

Who Can Receive the Sacrament of Confirmation (Fr. Denis Tameh)

One may wonder why this question is important or pertinent. Why should the Church be worried about who can receive the sacrament of Confirmation? I believe it is to ensure that those who receive it understand what they are receiving and what it signifies and demands of them. The Catechism in n.1306 quotes canon 889 which states those whom the Church considers as having the capacity for confirmation. These are every baptized person not yet confirmed and who have attained the age of reason. At the appropriate time, they are to receive the sacrament of Confirmation.

The above consideration raises a series of questions. When it says those who are baptized, does it include those baptized outside the Catholic Church? It involves them only when they convert to the Catholic faith and after going through the rite of Christian initiation do not have to be baptized again but are qualified to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. This is true for those ecclesial communities whose baptisms are valid (that is, those communities that baptize in the name of the Trinity). Secondly, what is the age of reason or the age of discretion in the Church? The General norms of Church law in canon 11 stipulates the completion of the age of seven as the age of reason in the Church. Canonical obligations of the Church start binding only after the completion of this age (the obligation to attend Mass, refrain from burdensome labor on Sundays and holy days of obligation, to confess all serious sins at least once a year, to receive communion at least once a year). Other obligations tend to bind at higher ages (14 years for abstinence, 16 years to be subject to sanctions in the church, 18 years for fasting). Thus, the age of reason is the age when it is believed the individual can come to a simple understanding of what is received in the sacrament. Thus, for confirmation the age of discretion is still seven (Canon 891). However, the Church allows the Bishop's Conference of each country to determine another age. In the United States, the Conference determined in 1993 not a specific age but a range of ages from seven to eighteen. This allows that we can arrange for practical reasons to have this sacrament celebrated in the ninth or tenth grade. However, the Church allows that in danger of death or for a very grave reason, one can be confirmed even at an earlier age. Thirdly, what is the appropriate time for confirmation? The Church desires that those to be confirmed should be catechized so that they can know what they are receiving. In the Eastern Catholic Churches, the sacrament is celebrated at the same time with Baptism and the Eucharist. However, in the Latin Church that we belong to the normal order in which these sacraments have been received except for those in RCIA is baptism, penance, Eucharist and confirmation. With confirmation being deferred to a later date. The rite of Confirmation explained this as follows: *"With regard to children in the Latin Church the administration of confirmation is generally delayed until about the seventh year. For pastoral reasons, however, especially to implant deeply in the lives of the faithful complete obedience to Christ the lord and a firm witnessing to him, the conferences of bishops may set an age that seems more suitable. This means that the sacrament is given after the formation proper to it, when the recipients are more mature."* The reason therefore the Church defers confirmation to a later date is for pastoral reasons. If we consider the sacrament to be a completion of baptism and one that gives maturity to the faith and calls for adult commitment then it requires that preparation should be made, appropriate catechesis given before one becomes a soldier of Christ. The Catechism emphasizes that this preparation should be aimed at leading the Christian to a more intimate union with Christ, a lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit, to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, the universal Church as the parish community (CCC,1309).

Who can be a Sponsor of the Sacrament of Confirmation?

The code canon law requires that each confirmed person should have a sponsor who is to take care that the confirmed person behaves as a true witness of Christ and faithfully fulfills the obligation inherent in this sacrament. However, this is not mandatory but a preferred custom of the Church. It would be more desirable if this sponsor is the same one who undertook the same function at baptism since both may be conferred in the same liturgical celebration. A preference the Church insists should be considered. That is why the rite of confirmation states: *“As a rule there should be a sponsor for each of those to be confirmed. These sponsors bring the candidate to receive the sacrament, present them to the minister for anointing and will later help them to fulfill their baptismal promises faithful under the influence of the Holy Spirit whom they have received.”*

To be a sponsor, one has to fulfill certain prerequisites (c. 874). In the first place, the sponsor has to be designated by the one to be confirmed or the parents or guardians of the one to be confirmed. If there is none of the above, the pastor or minister can designate.

Secondly, the sponsor must have completed the sixteenth year of age. However, the diocesan bishop can dispense from that rule or the pastor or minister in individual cases can dispense from that rule.

Thirdly, the sponsor should be a fully initiated Catholic (received all the sacraments of initiation). Since the sponsor has the responsibility to help the baptized lead a worthy Christian life, it is fitting that he or she leads a life of faith in a manner keeping with the responsibilities of office. Thus, people who do not participate regularly in the Eucharist or who live in marriages not recognized by the Church may not qualify as sponsors. This is also true of those who live under declared or imposed canonical penalties.

Fourth, parents cannot be sponsors of their own children. The parents are primarily responsible for raising the children in the faith. The role of the sponsors is to assist them. And their role becomes critical when the parents fail in that duty.

It is important to note that a baptized non-Catholic cannot be sponsor except together with a catholic sponsor where the non-Catholic party then assumes the role of witness of the baptism. The witness does not replace the sponsor. This is to respond to a pastoral situation where parents may want to choose as sponsor a relative or a close friend who is baptized but not Catholic. In this situation the responsibility of Christian upbringing falls squarely on the Catholic sponsor.