

Visitation

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

This sermon emphasizes the importance of personal dealing with individual souls during the Confirmation season, and provides practical guidance on how to prepare candidates for this sacrament.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:15

Topics: "Spiritual Guidance", "Christian Discipleship"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas emphasizes the importance of the Confirmation season as a significant opportunity for clergy to have personal dealings with individual souls, especially at an impressionable time in the candidates' lives. He stresses the need for clergy to be spiritually prepared themselves to guide candidates effectively towards a genuine personal connection with Christ. The preparation for Confirmation involves more than just instruction; it should also focus on inspiration and personal influence, aiming for a true encounter with Christ as Savior and Master. The process includes personal interviews, careful consideration of devotional life, and detailed instruction to ensure candidates understand the significance of Confirmation and are spiritually ready for the experience.

Transcript

Section 1. Introduction The season of Confirmation provides one of the finest, if not the very finest opportunity afforded to the clergyman for personal dealing with individual souls. For the most part, the age of the candidates is in our favour, because Confirmation is held at an impressionable time of life. The personal contact with the candidate provides an occasion for individual work of almost incomparable value. Other Churches frequently testify to the need and value of some such opportunity with the young people of the congregation.

Be it ours to realize the splendid possibilities of our position and to make the best use we can of them. We shall do this, first of all, by making sure of our own personal life. Unless the clergyman is spiritually fit for the training of his candidates, the whole preparation will suffer. There is scarcely any occasion when the clergyman needs to be more "thoroughly furnished" for the work of getting into the closest possible touch with individual souls on behalf of Christ. Another way of making the most of Confirmation time is by remembering that the preparation must be very much more than instruction.

It must extend to inspiration, for we must ever keep in view the definite object of personal influence. The crowning purpose of Confirmation is the genuine personal contact of the soul with Christ as Saviour and Master. No absolute law is possible as to the age for Confirmation. It will vary with circumstances. The

Service speaks of "years of discretion," and the force of the word "hereafter" in the opening address points in the same direction. It must never be forgotten that in the English Church Confirmation has two sides, not one only.

The candidate "confirms," and "is confirmed". Among the poor there will be found frequent need of correcting the impression that obtains too often in regard to the merely passive act of Confirmation. Sometimes when a young girl is asked why she wishes to be confirmed, she will reply, "Because mother thought I had better be done," as though Confirmation were something like vaccination. A careful emphasis on the twofold aspect of the rite will effectually prevent any such misconception.

Most of our English Bishops seem to favour the age of fourteen, and we believe this will be found as a rule a very useful period. Speaking for myself, I would not go below fourteen if I could possibly help it; though I am well I aware that in certain cases where Christian instruction and influence at home have been of the right kind, the age of thirteen is quite satisfactory. But generally, I have a strong preference for fifteen for girls and sixteen for boys, since the former develop earlier than the latter.

Even though, as it is often urged, boys and also girls go out to work, and sometimes go away from home before these ages and should therefore be confirmed earlier, it does not necessarily follow that an earlier Confirmation would guarantee the necessary discretion and intelligence without which it is impossible for the candidate to enter fully into the real meaning of the Service. But every clergyman will judge this for himself, and will act according to what he believes to be the best way of obtaining the highest spiritual results.

Section 2. The Preparation.

The approach of Confirmation will naturally be introduced by announcements in Church, together with a sermon on the spiritual meaning and importance of the rite. At the close of this sermon an invitation should be given to candidates to send in their names, and it will be found helpful to follow this with the distribution of a leaflet, stating the hours of the classes, and providing a slip at the foot, which can be filled up, torn off, and returned to the clergy, signifying which hour will be most convenient to attend. Such a leaflet is essential in a large parish where there are several classes, and a variety of needs has to be met.

I. The Classes.

What should be the length of the preparation? At least ten weeks. An experienced and honoured clergyman of my acquaintance is in favour of fourteen, but this appears to me to be a little too long, and it is hardly likely that the interest of the classes can, as a rule, be kept up for just over three months.

For the most part, the boys and young men will be taken by the Curate, and he will certainly be well advised to separate rigidly between the two sections and have distinct classes for them. The girls will naturally fall to the Vicar to prepare, and it almost goes without saying that great care and discretion must be exercised. It has often been proved useful in the case of a young unmarried Vicar to take the boys and girls together, and then to obtain the help of an experienced lady to deal spiritually with the girls. That fine and able pastor, the late Canon Robinson of Marylebone, and then of Birmingham, once told me that he always made a point of having his classes composed of both sexes. In the case of older men being confirmed, they should undoubtedly be taken alone, for they are as reluctant to attend a class with young men, as young men are to go with boys. Adult Confirmations are often times of special opportunity; and if all our Bishops realized this, they would never confirm an adult with young people, but instead, have a

Confirmation Service in a cathedral, or some prominent parish church, for adults only. This would be of the greatest possible value, not only as a spiritual opportunity, but as a witness on behalf of the whole Church. Some Bishops are already doing this, but it would be a great matter if all adult Confirmations could be kept rigidly separate from the Confirmation of younger people.

In the conduct of the Classes care should be taken to make them definitely spiritual and personal. They should lead up to decision each time, whatever the subject may be. A hymn to open is helpful, if found practicable. The duration of the meeting should not be longer than forty-five minutes, and the gathering should be as bright and hearty as possible. The clergyman should be at the door at the close, to shake hands with the candidates as they leave. He should invite inquiries on any points arising out of his teaching, and, above everything, he should put his very best into this work of preparation, the best that his mind and heart can produce. He will never regret it; he will always thank God for the time and strength given to Confirmation preparation.

II. Work between the Classes.

Two things have to be avoided. We must beware of giving the candidates too much to do, thus making the preparation burdensome, especially to those who, whether in service or in business, have not too much time of their own. We must equally beware of giving them too much writing. Some of them may not be able to write very well, and they will be reluctant to show their lack of knowledge, whether in writing or in spelling. Then again, there is a constant fear of the preparation being merely intellectual; truth for the mind only. Yet something is undoubtedly needed between the meetings of the Class. The instructive side will best be provided by means of that admirable little booklet of Canon Robinson's, *Outline Lectures on Confirmation*. [Elliot Stock, 1d.] The material is divided into sections, and blank spaces are left for the candidate to find, and answer the text. These Lectures can easily be made the basis of the instruction for the next class; and it will be found that if the clergyman tells the candidates beforehand how much to do, the work will be easily accomplished and will be ample for the purpose. Later on in the preparation the books will be shown to the clergyman to see whether the texts have been found and the work done. The devotional side of the candidate's life between the classes will also need careful consideration. It may be that habits of prayer have been relaxed and something of guidance on this point will have to be given. A very useful little book for devotional purposes is *My Confirmation*, by Everard. [Nisbet & Co., 3d.] A copy given to each candidate, with suggestions how to use it, will prove spiritually helpful. A very useful method, blending both the devotional and instructive aspects of the work between the classes, is used by Canon Howitt, of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. He provides a paper of material for study each week, together with a slip to be filled up and signed by the candidate, saying that the information given on the paper has been thoroughly studied, perfectly understood, and personally accepted. I should much like to see Canon Howitt's plan made generally known in England. Another little book, entitled *Preparation for Confirmation*, by Canon Macnutt, is intended as a manual of instruction for candidates, and it would be possible to use this in connection with our own preparation. The only thing is that this, though full of useful and suggestive teaching, does not give the candidate anything to do but reading, and I venture to hope that Canon Macnutt will follow Canon Robinson's example in future editions and omit the verses from the Scripture references in order that the candidate may have the work of finding them from the Bible itself.

III. Personal Interviews.

About the sixth or seventh week of the preparation it will be found useful to ask each candidate to send in a brief letter or statement, answering the question, "Why I wish to be Confirmed." This is for the purpose of

bringing to a point the instructions that have been proceeding, and at the same time to prepare for what is to follow. If the candidate is assured of the absolute privacy of such communications, there will be no difficulty whatever in obtaining a note just telling in brief plain words the reason why the candidate has come forward. This note will then be used as the basis of the personal interview which will come about the end of the seventh week. The clergyman will see if the candidate really understands what is being done. This interview will not be concerned with any mere repetition of the catechism, or any part of it, but will have for its object the personal contact of the soul with Christ, and will lead as far as possible to genuine decision. The interview need not be long, and should close with definite personal prayer. Very often this interview will prove the turning point in the work of preparation. It is so easy and natural to use the candidate's letter as the warrant for a very frank, personal talk, and this in almost every case will prove spiritually fruitful. It is obvious that such personal interviews with those of the opposite sex will need the greatest care and should be as brief as possible. At the same time there must be spiritual faithfulness with a view to decision for Christ. A clergyman will not be unduly encouraged or elated if some of his candidates are quick to respond to his inquiries and appeals. Confirmation usually comes at an impressionable time of life, and in the case of girls and often of young women there are emotional tendencies which are only too apt to be mistaken both by the candidate and the clergyman for spiritual experiences. The counsel and assistance of the clergyman's wife, or in the case of a bachelor Vicar, of some experienced lady worker, will be of immense help in dealing with this well-known and difficult problem.

IV. Close of Preparation.

The last meeting of the series will necessarily concern itself with certain instructions as to the time and place of the Confirmation, and the distribution of the cards to the accepted candidates. At this meeting cards will also be given to the candidates for their friends, two at least to each candidate, together with the information that a sufficient space will be reserved in the Church for all parents, sponsors, and other friends. This notice will of course be put on the card itself. Among the verbal instructions it will not be found unnecessary to refer briefly but pointedly to the dress of the girl candidates, that it should be neat and not conspicuous, and that there should be no veil over the face, but only a cap with if necessary, a veil down the back. Candidates from time to time, simply through lack of knowledge, get the impression that a Confirmation veil is almost the same as a bridal veil, and Bishops are known to feel very strongly on this matter. A spirit of expectation should be encouraged and cultivated at this last meeting, and the reality of the Service impressed as deeply as possible on the candidate. If the preparation has been earnest, thorough, and detailed, the realities of the Christian life will be well before the candidates, and they will understand that the approaching Confirmation will be a blessed opportunity of entering into the fullness of blessing in fellowship with Christ and His Church.

V. Confirmation Day.

It will be found particularly useful to provide a paper containing the hymns and the Confirmation Service arranged in order, together with suggestions for the candidates. These will include instructions as to what may be required in the course of the Service, and above all, passages of Scripture, and perhaps a Collect or two, for use during the times of waiting. Candidates should be told that they need not remain kneeling all the time of the Service after the actual Confirmation. Physical weariness may often be prevented, if there happens to be a large number of candidates, by remaining seated, while meditating on the passages from the Bible found in the paper of suggestions. It will be found wise to announce beforehand, and on the paper itself, that the church doors will be closed during the opening hymn, and that no one will be admitted to the building afterwards. This will ensure quiet throughout the entire service, and all concerned will feel

and appreciate the spiritual benefit.

VI. After Confirmation. It is of the greatest spiritual value to make as much as possible of the first occasion of Holy Communion after Confirmation. As far as practicable the candidates should be encouraged to come all together at the same time. In my London parish we had an arrangement which worked so well that I venture to mention its details to others. In our case it was convenient to arrange a special celebration of the Holy Communion for past and present confirmees on the following Sunday evening after the Confirmation.

This annual gathering was prefaced by an annual letter to past confirmees, announcing the date of the Confirmation and of this special celebration, and inviting their prayers, and, if possible, their attendance. On the occasion itself the candidates were arranged in the seats on both sides of the center aisle, near the chancel steps, and they had been instructed beforehand not to come up to the Communion rails until they were invited to do so. The general congregation then communicated in the usual way, and when all was finished, a few words were spoken to the congregation, calling attention to the new members who were then communicating for the first time, and bespeaking prayers on their behalf.

It was very impressive to note the congregation all going on their knees in prayer whilst the new confirmees came up to receive the Holy Sacrament. Thus both congregation and confirmees were enabled to realize the importance of the occasion on which these fresh accessions to full Church membership were made. Those who have attempted something of this special Service will not easily forget its impressiveness. Of course the same arrangements can be made at an early morning, or a midday celebration, according to convenience.

As soon as possible after the Confirmation, and preferably on the Monday evening after the first Communion, the past and present confirmees should be invited to a social gathering. There should be simple refreshments for the first forty or forty-five minutes, and then a brief meeting lasting not longer than another forty-five minutes. At this gathering there should be a short address, mainly on the life and work in front of the new confirmees, and the confirmees of past years who will be present will often find spiritual profit and enjoyment at this meeting.

It is an opportunity for reunion, and the clergyman then sees a number of his old friends who have left the parish and gone to work in other parts of the city or country. In this address the confirmees should be urged to take up some definite work: choir, or tract work, or Sunday school teaching. At the close of this meeting two books should be given to each candidate in remembrance of Confirmation time. One should be of a general character dealing with the Christian life, and the other more specific, concerned with the Holy Communion.

For the former purpose I used to find the following books of great value. After Confirmation: *What?* by the Rev. R. C. Joynt. *Strong and Free*; a book for Young Men, by Everard. *Bright and Fair*; a book for Young Ladies, by Everard. *Beneath the Cross*; *Counsels for Communicants*, by Everard. [All these are published by Nisbet & Co., 1s.] For the latter purpose I found the Bishop of Durham's *At the Holy Communion*, and *Pledges of His Love* [Seeley & Co., 6d. and 1s.] very useful, and *The Holy Communion*, by Canon Barnes-Lawrence. [Bemrose & Sons, 6d. and 1s.] *The English Church Manual on the Holy Communion*, by the Rev. H. M. Lang, will also be found helpful, especially as it contains the Communion Service and hymns for meditation. [Longman & Co., 3d.]

Section 3. Outlines of Teaching.

The following sketch is arranged to cover eleven meetings; ten before, and one after Confirmation. Two main ideas must be ever kept in view: instruction and impression. Perhaps the greatest need of all is the endeavour to invest old truths with something like freshness of treatment for the young life that comes before us.

The main lines of preparation may be suggested as follows:-

1. What Confirmation is (2 Lessons).
2. What the Christian life is; on its Divine side (1 Lesson).
3. What the Christian life is; on its human side (3 Lessons).
4. How the Christian life becomes possible (4 Lessons).
5. After Confirmation: What? (1 Lesson).

The detail of this general plan may be seen in the following statement.

1. First lesson. The meaning of Confirmation in general. (a) Towards God; (b) towards the Church.
2. Second Lesson. The Confirmation Service. (a) Its active part; (b) its passive part.
3. Third Lesson. The Divine Blessings (first and second questions and answers in Catechism).
4. Fourth Lesson. The human reception and enjoyment of these blessings (1. Repentance).
5. Fifth Lesson. The human reception and enjoyment of these blessings (2. Faith).
6. Sixth Lesson. The human reception and enjoyment of these blessings (3. Obedience. (a) Towards God; (b) towards man).
7. Seventh Lesson. The human need of grace (1. Prayer).
8. Eighth Lesson. The human need of grace (2. The Bible).
9. Ninth Lesson. The human need of grace (3. The Holy Communion in Scripture and Catechism).
10. Tenth Lesson. The human need of grace (4. The Holy Communion in the Communion Office).
11. Eleventh Lesson. The human obligation. Life and Service after Confirmation.

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