from work. We may deplore the economic situation that makes this necessary, but the fact remains that old heads are being put on young shoulders. May we not hope that the supernatural strength and wisdom of the Holy Ghost will steady their natural precocity and prevent it turning into mere worldly wisdom; quite simply, prevent them turning into spivs and wide boys. To me the case for early Confirmation seems even more pressing when I see the adult influences to which children are exposed as soon as they can read, not letters, but pictures on the hoardings, in the magazines, newspapers and so forth. It is not only the exploitation of sex but all the materialistic standards of life which are urged upon them; these things force children to grow up prematurely. It is a brittle, materialistic maturing, and perhaps Confirmation can strengthen it. Only stand outside a Catholic secondary modern school to observe the effects of this in their dress and manner. No amount of telling children not to look at the pictures will do any good; it is even worse to tell them that all newspapers, magazines and advertise-

ments are bad. That would just not be true. The only thing is to make them critical, to make them pass judgments on the things they see as soon as possible, and any teacher will tell you how difficult a thing that is. It is asking children to perform an adult Christian operation, and to ask them to do it without the help of Confirmation is asking the impossible.

In all these matters one sometimes feels helpless and hopeless, but at least there is a spark of hope when we can see how the common practice of the Church in giving the sacrament of Confirmation early seems to fit the needs of children in urban communities. It is not presumptuous to detect the hand of God here, and this certainly is the sort of thing we can discuss with a boy in order to encourage him in the struggle which he should be beginning to make. And in the religious knowledge class itself much good work of this sort can be started. A clear explanation of what it means to be a grown-up, discerning and critical Catholic will come first. Examples in abundance will come to hand from the boy's own life: how is he to behave to his companions with filthy tongues? Is it right to 'borrow' things from disused aerodromes? 'Everybody does and I look a cissy if I don't, especially as I am interested in radio.' These and similar matters are real because they enter into his experience. As often as not they are questions which he has half wanted to ask himself and been torn between the fear of getting the answer he did not want and the fear of shirking his duty.

At this point it is always good to remind ourselves and our class how subtle and elusive truth really is, and to remember that least commonly remembered effect of original sin, *obcaecatio intellectus*. We suffer a paralyzing blindness of mind which makes it very difficult for us, even in our redeemed state of grace, to pursue our problems to the bitter end until we come face to face with the truth itself. How easy it is to convince ourselves, especially on moral problems, that we are right when in fact we are looking only with half an eye. But we must not exaggerate this human weakness; the blind eye of the intellect is there, sure enough, but so too is the grace of the Holy Ghost which gives us light to see and strength to master our weakness. For in all these questions it becomes clear that what we need is strength, strength to face companions who call us cissy, strength to face unpopularity, strength to face perhaps poverty. And it always seems a

strength that is more than human. It certainly is, it is the supernatural strength of the fully-fledged Christian.

Even so we have only made the boy see the need for such strength; he presumably believes he can tap the source of this strength in his own Confirmation. Can we do anything further actually to encourage him to use his supernatural strength? This is the most difficult and delicate part of all. Obviously all the usual tricks of the teaching trade which inveigle him into standing on his own feet will help here, but we need more than human methods. Once again we are back to the level of hero-worship. Whether we like it or not, the boy is going to take his cue from us if he is going to take a cue at all. So, without trying to narrow the gap between adult and child, we need to share life with him in every possible department. For a time many of his actions will be prompted by the thought or even the word: 'My father says, my father does', or 'My teacher says, my teacher does'. If he knows his father only as a breadwinner or a keen supporter of the Arsenal, if he knows his teacher only as a mathematician or wizard centre three-quarter, then his range will be limited. But if these men also turn out to be heroes in other places besides the football field, if he knows that his father has suffered at work for his religion, if he knows that his teacher goes to daily Mass and Communion, then his own courage and his strength is the greater, and his life will be the richer.

For the teacher and the parent this is no doubt a daunting prospect. It was Edward Thring who never asked his boys to do what he himself would not do, and at fifty he was still defeating the finest fives players in the school. We have no need to emulate either the athletic or the intellectual prowess of such men, for even Thring saw this as only the beginning of something much larger. When Nettleship won the first classical scholarship from Uppingham to Oxford he reminded him that 'life is long and scholarships short'. And it is for the endurance of that long life that teachers and fathers too have been given the grace of Confirmation: we shall need it if we are to keep up the diligent study of religion that St Augustine urged on teachers (and that Frank Sheed in our own day has so rightly stressed). And equally so if we are to live lives fit to lead the way for children. And if in the end we are driven to get down on our knees beside the children we teach we could not find ourselves in a better position.