

Bishop Kevin Rhoades confirms a young man at St. Mary of the Annunciation Church in Bristol, Indiana.

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SACRAMENTAL FORMATION & THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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CONFIRMATION

The first installment in this series presented reflections on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as a process of conversion toward discipleship which offers a blueprint for the theology of all the sacraments of initiation. However, the current pastoral reality, at least in the United States, is that the majority of those being initiated sacramentally are infants, children, and adolescents; therefore, this reality challenges us to find ways

to translate the lessons intrinsic to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults into offerings of sacramental formation for the younger population. Mindful of this challenge, the second installment offered insights related to formation for infant Baptism and for the celebration of the Eucharist. This column will consider yet another challenging element of formation for the sacraments of initiation, namely, formation for Confirmation.

Restoring the Order of the Sacraments of Initiation

Confirmation is often represented as a 'sacrament without a theology.' From this perspective, formation for this sacrament becomes an increasingly difficult task. However, this column considers celebrating the sacraments of initiation in their restored order as a strategic approach to a pastoral challenge. The challenge faced encompasses not having a consistent approach to the essential elements of formation for Confirmation, determining the appropriate age to celebrate this sacrament, and consequently, establishing the appropriate order of celebrating it. Yet the deeper concern from a strategic approach is whether or not our current pastoral practices reflect an accurate theology of the sacrament of Confirmation.

Among many if not most catechetical leaders there is a poor understanding of the concept of restoring the sacraments of initiation. This practice is either completely foreign or viewed with suspicion by those who have not explored this approach. The purpose of this column is not to present a comprehensive study on the restored order; however, in order to fully appreciate its importance, it is crucial to offer a very brief review of the historical and theological realities of this pastoral practice. The ‘proper order’ of the sacraments of initiation, as clearly reflected in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, is Baptism, Confirmation (anointing), Eucharist. This order was the practice of the early Church, as has been recorded in the writings of Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, and others. Expansion of Christian communities, growing practice of infant Baptism, and acceptance of those baptized in heretical communities were three factors which slowly evolved between the fourth and sixth centuries, causing the separation of these three sacraments and the fragmentation of the rite of initiation, especially in the Western churches.¹

From the fifth to the thirteenth centuries, priests baptized and gave Eucharist to infants, and later the bishop would come and ‘confirm’ the Baptism. From the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the ‘proper order’ of celebration was restored as children of the age of reason received Confirmation, but were not able to receive the Eucharist until much later. By the sixteenth century, the age of Confirmation ranged from ages seven to fifteen; regardless of the age, Eucharist would always follow Confirmation.²

In the middle of the nineteenth century, some of the councils of French bishops began the practice of delaying Confirmation until many years after first Communion, thus celebrating the initiation sacraments out of the proper order. These bishops began to adopt this practice on the grounds of a perceived necessity

of greater understanding of doctrine on the part of those to be confirmed. This was certainly not the universal practice of the Church. In 1854, Rome rejected this practice and affirmed that the sacrament of Confirmation should be celebrated first, and that first Communion should follow at a later time. The schema (preparatory draft document) for the First Vatican Council referred to the celebration of Confirmation before first Communion as a “perpetual practice” and called the reversed order (Eucharist first, followed by Confirmation years later) an “absurd practice.” In 1897, Pope Leo XIII wrote a letter to the Bishop of Marseilles in which he praised the bishop’s practice of celebrating Confirmation before first Communion.³ Yet the ‘proper order’ of the sacraments of initiation was unintentionally disrupted once again in 1910 when Pope Pius X approved the Decree *Quam Singulari* of the Sacred Congregation on the Discipline of the Sacraments, whereby the age of first Communion was lowered to seven. This decree did not offer any guidelines about the age of Confirmation nor the order of celebration of the sacraments.⁴

For the last hundred years, the practice of celebrating Confirmation has been diverse throughout the Church. The restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and the revised Rite of Confirmation, both promulgated after Vatican II, have motivated many dioceses across the world to celebrate the sacraments of initiation in the ‘restored’ or proper order. In the 2007 Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI addressed the issue of diverse pastoral practice regarding Confirmation. He explained that the difference is not dogmatic, but rather pastoral; furthermore, he urged the bishops to examine what practice helps the faithful place the Eucharist at the center of their lives.⁵ In the final propositions following the Synod on the New Evangelization, it was encouraged that dioceses and episcopal conferences

review their practices of Confirmation so that they truly reflected the centrality of the Eucharist as expressed in *Sacramentum Caritatis*.⁶

In accordance with the long-standing Catholic tradition of *lex orandi lex credendi*, the way in which we pray and worship should reflect our beliefs. The pastoral practice of celebrating Confirmation after Eucharist communicates a conflicting sacramental theology. Treating Confirmation as the culmination of initiation displaces the Eucharist as the summit of our faith and the end toward which our sacramental lives are ordered. Celebrating the sacraments of initiation in the restored order opens up possibilities for our practices to be congruent with our beliefs. It is precisely through the graces received in Confirmation that anyone can approach the Eucharist with a better disposition to actively, fully, and consciously participate in the Paschal mystery at the Eucharistic table.

Furthermore, the practice of the restored order compels faith formators to move away from a model that emphasizes a perception of earning the sacrament, or a necessity of mastering doctrine before the celebration of Confirmation, towards a model that accentuates the sacrament as a moment of grace on a continuing journey of faith. Confirmation is a sacrament of strengthening in the Spirit, not of mastering theological concepts. As Pope Francis stated in the recent Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, a second area of concern for the New Evangelization is that of “*the baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism*” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §15, emphasis original). It is worth noting that this could easily be extended to a pastoral concern of those who have been baptized, eucharisted, and confirmed, but whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism. How can their lives reflect their baptismal calling if the manner of sacramental formation has inadvertently communicated that Confirmation is a sacrament of maturity

whereby ‘graduation’ is obtained? It is imperative that sacramental preparation offerings emphasize that formation is a journey of a lifetime.

Best Practices for the Formation and Celebration of Confirmation

As expressed earlier, the restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and the revision of the Rite of Confirmation encouraged many bishops to reflect on their pastoral practices. As a result, some dioceses across the world are currently celebrating the sacrament of Confirmation under the restored order. In a 2005 study, eight dioceses in the United States had restored the order in all their parishes, and seventeen more dioceses had begun the process but had not yet completed it.⁷ Undoubtedly those numbers have changed in the ten years since that study. Nevertheless, of dioceses that have fully restored the order, one stands out as an example of best practice: the Diocese of Fargo, where the restoration began under the leadership of Bishop Samuel Aquila in 2002 and was fully implemented by 2005. On October 9, 2013, Aquila, who had become Archbishop of Denver in 2012, addressed the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions and shared an aspect of his March 2012 *ad limina* visit with Pope Benedict XVI. The Pope told him, “You have done what I always wanted to do.”⁸ The words of the Pope seem to indicate recognition of a best practice. Archbishop Aquila also expressed in his address a keen focus on discipleship as integral to the formation and preparation for Confirmation. He indicated that, as a disciple, one is chosen by God to receive the fullness of the Spirit in Confirmation. Furthermore, Archbishop Aquila shared that his experiences at the parish level have encouraged a culture where catechesis is practiced as a lifelong process of formation, and parents assume more responsibility as the primary evangelizers and catechists of their children.⁹

The best practices for formation, exemplified by the Diocese of Fargo, are summarized in the *National Directory for Catechesis*. The guidelines for catechesis do not include mastery of doctrine or requirements of service hours; the elements that are central to the preparation include the connection between Baptism and Confirmation, the role of the Holy Spirit, his gifts and fruits, and an explanation of the rite and its symbols.¹⁰ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “Although Confirmation is sometimes called the ‘sacrament of Christian maturity,’ we must not confuse adult faith with the adult age of natural growth, nor forget that the baptismal grace is a grace of free, unmerited election and does not need ‘ratification’ to become effective” (§1308). Formation for Confirmation is not about completing a curriculum; rather, it should be about nurturing a deeper relationship with God, and an ongoing invitation to conversion and discipleship.

The next and final column in this series will offer concluding reflections on essential aspects of preparation for all the sacraments of initiation. Certainly sacramental formation has a key role in the life and mission of the Church, in particular as evangelization is examined through a new lens.



NOTES

1 See Kenan Osborne, *The Christian Sacraments of Initiation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 119–124.

2 See Bishop Samuel Aquila, Pastoral Letter *Send Forth Your Spirit* (2002), §§7–8. <http://www.americancatholicpress.org/Bishop_Aquila_Send_Forth_Your_Spirit.html>

3 See Paul Turner, “Benedict XVI and the Sequence of the Sacraments of Initiation” in *Worship*, 82:2 (March 2008), 134–138. Turner includes the following excerpt from the schema for Vatican I:

Since in some places a custom contrary to the perpetual practice of the church has grown up, in which confirmation is administered by an absurd order only to those who have already been admitted to the most holy sacrament of the eucharist, we wish this to be corrected completely; especially since one who has already begun to fight against the enemy should not be kept from armor. (137)

Turner also includes the following excerpt from Leo XIII’s letter to Bishop Robert of Marseilles:

We praise your proposal to the greatest extent. For that opinion which had grown strong there and in other places corresponded neither to the old and constant intent of the church, not to the advantage of the faithful. For the beginnings of cupidity are in the souls of children. . . . Therefore the faithful, even from the tender years, have a need ‘to be clothed with strength from on high,’ which the sacrament of confirmation was born to produce. (138)

4 Congregation on the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Quam Singulari* (8 August 1910). <<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10quam.htm>> Accessed 15 November 2013.

5 Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007). <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis_en.html> Accessed 16 November 2013.

In this regard, attention needs to be paid to the order of the sacraments of initiation. Different traditions exist within the Church. There is a clear variation between, on the one hand, the ecclesial customs of the East and the practice of the West regarding the initiation of adults, and, on the other hand, the procedure adopted for children. Yet these variations are not properly of the dogmatic order, but are pastoral in character. Concretely, it needs to be seen which practice better enables the faithful to put the sacrament of

the Eucharist at the center, as the goal of the whole process of initiation. In close collaboration with the competent offices of the Roman Curia, Bishops' Conferences should examine the effectiveness of current approaches to Christian initiation, so that the faithful can be helped both to mature through the formation received in our communities and to give their lives an authentically eucharistic direction, so that they can offer a reason for the hope within them in a way suited to our times (cf. 1 Pet 3:15). (§18)

6 XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Propositions* (27 October 2012), §38. <http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b33_02.html> Accessed 8 November 2013.

7 See Stella Marie Jeffrey, "Christian Initiation: A Pastoral Perspective on Restored Order" in *Antiphon*, vol. 9 (2005), 252.

8 Archbishop Samuel Aquila, "Restored Order of the Sacraments of Initiation," Keynote Address at the Annual Meeting of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions (9 October 2013).

9 Ibid.

10 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 2005), 122–123.



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