

“Anchoring Confirmation’s Place to the Eucharist – A Catechetical Success Story”
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Does Practice Dictate Theology?

The seven year old Lutheran will celebrate Confirmation and Eucharist for the first time at a Sunday liturgy within the community he will be brought into full communion. The seven year old baptized Catholic has to wait until he is at least 14 and complete two years of study and service in order to celebrate the same sacrament. What is the teaching of the Church regarding the theology of the Sacraments of Initiation? Do we have two theologies of initiation? It would seem our practices are dictating our theologies rather than the other way around.

The experience of bringing a diocese into the process of Christian Initiation has led the Diocese of Tyler into dialogue and reflection as to the pastoral realities of initiating children who were baptized Catholics under the age of 7. Should our pastoral practices reflect the relationship of the Sacraments of Initiation and the importance of the Sacrament of Penance in the call to holiness for every Christian disciple? A movement from BEC to BCE brings a great opportunity to evangelize all households of faith. Benedict XVI recent document *Sacramentum Caritatis* encourages all Episcopal conferences to revisit the age which Confirmation is celebrated in light of church documents.

Evangelization is the event of Jesus Christ which encounters an individual. Catechesis must respond to this event, this encounter. These events take place at funerals, weddings, Quinceaneras, baptisms, anniversaries, birthdays, any time life is celebrated and ritualized within the tradition of the Church. The challenge is whether our catechetical programs in our parishes are ready to handle these events, to nurture the faith at every stage of development from no faith to an owned faith. Every individual must move through the stages of faith from imitation, doubt, questioning, and finally an ownership which leads to discipleship.

We Have Always Done it This Way. . .

Historically, the Church has couched the primary catechetical effort within parish programs, which has proven to be only partially successful. The household is the primary locus from which lifelong catechesis takes root. In 2005 the Diocese of Tyler ‘anchored Confirmation to the Eucharist.’ The language deliberately omitted ‘restored order’ so it would facilitate a connection to the Sacraments of Initiation and lifelong Christian living rather than a list of things to complete to ‘graduate’ from CCD.

Additionally, a tremendous shift in who is responsible for catechesis moved from the parish and the catechist to the household where it properly belongs. There was not a particular ‘age’ designated either as some dioceses implement for celebrating Confirmation to get candidates caught up. The procedure was designed to invite households who have individuals who have not completed the sacraments of initiation to

take a more active role in catechesis to assist these individuals and to grow personally in faith formation.

Certain challenges arose in shifting this responsibility for catechesis. Some adults in these households did not feel adequate to hand on their faith if they grew up in a model where lifelong catechesis was not encouraged. Adults who are not engaged in personal ongoing faith formation had difficulty understanding the reasons for changing in both formation and celebration of the sacraments of initiation. These individuals base their opinions on their own personal experience when they ‘graduated’ from CCD. The United States Catholic Conference of Bishops cannot agree on when Confirmation should be celebrated so they allow the local ordinary to set this policy.

Six Years Later. . .

On the positive side of this topic, there are many adults who embraced this primary role for catechesis which they signed on for at their child’s baptism. The parishes provided formation sessions. The diocese provided handbooks for catechists, priests, candidates, and households. Bishop Alvaro Corrada provided a *Pastoral Reflection on the Sacrament of Confirmation* which emphasized its connection to the Eucharist and the misconception that it is a ‘sacrament of maturity.’ Bishop Corrada also emphasized that children at the age of reason should begin to be catechized on the Sacrament of Reconciliation and celebrate this sacrament regularly for 10 months prior to celebrating Confirmation and Eucharist for the first time. The household became the primary educator in the faith in this process. The household initiated the process. The household agreed to bring their children to Mass, to engage in personal faith formation, to pray with their children, and to take responsibility to discern when their child was ready to celebrate the sacraments.

The Diocese of Tyler is now in its 6th year with Confirmation anchored to the Eucharist in our catechetical formation. We have one theology of initiation for both Catholics and non-Catholics. Households are committed to catechesis for every individual in their homes. Youth ministry targeted service and social activities rather than Confirmation programs. Christian Initiation process flourished supported with the launch of promoting the catechumenate as the basis for all catechesis in the diocese. A renewal of the Sacrament of Reconciliation was seen within intergenerational households and extended families. Quinceaneras were revised based on the frequent misuse of the Sacrament of Confirmation as a hoop to jump through in order to celebrate this coming out for the young Hispanic girl.

Probably the most frequent argument by bishops for holding to Confirmation being celebrated by youth during the teen years is CCD retention. They are afraid these individuals will stay in CCD as long as they are not yet confirmed. The results we have seen in the Diocese of Tyler does not support this problem. Some of our candidates do not return to faith formation. However, the percentage of those who do continue formation is remarkably high. The key factor is dependent on whether the household is part of the process. If this does not exist, the children will not return whether they are confirmed at 7 or 17.

Supporting Documents of the Church

1566 - Catechism of the Council of the Trent

“The Proper Age for Confirmation - Here it is to be observed, after Baptism, the Sacrament of Confirmation may indeed be administered to all; but that until children shall have attained the use of reason, its administration is inexpedient. If it does not seem well to defer (Confirmation) to the age of twelve, it is most proper to postpone this Sacrament at least to that of seven years.” (208)

1963-65 - Second Vatican Council Documents:

“The rite of Confirmation is to be revised also so that the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of the Christian initiation may more clearly appear. For this reason the renewal of baptismal promises should fittingly precede the reception of this sacrament.”

(Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 71 - 1963)

“The Eucharist appears as the source and the summit of all preaching of the Gospel: catechumens are gradually led up to participation in the Eucharist, while the faithful who have already been consecrated in baptism and confirmation are fully incorporated in the body of Christ by the reception of the Eucharist.”

(Decree

Presbyterorum Ordinis 5 - 1965)

1983 - Revised Code of Canon Law

“To receive Confirmation licitly outside the danger of death requires that a person who has the use of reason be suitably instructed, properly disposed, and able to renew the baptismal promises.” (Canon 889)

“The faithful are obliged to receive this sacrament at the proper time. Parents and pastors of souls, especially pastors of parishes, are to take care that the faithful are properly instructed to receive the sacrament and come to it at the appropriate time.”

(Canon 890)

“The sacrament of Confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful around the age of discretion, unless the episcopal conference determines some other age, or unless there is present danger of death or some other grave cause which in the judgment of the minister persuades otherwise.”

(Canon 891)

1994 - Catechism of the Catholic Church

“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 free, unmerited election and does not need ratification to become effective.

(CCC. 1308)

“For centuries, Latin custom has indicated “the age of discretion” as the reference point for receiving Confirmation.”

(CCC 1307)

Language Must Change

In order for catechesis to shift, our language regarding sacrament must change.

- a. Formation - not preparation*
- b. Households of faith – not families*
- c. Catechists – not teachers*
- d. Celebrate sacraments – not get*
- e. Catechetical sessions – not classes*

Feedback from parish teams/ individuals since Confirmation was anchored to Eucharist during the last 6 years.

1. “A renewal in the celebration of Sacrament of Penance”

2. "Parents of First Communicants were offered the option to have child confirmed at the same liturgy - this is how we began. After six years it has become parish "policy" it is rare for a parent to have objections to this or request a later age."

3. "Adolescent catechesis and youth programs developed as lifelong faith formation rather than ending with Confirmation."

4. "Families tend to be involved in preparation of sacraments when children are younger."

5. "Full Eucharistic communion, not Confirmation, is experienced as the culmination of initiation."

6. "Since our Christian Initiation process was in place, it was easier to move Confirmation and not for the parish to see something out of the ordinary."

7. "Having families sit together at the celebration liturgy is more meaningful for us compared to having a group celebration. It seems like a natural step in our living the sacramental life of the church."

8. "Initially I felt I did not know enough to prepare my child for his sacraments. The more I helped him, the more I learned and the more I realized how helpful this faith knowledge is in living my life every day with every choice."

9. "As a pastor, the concept of Whole Community Catechesis was something I always wanted to implement. This concept was implemented to provide the parish resources for the new Sacramental formation policies. To my surprise it has been well attended and we are catechizing more people in the parish than before."

10. "Working in Sacramental formation for the Cathedral, the largest parish in the diocese, traditional CCD and sacramental formation was not working. Whole Community Catechesis became the primary format for catechesis for all ages in the parish. Special needs individuals surfaced as catechesis shifted to the households."

One Program – Two Languages

The Diocese of Tyler is 60% Hispanic. Every program and process in the diocese is developed in both English and Spanish.