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A look at Medieval Confirmation

by Mervyn Duffy

The Catholic Church has been celebrating sacraments for a very long time. When dealing with liturgical history, it is often difficult to visualise precisely what an earlier form of the celebration of a sacrament actually looked like. This article endeavours to do this with respect to the late medieval celebration of the sacrament of Confirmation thanks to the account provided by Spanish pastoral manual from the early 1330s and a remarkable Netherlandish painting from the 1440s. The close agreement between sources from different countries and centuries suggests a widespread, stable form of the celebration of Confirmation.



Figure 1

The Medieval Text

The text is *Manipulus curatorum* - Handbook for Curates - a manual for pastoral ministry prepared by one Guido of Monte Rochen. Thomas Tentler, in commenting on Guido, contrasted him with roughly contemporary original thinkers like Meister Eckhart, Dante, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. He did not earn fame like theirs because he was not a pioneer. He was an uncontentious and safe authority which leads Tentler to assert:

Today, historians searching for the ever elusive "lived religion" of late medieval and early modern Europe value him precisely for those mundane qualities.¹

This avoidance of novelty and practical summaries of well-accepted thinkers made the *Manipulus* a standard text for clerical education and parish life for the next three centuries. Over 250 manuscript copies survive from before the age of printing, and once that technology was established, it appeared in 122 printed editions. The Handbook did the medieval equivalent of "going viral", and is thus both an evidence of "lived religion" and a significant influence on it.

As one would expect with a pastoral manual there is a treatment of "the sacraments and their administration." With regard to the recipients of Confirmation, the *Manipulus* says:

All the baptised, both men and women, ought to receive the sacrament of confirmation because it is different for spiritual soldiers than for worldly soldiers. Whereas a worldly army ought not to receive women, but only men, because women are not suited for bodily fighting, yet the spiritual army can receive all without distinction, both men and women, because both men and women are suited for fighting spiritually against persecutors of the faith. But spiritual soldiery is given in confirmation, which is why the sacrament can be received by both men and women. And that is what the Apostle says, "In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female" as if he wanted to say that for Christ there is no difference between male and female.

But are children to be confirmed? The answer is yes, as soon as they begin to have the use of reason, because then they are fit for confessing the faith of Christ. And in this sacrament, the Holy Spirit is given for strength, so that the faith of Christ may be boldly received and confessed.²

The dominant metaphor that Guido uses to interpret the sacrament of confirmation is "the soldier of Christ." Confirmation equips the recipient for spiritual warfare. A limitation of this metaphor is immediately apparent; it does not fit half the recipients of the sacrament. In Guido's world "soldiers" was a category that excluded women. He argues his way round this obstacle by appealing to a spiritual army which differs from a worldly army in that it can receive all persons without distinction. That this is what governs spiritual realities he argues from Galatians 3:28 and suggests that it is as if St Paul "wanted to say that for Christ there is no difference between male and female." Thus a sexist imagery is defended by a strong statement of the equal Christian

dignity of male and female, which Guido, perhaps trapped by his times, makes as a *hypothetical* statement.

The age envisaged for the reception of the sacrament is not entirely clear, and probably varied, but the age of reason is given as the lower limit. The "age of reason" is when a child can assume moral responsibility. After their seventh birthday a child is assumed to have attained to this age unless there is some other developmental factor which keeps them as "an innocent."

How the Sacrament of Confirmation was Celebrated

Here is what the *Manipulus* has on the rite of confirmation

The rite of the sacrament of confirmation is that when someone is confirmed, he is anointed with the sign of the cross with chrism by the bishop on his forehead under the form of words given above, namely, "I sign you, etc." And this rite is appropriate. The reason is that in the rite of a sacrament, the power and effect of the sacrament ought to be signified. Now the power and effect of the sacrament of confirmation are that through it the Holy spirit is given for boldly confession the faith of Christ, through it, the one confirmed is made a fighter for Christ. And this is signified in the rite of this sacrament, for through anointing it is signified that by confirmation the one confirmed is made a fighter for Christ, for long ago fighters were anointed.

And through the other [part of the rite], it is signified that the one confirmed ought to boldly confess the faith of Christ. For one can be hindered from confessing Christ on account of two things, namely, on account of shame or on account of fear. Against the first, the cross is made with chrism on the forehead of the confirmed, so that, it is easy to see, he should not blush to confess the faith of Christ, because shame first appears on the forehead, since when a person is ashamed, the forehead begins to turn red first. Therefore the forehead is anointed against the blush of shame. But against fear, the sign of the cross is also made on the forehead because when a person is afraid, his forehead and even his whole face begin to turn pale. Therefore, the one confirmed is armed against fear with the sign of the cross.

The slap on the cheek which is given to the one confirmed does not belong to the sacrament of necessity, but is given only to aid the memory. And the place of anointing ought to be wrapped with a clean linen cloth on account of reverence for the sacrament.³

The Theological Basis

Guido, as indicated above, is not an innovator, his theology is an unpacking of the ideas of Thomas Aquinas as can be seen by comparing his text with that of Thomas writing in the century before:

The perfection of spiritual strength consists properly in a man's daring to confess the faith of Christ in the presence of anyone at all, and in a man's being not withdrawn therefrom either by confusion or by terror, for strength drives out inordinate terror. Therefore, the sacrament by which spiritual strength is conferred on the one born again makes him in some sense a front-

line fighter for the faith of Christ. And because fighters under a prince carry his insignia, they who receive the sacrament of confirmation are signed with the sign of Christ; this is the sign of the cross by which He fought and conquered. This sign they receive on the forehead as a sign that without a blush they publicly confess the faith of Christ.⁴

Guido's guiding metaphor is reasonably elastic. 'Soldier for Christ' becomes 'fighter for Christ' when he wants to give an explanation for the use of oil. The responsibility that is laid on the confirmed is "to boldly confess the faith of Christ" which seems to abandon the military metaphor entirely. The idea of 'signification' is key to his sacramental theology. In each element of the rite he looks for a 'similitude'. Hugh of St Victor (1096-1141) had defined a sacrament as:

A corporeal or material element set before the external senses, representing by similitude, signifying by institution and containing by sanctification some invisible and spiritual grace.⁵

Hence Guido is looking for a symbolic connection between the corporeal or material elements of the rite and the spiritual effect that the sacrament produces. He is forced to give an "explanation" of the symbol because the experience of it has been so diminished by the minute quantity involved. The tiny bit of oil administered is, by way of the full-body anointing of a boxer, linked to being strengthened to fight for Christ by boldly confessing the faith. That it is the forehead which is signed is deemed significant because of the beautifully observed and very bodily reason that the face shows shame and fear,⁶ and that the sacrament, by the power of the cross arms against both those impediments to bold Christian witness.

The gesture of the slap on the cheek probably indicated a willingness to receive blows in defence of one's Lord. Guido knows of the custom, does not consider it an essential part of the rite, and sees it as an 'aid to the memory', which may say something about the education system of his time.

His description of the rite could apply to a modern Confirmation ceremony⁷ apart from the detail introduced in the last sentence "the place of anointing ought to be wrapped with a clean linen cloth". By context, this too, is not part of the essential material of the rite, but a custom that shows reverence for the sacrament, in particular for the sacramental element of oil on the forehead of the recipient.

The Medieval Image

Reconstructing how this linen cloth might be applied is facilitated by my second source, a detail from Rogier Van Der Weyden's *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece*. This triptych, now in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp was intended to face a congregation from the top of an altar. It is likely that it was commissioned by Bishop Jean Chevrot of Tournai, Rogier's home diocese in Belgium, and that the celebrant in the Confirmation scene is Bishop Chevrot himself. Each of the seven sacraments is depicted being celebrated within a grand imagined church. The Sacraments are at smaller scale than the representation

of the crucifixion which dominates the foreground and centre of the altarpiece. It is a strongly theological artwork, deliberately posing the sacraments about the Calvary event from which they draw their power and efficacy. It is not the record of a particular celebration of the sacraments, but given that it is commissioned by a Bishop, who is himself depicted, it is presumably "true to life".

Confirmation is shown as being celebrated on the left hand side of the church, between Baptism and Reconciliation. The Baptism which is of an infant is celebrated by a priest wearing choir dress topped with a stole. The celebrant of Confirmation is the Bishop wearing his mitre and a magnificent cope. He is shown anointing the brow of a youth of perhaps twelve years of age. There are four other newly-confirmed visible in the painting, all youthful, within the 7-14 age range.

Reverence for the Material Element

On the right-hand side of the bishop confirming is another tonsured cleric in choir dress "wrapping the place of anointing with a clean linen cloth". The fastening of the cloth

around the head does not look very dignified, but the three young confirmed walking away are clearly marked out by this sign of the sacrament just celebrated. We can imagine their families showing them off as "newly confirmed" with their linen headbands being worn with pride.

In the altarpiece, in all four sacraments involving the use of oil, the celebrant is shown using a stylus to anoint with the oil rather than using his own hand which would be the usual contemporary method. The quantity of oil being applied by this method looks very small. This supports the contention that medieval clerics were 'minimalist' in their use of sacramental matter, and their liturgical instructions stress the minimum required for validity rather than the ample symbols that make for good liturgy. Guido mentions "reverence for the sacrament" as the motive for the headbands and, in the altarpiece, the range of elaborate oil containers, the consistent method of dispensing it without the celebrant touching it, and the care shown to wipe it after the anointing of the sick, all suggest a reverence for the power and spiritual potency of the oil.



Figure 2
Baptism, Confirmation and Penance – detail from The Seven Sacrament Altarpiece by Rogier van der Weyden (1445-1450)

In his description of Extreme Unction, Guido instructs:

When someone sick is anointed, there ought to be some servant there who wipes the place of anointing with a linen cloth, and afterward the cloth should be burned.⁸

This detail, too, is represented by Rogier van der Weyden.

In the Anointing scene, there is a priest celebrant with an elaborate oil stock using a stylus to apply the oil to back of the hand of a dying person. An assisting cleric is ready to wipe the place of anointing with either a piece of bread or a small cloth, moreover he holds beneath the hand of the sick person a platter ready to catch any oil drops that may fall. Over his arm is clean piece of linen. It is a reverence for the oil similar to that which moderns show to the consecrated host.



Figure 3
A cleric ready to wipe the oil of Anointing

This exaggerated concern for the sacred power of the oil runs against its use as a symbol. Oil naturally soothes, penetrates and heals when it is left in contact with the skin. The dying person would experience the physical contact of a robust anointing with a good quantity of oil and that experience would communicate to them the reality of the sacrament. Guido is so concerned for the invisible power and potency of the oil that he does not allow for its visible and tangible effects to be experienced – no sooner is it applied than it is wiped off.

Conclusion

Van der Weyden's painting makes it easy for us to visualise the administration of the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Netherlands in the 15th Century and the close correspondence with the description given by Guido of Monte Rochen suggests that the sacrament is administered in the same way across Europe for at least a couple of hundred years. In contemplating the altarpiece and considering the Handbook for Curates we can glimpse the rationale and practice of medieval Confirmation, its integration into the sacramental system, and its inner logic.

Mervyn Duffy is a Marist Priest who lectures in theology and is the Dean of Studies at Good Shepherd College in Auckland, NZ. He has a research interest in how faith is expressed in, and nurtured by art. He is the author of *How Language, Ritual and Sacraments Work* (2005) and co-author of *Verguet's Sketchbook* (2014).

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¹ Guido of Monte Rochen, *Handbook for Curates: A Late Medieval Manual on Pastoral Ministry*, trans. Anne Thayer, Catholic University of America Press: Washington, D.C. (2011), viii.

² Guido of Monte Rochen, *Handbook for Curates*, 40-1.

³ Guido of Monte Rochen, *Handbook for Curates*, 41-2.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, 60. Thomas does have a much fuller treatment of Confirmation in the *Summa Theologiae* III, 72.

⁵ Hugh of St Victor, *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei*, P. IX, c.2; PL 176, 317b.

⁶ The observation "people who feel disgraced blush, and those who fear death turn pale" comes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, iv, 9, by way of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 72, 9.

⁷ There is variation today in the age that Confirmation is celebrated and in the order of celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation. There are dioceses that have taken up the patristic model of Confirmation – the restored order – as more closely aligned to Baptism and Eucharist, and so administer Confirmation at about the age of seven. There are dioceses where Confirmation is generally administered in the teen years; after the celebration of First Reconciliation and First Eucharist. *The Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* has the sacraments in the order Baptism, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Eucharist.

⁸ Guido of Monte Rochen, *Handbook for Curates*, 123.