

Q&A: The Validity of Confirmations Performed by Schismatic Priests

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 2 August 2022

Q. All bishops have the ability to administer confirmation validly, but a priest can only do so if he is granted the necessary authorization. Orthodox bishops are not in communion with the Catholic Church, and so they cannot delegate the power to confirm to Orthodox priests, but the Church has always recognized the confirmations performed by the latter as valid. How is this possible? Does it imply that the Orthodox are in some kind of “partial communion” with the Church by having validly ordained clergy?

A. It is a *de fide* teaching of the Church that the ordinary minister of confirmation is the bishop. As the Council of Trent stated: “If any one saith, that the ordinary minister of holy confirmation is not the bishop alone, but any simple priest soever; let him be anathema.”¹ The reason why it makes sense to reserve confirmation to the bishop is that confirmation is the sacrament by which a baptized person becomes a soldier of Christ authorized to wage spiritual warfare, and the bishops are the generals in the Church’s army.

That being said, it is also theologically certain that a priest can be an extraordinary minister of confirmation if this power is “conferred by the common law or by a special apostolic indult.”² This shows that the reservation of confirmation to bishops is not a matter of the priests lacking something in the power of orders, but rather a question of jurisdiction, the granting of which actualizes the radical capacity to confirm that the priest already possesses. Without the permission of the supreme authority of the Church, whether given directly by the pope himself or delegated by another superior according to canon law, a priest cannot exercise this power validly or licitly. While the power is “a constituent part of the power of consecration received by the priest in Holy Order,” it “can be used only in virtue of the papal power of the Keys.”³

Given that it is *de fide* that the ordinary minister of confirmation is the bishop, we can conclude that the usual restriction of the priest’s power to confirm is not a matter of ecclesiastical law, but part of the divine institution of the sacrament. It was the will of Our Lord that bishops be ordinary ministers of confirmation and priests only extraordinary ministers; the latter’s power can only be exercised in dependence upon the supreme authority of the Church. Because an Orthodox bishop is not in communion with the Church, he cannot possess ecclesiastical office, and consequently, his priests—who are, *materially* speaking, his subordinates—cannot receive that jurisdiction from the pope through him. This means that the validity of the confirmations performed by Orthodox priests comes not from their own “hierarchy” itself, which exists only materially but not formally, but rather, from “a tacit privilege of the Apostolic See.”⁴

Far from constituting evidence of some kind of “partial communion” possessed by the Orthodox, the actual mechanism that validates the confirmations performed by Orthodox priests actually reinforces the fact that they are in schism. The existence of validly ordained clergy

1 Council of Trent, Session VII, *On Confirmation*, Canon III.

2 L. Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1974), 369.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

within the Orthodox schism does not render these so-called “Churches” any closer to the true Catholic Church than, for example, a Protestant sect that does not have any valid ordinations. All heretical and schismatic sects, regardless of the number of true teachings or valid sacraments that they retain, are necessarily outside of the true Church, and there is no such thing as “partial communion.” If a person or group does not accept the Catholic faith, all of the sacraments, and ecclesiastical governance, then there is a lack of communion.

While so-called Orthodoxy may be closer to Catholicism than Protestantism in terms of the number of truths it teaches and the number of valid sacraments it possesses, this does not change the fact that both are outside the Church. To say otherwise would be a “doctrinal aberration” claiming that Catholicism differs from other religions “not as the true is distinct from the false, but only as the plenitude is distinct from incomplete participations of itself.”⁵ When dirty water and clean water are mixed together, they do not yield “partially clean” water, but dirty water: likewise, religions that juxtapose truth and error are not “partially true,” but wholly false. The Orthodox are not in any kind of “partial communion” with the Catholic Church, and the validity of the confirmations performed by their schismatic priests are valid by virtue of a tacit privilege granted by the Apostolic See.

5 J. C. Fenton, *The Catholic Church and Salvation: In the Light of Recent Pronouncements by the Holy See* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1958), 47.