

The Rite of First Communion prior to Confirmation

This is a refreshing of a document I prepared in 2019. It has been updated and expanded a bit.

The Rite of First Communion prior to Confirmation is nothing new for the Lutheran Church. Historically the church has communed children before the Rite of Confirmation. Even our own 'Agenda' for the hymnal (that's the book used by pastors for performing all the various rites and ceremonies of the Church), the *Lutheran Service Book*, has the rite of First Communion Prior to Confirmation (p.25ff), developed and approved by the Synod in Convention, indicating that this practice is gaining acceptance in the LCMS churches. As we shall see below, this is not a new practice but an old one.

We believe, teach, and confess at St. Paul's that in receiving the Lord's Supper we receive the very body & blood of Christ our Lord (Matthew 26:26,28). We believe this is one of the many gifts that the Lord has given to His Church for our benefit. Therefore, if receiving the Lord's Supper is a benefit for the Christian, whereby we receive from Christ the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, and the strengthening of faith, **shouldn't we be preparing our children to receive it as soon as possible?**

The answer is simple enough: **"Yes!"** But how do we do it? How do we make sure that a child has been properly trained and is able to articulate what it is received in the Sacrament? After all, Paul does warn in his epistle to the Corinthians, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." (1 Cor 11:28-29) According to our confessions, Luther suggests in the Large Catechism that one must know the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed, and the Lord's Prayer *by heart* before receiving the Lord's Supper. So, there is a baseline for knowing key elements of the faith before communing.

But we also learn from the Small Catechism that reception of the Lord's Supper is not based on knowing enough or being good enough. Instead, concerning worthy reception of the Lord's Supper, the Small Catechism teaches that a "person is truly worthy and well prepared (to receive the Lord's Supper) who has faith in these words: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.'" It's faith that grabs hold of the promises of God. Faith trusts what God says, what He does. Can children have faith and believe in those words, *"Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins"*? Yes! Can the faith of a child discern (that is recognize) that Jesus is in the bread and wine because He said so? Yes! But the age when a child can articulate and confess that faith varies, depending on their maturity and spiritual growth.

The child (or any person of any age) also has to be able to make a basic confession of sins. For the Supper gives forgiveness, grace, and mercy, so any communicant approaches the chancel with a repentant heart, a sorrow for sin, and an acknowledgment of their sinful condition. That takes maturity and a burgeoning of self-awareness.

What Is the Process of Preparation for One to Receive the Supper?

First of all, prayer. Pray that they would grow in the knowledge of Christ our Lord, and be guided by the Holy Spirit in all truth and wisdom according to the very Word of God. Then *teach your child*. Yes, you teach your child the basics. Luther's Small Catechism states: "*As the head of the household* should teach them in a simple way to his household." So, teach your children and your spouse, as well as familiarize yourself with the following things:

- The Ten Commandments
- The Apostle's Creed
- The Lord's Prayer

Worship weekly as a family, go to Sunday school and Bible study as well. *And once your child has memorized the things of the faith listed above*, set up a time with the pastor for your child to attend the following sessions:

- The child and parent(s) attend two sessions with Pastor on First Communion
- The child and parent(s) attend two sessions with Pastor on Holy Communion

Once your child has done all of the above, they will be examined by the Pastor, along with the parent(s). After this examination it will be determined if your child is ready to come to the table to receive the blessings of our Lord. Our goal is for all of God's children to be able to come to the table, but in coming we want to make sure that the children discern the things they are receiving and not necessarily taking it to their harm or in a frivolous manner.

Is there an age limit or requirement?

No, there is no age limit. We aren't focused on age but we are focused on faith. If your child can learn the things of God and *answer for the faith when questioned*, then they may be welcomed to the table of the Lord. Children, then, are examined and invited to the Table *on a case-by-case basis*. After all, does not our Lord say, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 19:14)

Does this practice replace the Rite of Confirmation? No! Catechesis is *lifelong and ongoing*. Further instruction will follow, leading to a confirmation of one's baptismal vows. The instruction begun at home should continue, as well as formal catechesis by the pastor. The Rite of Confirmation is a different rite, with different goals. It is a public confirming of the vows, and a public profession of one's fidelity unto death, with the help of God. So, confirmation should occur when one is much older, and able to take such a vow. First communion has nothing to do with confirmation, frankly.

Some of you may believe me to be mistaken. "When I grew up, people were confirmed in eighth grade, and then they would take communion." But this is an innovation, and not a good one. Sometimes it's helpful to go back to the roots and fathers of our denomination. So, what was the typical age of first communion during the Reformation? We find this out from Johannes Bugenhagen, who was Luther's pastor. He mentioned, in passing, that those who received first communion "were little children of about *eight years or less*." (Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Section 104) So, the oldest children

receiving first communion were about eight, with no mention of how old the youngest were. Perhaps, we can think about first communion this way. If the Lord's Supper is what we say it is, **Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins**, then we should be communing as early as possible. For it is not only we who continue to need Christ and His forgiveness in His Supper, but also the young. Maybe putting it rhetorically will help: *if the body and blood are a gift, why would we withhold this gift until people were in eighth grade?* In all of this, the goal of the pastor is to come alongside parents and their children to help to inculcate the faith. The pastor is also taking the long view of the child—will they be engrafted in a life of faith and continue to receive the forgiveness of Christ to hand down to their children. This is best done through faithful practices at home and in worship.