

Gift from on High: Pastoral Letter on the Sacrament of Confirmation

Diocese of Phoenix

To the Faithful of the Diocese of Phoenix:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

The coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, fulfilling Jesus’ promise, is referred to as the birthday of the Church. On that day, the Apostles were empowered to fulfill the mission that Christ had entrusted to them.

The celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation makes present the same grace that was showered upon the Apostles fifty days after the Resurrection of Christ. The reception of this sacrament is an indispensable moment in the life of all Catholics, and its celebration is of vital importance for the Church. I now take this moment in the life of the Diocese of Phoenix to reflect on how Confirmation has been celebrated in the past and to give direction to how it will be celebrated in the future.

Background

For many years the policy of the Diocese has been to invite high school youth to prepare for the Sacrament of Confirmation, and to celebrate the Sacrament with them as sophomores or juniors. Many fine programs have been offered through the parishes of our Diocese to enable our teens to grow spiritually and to deepen and strengthen their faith through Confirmation. I want to thank the pastors, youth ministers, and adults who have ministered so effectively to our teens, and to ask them to continue to do so.

Four major concerns have prompted us to re-think the high school years as the most appropriate age for this Sacrament:

- The number of adolescents accepting our invitation to participate in preparation for Confirmation is less than 40% of those who are eligible for the Sacrament.
- This Sacrament is often mistakenly seen as bringing to completion the need for continuing education and ongoing growth in faith – more like a graduation than an initiation.
- The grace of Confirmation to help adolescents in facing the many moral and spiritual challenges that our society presents today is delayed long past the time when that grace is needed.

- Since over 60% of our teens are not being confirmed, we have thousands of adults attempting to face the challenges of the modern world without the grace of Confirmation to help them.

Last year, I convened a task force to look at the question of an appropriate age for Confirmation in our Diocese. The task force was unanimous in its conclusion that the age should be lowered. They further recommended that the Sacrament be celebrated in the original order in which the Church, for centuries, celebrated what we know as the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. I consulted with the seventeen pastors who make up the Presbyteral Council and they, too, gave their unanimous support to the task force's recommendations.

On the basis of the consultation, with this pastoral letter I am revising the policy of our Diocese so that the Sacrament of Confirmation will be prepared for and celebrated in conjunction with First Eucharist. Under this new policy, our children will receive the Sacrament of Confirmation in the 3rd grade.

A Brief History of the Sacrament of Confirmation

For the first five centuries of the Church's history, the three Sacraments of Initiation, Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, were celebrated together as part of one initiation rite. This was true for adults and children. During the 5th through the 13th centuries infant baptism became the norm. At that time Church leaders separated Confirmation and Eucharist from Baptism. For the most part, Confirmation was celebrated at the age of discretion (7 years of age), and First Communion took place in pre-adolescence. Although separated from Baptism, the order of the Sacraments remained the same. It was not until the twentieth century, in 1910, that the age for Eucharist was lowered to the age of discretion. At that point, the norm became to celebrate Eucharist around the age of 7 or 8, and Confirmation sometime between 8 and 18.

Today, our Church sets the age for Confirmation at the age of discretion, or older. Canon 891 states:

“The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops has determined another age, or there is danger of death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause suggests otherwise.”

Thus at about age 7, or 2nd grade, the law of the Church states that children may begin to prepare for the Sacrament of Confirmation. In the United States, the age for Confirmation varies from around age 8 to age 18. In areas such as the Southwest, when the Spanish missionaries settled the area, they administered Confirmation with Baptism, and Eucharist was celebrated at a later age. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1233, states:

“Today in all the rites, Latin and Eastern, the Christian initiation of adults begins with their entry into the catechumenate and reaches its culmination in a single celebration of the three sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. In the Eastern rites the Christian initiation of infants also begins with Baptism followed immediately by Confirmation and the Eucharist, while in the Roman rite it is followed by years of catechesis before being completed later by Confirmation and the Eucharist, the summit of their Christian initiation.”

It is the ordinary policy of the Church to initiate all persons over the age of discretion with the original order of the sacraments: first Baptism, then Confirmation, and finally Eucharist. (You may remember seeing this from attending an Easter Vigil.) In this order, Eucharist is seen as the sacrament which completes our initiation, and it is the only one of the three that is celebrated more than once. Thus, it is by way of the reception of Holy Communion that all of us renew our commitment to the Holy Catholic Church.

The Church's Understanding and Celebration of Confirmation

The Church has always understood Confirmation to be one of the three Sacraments of Initiation. These Sacraments are the rites by which we become members of the Body of Christ and take our place in full communion with Christ's people – the Church.

Just like all of the sacraments, the Church teaches that Jesus Himself instituted Confirmation and handed on its celebration to His apostles. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1288, states:

“From that time on the apostles, in fulfillment of Christ's will, imparted to the newly baptized by the laying on of hands the gift of the Spirit that completes the grace of Baptism. For this reason in the Letter to the Hebrews the doctrine concerning Baptism and the laying on of hands is listed among the first elements of Christian instruction. The imposition of hands is rightly recognized by the Catholic tradition as the origin of the sacrament of Confirmation, which in a certain way perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church.”

Through the celebration of Confirmation, the Father and the Son pour out the Spirit, who brings seven special gifts: wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, knowledge, reverence, and wonder and awe in the presence of the Lord. Each of these special gifts of the Spirit gives graces that help us to face the challenges of living in full accord with the Gospel today.

This pouring out of the Spirit is accomplished during the celebration of the Sacrament through the laying on of hands (accompanied with a prayer asking that the Spirit be poured out) and anointing with chrism (which is perfumed oil blessed during Holy Week at a special Chrism Mass). The Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1289, states:

“Very early, the better to signify the gift of the Holy Spirit, an anointing with perfumed oil (chrism) was added to the laying on of hands. This anointing highlights the name ‘Christian,’ which means ‘anointed’ and derives from that of Christ himself whom God ‘anointed with the Holy Spirit.’ This rite of anointing has continued ever since, in both East and West. For this reason the Eastern Churches call this sacrament *Chrismation*, anointing with chrism, or myron which means “chrism.” In the West, the term Confirmation suggests that this sacrament both confirms and strengthens baptismal grace.”

The Effects of Confirmation

The Sacrament of Confirmation seals us with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us that Confirmation:

- perfects the grace of Baptism,

- gives the Holy Spirit in order to root us more deeply in the divine filiation (to root us more deeply in our identity as sons and daughters of the Father),
- incorporates us more firmly into Christ,
- strengthens our bond with the Church, associates us more closely with the mission of the Church, and
- helps us bear witness to the Christian faith in word and deed. (See Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1316)

With these graces, the baptized follower of Christ is prepared to receive His Body and Blood, thereby completing initiation into the mystery of Christ and His Church. Conferring the Sacrament of Confirmation upon younger children means that they will possess these gifts at an earlier age. It will be important that their families immerse them in a Mystagogy of continuing education and formation so that they will, as they grow and mature, come to a fuller understanding of the gift they have been given.

Mystagogy: A Life-long Commitment

The celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation are not intended to bring our formation as Christians to an end, but rather to begin a process of continuing education and formation that is life-long and that gradually unfolds the mystery of God's love and our response as we grow and mature.

The Church refers to this life-long process as Mystagogy. All of the Sacraments are generous gifts from our loving God. Mystagogy invites us into a never-ending process of cherishing the 4 gifts of the Sacraments of Initiation and continuously growing in our understanding of the power of God working in us as a result of our initiation into His Church.

Understood in this light, Confirmation and Eucharist are not seen as an end, but rather as a beginning. They are gifts of the Father that strengthen and support us in living faithfully our life in Christ. They are gifts to be continuously meditated upon and studied. Our understanding of them is meant to deepen as we grow and mature.

Our Future Celebration of Confirmation

Effective immediately, the age for celebration of Confirmation is lowered so that, ordinarily, children baptized as infants will celebrate Confirmation and 1st Eucharist in the same Sacred Liturgy during the third grade. Preparation and celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to precede Confirmation and should, ordinarily, occur in the second grade.

Pastors, Catechetical Leaders and Catechists are urged to fashion programs of preparation that are family-centered, helping parents to exercise their fundamental role as the primary religious educators of their children. The Rite of Baptism, #5, gives this responsibility to the parents:

“After baptism it is the responsibility of the parents, in their gratitude to God and in fidelity to the duty they have undertaken, to enable the child to know God, whose adopted child it has become, to receive confirmation, and to participate in the holy eucharist. In this duty they are again to be helped by the parish priest by suitable means.”

The Catechetical Office of the Diocese of Phoenix will also recommend resources that involve families in praying and studying together to prepare for Sacraments.

This policy is to be fully implemented over the next three years. We will lower the age for Confirmation as follows:

- Inviting those in all high school grades (9-12) to begin preparation in the Fall of 2005 and to celebrate in the Spring of 2006. Pastors may, if they wish, include their 8th grade students at this time.
- Inviting those in 7th and 8th grade, and older, to begin preparation in the Fall of 2006 and to celebrate in the Spring of 2007. Pastors, may if they wish, include their 6th grade students at this time.
- Inviting those in 4th, 5th, and 6th grade, and older, to begin preparation no later than January of 2007 and to celebrate in the Fall of 2007.
- Inviting those in 3rd grade and older to begin preparation in the Fall of 2007 and to celebrate First Holy Eucharist and Confirmation in the Spring or Fall of 2008.

Confirmation will continue to be celebrated by the Bishop of the Diocese of Phoenix, by visiting Bishops, and by certain priests with delegated faculties from the Bishop of Phoenix for conferring Confirmation. Confirmation and 1st Eucharist will be celebrated both in the Fall and in the Spring, and processes of preparation will need to be adjusted to enable this.

Because the Diocese of Phoenix experiences constant growth, it is foreseen that, even after the policy is fully implemented, there will always be children older than 3rd grade who may be presented for Confirmation, and a large number of adults who may wish to prepare for the sacrament. An inter-generational model is to be developed and made available to parishes that have the capacity to incorporate all people, grades three through high school, and adults, who wish to prepare for Confirmation.

The current practices of involving Confirmation candidates in service projects and retreats are to be maintained, wherever possible, and adapted for the age level of the participants. Involvement of families in these practices is to be encouraged.

Conclusion

“When he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth.” (Jn. 16:13)

After 2000 years the Spirit continues to guide Christ’s Church to all truth. How blessed we are to have a God who so generously bestows upon us such love and goodness, as He blesses us with His very Divine Life through the gift of the Sacraments.

As we implement these changes in our celebration of Confirmation, let us seek to be of one mind and one heart. I ask pastors, who so faithfully shepherd their parishes, to help parents to prepare their children for the reception of these great gifts from God. Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has continuously called for us to revive the concept of a family’s home as a domestic Church; a place where the Gospel is heard, and where one learns what it means to follow Christ. My desire for the Church of Phoenix is that in implementing this revised policy we will seize the opportunity to

strengthen our homes so that each one truly is a domestic Church. Pastors are especially entrusted to provide parents with the resources and formation they need to guide the spiritual journey of their children. It is my hope that this will, in turn, enliven our parishes with renewed faith.

May Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of America, and Patroness of the Diocese of Phoenix, intercede for us as we seek to be faithful to her Son, and to become a chosen people, rejoicing in the rich gifts of the Holy Spirit.

+Thomas J. Olmsted
Bishop of Phoenix
Pentecost Sunday
May 15, 2005