

*Celebrating Confirmation: Order or Age?*  
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The Diocesan Christian Initiation Team was meeting one Wednesday afternoon in March 2005. The bishop had been invited to attend the gathering. The concern arose that we seem to have two theologies of initiation: one for Catholics and one for non - Catholics. The bishop, Alvaro Corrada, paused, head cocked, and smiled. Then he said very assuredly: “We should consider offering Confirmation prior to First Eucharist for baptized Catholics. What do you’all think about that?” As Director of Faith Formation for the diocese, I had to pick myself up from the floor, realizing that this would become an uphill battle.

The question: What age does your diocese confirm candidates?

The answer: Adolescents

The question: Why adolescents?

The answer: To keep them in formation longer

That is the usual response we received in researching dioceses around the world. As we began to approach this change from an initiation standpoint, the road became much less traveled and more navigable.

**1. The Reality: Parish hopping, Sacramental filling stations, Misguided theology. . .**

Our first step was to survey and evaluate the current practices for sacramental preparation in the diocese. In doing so we realized there were as many programs as we had parishes. Even with guidelines, resources, curriculum, policies, every parish seemed to be “doing their own thing.” And if parishioners didn’t like the hoops their parish required for sacraments, they would parish hop until they found one to their liking.

Another finding was that the sacrament of confirmation was seeking a theology - while the church has given us the meaning of the sacrament in our documents, our catechisms, our tradition, the general Catholic population understands the sacrament as a “sacrament of choice, a time for choosing the Church, a sacrament of maturity, makes us a soldier of Christ.”

**2. The Plan: A Pastoral Reflection on the Sacrament of Confirmation**

With this information the team set out a plan to present to the Presbyteral and Diaconal councils for input on how to proceed. The result was a request by the councils to the bishop to articulate a “theology of Confirmation” from which they could proceed. I think they expected a paragraph. Instead Bishop Corrada presented in October, 2005 a “Pastoral Reflection on the Sacrament of Confirmation” which is about 37 articles and about 11 pages. This reflection can be accessed at our diocesan website [www.dioceseoftyler.org](http://www.dioceseoftyler.org). The theology focuses on a close connection between the sacraments of initiation, not order or age.

“The Sacrament of Confirmation completes the baptismal grace. That is, the Holy Spirit, first received in Baptism, now strengthens the Christian, binding him more perfectly to Christ and the

Church so that, as a true witness of Christ, he might spread and defend the faith by word and deed (see CCC 1285). Thus it is not accurate to connect Confirmation to maturity in the psychological sense so that it would best be given at an age of social maturity. The Sacrament of Confirmation strengthens the person to bear witness, rather than expresses the person's determination to bear witness, to his faith. This strengthening is something that can be fittingly given at any age. By the reception of Confirmation, the Christian is given the grace to take his place in the life and apostolic mission of the Church. That mission is, first of all, to go out to all the world and witness to the Gospel of Christ. For a Christian publicly to take his place in the Eucharistic assembly is the greatest participation in the apostolic mission of the Church that is imaginable.”<sup>1</sup>

### **3. The Implementation: Sacrament Notebooks, Information Sessions. . .**

Our first step was to organize handbooks for households of faith, for candidates, for priests, for catechists. As we organized these materials we were conscious of the importance of the role of Reconciliation prior to preparation for these other sacraments as this often becomes only a stepping stone to receiving First Eucharist.

Information Sessions were held around the diocese to present the history, the theology, the implementation. All of our handbooks are available also on the website.

### **4. The Result: Parish Renewal, Whole Community Catechesis. . .**

- a. Families are becoming more involved in the process of faith formation
- b. Reconciliation is taking on a renewal with all individuals on a regular basis and not just prior to First Eucharist
- c. Sacraments are not seen as filling stations and celebrations are not viewed as graduations but ongoing nourishment in the life of the community
- d. Children do not leave formation after sacraments if families are involved in the preparation - whether they are 8 or 16.
- e. Youth programs become more focused on theological reflection, social justice, and relationships instead of being primarily Confirmation preparation
- f. There is one theology of initiation for Catholics and non-Catholics which becomes an enriching experience for the parish community.
- g. Adult faith formation has become more widespread as parents seek ways to teach their children about sacraments.
- h. Parishes and pastors have been challenged to provide whole community catechesis for sacramental sessions which reaches more PIP (people in the pew).

### **5. The Challenges:**

- I would be amiss if I did not admit that even though the road is less traveled does not mean there have not been bumps, although we managed to avoid the ditches. a.
- a. Parents are reluctant to take on the responsibility of handing on the faith.
  - b. Need for better understanding by clergy and catechists

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<sup>1</sup>*Pastoral Reflection on the Sacrament of Confirmation, 17*, Bishop Alvaro Corrada, SJ October 2006, Diocese of Tyler, Texas

- c. First Communion liturgy as a ceremony is more important than the beginning of a lifelong nurturing of the faith.
- d. Parishes without strong youth programs were challenged to begin something

In conclusion, as I look back on that first meeting almost two years ago and what has been accomplished since that time, I thank God for the wisdom of our Bishop, Alvaro Corrada, to know the teachings of the Church, to articulate those teachings with grace and style, and to have the courage and vision to support that our practices, our preparation, our rituals indeed show what we believe. *Lex orandi lex credendi!* In the future when another road less traveled comes our way, we'll smile, and maybe cock our heads too, and embrace the journey with faith, hope, and love.

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