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THE ATTACK ON CONFIRMATION

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by

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The Attack on Confirmation

By LOUIS A. HASELMAYER, Ph.D.

IN recent years there has been a succession of attacks upon the Sacrament of Holy Confirmation. Lax practices and liberal ideas converge at present in a doctrinal controversy of large proportions. The issues involved, the problems created, are all practical matters upon which we have to take a stand, and it is well that we know where to stand.

There is the attack coming from those who hold a Protestant interpretation of Anglican doctrine. For them the sacrament is nothing but a rite or ceremony of the Church, of human origin, upon which it is unimportant to insist. Out of this kind of thinking has developed a fairly systematic neglect of Confirmation as a necessary prerequisite to communicant standing, and the wholesale admission of un-instructed and unconfirmed persons to the Holy Communion as a regular experience. There are parishes in every city which make a deliberate, open, and public practice of this, and would seem to regard Holy Confirmation as something which you can have but do not need.

The same problem is found in the Armed Forces.

Many chaplains find that they have difficulty in insisting that only communicants of the Church be admitted to the Holy Communion, and that officials of our Church who have been appointed to deal with the Army and Navy in regard to our polity and doctrine have not insisted on this point. There seems to be the opinion that all Protestants in uniform should be admitted to the Holy Communion. Some of this reasoning is based on the theory of special rules for wartime, or on a sentimental notion that all men in dangerous ways of life should be allowed to receive all the means of grace. The trouble with special rules for particular occasions in the Episcopal Church is that they usually are used later as precedents of a universal character. The admission of all Protestants to the Holy Communion by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the last Oxford Conference on Life and Work is still being used as an argument in this matter.

In our recent negotiations with the delegates of the Presbyterian Church, the issue of Holy Confirmation was at stake. The earliest statements regarding common belief and practice made no reference at all to this sacrament. Later statements relegated it to a position of estimable unimportance, and made provision for its administration under conditions of most dubious validity. Since the 16th century, Continental Protestants and English Dissenters have always been annoyed by the Anglican insistence upon Holy Confirmation. There is no

reason to assume that future negotiations between Anglicans, Continental Protestants and English Non-Conformists will be any less thorny.

Finally, in the statement issued last spring by the newly organized Liberal Evangelical Party, one of the aims was the definite removal from the Book of Common Prayer of the Rubric at the end of the Confirmation Office requiring Holy Confirmation as a prerequisite to Holy Communion. Since Prayer Book Revision is on the agenda of General Convention, we can be sure that this group will propose such action.

Face the Issue

These are real, live, and vital issues in the life of the Church. They shall continue and increase being live issues in the post-war Church. The post-war world will see another definite movement toward Pan-Protestant union and action in the United States, and there will be a definite attempt made to sweep the Anglican Communion into this. The problems relating to Holy Confirmation are part of the issue involved, and we shall be the wiser in our post-war planning if we face the issue now and not then. The arguments and reasons which are employed by all of these parties are based upon definite theories and facts, though they may be erroneous. We cannot counter these attacks by a blind insistence on a single Rubric of the Prayer Book. For behind the issues lies a conflict between a sacra-

mental conception of Holy Confirmation and a non-sacramental conception, between a Protestant notion of the Church and a Catholic theology of the Church. The Rubric in the Prayer Book about the necessity of Confirmation is the crystallization of Catholic sacramental doctrine, and the practice which it establishes is the expression of that doctrine. Those who attack the rubric do so because they are not convinced of Catholic truth. We who maintain and defend Catholic truth must do so by demonstrating that all other facts and reasons are not valid and acceptable, and that only Catholic truth is the doctrine of the Church.

The problem is complicated by Anglican ambiguity and vagueness in the formulation of doctrine. The Anglican comprehensiveness, which is extolled by so many misguided priests as so truly democratic, reasonable, and American, is the cause of most of the ecclesiastical aberrations and practices which are daily inflicted upon us. Roman books on theology open very neatly by quoting the decisions of the Council of Trent. We cannot begin with such ease. What is the Anglican position in regard to what is called the ceremony, the Apostolic Rite, of Holy Confirmation or the laying on of hands?

When we open *The Book of Common Prayer*, we find that we are provided with a required liturgy for the administration of Holy Confirmation. The text of the service indicates that it is an apostolic rite, and all of the details of the liturgy show that

the Bishop performing the rite does so in the exercise of his apostolic succession. *The American Prayer Book* makes this fact even clearer by inserting a Lesson at the opening of the Office from *Acts 8* in which the identity between the apostolic practice and the present ceremony is well established. Its intention is to strengthen the apostolicity of the ceremony. The Prayer to be said by the Bishop after the administration refers to this action as having been done "after the example of the Holy Apostles."

What is done is not only called an apostolic rite, but is in content definitely a sacramental action. It has an outward and visible sign of required matter and form: the laying on of hands and the recitation of prayer. There is the bestowal of some inward and spiritual grace. A spiritual gift of a specific character is definitely conferred. The Prayer before the administration makes reference to the regeneration of Holy Baptism, asks that the candidate may be strengthened "with the Holy Ghost the Comforter . . ."; and refers in particular to the gifts of the spirit. The form of the rite, "Defend . . . with thy heavenly grace . . ." points to some spiritual action about to be effected. The Prayer after the administration "to certify them, by this sign, of thy favor and gracious goodness" sets forth the same conception. Other prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer* such as the *Prayer for Confirmands* on page 43 and the Prayer in the *Service of the Consecration of a*

Church on page 558 reveal the same doctrine. As far as the liturgical orations are concerned, the Church intends that this rite of the laying on of hands is a sacramental action. There is an outward and visible sign, an inward and spiritual grace, and the spiritual grace becomes the possession of the human soul only through the use of the rite. Finally, the rubrics at the end of the Office fit this action into the sacramental economy of the Church. Those who were baptized previously, and now confirmed, are then to be admitted to the Holy Communion. Between two openly avowed sacraments, the link is Confirmation; and nothing would suggest that this is not a sacrament or a sacramental action which is the same thing. An essential link between two sacramental actions would obviously have to be another sacramental action.

A Sacrament

There probably never would have been any doubt of the clarity of the Prayer Book, and the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* would have carried had it not been for *The Thirty-Nine Articles*. True enough, they may not be binding on our faith and may have no real importance for Americans, but there they are and they are always being brought up. The worst of the thirty-nine is the Twenty-fifth Article: Two sacraments ordained by Christ in the Gospels; five "commonly called sacraments . . . are not

to be counted for Sacraments of the Gospel, being such as have grown partly of the corrupt following of the Apostles, partly are states of life allowed in the Scriptures, but yet have not like nature of Sacraments with Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, for that they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained by God." A rapid reading of this article is the best way to read it for it intends to say that the five other sacraments are not of the same solemn importance as Holy Baptism and Holy Communion since they have not visible signs of administration instituted by Christ. But upon every word of this article tomes have been written, arguments have been started, and controversies have been continued.

There are sufficient standard and scholarly works available on the subject of *The Thirty-Nine Articles* and their meaning so that we can assume the following facts without argumentation. They were an eirenicon, a compromise document, loosely phrased and ambiguously worded in order to hold together at a certain time conflicting schools of theological thought in the Anglican Church. For the good unity of the English nation and the unity of the Church, they were put forth so that all men might read them and all feel that they confirmed each individual belief. The chief intent of this article is clear. Five of the sacraments have no specific institution of outward rite by Our Lord mentioned in the Gospels and are therefore differentiated from Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. But this is

all that the article really says, and the rest of the verbiage is largely self-contradictory.

To quote any of the phrases or clauses to prove that Confirmation is not a sacrament is absurd and impossible. The word "commonly" is used in the same sense as elsewhere in the Prayer Book: "The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, commonly called Christmas;" "The Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, commonly called Michaelmas;" and in the First Prayer Book of Edward VI, "the Holy Communion, commonly called the Mass." The word is used in no sense of derogation. It is merely descriptive. "Not a sacrament of the Gospel" is to be tied up with the clause "for that they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained by God." "Partly of the corrupt following of the Apostles" is the worst clause of all. For it is quite evident from the Prayer Book Office of administration that the Church did not regard Holy Confirmation as a "corrupt" following of the apostles, but a most significant following of the apostles. Unless we are to find here a direct contradiction of the Prayer Book which is what the Puritans at the Hampton Court Conference did do, we must assume that "corrupt" means merely "later" and may have reference to additional external ceremonies such as the chrism and the tap on the cheek. "Partly are states of life" has, of course, no obvious reference to Confirmation at all.

The only serious point which is raised by this ar-

ticle is the matter of Institution. Certainly our Lord did not in any passage of the Gospels known to us institute directly and specifically the outward form and ceremony of Holy Confirmation. Does this mean that we account as sacraments only those which he instituted directly? We face here the theological problem of institution *in specie* and *in genere*. Are we to allow that the Apostolic Church was able to generate out of its meeting with the world through its conveyed authority the means by which it became a dispenser of grace? Or must we decide that only Gospel practices can be accepted as necessary to Christianity? Reason and argument are on the side of traditional theology which has held that valid sacraments obtain even though the mode of administration be not instituted directly by Our Lord. The sane words of Dr. Francis J. Hall have bearing on this point. "What is here maintained is that Christ and His Holy Spirit revealed, pledged, and established a sacramental dispensation of grace which, in its apostolic unfolding and subsequent acceptance and administration by the Church, eventually developed into the seven sacraments of Catholic theology, both East and West. It is on such grounds and with such meaning that we can assert these sacraments to have been severally instituted at least *in genere* by Christ and His Holy Spirit." (F. J. Hall, *The Church and the Sacramental System*, p. 291).

Its Necessity

The issue before us is a conflict between what is set forth in the Prayer Book Office and what is set forth in the Thirty-Nine Articles regarding the nature and necessity of Holy Confirmation. This issue has been continued down to the present time. Some would follow the Prayer Book, some would follow the peculiar teaching of The Thirty-Nine Articles, and all difficulties can be traced back to this initial contradiction. Much light for our purpose can be cast on this subject if we examine Anglican history since 1549 to see how the Church as a whole through the practices of the clergy and the doctrinal statements of synods, Bishops, and theologians treat this matter. How has the Church accepted and interpreted the Prayer Book and The Thirty-Nine Articles on the matter of Holy Confirmation? In this problem we have been given great assistance by a first-hand and scholarly examination of the history of Confirmation in the Anglican Church made by the Reverend Canon S. L. Ollard. (S. L. Ollard, *Confirmation in the Anglican Communion in Confirmation* by Various Authors, London, S.P.C.K., 1926). Canon Ollard has investigated all of the statements of Church bodies to ascertain official opinion; has examined every Anglican tract and theological work on the subject; and has studied the visitation records of all the Bishops to see what the opinion and practice was in the Anglican Church. There are evidences of great laxity in both belief and adminis-

tration throughout this period. But on the whole the content of Anglican formularies, doctrinal writings, solutions of conflicts in relation to Non-Conformists, as well as the visitation articles of Bishops, has been to uphold the doctrine set forth in the Office of Confirmation in the Prayer Book: Confirmation is a sacramental action of apostolic origin; it is necessary to the sacramental economy of the Church; it is required for the communicant life of the individual and is an essential prerequisite to admission to the Holy Communion.

There has never been any official utterance when the issue was raised either by lax practices in the procedure of Bishops or of attempts to deal with Protestant sects which would suggest that it is not essential to the faith and life of the Anglican Church. Even in so unsatisfactory a statement as the modern *Archbishops' Report on Doctrine in the Church of England* is this matter quite clear. Those who would work for its elimination can only point to instances of laxity in requirement or administration; failures of Bishops to administer it regularly; failures of Bishops to insist that it be received before admission to the Holy Communion; failures of discipline in allowing Non-Conformists and Continental Protestants to make occasional communions; sentimental exceptions for family reasons, and for the purpose of union gatherings. But no outstanding or reputable Anglican theologian; no general and permissive legislative action by convention,

synod, or convocation; no general episcopal definition; no radical change in the Prayer Book; no united statement by corporate groups of Bishops have legalized any of these lax practices into a rule of general application in the area of doctrine or polity.

Here we are on sure ground and we can assert that all of Anglican formularies, doctrine, and historical practice insists that Holy Confirmation is a sacramental action of apostolic origin, that it must be received by all who would enter into the communicant life of the Church. Those within the Anglican Communion who would think otherwise and advocate more liberal revision do so without any basis in Anglican history worthy of citation.

New Testament Basis

The more recent attacks on the doctrine of Holy Confirmation come not from those who would disregard Anglican history, but from those who base their attack on the apparent conclusions of New Testament scholarship. The theory has been advanced that what we practice today is not related to the Apostolic practices of the New Testament, and that on the basis of historical scholarship, Confirmation can be brushed aside. The controversial writings of A. C. Headlam, Oliver Quick, Canon Streeter, and Cyril Richardson make use of such an approach, and the books of these writers are being

used and quoted by lesser lights in the liberal wing of modern churchmen.

What we have in the New Testament is this. There is the story in Acts 8:4ff in which Peter and John laid hands upon the Samaritan converts of Philip. There is the story in Acts 19:1ff in which Paul laid hands upon the Ephesian converts of John the Baptist. There is the reference in Hebrews 6:2 listing the laying on of hands as an essential element of the Christian life. There is the reference in II Timothy 1:6 to stirring up the grace which had been received by the laying on of hands. In each of these instances there is the reception of the gift of the spirit conveyed through the laying on of hands of a member of the apostolic group, and the clear implication of its necessity to the Christian life. The Catholic Church from the earliest patristic times to the Reformation has made a clear identification between these apostolic practices of the New Testament and the administration of the Sacrament of Holy Confirmation. When Reformation theologians began to remake the Church, they eliminated Holy Confirmation on the theory that there was not this identification. They insist that the laying on of hands in The Book of Acts and elsewhere was intended to convey to the faithful, Pentecostal charismatic gifts and that the use of this practice ceased when the charismatic gifts were withdrawn. Further they assert that the Catholic Church invented the Sacrament of Holy Confirmation and identified

it with these Apostolic practices to give it authority and sanction. Protestant scholars continue to hold this doctrine and their exegesis of the Biblical passages in question follow that line of thinking.

Some modern Anglican writers have been led into this heresy, but more of them doubt the veracity of the accounts in Acts. Using the methods of form-criticism, they detect in these accounts a coloring from a later hierarchial interest. But the actual results of Biblical exegesis on these matters are not so definite as the controversialists would have us believe. The fullest examination of The Book of Acts and perhaps the most radical is that of Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake. From the welter of discussion of early traditions and later additions, these two scholars emerge with the somewhat grudging conclusion that both passages in Acts dealing with Confirmation are among the more primitive in the work. Rather than feel that these stories were colored up at a later date to give an early sanction to the practice, they hold to the reverse. Foakes Jackson says, "Personally, I incline to think that it (Acts 8) is primitive, and that . . . the 'Apostolic' element in Acts is early rather than late . . ." (Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, vol. 4, p. 192). Again, "Most important of all, in viii, 16ff, the laying on of hands of the Apostles is regarded as the cause of the gift of the spirit to the Samaritans, and in xix, 1ff is apparently the direct cause of the reception of the spirit by the Ephesian

Christians. . . . The direct descent of the practice indicated is obviously the Catholic association of Baptism and Confirmation . . .” (Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, vol. 5, p. 138). These two quotations seem sufficient evidence for the point.

Continuous History

The evidence of modern scholarship on The Acts does not destroy the identity between the Sacrament of Holy Confirmation as defined by Catholic theologians and the Scriptural Apostolic usages. There is a clear relationship, although it is obvious that the thing was not worked out in the fullest detail. It is only by historical origin that we can call the stories in Acts “Confirmation visits.” They are the traces of a practice which the Church was later to regularize and systematize. But the relationship between the ordered system and the origin is clear.

The principle at work behind these stories is evident. Christians must share the gift of the Spirit which fell upon some at Whitsunday. This gift of the Spirit was not conveyed entirely through Holy Baptism, and some additional form of human mediation was necessary. The laying on of hands was a method for conveying divine grace through the Jewish world. It was the method of ordination by Jewish elders; it was used as a means of healing. It was the natural mode which occurred to the Apostles for both ordination and the conveying of the Spirit.

They had the authority and commission to bring salvation into the world and by that authority they chose this visible sign as the means of conveying the gift of the Spirit. In an excellent discussion of the Scriptural evidence, W. K. Lowther Clarke says “Everything points to the conclusion that the Apostles, in all the fulness of their Pentecostal inspiration took a vital decision, and then and there instituted the rite which we call Confirmation as the necessary and positive complement to the baptismal washing away of sins.” (W. K. Lowther Clarke, *Laying on of Hands in the New Testament in Confirmation*, London: 1926, vol. 1, p. 21.)

The identification which the Church has made is a correct one, and there is nothing in the historical analysis of the Scriptural texts which should lead us to doubt either their historicity or their meaning. When we are told by modern controversial writers that Holy Confirmation has no basis in the New Testament, we must ask them to produce the evidence from sound Biblical scholarship. The burden of proof lies with them, and this proof is one which they will struggle in vain to produce.

Another modern attack on Confirmation has grown out of this previous discussion. It is concerned with the problem of the relation of Holy Baptism to Holy Confirmation, and the relation of the gifts conveyed. Does Holy Baptism convey a gift of the Spirit as well as regeneration from sin, and if it does, why is another gift necessary? Is Holy Confirmation

an addition or a complement to Holy Baptism? It is one of the more troublesome problems in the history of sacramental theology, and on the nature of the two gifts there is no universal ecumenical opinion. Normally, the apostolic practice was to make Baptism and Confirmation parts of the same rite, although in Acts 19 they are separate rites. The early Church administered the two together, and this is true of the Eastern Churches. The separation of the two rites in time has created two separate theologies, and the result is some confusion. Some would hold that Holy Baptism has only a negative effect and that Holy Confirmation has only a positive effect. Others would hold that Holy Confirmation is an action merely complementary to Holy Baptism. Because of this theological problem of exact definition, certain liberal thinkers would advocate that Confirmation be abolished. But there is no reason for assuming that because a problem does not have clear-cut theological exactitude there is no real spiritual value. There is no ecumenical definition of the doctrine of the Atonement, and yet this is no argument for dropping it from the articles of the Catholic faith.

Differences in the manner of administration and the minister would lead others to the same conclusion. In the Anglican Communion, it is administered by a Bishop alone through the laying on of hands. In the Roman Communion, it is administered by a Bishop through the laying on of hands

and the anointing with chrism. There are instances in which a priest by indult can administer the sacrament by using the chrism blessed by the Bishop. The same is true in the Eastern Churches.

The common Roman practice of admitting children to confession and communion some years before the reception of Holy Confirmation also complicates the matter. The Roman Church would assume in this matter that all the candidates are ready and desirous of confirmation. But there is on record a statement by Pope Leo XIII that this matter of admission to confession and communion before Confirmation is not in accord with the ancient tradition of the Church nor with its spiritual health. (Cf. A. C. A. Hall, *Confirmation*, pp. 94-95). All of these matters are troublesome and require much historical and theological explanation. But none of them reveal any intention in the mind of those Communion to depart from the essential nature or necessity of Holy Confirmation. History in every detail does not follow a uniform pattern of mechanical exactness. But the main trends of theological development are clear. These differences of meaning and administration have led certain Anglican writers as A. C. Headlam and Cyril Richardson to disregard Confirmation in matters touching reunion. They argue falsely that these differences are sufficient to invalidate the entire sacrament.

The Requirement

Finally there is the matter of the Rubric at the end of the Confirmation Office in the Prayer Book. In the 1549 Prayer Book, the Rubric read, "And there shall none be admitted to the holy communion until such time as he be confirmed." In the 1552 Prayer Book it read, "and there shall none be admitted to the holy communion until such time as he can say the catechism and be confirmed." The addition was made in line with all 16th century efforts toward greater instruction. The modern rubric in both American and British Prayer Books reads, "And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion until such time as he be confirmed or be ready and desirous to be confirmed." The last addition was made after the period of the Commonwealth when Confirmation had not been available and some adjustment to temporary needs had to be made. It also served well during the Colonial period of American history when Confirmation was difficult to obtain, and does so in mission fields today. But the intention is quite clear that Holy Confirmation must be related to the sacramental life of the communicant.

The Rubric was drawn from a Pre-Reformation Sarum Rite of Baptism and read "Item nullus debet admitti ad sacramentum corporis et sanguinis Christi Jesu extra mortis articulum, nisi fuerit confirmatus, vel receptione sacramenti confirmationis fuerit rationalibiter impeditus." This is turn was

based upon one of the Constitutions of Archbishop Peckham in 1281 (Lynwode, Prov. 1:til:6). The Constitution of Peckham was written at the end of the 13th century because of the systematic neglect of Holy Confirmation at the time and was intended to safeguard the importance of the sacrament. It was carried on in actual books of sacramental ministrations and was put into the First Prayer Book with the same intention. The history of the rubric clearly reveals that Holy Confirmation is the necessary sacramental link between Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, and to assume the life of a communicant without receiving it, is a sinful state of affairs.

The Anglican divines who were responsible for the Prayer Book held to this doctrine without question. The rubric is intended to cover all Christians, and it is not to be dispensed with when attempts at reunion with Protestants arise. To insist that this is merely a rule for Anglicans is an argument without weight in the light of the history of the Rubric. Either Holy Confirmation is necessary or it is not. There is no reason why Anglicans should receive it, and Protestants not. But all manner of curious opinions have been voiced in this matter. B. H. Streeter in *Restatement and Reunion* calmly says that since the Anglican Church at the Reformation dispensed its communicants from the obligation of the sacrament of penance, it can now dispense from the obligation of the sacrament of confirmation (p. 196), and that the whole matter is "one of

expediency and not of principle." All of which is playing fast and loose with the sacramental system.

A. C. Headlam in *The Doctrine of the Church and Christian Reunion* says, "We have a rule also in our Church for our own members that the normal condition of admission to the Holy Communion is to have been confirmed. That too, I believe to be a most healthy ecclesiastical discipline. But it is quite another thing to propose that we should require other churches to adopt our customs as conditions of reunion." (p. 294). Both of these writers are typical of a host of liberal thinkers who would calmly ignore the matter of the sacramental life and economy of the Church, and seek to make this Rubric not the expression of Catholic truth and doctrine but a mere ecclesiastical regulation of a domestic nature. The history of the Rubric reveals no such intention.

The Rubric is tied up with the whole problem of sacramental theology and expresses a truth of the Catholic Faith. As far back as 1662, an Anglican writer named Thorndike who was a member of the Savoy Conference and a writer on the subject of Confirmation made the point that the rejection of Confirmation was a rejection of the disciplined unity of the Church. This point is made even more sharply by Dr. Francis J. Hall. "Confirmation has always and everywhere constituted the normal sequel of Baptism, and never have the baptized been dispensed from receiving it when it could be obtained.

Rejection of it has in all catholic communions been followed by exclusion from Holy Communion. It has to be remembered in this connection that the Catholic Church regards all the baptized as properly subject to Catholic discipline, and cannot consistently exempt Non-Conformists because of their independent organization from the conditions which are imposed upon those who would enjoy catholic privileges. To do so would not only encourage Non-Conformists in their non-conformity, but would be prejudicial to the maintenance of discipline within. The Prayer Book rubric requiring confirmation or readiness and desire to be confirmed before admission to Holy Communion is clearly designed to be applied without exception to all Christians who would fulfill their 'bounden duty and service' of receiving the body and blood of Christ and of participating in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The entrenchment of non-conformity in novel organizations designedly and persistently opposed to catholic authority obviously cannot annul for Non-Conformists the principle that obedience to Catholic precepts is the only lawful basis of admission to Catholic privileges. And to reject Confirmation is to disobey a precept having New Testament as well as Catholic sanction." (F. J. Hall, *The Sacraments*, p. 62). The problem connected with this Rubric is a matter of the importance of the sacraments and the safeguarding of the sacramental life. It is not a problem of domestic Anglican customs and canonical regulations.