A Manual for Confirmation

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Oxford Church Text Books

A Manual for Confirmation

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ALMAE MTRI

ECCLESIAE CHRISTI CANTUAR:

ALUMNUS
INTRODUCTION

Those who use this book will probably belong to a class in which custom and tradition have made Confirmation a recognised incident in life. They will not be called upon to face the trial which in some conditions of society is a severe one—of standing almost alone against the indifference and the ridicule of their friends in taking this definite step on the side of Christ and His Church. They may well thank God that this struggle has been spared them. But they must remember that their own position has its danger also—the danger of regarding Confirmation as a mere formal necessity, as something which they are expected to go through, but of which they hardly recognise the meaning or the obligation.

It is, of course, in one sense a necessity. We believe that in it there is a gift which God offers to us and a duty which He demands from us. But if we think of it as a necessity only because our friends expect us to be confirmed, and most of our acquaintances have been confirmed, we are not doing what God wants us to do, nor can we receive the gift which He is willing to bestow. We must never forget that though the actual presentation of ourselves for Confirmation has been made easy for us, real preparation means a great choice, and the choice involves a great struggle.

Of this struggle we have known something from our
earliest years—the struggle between doing what we like and what we ought. As we get older we see what this means; it is the choice between what God wills and what He hates. In our relation to others it means the choice between a life of selfish enjoyment and a life of useful service to mankind; and this means for us a life which in the end leads to banishment from the face of God hereafter or enjoyment of His Presence and His Love.

Children live naturally without much thought of the future; they anticipate its freedom, but want to put off facing its responsibilities. But the time comes when the choice of a profession must be made, and then we can tell what determines our choice most—whether we think only of what we should like, or think chiefly of the way in which we can be most useful. It is idle to say, 'I want, of course, to be useful, but I want to enjoy myself too, and I cannot see why I must choose between the two.' The fact is that every hour we are choosing between the two, and choosing more and more regularly one or the other. Putting off the choice means living a life with no aim or purpose, following the impulse of the moment instead of pursuing some ideal in the future, and that is really making the wrong choice of what we like instead of what we ought. This is what our Lord means when He says we cannot serve God and Mammon. We cannot combine the life of service and the life of self-seeking, and Confirmation gives us a critical opportunity of choosing between them. We stand as Herakles is represented as standing in a beautiful Greek story—at the parting of the ways, tempted to the one by Pleasure, and invited to the other by Virtue. The choice of Herakles is before us all.

It is a mistake to regard any ordinance of the Church apart from the natural needs and instincts of mankind. Our Lord tells us, for example, that the Sabbath was
made for man, and S. Paul tells us to think first of that which is natural and then of that which is spiritual. It is therefore very instructive to see how very general the feeling has been that boys at a certain age should be taught to realise their duties and responsibilities, and how often with this has been combined some solemn ceremony of dedication to those duties. Of this, perhaps the most beautiful instance is the enrolment of boys as citizens at Athens. As soon as they were old enough to undertake that responsibility they were admitted by a religious ceremony. They took an oath before the gods that they would never disgrace their arms, or desert their comrades; that they would fight for their country to the death, obey its laws, leave it not worse, but better, than they found it; and, above all, reverence the religion of their forefathers.

Chivalry in its ideal presents us with even more instructive symbolism. The candidate for knighthood fasted and confessed his sins and passed the night before his initiation in prayer and watching over his arms. In the morning he bathed and was dressed in new robes, and took before the altar a vow to defend churches, widows, and orphans, and to fight for the faith. He then received from the priest his consecrated sword, with which some prince or noble dubbed him knight.

There is undoubtedly in this something which unites itself with a boy's first and most natural ideas about Confirmation. He recognises an ideal of honour and of bravery; he recognises a call to service; he wants to leave the world better, and not worse, for his having lived in it. He is prepared to stand up before his fellows, and in the presence of God to dedicate his life to the highest that he knows, and then to kneel humbly and pray that God will help him to fulfil his promise. There is in an Englishman an unwillingness to undertake anything
which he does not understand and mean to carry through. ‘Pactum serva’ is the motto of the greatest of our kings, and it represents, we are proud to think, an instinct in our people.

But in this natural view, as we may call it, of Confirmation, we have as yet had no glimpse of the fact that Confirmation is a sacramental rite of the Church. It is something much more than a convenient expression of a natural instinct. It is a means whereby God has seen fit to convey to us a gift. We must not think first of what we can do, but of what God has done. God always comes to us before we come to Him. The choice between right and wrong is not as it were an open question. God has chosen us to be His children before He asks us to make our choice for Him. We love Him because He first loved us.

It is true that in the Confirmation Service we are told that we come to confirm the promises made in our name, but we speak more usually of coming to be confirmed. And this is right. We must think first of God’s gift. At our Confirmation God gives to us the special help of the Holy Spirit. He gives us new intellectual and moral powers which make perfect the power which we received at Baptism. We must be sure we really desire this help, prepare to receive it, and then realise how great is God’s claim on us to show our gratitude for it. That is what preparation for Confirmation means.

It involves:—

1. The preparation of the mind: to try and understand the story of the great things God has done for us, the exceeding love of our Master and only Saviour Jesus Christ dying for us. The reading of the story of His life and death, the study of His perfect example, should be a great part of our care. The more clearly we understand this, the more perfectly shall we proceed to
INTRODUCTION

2. The preparation of the heart. The thought of what God has done for us must lead to the thought of what we must do for Him. The story of His love must create love in our hearts in return, the loving desire to serve and please Him in all things. We must therefore ask ourselves whether our desire is:

   a. Sincere and thorough. We deceive ourselves often and know little of our own failings. We are in danger of clinging to some one evil habit which we find it difficult to give up, or to neglect some one special duty which happens to be particularly unpleasant. We must be honest with ourselves and with God, and not fancy that we desire what we do not desire or hate what we really want to keep.

   b. Definite and practical. We are tempted to admire heroism in other people, and to hope vaguely that we may follow noble examples some day. We want to secure the results without paying the price, and to win the crown without the struggle. We must mark out definite temptations to be resisted, definite duties to fulfil. We must 'do the next thing,' and make the right choice in the difficulties which meet us hour by hour.

   c. Constant. We are easily attracted by what is novel. The great test of character is dogged perseverance.

   d. Progressive. It must begin with a feeling and a loving desire, but it must not end in emotion. There must be practical result in duties done, evil habits conquered, progress gained. God will not reject us because we have not yet gained a complete conquest over sin, nor will He reject us because again and again we fail to realise our hopes. But He does ask sincerity, and we may be quite certain that if we are making no progress at all we are not sincere. It cannot be God's fault, it
must be ours; it is not that God fails to fulfil His promise, but that we are not sincere in our prayers which claim it.

3. Consequently, beside the preparation of mind and heart, there must be the gradual discipline of the will: we pray that we may not only perceive and know what things we ought to do, but also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil them.

"We have been obliged to anticipate much which will presently receive farther explanation. It was necessary to make clear the two sides of Confirmation—God's gift and our obligation—and the threefold preparation of mind and heart and will which will enable us to receive the gift and to carry out the duty."