



When I was growing up in the Episcopal Church in the 1950's – as well as when my parents were in the 1930's – all babies were Baptised within a few weeks of their birth. All children were Confirmed at age 12, and they then received their First Holy Communion. I don't understand why the Episcopal Church is so casual now about the age at which children receive these Sacraments.

In sacramental theology Holy Baptism, Holy Confirmation, and First Holy Communion are called the Initiatory Sacraments. In the early centuries of the Christian Church they were always administered together (originally only at the Easter Vigil) and, with very rare exceptions, only to adults after several years of intensive theological and spiritual preparation and of testing the firmness of their commitment.

After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the late A.D. 400's – probably, the scholars say, because of the dramatic rise in infant mortality in the “Dark Ages” which followed – infant Baptism slowly became more common. Because this was considered a necessary emergency practice – not a change in sacramental theology which continued to understand the three Initiatory Rites to be adult Sacraments – children were only Baptised when their parents were deeply committed, fully active members of the Church.

This “necessary emergency practice,” however, meant that in the Western Church not only was the candidate's own personal commitment to the Baptismal Vows lost but the initiatory unity of Baptism, Confirmation, and First Holy Communion was badly obscured.*

In 1906 Pope (St) Pius X, in order to encourage more frequent lay reception of the Blessed Sacrament, changed the policy of the Western Roman Catholic Church to permit children at “the age of reason” (normally interpreted as being age seven) to receive First Holy Communion, well before being Confirmed.

In the American Episcopal Church during the first half of the 20th century the age of Confirmation, and thus First Holy Communion which followed, became lower and lower. After the Second World War it was universally 12 or 13 throughout the Church. In 1970 – in part because of the pressures of the Baby Boom – the American Episcopal Church adopted the 20th century Roman Catholic practice of permitting First Holy Communion before Confirmation, at the same time calling for the renewal of Confirmation as an authentically adult Sacrament.

Ironically, at the same time the Episcopal Church was adopting Pope Pius X's 1906 policy, the Roman Catholic Church – as a result of the Second Vatican Council's (1962-1965) restoration of Early Christian norms and practices – was reviving the adult catechumenate and “RCIA” (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), the administration of Baptism, Confirmation, and First Holy Communion together to adults at the Easter Vigil.

* The Eastern Church believed that the unity of the Initiatory Sacraments was of paramount importance and thus administered all three together to infants. This practice required the theological compromise of separating all three from adulthood and removing the Bishop as the sacramental minister of Confirmation (Eastern rite Priests Confirm with Sacred Chrism consecrated by the Bishop).

St Paul's Parish, as well as Anglicanism in general, is firmly committed to an Early Christian understanding of the Church and strives to be guided by Patristic norms in parish life and policies. Therefore all three Initiatory Rites are understood to be adult Sacraments theologically; any other practice is a necessary exception, never the norm.

For this reason, both Anglicanism now in general and St Paul's in particular teach that there is no requirement that the Initiatory Sacraments be received at *any* particular time before adulthood. If they are administered before adulthood, however, full adult preparation and demonstrated personal commitment are required of the candidate in the cases of First Holy Communion and of Confirmation and of the parents in the case of infant or child Baptism.

At St Paul's our administration of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is governed by the published policies and norms of both the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Chicago. In the case of infant and child Baptism they establish the criteria for the required commitment to the Baptismal Vows, church participation, and instruction of both parents and sponsors.

Because we are deeply committed to the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in its full authentic form, our administration of First Holy Communion is governed by the practice of Dr Sofia Cavalletti's Atrium in Rome. In this the original and definitive Atrium, young people age 10 and above, after a number of years of intensive Catechesis formation, indicate themselves when they are ready to begin the final phase of preparation for First Holy Communion. There is no standard age established nor is there any participation in this decision by either parents or Catechists.

At St Paul's our administration of Holy Confirmation is governed by the theology of the Sacrament itself which holds that it is an adult rite administered by the Bishop which confers sacramental grace for full adult life in the Church. Therefore this Sacrament requires both the maturity and full personal commitment as well as the theological and spiritual preparation for lay ministry.

The reason that the Episcopal Church now may seem casual about the age at which children receive the Initiatory Sacraments is its official shift in the 1970's to explicitly Early Christian (Patristic) norms and practices instead of Medieval ones. Baptism, Confirmation, and First Holy Communion are theologically adult Sacraments. Administering them to children is an exception, not the norm. Therefore when they are administered to those who are not yet adults, it is done only when the person him/herself is fully committed and theologically prepared in the case of First Holy Communion or when the parents are fully committed and theologically prepared in the case of infant and child Baptism.