

BAPTISM AND HOLY COMMUNION

REVISITING THE TRADITION AND PRACTICE: RATIONALE

The House of Bishops of the Province, having begun a process of reflection on our sacramental theology and pastoral and liturgical practices as these relate to Christian initiation and admission to Holy Communion, invites the people of the Province, clergy and laity alike, to study the accompanying document and to share reflections as we seek to arrive at a position on the issues in line with the rest of the Anglican Communion, our inherited tradition, and that which gives integrity to our faith and our practice. This will require focusing on the Rites of Christian Initiation in the history of the Church.

In the Early Church two traditions emerged in respect of Christian Initiation.

1. In the Eastern Tradition the Rite of Christian Initiation developed as a single rite in which persons baptized, both adults and infants, are anointed and receive Holy Communion without any provision for a sacrament of Confirmation.
2. The sacrament of Confirmation developed in the Western Church under the leadership of the Bishop of Rome. In the West, Christian Initiation developed into two parts.
 - a) Baptism marked the entry into the Christian fellowship but persons baptized were not admitted to communion at baptism.
 - b) The Parish clergy were authorized to officiate at Holy Baptism but the sacred anointing was reserved for the bishop who combined the re-affirmation of the baptismal vows with the sacred anointing in the sacrament of Confirmation. Despite the insistence on Confirmation the Bishops did not insist on Confirmation as the gateway to Holy Communion. Instead, the Bishops made provision for persons baptized in infancy to receive "First Communion" before Confirmation.

At the 16th century Reformation, the Church of England accepted the Western division of Initiation into two distinct parts, Baptism and Confirmation. However, the authorities made no provision for "First Communion" and insisted on Confirmation as the gateway to the reception of Holy Communion. In doing so, they insisted on an extensive Christian education programme that would ensure that after such exposure the person baptized as infants would have a sufficient understanding of the nature of Holy Communion, having attained "the age of reason", or "age of discretion".

Since the 1960's, the issue of admission of the baptized to full communicant status has re-surfaced with the various Provinces of the Anglican Communion pursuing different policies ranging from:

- i. the administration of the Holy Communion to the newly baptized infants,
- ii. admission of all the baptized to Holy Communion, to
- iii. continuation of the policy of admission to the Holy Communion of the baptized and confirmed. This latter position represents the current position of the Province of The West Indies.

Those who advocate the admission of the baptized to full communion status base their position on the biblical understanding on the nature of baptism. They emphasize that in the New Testament Baptism inaugurates a personal relationship to God in Christ. It is this view of baptism that led the international Liturgical Consultation to conclude:

“ Baptism is the sacramental sign of full incorporation into the body of Christ. Thus, all who are baptized should be welcomed into the Eucharistic fellowship of the church.” Persons who support this view maintain that since we are made members of the family of God by adoption in baptism, every baptized person should be able to be fed with the church’s principle food. It is now beyond dispute that in the Early Church baptism led to Eucharistic participation i.e. there was no insistence on Confirmation as the gateway to Holy Communion. It is highly significant that the Eastern Orthodox Church has never insisted on Confirmation as the gateway to Holy Communion.

PROVINCIAL INTENTION

Many Provinces within the Communion have returned the practice of the Early Church by making provision for the communion of the baptized. The House of Bishops in this Province is of the opinion that our Province should join those Provinces who made that radical shift in Anglican practice and theology. We do not believe that we should continue to insist on Confirmation as the gateway to Holy Communion.

At the same time, we would agree that Confirmation can continue to serve as a suitable occasion for an adult and public proclamation of our faith, though whether it is realistic to ask this of a child of twelve is another matter, we recommend that Confirmation be retained as a public commissioning to adult witness and adult responsibility in the church.

Synod is hereby informed that the House of Bishops intends to return to the early practice of Christian initiation inclusive of making Baptism the gateway to Holy Communion. The faithful across the Province are invited to engage in a time of preparation through the use of the accompanying educational material. The House of Bishops assures the faithful that it will subsequently address matters related to what would constitute appropriate pastoral and liturgical practice with the adoption of the early practice of Christian initiation.