

HISTORICAL STUDIES, II

Topic: Sacraments at an Impasse: Confirmation and Confession
Presenters: Eugene Finnegan, Calumet College of St. Joseph
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In "The Sacramental Practice of Confirmation at an Impasse," Eugene Finnegan reviewed the history of the sacrament of confirmation in its main points. During the early Middle Ages in the West, it became distinct from baptism and reserved to the bishop. A key part in developing the theology of the rite in its new form was played by Faustus of Riez at the end of the fifth century. By the time of the scholastic theologians of the thirteenth century and later, it was as if the sacrament had always been celebrated in this way and with the same meaning. Only in the last century, with the discovery of other and earlier practices and theology, did fault-lines appear in the Catholic celebration of confirmation. The RCIA exposed questions about its place in Christian initiation, and this translated into arguments about the proper order in which children should receive the sacraments and the best age for the celebration of confirmation. From the vigorous discussion that ensued, it appears that we are not yet beyond this impasse.

Annemarie Kidder threw an ecumenical light on the current impasse in the sacrament of reconciliation with her paper, "The Impasse of Private Confession: Revisiting the Church of the Sixteenth Century." Prior to the Reformation, the practice of confession to a priest had dropped off in favor of alternative ways of penance. Three of the Reformers tried to restore some form of confession. Luther at first retained penance, not as a sacrament but as a proclamation of the forgiveness given through faith in Christ, a proclamation that any Christian could make to another. A role for the pastor remained in examining parishioners before communion. Bucer in Strasburg held all church members responsible for caring for each other's souls, and favored public confession of sins. Calvin emphasized the pastor's role in examining all before communion, sometimes involving a second homily at that point in the liturgy; but earlier in his rite, there was a communal confession of sins, a period of silence, and absolution. On the Catholic side, the Jesuits combined confession with individual direction of penitents. This history shows that confession has not always required a strictly sacramental venue.

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