

When should my child begin receiving Holy Communion?

By The Reverend Andrew O'Dell, Senior Associate, St. Philip's Church

On April 14, Amy Watson Smith and the Rev. Ryan Streett will offer a child + parent workshop to prepare children to receive their first communion.

The topic of “first communion” raises an obvious question: “How old does my child need to be to receive?” Here at St. Philip’s, we recognize and honor two traditions.

Prior to the 1979 revision of *Book of Common Prayer*, children in the Anglican church customarily did not receive communion until they had been confirmed. The English word “confirmation” comes from a Greek word that would perhaps be better translated as “to strengthen.” Confirmation is that moment in a person’s life when, having reached the age of accountability, he confirms the very same faith in Jesus Christ that his parents professed when he was baptized as an infant. God’s Word teaches us that it is faith in Jesus Christ, not the act of baptism, that opens the door to salvation (Acts 16:30-33). Again, baptism is not magic: the mere act of baptizing someone (infant or otherwise) does not save. It is faith in Jesus and his cross, and a commitment to follow him as Savior and Lord, that makes a person a Christian. Baptism is simply the outward and visible sign that follows, once a person has made the faith commitment. However, an infant is incapable of making such a commitment, and, for this reason, infant Baptism is only a first step. Once a child has reached the age of accountability, he must confirm this first step by his own mature commitment to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord. Confirmation is the outward and visible sign of this commitment. This is why the church’s practice was to withhold communion from children until they were old enough to be confirmed: confirmation is the public, formal acknowledgement that, in the words of that old spiritual, “I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.” Some families choose to follow this tradition of communion-after-confirmation today.

The second tradition in our church arose after the 1979 revision of *Book of Common Prayer* and its emphasis on Baptism as the rite of full initiation into the Christian community. With this stronger emphasis on baptism, children were permitted to receive Holy Communion once baptized and duly instructed in the meaning and significance of the bread and the wine. While this practice was new for the Anglican “branch” of the “Christian family tree,” other “branches” (the Greek Orthodox church, for example) permit infants to receive the sacrament as soon as they have been baptized. After all, Jesus himself instituted the sacrament of Baptism (Matthew 28:16- 20), and nowhere in God’s Word are we told to “go and be confirmed!” Furthermore, as any parent can observe, children have an immense capacity to understand the things of God. We adults are often taken aback by the faith of our children, but Christ himself said, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Mark 10:15). I have encountered children who have demonstrated a deeper understanding of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for our sin than some adults who’ve spent their entire lives in the church! So, even a child can be taught to understand what it means to be a sinner, saved by Christ and his cross. Even a child can be taught that when we receive the bread and the wine, we are remembering Jesus’ last supper, remembering that he gave his body and blood for us, remembering that we are dependent upon God to nourish us daily, remembering that Jesus promises us of a future day when we will be given a mansion in the father’s house (John 14:2 KJV) and a place at his table during the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6-9). For this reason, some parents, recognizing their children’s basic understanding of the

meaning of Holy Communion, choose to instruct and prepare their children to partake prior to being confirmed (assuming, of course, that they have been baptized).

Having said this, there is no question that as we grow and mature in our faith, we are called to grow into a *mature* understanding of Holy Communion, its meaning and purpose. We are called to understand that it was instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper, that it is inextricably linked to the Passover in the Old Testament, that it is an outward and visible sign both of our communion with God but also our communion with the body of believers. We must learn to “discern the body” (1 Corinthians 11:17-34), so that every time we receive the bread and wine, we ask ourselves, “Am I guilty of withholding forgiveness from anyone? Of holding a grudge? Of sowing seeds of division? Must I make some amends before I partake of this bread and this cup?” My point is this: even if our children partake of the Lord’s Supper with a basic understanding of what it means, they are called to grow up into full maturity, that they might come to a mature understanding of the Lord’s Supper, and thereby partake more fully of it as adults in the faith.

So, there are two traditions that we observe and honor within our community. *Both* are equally valued, respected and honored by the clergy of this parish. We encourage parents, as the chief catechists (spiritual teachers/leaders) of their families, prayerfully to consider which tradition is best for their family. If you should wish to talk through any of these issues, please know that we would be more than happy to schedule a time to do so. We also recommend the booklet, “What Christian Parents Should Know About Infant Baptism” by John P. Sartelle, which is available in the church office.

May God continue to open our eyes to see the great wonder and mystery of Holy Communion, whereby we are brought face to face with the means of our salvation and the hope of our future glory!