

AT WHAT AGE CONFIRMATION?

The introduction of Middle Schooling in our schools is raising questions about when the Sacrament of Confirmation should be celebrated. To date, this sacrament has been conferred in Year Seven. We now have an opportunity to reconsider whether this is the best age for children to receive Confirmation.

What is the situation today?

Being the last of the three Sacraments of Initiation our young people receive, they are said after receiving Confirmation to be fully initiated into the Church. However, in practice, Confirmation has become the ‘Sacrament of Farewell’ for the vast majority of our young people. It is the end of the young person’s involvement in the life of the Church.

Indeed, judging from the statistics of the 2006 National Church Life Survey, it would seem that whichever of the Sacraments of Initiation they receive last is the ‘Sacrament of farewell’ for the majority of our young people today. One could ask: ‘In what sense can a person really be said to be initiated into a group when they have no real interest in it, nor any intention of being involved in it further in any active way?’ ‘Why are the Sacraments of Initiation not leading to our young people to become part of the community of the Church?’

Could the answers of these questions lie in our pastoral practice? Could the situation be improved by changing our pastoral practice in any way? A good starting point for discussing these questions is to recall the practice of the early stages of the Church.

The Early Church

Any study of the practice of the Early Church reveals several things.

First, the Sacraments of Initiation were seen as *sacraments of faith* – and were never conferred except in the context of a person completing the initiation stage on the journey of Christian faith. Faith was understood as both a gift of God and a human act, and a person must have progressed sufficiently along the journey of faith before they could receive these sacraments [cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 153-155].

Second, children received the Sacraments of Initiation if their parents had Christian faith, and could form their children in this faith as they grew older. These were parents who were capable of giving

their children ‘initiator catechesis’, *the basic apprenticeship* in the life of Christian faith inherited from the Apostles [cf *General Directory for Catechesis* 67]. The Apostles learned it from Jesus himself who, in his turn, was following the practice of the prophets and teachers of the Old Testament before him.

Third, the order in which the Sacraments of Initiation were conferred in the Early Church was Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Gradually the celebrations of Baptism and Confirmation were separated for various reasons. Then, early in the twentieth century, the age at which children could receive their First Holy Communion was dropped by Pope Pius X to the ‘age of discretion’, which is around six or seven years of age.

What is catechesis?

It is difficult to discuss the practice of the Early Church without being clear on what is meant by ‘initiator catechesis’. As we all know from experience, this catechesis is so often confused with religious education – leading some to the mistaken idea that children can be adequately prepared for Confirmation with sufficient religious education in the home and the school.

We do not need to delay much on the distinction between initiator catechesis and religious education pedagogies here – but the point needs to be made. The reasons will become obvious shortly when we begin to reflect upon questions we need to face as a Diocese. Suffice to say that Pope John Paul II stressed ‘there is an absolute necessity to distinguish clearly between religious instruction and ‘initiator catechesis’ [*General Directory for Catechesis* 73].

Comparing them as pedagogies, *initiator catechesis is an apprenticeship* in the faith (as mentioned already), whereas *religious education is an educational discipline*. It complements initiator catechesis by leading students to an ‘understanding that contributes towards faith’. They are, therefore, quite different pedagogies. To confuse them is like confusing an electrical apprenticeship with a master electrician and the TAFE electricians’ course, which apprentices have also to complete.

Confusion of the two turns the RCIA into a ‘convert instruction programme’ that risks the hearer giving up the practice of the faith, once the initial fervour dies down. It is reflected when people say that religious education is failing because students give up practice of the faith. While religious education will never be perfect, this is like saying that the electrocution of a young electrician apprentice is the fault of TAFE because he did the TAFE component of the electrician’s training, but had not yet worked much as an apprentice.

Yet, while catechesis requires an apprenticeship methodology, it is certainly is not simply the development of skills. Rather, it is an apprenticeship in how to deepen in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ himself, within the community of faith. It includes the beliefs and the liturgical, moral and prayer practices that lead one into the experience of Christ, and, through him, into experience of the Father and the Holy Spirit. This, the ‘nucleus of Christian experience’, is codified in the Apostles Creed, the Sacraments, the Life in Christ and the Lord’s Prayer [*General Directory for Catechesis* 67].

The practice of recent times

If we compare the practices of recent times with those of the early Church, we see radical differences, particularly in relation to children.

First, whereas originally only the children of families capable of giving them initiatory catechesis received the Sacraments of Initiation, now the children of families with no capacity whatsoever to offer initiatory catechesis can receive these sacraments. How can a child receive an apprenticeship in the Eucharist or Reconciliation, for example, if neither parent participates in the Sunday Eucharist or Reconciliation?

All too often parents today, in their turn, did not receive catechesis when they were growing up. Many have not developed faith in basics of Christian faith, much less have the capacity to pass these on to their children. They may have received religious education in their school years, but, without adequate initiatory catechesis, this is no more adequate for handing on Christian faith than would be TAFE courses for qualifying as an electrician, without an apprenticeship.

Second, the Sacraments of Initiation are no longer related to any stage of the journey of Christian faith. A child can receive these sacraments even though they are not yet on this journey because they are receiving no catechesis from their parents. And if parents are not offering catechesis, their parishes are unlikely to be able to offer catechesis because the parents probably won’t be part of its life and worship.

Third, since children not receiving catechesis cannot be on the journey of faith, clearly the ‘human act’ dimension of Christian faith has been forgotten when they receive Confirmation regardless. This is no more obviously revealed than in the attitude that a basic religious education preparation is sufficient for a Sacrament of Initiation: a child can receive Sacraments so long as they have a basic ‘understanding’ of the Sacrament they are receiving.

As one boy said to me not so long ago: 'I don't need to go to Mass, Bishop, as I have already received Holy Communion'. When I asked what he meant by Holy Communion, he could tell me he had received the Body of Christ. His religious education gave him the understanding, but, having missed the apprenticeship of initiatory catechesis, his faith was seriously defective. There was no human 'act' of faith.

Fourth, the order in which our children receive the Sacraments of Initiation is different from that of the early Church. We seem to have said: 'they are not receiving catechesis at home, and therefore in their parishes, so let us give them the chance of receiving at least some level of catechesis through the school before receiving the last Sacrament of Initiation'

There is a certain wishful thinking (and perhaps even an abdication of pastoral responsibility) reflected in the view that sacraments can be given without appropriate catechesis as 'we don't know what the Holy Spirit might do'. The fact is that the Spirit led the Early Church to continue the apostolic practice of initiatory catechesis and to call for its renewal at the Second Vatican Council. Does not the present situation reflect failure to heed this lesson from the Spirit.

Is there any wonder that Confirmation has so often become in every practical sense a 'Sacrament of Farewell?' The practice of offering Sacraments of Initiation to children from non-catechising families is a chasm away from the practice of the Early Church. It is a development that divorces sacramental celebrations from their meaning.

What initiatory catechesis for Confirmation?

As stated already, initiatory catechesis is an apprenticeship. Restricting myself to the Sacrament of Confirmation, candidates for Confirmation need apprenticeship in how to draw on the fruits of this sacrament into their daily lives [*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1302-1303]. They need too to appreciate how the ritual of the celebration expresses and celebrates these fruits [cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1297-1301].

The *Catechism* goes on to explain the basic themes that need to be reflected in any Confirmation catechesis [*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1309]:

Preparation for Confirmation should aim at leading the Christian toward a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy spirit – his actions, his gifts, and his

biddings – in order to be more capable to assuming the apostolic responsibilities of Christian life. To this end catechesis for Confirmation should strive to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, the universal Church as well as the parish community.

This is the initiatory catechesis needed by adults converting to the faith, and by children who have received Sacraments of Initiation from their families as they grow up. The wide-spread experience of Confirmation as the ‘Sacrament of Farewell’ in many parts of the world led the *General Directory of Catechesis* to comment [*General directory for Catechesis* 181]:

Very often at this time, the pre-adolescent, in receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation, formally concludes the process of Christian Initiation but from that moment, virtually abandons completely the practices of the faith. This is a matter of serious pastoral concerns which requires specific pastoral care, based upon the formative resources of the journey of initiation itself.

In other words, we need to review our pastoral practice in relation to Confirmation, basing it on the *formative journey* of initiatory catechesis. Is the present practice based on this formative journey?

Pope Benedict XVI takes up this theme again in his Apostolic Exhortation *The Sacrament of Love*, which is on the Eucharist. In the context of relationship of Confirmation to the Eucharist, the Pope calls Bishops to [*Sacrament of Love* 18]:

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 them an authentically Eucharistic direction...

In other words, how effectively is the present approach helping children and their parents to ‘mature’ in Eucharistic faith? How effectively is it helping them to grow in faith through ‘formation received in our communities’? Clearly, practices that lead to Confirmation becoming a ‘sacrament of farewell’ are the reverse of those needed to lead those who receive this sacrament to ‘mature through the formation received in our communities’.

The Pope goes on to describe Christian initiation as ‘a process of conversion’. It is not simply a matter of conferring sacraments, regardless of the person’s faith readiness – or of whether, if they are

children, they are receiving adequate initiatory catechesis in their families and parishes.

Speaking of the need to review current practices the Pope emphasises the need to discover which practice [*Sacrament of Love* 18]:

... better enables the faithful to put the sacrament of the Eucharist at the centre, as the goal of the whole process of initiation.

As the *General Directory for Catechesis* shows, the ‘whole process of initiation’ is the process of initiatory catechesis. To put the Eucharist ‘at the centre, and as the goal’ of the whole Christian initiation process means leading people into ‘the formation received in our communities’ so that, in turn, they are led the Eucharist as ‘the source and summit’ of the Christian life.

Questions for our Diocese

It seems clear that Confirmation will remain the ‘Sacrament of Farewell’ for most of our young people while they do not receive the necessary initiatory catechesis (or apprenticeship) in the sacrament.

There is no question that the practice of conferring this sacrament on children from families who are incapable of giving catechesis is not part of our pastoral tradition. It is a recent innovation that is leading to disastrous consequences for our young people – including leading them away from, rather than into, ‘the chance to ‘mature through the formation received in our communities’. It cannot continue if we are serious about proclaiming the Gospel.

While the young people receive religious education prior to Confirmation, this is nowhere near sufficient.

Some may be tempted to suggest that we should settle on different ages for children. Those receiving family catechesis are confirmed at one age; those who are not at another. We need to be cautious here because even children from families strong in the practice of the faith seem to be giving up religious practice. This is because our general religious situation requires a New Evangelisation strategy: all children are subject to the same societal influences that weaken faith.

Should we restore the practice of the Early Church?

Should Confirmation be restricted to adults converting to the faith, and to children from families capable of catechesis? A positive response would mean that the children of non-catechising families

could not receive Confirmation until adulthood.

How pastorally effective would such a restriction be? Might it not lead to just a few receiving this sacrament, and the alienation of many from the Church?

Should we restore the order of the Early Church?

If we face the reality of the present situation, one question we have to ask is: 'Should the current age for Confirmation be lowered and the order of the Early Church restored?'

Again, how pastorally effective would such a change be? Would it lead children to, in the words of Pope Benedict, 'the formation received in our communities'? Would this lead them to 'an authentically Eucharistic direction?' as the 'centre and goal of the whole process of initiation', as Pope Benedict has called for? Or might not the Eucharist simply replace Confirmation as the 'Sacrament of Farewell'?

Personally I see no sense in simply swapping the Eucharist for Confirmation as the 'Sacrament of Farewell'. Indeed, instead of being a gain, it is the opposite for it means children would stop involvement in the Church even earlier than now.

Are there other alternatives?

No doubt there are. Whatever approach is adopted must bring a positive response to the question: 'will this lead to the 'formation received in our communities'?'

One approach I am suggesting we consider, but am not pushing at this stage, could be to take up Pope Benedict's idea of the need to place Confirmation and the Eucharist within the initiation process in a way that leads them to 'the formation received in our communities' and gives them 'an authentic Eucharistic direction', but modifies this process to some extent, at least for the children of non-catechising families, in the light of the pastoral realities of today..

We could say that, in addition to religious education, children must have received some specially focussed initiatory catechesis before the *final* Sacrament of Initiation is conferred. This would involve close collaboration between the parish and Catholic school.

There are many ways that such a catechesis could draw in parents, and even families, as well. It would help those who are rethinking the role of the Gospel in their lives as their children prepare for Confirmation by involving them in its processes.

Such a catechesis would mean the age of Confirmation needs to be raised according to whatever is needed for this catechesis to be completed. A key element in this catechesis would be the ‘formation received in our communities’ – the parish and school in this case. This would fit into our diocesan direction of *‘family catechesis, parish based and school supported.’*

In many dioceses overseas, the age for Confirmation is higher than it is in our Diocese. Initiatory catechesis revolves around parish community service, which is very attractive to many mid-teenagers, and seeks to draw them into the parish community first through its works. This is a completely different catechesis from what is possible with twelve year olds, and a very different approach from anything offered currently in Australia as far as I know.

This approach could be studied to evaluate its possibilities for us if we decide that candidates should receive adequate initiatory catechesis before receiving the *final* Sacrament of Initiation. The legislated requirement that secondary students in Western Australia undertake community service before receiving graduation opens new possibilities for our young people, whether they go to Catholic or other schools.

Parishes would need to think of how to involve young people in their community service activities – and perhaps even develop new ones. Perhaps Parish Pastoral Councils would need to assign someone to plan and supervise student involvement in parish activities. School evangelisation programmes would need to offer a more specifically focussed initiatory catechesis in the sacraments of Initiation.

Conclusion

Currently, circumstances are forcing us to reconsider at what age the Sacrament of Confirmation should be conferred on children. We have the opportunity to consider how we might stop Confirmation being the sacrament of farewell.

Let us pray for the Spirit’s guidance as we reflect as a diocese on this important issue for our young people’s faith.

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