

Brian Niermann, CWID 10313616

Professor Tracey Lamont

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Final Research Paper: Crisis of Parishioners Becoming Less Involved Following Confirmation

For the past twenty-one years I have served as a volunteer catechist for the seventh and eighth grade classes in our Parish School of Religion (PSR). Eleven of these years have involved preparing the class to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. Throughout this time there has been a consistent pattern in which many of the students have discontinued their religious education immediately following their reception of the Sacrament. In some cases they have ceased practicing their faith on a consistent basis.

In September 2015 the Pew Research Center reported that 52 percent of adults raised Catholic had left the church at some point in their life. It was also reported at the same time that nearly one-tenth of the United States population is made up of people who classified themselves as former Catholics – many of whom likely have been Confirmed (Francis). Our current approach to Confirmation preparation seems to mark the end of catechetical instruction, serving as a “graduation” from participating in the faith for many adolescents. This paper will present a condensed history of the Sacrament of Confirmation within the realm of all Sacraments, discuss the current thinking as to how we can modify our approach to Confirmation preparation, and offer possible solutions as to how our particular parish can improve our program to persuade more of our Confirmandi to continue in the practice of the faith.

Initial Understanding

Sacraments “represent the highest expression of the manifestive, eventful word of grace in the church” (Rahner 281). The magisterium, the teaching body of the church, has never given a working definition of what a sacrament is, though many teachers and theologians have (Irwin 10). “Sacraments are visible signs and effective means chosen by Christ and celebrated ritually in the community of the church to draw the church into an experience of Christ’s paschal mystery by means of liturgical actions enacted through the power of the Holy Spirit with the active participation of the gathered assembly of faithful believers presided over by the church’s ordained ministers using the sacred word of the Bible, rites and actions accompanied by prayer texts that describe the saving act of God that is occurring through them” (Irwin 10-11).

We as Catholics believe that Jesus initiated all of the seven Sacraments. The origin of Confirmation is the Baptism of Jesus at the Jordan River. Validated by this experience, a form of Christian initiation emerged along these lines: “Evangelistic witnesses, instruction of converts, water Baptism, Chrismation (anointing with oil), laying on of hands with prayers for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and First Eucharist (the Thanksgiving meal of Holy Communion)” (Kriewald 22). Documentation from the second century shows that the early church united the practices of Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist into a single rite of initiation for adults as well as infants (Kriewald 22).

The celebration of Christian initiation has remained basically the same except (in western Christianity) for two major changes, one of these being that “the Bishop’s Chrismation became separated from Baptism and developed into a distinct sacramental ritual of

Confirmation” (Cooke 135). There was no theological foundation for separating these two. It essentially was out of necessity. As Christianity spread beyond the urban areas, “care of the non-urban Christians became a full-time task, so a resident presbyter was assigned to a town or village ... one of the principal liturgical tasks of these presbyters was to celebrate the ritual of initiating new Christians” (Cooke 135). However, the Bishop continued to preside over the Chrismation anointing that followed Baptism. This “then developed into a fully independent ritual and was considered distinctly by the 5th century as “Confirmation” by the Councils of Riez (439) and Orange (441)” (Cooke 135).

In 1910 Pope Pius X, in order to encourage more people to receive Communion decreed that the Eucharist should be open to any child who reached the Communion during their teen years after they were Confirmed (Francis). Because of this decree, the order of these two sacraments was reversed. However, this decree did not specifically mention Confirmation, so parishes had to adapt to the new situation without the benefit of sufficient guidance. After some time, it was considered the general practice that Confirmation was conferred at the age when First Communion was previously celebrated (about the early teen years).

“There is no obligatory policy in the church stipulating the age of Confirmation for someone Baptized as an infant” (Francis). The National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices notes five possible moments for the celebration of Confirmation: before First Communion, around sixth grade, adolescence, entrance into adulthood and during adulthood (Francis). At the current time in the United States, each Bishop is free to set the age for conferral of the sacrament in their particular Diocese.

Currently in my Diocese of Belleville, IL the recommended age to be Confirmed is 7th or 8th grade. Some exceptions are made in cases such as extraordinarily large or small class sizes, etc.

Testing

There is no debate as to the desire of the Catholic Church that all believers receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. “The reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of sacramental grace (Catechism #1285). Pope Paul VI affirms this in stating that in Confirmation Catholics “are more perfectly bound to the church ... and the Holy Spirit endows them with special strength so that they are more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith, both by word and by deed, as true witnesses of Christ” (Paul VI, #11). However, data would appear to indicate that fewer individuals who identify themselves as Catholics are being Confirmed. Statistics from a report in 2008 by the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate (CARA) showed that between the Vatican II and post-Vatican II generations there was a 12% drop in the number of self-identified Catholics who were Confirmed. In the millennial generation the drop off has been even greater; nearly one-third of young Catholics have not been Confirmed (Marchal 25). These statistics, along with the number of Catholics who cease practicing their faith following Confirmation, indicate that there is indeed a crisis in how and when we are preparing candidates for the sacrament.

The question of the appropriate age to celebrate Confirmation for those baptized as infants has been a subject of debate for many years. The canonical norm is to administer the sacrament prior to First Communion (Marchal 25). There are some who believe that the age of adolescence is more appropriate given that it has been the more traditional time and because candidates are more knowledgeable in their faith and can make a more informed decision as to

whether they wish to receive the sacrament. There are also others who have advocated raising the age of reception because “they wish to make the renewal of baptismal vows by those being Confirmed into a more authentic commitment” (Marchal 25-26). This is a discussion as a parish that we have had in the past. If it is the decision of the candidate to receive the Sacrament, then would it not make sense for them to be of a more mature age in order to make a more informed decision? I think part of the motivation to do this, however, was to keep parishioners of high school age in religious education and to attempt to ward off the trend of adolescents ceasing to practice their faith following Confirmation.

Out of the 177 Roman Catholic dioceses in the United States, 13 have gone back to the prescribed order in which the candidate receives Confirmation prior to First Communion (Van Son). One of these is the neighboring Diocese of Springfield, IL. In 2019 they implemented a program titled “Restored Order.” This program instituted a two-year preparation period in which the baptized child receives the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the second grade, and then receives Confirmation and First Eucharist in the third grade.

In presenting this new program the diocese addressed several issues and concerns. One was the impression that Confirmation was a Sacrament of maturity that should be administered following the reception of First Communion. The gift of Confirmation is a gift of grace. Grace does not have to be earned as it is a gift given freely by God. “The perfection of baptismal grace found in the Sacrament of Confirmation is not dependent upon age or knowledge of the Confirmand” (Dausman). The grace conferred is a free gift from God and “does not need ratification to become effective” (Catechism #1308). The traditional practice of adolescent

reception of the sacrament has given the impression that somehow it is a reward for someone who reaches a certain age or has completed a certain amount of preparation.

The sacrament is an effective means of receiving grace at any age as long as the Confirmation is valid. The benefits of this grace are realized from the moment of reception no matter what the age of the candidate. The young person can then receive the benefits of this grace earlier in their lifetime, and it can be of help to them as they continue to grow toward the adolescent years (Dausman).

Another concern that is addressed is whether the candidate will have more of a desire to drop out of religious education before their formal program ends. In dioceses that continue to celebrate Confirmation following First Communion, there is a sense that Confirmation represents a “graduation” from religious education and learning about the faith. “The temptation, supported by so many of the preparation programs available from Catholic publishers, is to transform the celebration of the sacrament into the “graduation” from a catechetical program ... based upon their greater maturity” (Marchal 27).

The notion that Confirmation is an ending is of course not true and not the intention of the church. “Even with Confirmation, if it is given in early adulthood, the process of initiation into the church and into the mystery of Christ is not completed. Christian initiation is ... a lifelong growth into human and Christian maturity that will be completed only in the next life” (Cooke 145). Growth in understanding and living our faith is a life-long effort. No matter what age the child receives Confirmation, it is ultimately the responsibility of the parents and guardians to see that their children stay in religious education. “Parents are to keep their children in religious education programs just as they keep their child in school until graduation

... it is the parents' responsibility to see that their children grow in faith. Our parishes are there to assist in the process" (Dausman).

It is also agreed that adults, particularly parents, benefit from the concept of restored order. "While children are the recipients of the sacraments, adults are learning and experiencing that Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion initiate a person into the community of faith. It may well be the first time in their lives that the parents realize this important truth" (Dreese 21). It can also be a means of avoiding conflict. Younger children tend to make the decision to receive Confirmation and First Communion at the same time more readily than older children, who more often conflict with the parents over the decision. "Second graders believe firmly in Jesus, the sacraments, and the church ... they are "focused" without the distractions that aging and adolescence bring. They have not yet entered into adolescent rebellion and, along with that rebellion, doubts about their faith" (Dreese 21).

Despite the many advantages that have been listed to lower the age for the reception of Confirmation, bishops still disagree on what the ideal age should be. Bishop Thomas Tobin, for example, argues that the junior high age is the most advantageous. There is "an opportunity to catechize the young people about the meaning of the sacrament and ... they are old enough to understand what they are doing" (Tobin). He also believes that bestowing the gifts of the Holy Spirit on a person entering their teenage years is important since they are entering what could very well be the most dangerous and challenging years of their life. He does acknowledge, however, that the original order of the sacraments is lost by continuing this approach (Tobin).

Confirmation functions as a sealing or perfecting of "the new life given by water and the upon the Christian person, as is Baptism. This could certainly be one major reason why there

continues to be so much debate as to what the proper age of reception is. There could, however, be an alternative solution. Some form of nonsacramental ritual could be developed to “celebrate and reaffirm our Christian initiation later on life” (Marchal 28). Other mainstream Christian churches have taken this approach.

Confirmation is the name given to the sacrament when an individual publicly reaffirms their Baptism for the first time. This does not mean, however, that there cannot be subsequent celebrations or reaffirmations that do not fall under the heading of a sacrament. “This approach respects the most traditional understanding of the sequence of the initiation sacraments ... yet it also respects the reality of Christian development and the need to ritually mark significant life stages” (Marchal 28).

This approach also allows for the person to exercise their personal freedom. If after a period of preparation, which could include both catechesis and psychological development, the young person does not feel comfortable in making this sort of commitment, they could simply wait until another time. This gives the young person a “truly open-ended approach” (Marchal 28).

Though there is a movement toward restored order in reception of the sacraments of initiation, most dioceses still are refraining from preparing students for Confirmation prior to the age of adolescence, including ours. The other logical piece to look at then to address this crisis of young people ceasing to practice their faith after Confirmation is catechesis. Though there are certain expectations and requirements to fulfill, each parish has some leeway to take their own approach in their preparation program. For example, some parishes devote one year to preparation, while others follow a two-year format. Some parishes have a single catechist

that implements the program while others take a team approach. Our parish does a one year preparation with a single catechist (with guidance from the Coordinator of Religious Education (CRE)).

Forming a leadership team may be more effective in designing a Confirmation program. This team could include not only catechists and parish staff, but also parents, grandparents, and even young adults in the parish who may have a previous relationship with the youth. “With their youthful perspective and fresh ideas, their insights and experience could be helpful in customizing Confirmation to your context” (Elton 103).

Once a team is in place, then the process must be outlined. This does not mean automatically purchasing the best, most expensive Confirmation curriculum and jumping immediately into program planning. The first step should involve gathering information. This would include looking at the past enrollments, retention numbers, and other statistics. More importantly, this would involve talking with people who have participated in the program in the past, including the Pastor, parents, and former students. This would be helpful in identifying the specific needs of the program.

Initial planning should also include getting to know the candidates, even prior to the beginning of the preparation time. “The more Confirmation leaders know about the learners, the better able they are to develop an approach that maximizes learning” (Elton 105). The team would have to plan how to gather information, and once gathered pick out the common themes and the unexpected responses.

Once information is gathered, the task turns to designing a program. There is no such thing as a “one size fits all” Confirmation program given the diversity of different congregations.

The design process should begin with the end goal in mind. “What are the few big concepts, skills and dispositions you want learners to take away from the Confirmation experience?” (Elton 107). Many leaders focus mainly on the curriculum and what the teacher is doing. The danger in this is that there can be too much emphasis on content and not enough on connecting with the candidates.

The decision also has to be made as to who will comprise the teaching team. “If a Pastor or paid staff person is a primary teacher, no matter what size Confirmation program you have ... invite others to be part of the teaching team” (Elton 111). Leading a vibrant Confirmation program involves more than lesson planning and designing the learning environment. It also involves recognizing God’s activity in their life and encouraging participants to explore God’s presence in their life and in their congregation. A team approach aides to make room for the Holy Spirit as the Confirmandi engage in Scripture, gather in the Christian community and learn about God.

Implementation

Sacraments can be defined as “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the church, by which divine life is dispensed to us” (Catechism #1131). Thus when a sacrament is received, we are given the gift of God’s grace; it is not something that has to be earned. This may be a major reason why more dioceses are returning to the original order in which the sacraments of initiation were bestowed. By Confirming children prior to the reception of First Communion, they will have this gift of grace for a longer period of their life.

Many dioceses, however, continue the practice that began in the early 20th century of the child receiving First Eucharist around the age of seven, then refraining from bestowing

Confirmation until the adolescent years or beyond. This is still the case in my Diocese of Belleville, IL. Until a change in the current policy of when children should be Confirmed occurs, our energy should focus on more effective catechesis and more involvement of the entire parish if we are to improve the current pattern of many students in our PSR program ceasing to participate in the life of the church following Confirmation.

Currently our program is led by a single catechist with the guidance of the CRE. A more effective program should involve more people in instruction and implementation. This team should also include parents and guardians, possibly grandparents, and other parishioners, particularly younger people who could relate to the students on their level. This input would be helpful in designing a program, and parents in particular may feel like they have more ownership in what their children are learning, and this may give them more incentive to spend more time with their children in enhancing their faith life.

Another improvement that must be made is to correct the misunderstandings students and parishioners alike have about what Confirmation really means. Some of these misconceptions I have heard include the following: 1) It is the completion of my religious education requirement; 2) it is when I receive the Holy Spirit for the first time; 3) I become an adult in the Catholic Church; 4) It is me choosing the faith that my parents and godparents chose for me when I was a baby. All of these are inaccurate, and if they are in the mindset of the candidate, this could certainly be a factor in the pattern of them leaving their faith behind following Confirmation. Emphasis needs to be put on what Confirmation truly is: 1) That it completes the graces of our Baptism; 2) that it not the first reception of the Holy Spirit in our lives, but that it is a special outpouring to us, similar to what the Apostles experienced at

Pentecost; and 3) it gives us the courage and strength to pass on the faith and to be good witnesses. If we as catechists and parents can be mentors of the faith, we can relate the true meaning of Confirmation to the candidates. I think they would be more open to the preparation process and perhaps be more receptive to continuing their religious education beyond Confirmation.

Currently our program spans one school year. This can cause an issue of lack of preparation, especially in a PSR program which only meets once per week. Some parishes have expanded this their preparation over a two-year time period. This may be something to consider in order to alleviate the time crunch. Also the team should be in contact with catechists in the lower grades to see what their programs entail. Some of the material that we currently try to put all into one year could be incorporated into the curriculum of these earlier grades, particularly material such as church doctrine.

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