

Restoration of Order of Sacraments underway in diocese of Saskatoon

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

SASKATOON - The diocese of Saskatoon is moving toward the restoration of the order of sacraments, with several parishes beginning pilot projects this year in which young people will receive confirmation before receiving first communion.

The traditional order of baptism-confirmation-Eucharist is presently in place only at one parish in the Saskatoon diocese: St. Augustine Parish in Humboldt. In other parishes across the diocese children are now confirmed several years after making their first communion, usually around Grade 6. Once the restored order is in place across the diocese, confirmation and first communion would both happen together, usually in Grade 2.

The original and traditional order - baptism, confirmation and then Eucharist - clearly reflects the meaning of Christian initiation, said Bishop Albert LeGatt.

“There is a need to come back to both a theology and a sacramental practice that sees initiation or becoming a disciple of Christ as one single reality leading to Eucharist,” he said. “Historically what we’ve rediscovered is that the right order is baptism, wherein we are brought into this new life in Christ; confirmation, where we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit to live out that new life; and then the Eucharist, which unites us repeatedly and sacramentally to Christ and to one another in that new life.”

He noted that the Vatican II call to renewal of the liturgy asks for the link between baptism and confirmation to be more strongly affirmed. Before 1910 the sacrament of confirmation was always received before first Eucharist. With the introduction of an earlier age for first Eucharist initiated by Pope Pius X, confirmation was left at a later age, and the order of initiation was disrupted. As a result, confirmation became connected with the idea of an adult commitment to the faith.

“But confirmation is not a question of understanding; it’s not dependent on our knowledge; it’s a free gift,” said LeGatt.. Catechesis is not something that leads to confirmation and then stops, he explained. Rather, formation in the Christian faith and in Christian life is a life-long journey, which begins with initiation, he said.

Preliminary work on restoring the order of sacraments has already started, with the creation of a diocesan committee in December 2003 to consider the implications of the changeover.

For the past year this committee has examined the question of restoring the order of sacraments, undertaken preliminary research and gathered materials. “Bishop LeGatt

asked us for initial input – what opportunities this change presented, and what challenges,” said Agnes Rolheiser, a member of the diocesan rural catechetics team who was recently appointed chair of what is now a working committee.

Committee members have a wide range of experience in catechetics and Christian initiation, including the sacramental preparation of children and the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) process.

The committee contacted other dioceses in Canada that have already restored the order of sacraments, researching their experience and gathering suggestions about the practicalities of implementing the change, said Rolheiser. The practice of Eastern rite churches – which have always preserved the traditional order of sacraments – was also examined, as was the RCIA model of initiation.

Practical issues such as choice of catechetical materials, the need to change the focus of parish programs, and the creation of ongoing faith-formation opportunities for youth after confirmation are also being addressed by the committee. Turning its attention to implementing the changes, the new working committee is now developing a timeline for the change, which will be a gradual process, said Rolheiser.

A pilot project involving three rural parishes and two urban parishes will begin in fall 2005, with the restored order being phased in across the diocese from 2006 to 2009.

“This is something that is going to take time and reflection,” noted Rolheiser.

An upcoming workshop on the restored order of sacraments April 20 with Bishop Gerald Wiesner of Prince George, B.C. will be an important opportunity for furthering understanding of the theology of initiation and the reason for undertaking the restoration of the traditional order, she noted.

“The rightful place of confirmation is to provide the link from baptism to Eucharist ... you are washed, you are anointed and then you come to the table,” said Rolheiser of the theological reasons behind the change. She also emphasized that catechesis does not end with confirmation, she said, but is a life-long journey of “mystagogia” or delving deeper into our experience and understanding of God.

Other dioceses that have restored the order of sacraments have not experienced a higher “drop out” rate because children are confirmed at a younger age, she noted. Instead, the initiation process is more family-centred, and as with RCIA, the community is a larger part of the initiation process. “Other dioceses report a real shift to family and community ... people get connected and stay connected.”