

## Session Four: The Basics of Confirmation Preparation

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<< After introduction, limbo music begins... recruit limbo dancers>>

When music stops, confess, wait a minute, The Catholic Church does not do limbo anymore. Oh, well...

Nonetheless, let's stay with the tropical theme for a few moments. Just enter into these scenes and allow me to do a few thanks you's while you chill...

First, as we come to the close of our day, I wanted to take a brief moment aside and

- THANK our wonderful bishops for their leadership and participation throughout the day;
- THANK today's presenters and those who have assisted in the presentation of this event;
- THANK the rest of the staff at the Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry;
- And, most especially, THANK YOU. Your participation has been invigorating and energizing.

Here is one last beach scene that should also place many of you into a happy tropical sort of mood. Ahhhhh, yes, David Hasselhoff from Baywatch. If I had a nickel time that people have confused me with David Hasselhoff, I would have .....

I think we look at Confirmation and sometimes confuse ourselves with David Hasselhoff or Pamela Anderson or any of the other lifeguards.

There we have a beautiful tropical scene, the sun, the sand, the scent of suntan oil and all we can see are the sharks in the water.

There we have the beach, the surf, the island breeze, and all we can see is the bomb ready to explode.

There we have relaxed pace, a sense of beach time, an aloha attitude, and all we can see is the one drowning in the undertow.

Confirmation is *not* the "alpha" and the "omega" of a young person's catechetical life. The National Directory for Catechesis reminds us that catechesis "is a lifelong process for the individual and a constant and concerted pastoral activity of the Christian Community." (NDC 19, E). Clearly, there are two partners which make catechesis a life-long process

1. the Individual: Young people will *always* be in some level of a relationship with God. Young People will *always* be in some level of a relationship with the Church. They will *always* be in growing in faith in some manner or another.
2. Constant and Concerted activity. We need to be assured that we are not offering catechesis out of a sense that "we've got you now and we are not going to waste this moment." Constant and concerted . . . imply the *always* that is the individual's experience.

Confirmation is *one* of the, if not *the*, largest programs that a parish does annually with her young people. We have, and should continue to be able to say that we have, done this well. The Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry has a simple hope for today's summit gathering. It is that you will start or (re)start ongoing conversations in your parish community about the way that you "do" Confirmation.

Recently, I have been part of the planning process. It is for the High-School Leadership Institute as it moves from a ten-day program into a seven-day program; from a one-track process to a three track program. (I have equated the planning involved for this to playing "Star Trek" three-level chess.)



Every program element has been re-examined and re-evaluated. Every assumption has been up for grabs. Everything is to be questioned. As we were preparing notes for the manual, the running comment became “Why (this or that) anyway?” If we were looking at a session on Communication, the initial comment was “Why communicate anyway?” If we were considering the closing slide show, we asked “Why is the slide show at the end anyway?”

## **BODY**

In my brief time this afternoon, I wanted to make a quick review the “Seal of the Spirit” resource. At this time, there will be no proposal of a massive change or shift.

That was never the goal of this gathering. Nor is it my intention to read the manual line for line to you.

What I *am* proposing is

1. that, together, we look at “Seal of the Spirit;”
2. consider some of the basic elements for Confirmation preparation all the while asking each other “Why (this or that) anyway?”; and
3. assure ourselves that not only are we true to the “Seal of the Spirit” but also true to the “*Spirit* of the *Seal*” of the Sacrament of Confirmation

What is the content of our catechesis for the sacrament of Confirmation? On page 14 of *Seal of the Spirit*, we are reminded that

Our catechesis for the Sacrament is NOT “to bear the weight of providing ALL information and formation in faith necessary for adult living.”

The goals are rather simple:

- Inform and prepare the candidate for participation in the Rite of Confirmation, its components, symbols, and effects
- Focus on active membership in the church community
- Invite young people into lived discipleship. Of course, we know that we are not only inviting young people into “lived” discipleship. We are also offering them opportunity to reflect upon the ways that they are *already* living discipleship.

NOTE: In almost every parish, this is our biggest effort in evangelization and catechesis with this age group in our parish; it should be our best!

What about all the *components* for the sacrament of Confirmation? The *components* for confirmation really shouldn’t be a new experience for the confirmandi. They are not meant to be part of a process that stands alone or separately from the parish experience.

These “*components*” are a continuation upon a natural rhythm of participation in the formation process of the parish. In other words, it is an extension of the parish’s works of service, worship, retreat, etc.

Therefore:

- *Resourcing families* does not necessarily equal a one-stop, one-shop parent meeting
- Nor does establishing faith opportunities between candidate and *sponsor*
- Celebration with *parish community*. This implies recognition by the parish community, prayer by the parish community on behalf of the candidates, perhaps even a parish commissioning the adults (catechists, Sponsors) involved with the candidates
- *Catechesis* has already been covered above. The guidelines call for 9-12 hours worth of it.
- *Service* should recognize that some young people are already involved in serve. It should also be a learning opportunity allowing young people to “reflect on their experiences with service and on its challenge and meaning for their life.” Catholic Social Teaching is one of the great gifts of the tradition of our church, confirmandi should at least have a passing glance at it.
- A *Retreat Experience* (covering, at minimum, 6 hours) provides *privileged time* with the confirmandi to consider their faith. We need to honor the privilege of young people spending time with us and give it our fullest attention as well as program in such a manner that demands their own full attention as well.
- *Prayer and worship* noting that the priority is not independent experiences as much as meaningful participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the faith community, and, finally
- An *interview* provides “for encouragement, discussions of faith content and the individuals personal and faith journey, (an) opportunity to deepen the candidates’ awareness of the Rite of Confirmation, and to invite them to continued growth.

Have we become set in our ways? Are there alternatives to how we go about this? Should we not re-examine each of these components? Should we search for new ways to be creative and effective with our efforts?

Let me REPEAT: In almost every parish, this is our biggest effort in evangelization and catechesis with this age group in our parish; it should be our best!

## CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with two notes and a parable:

NOTE ONE: Please eliminate the word mandatory. It is a graduation word; not a word of commencement or starting. Our programs should not be about demanding that the confirmandi fit. Our confirmandi should not be evaluating their own “successfulness” or completion based upon the perceived needs of the parish staff.

Use of the word mandatory suggests a definition of the overall climate/spirit of the parish community. Does subjecting an experience as mandatory imply desire for participation or need for compliance?

The “youth group” model of youth ministry has been severely questioned as it suggests that one size fit all. Is it not time that we begin to plan multiple options and flexibility in our Confirmation programming? Might this not be more indicative that our parish’s program is actually evangelizing the confirmandi, and their families, and their sponsors?

Reality shows on TV often convey the successful winner as one who can face any challenge and “make it work.” Our parishes should be about “can do” experiences. We desire to be a church of “Yes!” Saying “No” does not make us stronger. We want to present ourselves, our church as “being positive, of being open,” “The church is a church that says, ‘Yes!’ Yes, to all that is good and right; Yes to peace and justice; Yes to life; and Yes to marriage,”

We are inviting confirmandi to again consider saying “yes” to a new life in Christ. We are not asked “no,” We are asked to say Yes to the invitation to the Lord’s invitation to “Come and follow me.” We are asked to say “yes” to the great commission to “Go and make disciples.”

Many of us grew up in that whole “soldiers of Christ” metaphor for the Sacrament of Confirmation. I was reminded of that this weekend when Pope Benedict addressed his soldiers, The Swiss guard. To his soldiers, he said this about their mission.

"The Lord calls you to holiness," Benedict exhorted his guards, "to be his disciples, always ready to listen to his voice, to fulfill his will and to realize it in the daily accomplishment of your duties. This will help make of you 'good Christians' and at the same time 'exemplary soldiers,' animated by that evangelical spirit which makes each of the baptized a 'leaven' to uplift the rest and a 'light' that shines and warms in the places you live and work."

Today’s’ soldiers of Christ are leaven and light animated by that evangelical spirit

NOTE TWO: Towards that Yes, I would invite you to review the *Confirmation Covenant* that is a part of page 17 and 18 of *The Seal of the Spirit*.

This is a tool of commencement, of starting and starting again. Please consider utilizing this tool in a multitude of venues of Confirmation preparation.

Can families be included in this decision making process somehow? Clearly, sponsors should also have input in the decisions related to the covenant as well as the mystagogic follow-up on behalf of the church.

Might not the confirmandi’s service experience play into their covenant choices? Does the retreat experience allow them opportunity to reflect upon their covenant? Is the confirmandi’s covenant celebrated within community through prayer and worship? Is it discussed during the interview?

Maybe your parish is doing well with this. Maybe it has escaped your radar screen. It is my encouragement to you that

you invite young people to include their confirmation covenant statements in their letters to the Bishop.  
Furthermore, I would also encourage the Bishops to include references to their hopes for the church based on their expectation of the confirmation covenants been met by the young people.

#### FINALLY, A PARABLE:

You probably have never heard of the town of Bethsaida. It was hometown to Peter, Andrew, and Philip—all disciples of Jesus. You have most likely heard of them.

But, it is entirely unlikely that you have ever heard of the Bub Gong, the prophet from Bethsaida.

Remember the kid with the five barley loaves and two small fishes who generously assisted in the feeding of the multitudes? That was Bub from Bethsaida.

Bub was so impressed with the Lord that day that he decided to emulate the Master. He traveled all around performing all the good works that he had seen Jesus do. Bub was a fine story-teller; he matched the skills of Jesus in taking a metaphor from the daily lives of people and transforming it into a story. Because of this gift of story, Bub Gong was an honored guest for a meal throughout the land. It seemed as if some of the miracle-worker of the Lord must have rubbed off on Bub. Therefore, he could restore the temporary health of hope to the ill.

Bub Gong used all the technology of the day available to a spiritual guru. Yet, you never heard of him. Bub was doing all the right things, yet seemed to have no disciples or evangelists to carry on the message. Where did Bub go wrong?

More precisely, where did Bub Gong not go right? It turns out that Bub was so impressed with the miracle of the loaves and fishes, he never understood the message of the Lord. Truly, there is a lesson in that for each of us who attempt to transmit faith to today's young people while using all the cool gadgets and toys of the day.

We can be as talented as possible in developing programs. You can use of modern technology and media—utilizing Power Point or YouTube or updating our MySpace pages—and still end up just like Bub.

The real tools of the Lord were his relationships and his invitation into discipleship. *The Seal of the Spirit* is a wonderful resource, but we who lead confirmation well know that we are to be much more concerned about the Spirit of the Seal. It's not the flashy glitz that works; it's not shepherding sheep over various hurdles; it is the love one has to share.

Pope Benedict XVI has us refocusing on *God is Love*. Even today's business professionals are rediscovering the suggestion of author Tim Saunders that *Love is the Killer Ap*. This is where Bub from Bethsaida never really "got it."

Bub Gong just never understood that, for Jesus, it was all about a self-less love for the Father as well as for one's neighbor. Without that, there is something empty in one's ministry, no matter how gifted one might be with the technology of the ministry. Later in Bub's rather mediocre ministry (which had then moved to Corinth,) the Christian apostle Paul of Tarsus offered this critique of Bub, "If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding Gong or a clashing cymbal."

As we continue to invite and initiate young people through the Sacrament of Confirmation, let us remember (because no one else will!) the lessons learned from resounding but empty noise made by Bub Gong, the mediocre prophet from Bethsaida.