

# **Baptism and Communion in Anglicanism**

**By**

**The Most Reverend Drexel W. Gomez**

**Retired Archbishop of The Church in the West Indies**

**Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of The Bahamas and The Turks and  
Caicos Islands**

Source of current liturgy

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's first Prayer Book produced in 1549 contained a rite of Baptism. Cranmer translated the medieval baptism rite from Latin into English and added elements of Lutheran baptismal rites.

Liturgical changes

In 1552, Cranmer deleted some of the medieval ceremonies, exorcism, the blessing of the font and the anointing of the candidates with oil. Cranmer also re-ordered some components in 1549 for rite (for example, shifting the sign of the cross from before the water bath afterward); and added a post-baptismal prayer of thanksgiving, asking God to "regenerate this infant and receive him thy own child by adoption". Both of Cranmer's rites (1549 and 1552) included a lengthy

charge to the godparents to ensure that the child was brought up to know the Creeds, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer and to live a godly life.

### Sacramental action of the water

Later English Prayer Books, in 1559, 1604 and 1662, left Cranmer's basic structure intact. The 1662 Book made but a few minor changes to the baptismal liturgy, but only two significant ones. The 1662 Prayer Book added a petition to "sanctify this water to the mystical washing away of sin" to the prayer just prior to its administration, and added a vow to "obediently keep God's holy will and commandments and walk in the same to the end of their affirmation of the Creed. The former restored some of the sacramental emphasis lost in the 1552 revision when the blessing of the font was dropped, while the latter was a step toward acknowledging that Christian life is about behavior as well as belief. The 1662 Prayer Book added in separate rite for the Baptism of adults, though in structure and most of its contents were drawn from the more familiar liturgy for public baptism of infants.

### Cranmer's Baptismal rite

1. It was a rite for infant baptism, and Cranmer expected children to be baptized within days of birth.
2. The Baptismal rite was framed as a washing from sin: baptism's purpose was the individual's spiritual cleansing.

3. Baptism was sacramental and liturgical and the liturgical text asserted that the candidate was regenerated by the rite, but anything resembling the blessing of the water had been removed along with the anointing.
4. Finally, baptism was not, in itself complete, and the newly baptized was to be instructed and later at adolescence, return for the Sacrament of Confirmation.
5. Only The Sacrament of Confirmation conferred full membership in the church. Cranmer's Prayer Books made Baptism the first stage of a two part initiatory process.

### Rite of Confirmation

Cranmer's Prayer Books retained the medieval rite of Confirmation—but reinterpreted through the reformation lens.

### History

In the Early Church, there had been a variety of baptismal procedures, and by the fourth century A.D. a post baptismal anointing became increasingly accepted as part of the rite. The Roman pattern, in which one post-baptismal anointing was reserved to the bishop, became the root of Confirmation, once presbyters were allowed to baptize. This episcopal ceremony, designed for the children after baptism and termed "Confirmation", was quite separate from baptism in most of the

western churches. However, the Roman System did not insist on Confirmation as a gateway to the reception of Holy Communion.

The Anglican tradition echoed in the 1662 Prayer Book insisted on Confirmation as a necessary condition for the reception of Holy Communion. However, both the Roman and Anglican systems, in respect of the Confirmation Rite, owe their origin to the practice of infant baptism. + other events.

### Roman Catholic Perspective

Aidan Kavanagh observed that the norm for baptism in the Roman Catholic Church is adult baptism of candidates who have undergone a significant period of preparation in the catechumenate.

The baptism of infants is “a benign abnormality” so long as it is practiced with prudence as an unavoidable pastoral necessity in situations such as frail health of the infant, or in response to the earnest desire of Christian parents whose faith is vigorous and whose way of life gives clear promise that their child will develop in the faith of the church.

But at the same time, tradition’s witness to adult baptism as the norm provides a solid counterbalance against infant baptism becoming a malign abnormality due to pastoral malfeasance, theological obsession or the decline in faith among Christian parents into the degree of merely social conformity” (Shape of Baptism page 110)-He views infant baptism as a permitted departure from the norm.

In 1979 The Episcopal Church USA issued a new Prayer Book with a Baptism Rite that marked a departure from the historical Anglican position. The Prayer Book is marked by a baptismal ecclesiology, an emphasis on Baptism as the entry into discipleship and an assertion that baptism is full initiation. **"Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body, the Church"**. The Prayer Book adds, **"The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble"**. One becomes a full member in Baptism, and one cannot lose that status by any means.

This was, of course, a stunning reversal of traditional Anglican thought which maintained that one could not receive Holy Communion until one was confirmed.

### History of the Change

The common practice in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries had been to withhold communion until confirmation, but, influenced by Parish Communion Movement and the modern liturgical movement, clergy in many Provinces of the Communion began to administer communion to unconfirmed children. The Episcopal Church authorized communion to baptized children in 1970.

## Holdouts to change

Across the Communion two groups insisted on upholding the historic position of withholding communion until confirmation.

On the one hand, the Anglo Catholic wing of the church maintained that confirmation was an essential blessing and a completion of Baptism and on the other hand, those of a more evangelical persuasion insisted that one could not participate in a sacrament without the knowledge and understanding of its meaning.

## Baptism alone as the gateway to Holy Eucharist

The adherents of the modern liturgical movement maintain that it is the right of every baptized—regardless of age—to participate in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is an action of the whole church of which the baptized infants are a part.

If one accepts that baptism inaugurates a relationship with God in Christ, that is nurtured in the Eucharist, to deny a baptized child the Eucharist is to deny him/her the sacramental nourishment needed to sustain life in Christ.

To withhold the Eucharist from the baptized negatively impacts their Christian development. The church at large is being challenged to adopt the right of the baptized—regardless of age, to participate in the Eucharist.

## The need for Understanding

The promoters of the Eucharist for all the baptized maintain that the objections to the communion of baptized children—that they were not yet confirmed, and that they needed instruction leading to understanding—simply do not withstand scrutiny.

Baptism is now seen as full and complete initiation; confirmation is no longer a prerequisite for reception of the Eucharist.

The assertion that children must “understand” the Eucharist before receiving had its origins not in the early Christian practice, but in the catechetical program of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers. It substitutes an educational agenda for a sacramental one, and it wrongly implies that “rational understanding must precede the reception of God’s grace”. (Louis Weil).

It also begs the question of whether most adult communicants actually understand communion in terms that are much more advanced than the average child and whether understanding is likely to be accurate.

In this regard, Lee Mitchell argues that an understanding of nutrition is not required before a small child is allowed to eat at the family dinner table, and by extension one ought not insist on theological understanding of the sacrament before communion.

## Infant Communion

Incidentally, infant communion was not a twentieth century innovation, but rather an ancient practice. The Eastern Church has maintained

baptism is the complete right of Christian Initiation inclusive of the baptism and communion for infants. In the Western Church circumstantial evidence suggests that infants received communion at their baptisms in the second century, and by the third century in northern Africa. A fourth century inscription in Sicily recorded that an eighteen-month-old received the Eucharist and the Fourth Century Apostolic Constitution referred to babes in arms taking the Bread and Wine as well. A seventh century liturgical text, the ORDOROMANUS XI and a twelfth-century Roman pontifical both gave instructions presuming that nursing infants would receive communion. The Gregorian Sacramentary required explicitly that infants be communicated immediately after their baptisms, and Elfric of York ordered his clergy to give newly baptized infants the Eucharist.

### Withdrawal of Holy Eucharist from infants

The withdrawal of communion from infants happened in stages in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and it had nothing to do with knowledge or confirmation.

1. The difficulty experienced by some infants in fully swallowing the consecrated Bread led to the practice of giving infants only the cup.
2. When the practice of giving the laity the consecrated wine gradually ceased over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries it had the incidental effect of eliminating the one kind in which infants received.

3. Only later in the thirteenth century did pious traditions arise about the need to have reached the age of discretion before communion, but this was not the cause of the end of infant communion.

That the early church administered communion to infants was recognized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries debates in England between those who practiced infant baptism and those who insisted on believer's baptism. Jeremy Taylor even argued that infants should be given both sacraments or none, and infant communion was practiced in the eighteenth century by Non-jurors, as part of their recovery of ancient liturgical practices.

### The Position

1. Christian initiation was anciently a three-part liturgy: Baptism, laying on of hands with the anointing and first communion.
2. Baptism was full initiation and that meant that all the baptized, regardless of age, are entitled to share in the Eucharistic banquet.
3. Baptismal rights have nothing to do with cognition, but those who withhold communion from their children until they "understand" the sacrament, ignore both extensive research and development and considerable material on religious understanding of small children.
4. More importantly, they confuse God's gracious action by making it depend on human intellectual capacity. All baptized persons, including infants and children, in the patristic and medieval church were eligible

to receive the Body and Blood in the consecrated Bread and Wine of the Altar.

### Why children should participate in the Holy Eucharist?

As children participate in the Eucharist they are formed as Christians. Sharing in the Eucharist (liturgy) and receiving communion allows experiential learning. This kind of learning is especially suited to children—it is the primary basis of how the very young explore their world, begin to make associations, and learn. Through the rest of early childhood, experience is an important means of learning. Indeed, theorists and practitioners of early childhood education have come to emphasize the important role of experiential learning, including taking part in adult activities. Attending the liturgy with a parent or guardian, participating in the ways that they can (singing, moving following along in the Prayer Book or hymnal, making responses), receiving communion all help a child learn about the Christian life. The emphasis is on formation over information, on walking the walk of the Christian life.

### What could happen to Confirmation?

The Episcopal Church included a reduced rite of confirmations in its 1979 Prayer Book.

1. There is scope for a mature affirmation of faith and mature re-commitment to the vows in Baptism. Confirmation from this perspective, affirms a relationship between the candidate, who is

renewing baptismal promises, and the Lord into whom he/she was baptized.

2. The Bishop's function at this mature re-commitment service is to provide a symbolic representation of the larger church, witnessing this renewal, and offering the blessing of God and the sacred anointing. In this renewal ceremony, God is asked to strengthen or defend the individual, not to provide something previously lacking.
3. It should always take place in a Eucharistic celebration. Throughout the Christian pilgrimage there is a need for fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
4. If confirmation is to be celebrated as a mature affirmation of personal faith, the church must revisit the age of those participating in the re-commitment. This renewal and re-commitment of baptismal vows is about the life changing baptismal promise of Christian discipleship, and to make a truly mature public affirmation of these vows is a very demanding thing. Persons in their early teen years have not arrived at a level of Christian formation and should not be encouraged to offer themselves prematurely. In the early eighties, Urban "Terry" Holmes opined that a more appropriate range was eighteen to twenty-five years. Supporters of this position also acknowledge that this does not deny that some persons arrive at maturation at different ages.
5. The supporters of the retention of confirmation maintain that persons making a mature affirmation of the Baptismal vows need to understand both the importance of their renewal of the baptismal promises and its subordination to baptism itself. Thus renewal is not

completion of baptism but a public affirmation of the church's baptismal faith and a commitment to continue to grow as a member of the community of the baptized.

### Why we should restore the earliest traditions?

1. The ancient form of initiation involved one rite with three elements: the water bath, the hand laying, and the anointing (Chrismation) and first communion included infants and children.

The Eastern Orthodox Churches have retained this single rite of initiation, with no separate service of Confirmation. In the Western Church, the Rite of Baptism initially allowed the pattern outlined above.

However, in the middle ages, the hand laying and anointing became a separate rite of confirmation. The expansion of the church necessitated the utilization of Presbyters to officiate at the role of baptism but the bishops retained the right to preside at the hand laying and anointing. The distance between baptism and confirmation was bridged by provision of first communion for those baptized as infants.

However, The Roman Catholic Church never mandated confirmation as the gateway to the reception of Holy Communion.

2. In both the Eastern and the Western Tradition, baptism was seen as full and complete initiation.

Twentieth Century liturgical scholarship has drawn attention to the original unified rite of initiation in the early church, which included various ceremonies, such as anointing and hand laying in addition to the water bath in Baptism. The movement has promoted a baptismal ecclesiology, with an emphasis on baptism as the entry into discipleship, and an assertion that baptism is full initiation. In the 1979 Prayer Book of the Episcopal Church which is a child of the 20<sup>th</sup> century liturgical movement, on page 289, the Prayer Book states “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church. The Book adds, “The bond which God establishes in baptism is indissoluble.” One becomes a full member of the church in baptism and cannot lose that status by any means”.

3. A careful examination of the baptismal rite of the CPWI Prayer Book reveals that there is an inherent conflict between the theology contained in the rite, and the continued practice of insisting on Confirmation as a gateway to communion.

The theology and ecclesiology found in the Declaration and Collect on page 272, the presentation of the candidates (page 274), the Baptismal Covenant (page 275-276), the signing of the cross (page 279) is entirely consistent with the theology and ecclesiology found in the 1979 Prayer Book of the Episcopal Church affirming that Baptism makes us full members of the Body of Christ.

Although we are living members of the church, which is the body of Christ, we are unable to be fed with the Body and Blood of Christ until we have undergone a cognitive test that would facilitate understanding and leading to confirmation.

## Our Choices

As a Province we are confronted with an anomalous predicament by two choices: do we continue with an inherent conflict between our theology of Baptism and a 16<sup>th</sup> century creation in the rite of Confirmation? Or do we return to the undisputed practice of the Early Church with Baptism as a unitary rite including the admission of all the baptized, including infants and children to Holy Communion?

A decision in favour of the latter option would require us to revisit our existing rites; infant baptism, adult Initiation, and confirmation. The revision would place primary emphasis on teaching and practice of Baptism bequeathed to us by the Early Church.

In addition to these liturgical revisions, we must also make adequate provisions for the participation of the adult candidates and the sponsors of infant candidates and the candidates who offer themselves for confirmation. It is generally acknowledged that adult candidates will need one sort of formation, delivered before their baptisms. Infant candidates will need a very different sort of formation in order to live that which others have willed for them to receive. This would require adequate preparation of parents and godparents of infant candidates for Baptism. The final process would involve preparation for confirmands.

The Book of Occasional Services in its 2003 edition, produced by the Episcopal Church offers outlines for these three processes of preparation. The primary emphasis in each process is on formation in Christian life including the nurture of disciples. Rather than mastering a body of intellectual precepts, attention is focused on providing a basic

grounding in Christianity, which is a way, not simply a body of doctrine (as important as doctrine may be). Exposure to these processes places a demand on the whole person: on his/her thought, lifestyle, action, and choices.

Despite the obvious benefit to be derived from the study of these three processes offered in the Book of Occasional Services, our Provincial Commissions on Liturgy and Ministry will have to produce the requisite processes within our regional context with an emphasis on the practice of reflection on our experience as an autonomous province within the Anglican Communion. In addition to the Book of Occasional Services, our Provincial Commissions may utilize Anglican Communion resources produced to undergird our pursuit of “Intentional Discipleship” e.g. “Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making,” Archbishop Rowan Williams “Being Disciples-Essentials for Christian Life,” “Journey into Christian Initiation” edited by Paul Avis.

Our greatest challenge will revolve on our ability to commend the rite of confirmation as the renewal of baptismal vows given at the Baptism of Infants, accompanied by the laying on of hands with anointing by the Bishop in the context of the Eucharist. Confirmation will no longer provide its present access to Holy Communion. In its new setting, Confirmation serves a useful pastoral function as a point in time when it is pastorally appropriate and beneficial for an individual, baptized as an infant, to ritualize a deepening or renewed commitment to living the life of a baptized person. Such public adult affirmation of one’s baptism must always be an act of free will, undertaken by mature autonomous adults. Candidates for Confirmation will also need to understand both

the importance of their public re-affirmation of their baptismal promises and their renewed commitment to live the Christian life. In addition they must recognize and acknowledge that Confirmation is not completion of Baptism but an owning of the Baptismal covenant. In this regard, Confirmation can provide an important opportunity for an individual baptized as an infant, to ritualize a definite turn in their spiritual journey involving a mature commitment to vows made by others on their behalf. Such public commitments can be significant in the life of an individual, and the liturgies and the persons who take part demand the care and attention of the clergy.

If our Province adopts this presentation of Confirmation, attention must be placed on training and equipping of the clergy to adequately prepare the confirmands and to interpret this understanding of confirmation in the community of the Baptized. In addition, the church must accept the challenge of introducing a process of Christian formation from infancy, to adulthood and beyond.

Let us accept the challenge as we move forward in faith knowing that:

**“...my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” Philippians 4:19-20**