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Practical Proposals for the Better Administration and Observance of Confirmation

BY THE RT. REV. THE BISHOP OF CROYDON.

MY subject is of the first importance. I believe we have in our Church practice of administering Confirmation something we cannot value too highly, and yet one that has received far less attention than it deserves with the consequences of loss in Communicants and grave lapses after Confirmation. I am not in the least degree happy about the proposals to admit to Communion before Confirmation, nor of suggestions to experiment on such lines.

It seems clear to me that there is Divine Providence in the delay that must perforce exist in most cases between Baptism and Confirmation owing to the fact that the latter must be administered by a Bishop, who is, of course, not always available. In Acts viii. we have the account of the first recorded Confirmation. St. Philip preaches and baptizes, then come the apostles to lay their hands on the baptized.

It is right and proper that we bring our babies to be baptized as early as possible, dedicating them to the Service of the Master, bringing them under His influence, His Spirit, pledging them to be brought up to lead *godly and Christian lives*; then when they come to years of discretion prepare them for Confirmation. I suppose we have been slow to realise the changed conditions. In earlier days, and the hey-day of Sunday Schools, it was fairly safe to assume that children had been taught the Catechism and its meaning, and that therefore a dozen or so classes would suffice to prepare them for Confirmation. Whether this was really so or not, the facts of today hold no warranty for this assumption. People, especially children, come for Confirmation with very little background.

I plead that the Confirmation Classes should aim at covering the ground of Christian doctrine, belief and practice as far as may be, and that these should be attended by children from the ages of thirteen for three successive years; that these should include a Rule of Life about prayer, worship, communion and alms-giving and not until the child is ready to keep this rule should it be confirmed.

At Confirmation the Baptismal vows and promises are ratified and confirmed in the child's own person. It is, therefore, an act of solemn self-dedication. I am sure the meaning of "worship" should be prominent from the start, this is "Worth-ship". Expressing to God what He means—is worth—to us. Expressing to our fellows what God means to us. So few realise the true purpose of "going to Church", of prayer as learning to talk with God, of communion as really communing with our Lord.

It is strange to imagine that anyone, especially a child, can be brought to so tremendous a decision in a dozen classes, or to believe that a promise and rule of life made at the end of them is likely to be kept.

The period of preparation spread over two or three years is a preparation for a determined and sincere dedication, and this should be by keeping the Rule. So first I plead for a thorough revising of our whole method of preparation. There are several being tried, such as the "Confirmation School" and "Catechism Classes". Personally I use the three year plan, and find parents prepared to co-operate, and I do not find the children lose interest, but rather it increases. They must, of course, be shown clearly that the course lasts three years. This is important to avoid disappointment and the sense of being "turned down". Only this year, my third in my present parish, I have confirmed children who have been through the three year course, and have brought their parents to help them to keep the Rule.

Everything must depend upon the preparation. We need not be so much afraid of losing candidates by insisting on sincerity. There are those who do not feel they can keep the promises, but there remains always the Holy Spirit, and the one who misses Confirmation does feel it, and in later years will seek it.

Then, I submit, there should be a further period of preparation after the Confirmation before the first Communion. Our intelligences are limited, and we can only digest one thing at a time. We must not give the impression that when a person is confirmed it is "all over and done with". I submit there be a series of classes in preparation for Holy Communion. Methods as to the number of classes will vary. I have never yet found candidates anything but sorry when the classes end. The candidates form friendships and are willing enough to continue. Then, after the first communion, at least three more classes to gather up the threads. All this sounds as though a great deal of time and energy is involved, and so it is, but I submit there is nothing more worth doing. If we really are aiming at conversion and true dedication we cannot give too much to it.

With regard to the Administration, I urge that there be a preparation Service, preferably the night before the Confirmation, and parents and friends be urged to attend. The first part is taken up with seating arrangements and rehearsing the Candidates so that they will know exactly what to do. At the Service they should have been instructed how to occupy the time of waiting, and whilst the others are being confirmed. Hymns to read are of great value.

The actual service differs slightly in different places. In some the actual name of the Candidate accompanies the laying on of hands. In some each of the promises is put separately to the Candidate. Whichever method is used all depends on the preparation and the Spirit of the thing. If the standard is pitched high and candidates are urged to postpone their confirmation until they have prayed and thought about it more it does help to induce the sense of solemnity and obligation.

Time hardly allows me to say more, but I plead also for Annual Refresher Courses for those who have already been confirmed. There are many who say they wish they could be confirmed again because they did not understand it at the time. These welcome such classes and it helps the children.