

Session One: The Meaning and Implications of the Sacrament of Confirmation

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It would be safe to say that all of us in this room have a stake in the Sacrament of Confirmation. Whether we are Youth Ministers, Religious Education Directors, priests, deacons, bishops or women and men religious, we realize the importance of Confirmation's influence on our young people and their continued involvement and formation within the Church. Yet, we have so many mixed signals about this sacrament.

I have heard it called the "Pluto" of the Seven Sacraments. Last summer, Pluto was reclassified and "downgraded" from its planet status. The rationale was that Pluto is part of an asteroid belt, is smaller than our own moon and crosses Neptune's orbit so it should be disqualified as a planet. Confirmation seems to be in that same state of flux. Are we confused by Confirmation's orbital relationship with the six other Sacraments? Is it the "mini-me" of Baptism or analogous to the Bar or bat mitzvah in Judaism? Does the placement of Confirmation in the adolescent years confuse this sacrament with Graduation? I think that it is very appropriate that we are here in such great numbers as parish ministers and Christian educators to reflect on our experiences with Confirmation and share our insights for direction of allowing the fullness of grace to come forward in our young people for this sacrament.

Our own perplexity with Confirmation certainly begins in Biblical Times. We know the great event that Pentecost was for the early church and the transforming effect it had on the Eleven and the other disciples of Jesus. While we trace the origins of the other six sacraments to Jesus himself, it is a bit more difficult to directly place Confirmation consciously in Jesus' public ministry. In John's Gospel, chapter 16, verse 7, Jesus does tell the Apostles that if he does not leave them, then the Holy Spirit cannot come to them. One can argue that this does not directly establish the sacrament but rather promises it to the Apostles and the Church. In our Easter readings, the two sacraments that take precedence are Baptism and Eucharist. I point to the Emmaus Gospel and the account of the third Resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples on the Sea of Galilee to illustrate my point.

Later on, great theologians of the Church such as St. Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas speculated on the origins of Confirmation attributing it to the Holy Spirit through the work of the Apostles and even debating whether the sacrament was not formally established until the Council of Meaux in the year 845. If Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure had varied speculations about the origins of Confirmation, I wonder how we are going to settle all the questions we have in one day!

When I was a student of Theology at Catholic University, I began to think that all of our blessings and curses originated with the conversion to Christianity of Constantine in 312 AD. In the early Church, the community gathered around the bishop who celebrated the sacraments with his fellow Christians. When the communities grew to such large numbers, it was no longer possible for the bishop to celebrate Eucharist for all the Christians in his area, nor was it possible for him to baptize all of them, either.

However, while the presbyters could baptize, they were not allowed to sign the neophytes on the forehead with the Chrism. This was reserved for the Bishop. Here we see the "break" between Baptism and Confirmation taking place. In the Eastern Orthodox churches, the three sacraments of Initiation, Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation are given all at once, even to infants.

In our own country, we know that the age of Confirmation has been established in some dioceses to the age of reason and given at the reception of First Holy Communion. Some have urged that Confirmation should be moved back to its place with baptism or be conferred while the children are under ten years of age. I have been told by a pastor that he would like to see the age of Confirmation moved to

age 21 or beyond! Clearly, even the discussion of age-appropriateness runs the gamut for us. While there is some range of ages for Confirmation here in our own archdiocese, I think it would be safe to say that most of our young people are confirmed between the ages of 13 and 17. These ages pose their own challenges for us.

Some years ago, when I was pastor in South Baltimore, we had an awful problem with the pigeons in the steeple at Star of the Sea church. After Mass one Sunday, when I announced that we had a plan to remedy the situation, one of our catechists announced to me that he could solve our problem very easily. I innocently asked, "How do we do that?" To which he responded: "Confirm them!" Needless to say, while I found his answer humorous on the surface, I do think that he identified the frustrations of all of us entrusted with the continuing Christian formation of our young people.

However, despite all obstacles, I do think that we are on the right track by linking the Sacrament of Confirmation to Christian service. When I read the letters of many of our candidates, I am greatly encouraged when they speak of the first time they serve at places like Sarah's House or Our Daily Bread or a place to feed the hungry in their own parish. For many of them, it is an eye-opening experience to realize that there are people who do not have enough food or a place to live while they are living in a comfortable home with enough food and material goods. It is also good to note the positive effect that the retreat experience has on our candidates.

Many of them speak of the retreat as the first time they have had an opportunity to concentrate on prayer, Scripture and discussing their faith. I hope that you feel affirmed as religious educators, Youth ministers and leaders of Confirmation programs in your parishes as you witness the candidates experience these integral aspects of confirmation preparation. It is so important in our day to link Confirmation with concretely living out our commitment to the Lord Jesus. I also find that it is imperative that we provide opportunities for service within the parish for the newly confirmed.

Some parishes include the opportunities for service as part of the preparation process. It makes sense that if we invite the newly confirmed to become active members of the parish, that we provide the means by which they can do so. When a candidate includes in a letter that he or she realizes that Confirmation is not then end of their journey, but an important step in their faith life, I believe that it is a joy for all of us to see that realization that takes place.

As committed Catholics, we do not have the luxury of astronomers who can discuss the status of Pluto for years. We are here today because we are concerned about the impact that Confirmation should have on our young people and the ways in which we can serve them to bring the seven-fold gifts of the Spirit to our parishes.

This past Saturday, I attended a prayer service and a part of a social justice ministry workshop that was entitled "Inform, Inspire and Invite." It occurred to me that is what we seek to do in inviting our young people to the fullness of life in Jesus by taking their rightful place in the church. May our time together here be nourishing for us and give us the grace to be the instruments of the Holy Spirit who make a difference the lives of those who seek the fullness of initiation into our Christian community.