

Confirmation is a gift, not a sign of adult faith, Wiesner tells gathering

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

Confirmation is a gift, not a sign of adult faith commitment, stressed Bishop Gerald Wiesner of Prince George, B.C. at an April 20 workshop for parish leaders from across the diocese of Saskatoon.



As an initiation sacrament, the proper place for confirmation is after baptism and before first Eucharist, he said in a presentation focusing on the historical and theological reasons for “restoring the order” to baptism-confirmation-Eucharist.

“The holy Eucharist completes Christian initiation,” he said, citing Paragraph 1222 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, one of many references he provided to church documents, especially those rooted in the Vatican II council.

Repeated references in these documents and rites describe confirmation as a sacrament of initiation, which along with baptism, leads to Eucharist. “It is not presented as a sacrament of adulthood,” he said. “A person is baptized and confirmed in order that they may celebrate Eucharist.”

He quoted the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 1308: “Although confirmation is sometimes called the ‘sacrament of Christian maturity’ we must not confuse adult faith with the adult age of natural growth, nor forget that the baptismal grace is a grace of free, unmerited election.”

Faith does not conform to chronological age, Wiesner said. Bishop Albert LeGat later reiterated this point, adding receiving the sacrament is not a matter of knowledge and understanding, but of faith and a relationship with Jesus. “Does a Grade 6 student love Jesus more than Grade 2 student loves Jesus? I don’t think so.”

Confirmation is God’s gift of the Spirit and like baptism, it does not require that we earn or understand it completely, said Wiesner. “The presupposition is that there is faith there in the child, and the presupposition is that there is faith on the part of the parents ... so that on receiving the gift, the child is going to have the kind of support, leadership and instruction to enable them to take possession of the gift and live it out more fully.”

This raises the question of what other ways are we carrying out ongoing faith education with children and young people, beyond that related to the reception of sacraments, he noted. “I realize we have a long way to go to have our faith community become aware that faith education is ongoing and life-long.” (See related story) top of page 19)

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) makes clear that this ongoing faith journey is a “process, rather than a program ... we journey with people where they are at in their faith life,” Wiesner said.

In his concluding talk, Wiesner described the experience of his own diocese in restoring the order of sacraments about 10 years ago.

Most people are now comfortable with the change, however it is not a “command performance,” said the bishop. When opposition is encountered “we try to explain, try to encourage, but not demand.”

Wiesner stressed the importance of good preparation focusing on the involvement of the family. “I would say it is working quite well and I think our catechists and those preparing our children are quite satisfied with how it unfolds.”

The diocese of Prince George also emphasizes the need for ongoing evangelization, promoting the lay formation program across the diocese, the educational system in parish communities and youth ministry.

Change begins gradually

Saskatoon diocese will celebrate confirmation before first communion

The diocese of Saskatoon has started the gradual process of restoring the sacraments of Christian initiation to their proper order of baptism-confirmation-Eucharist.

Within a few years, children across the diocese will receive the sacrament of confirmation before first communion, usually in Grade 2.

The nuts and bolts of how that change will happen, and how children will be prepared to receive the two sacraments at once, is now being explored by a committee established by Bishop Albert LeGatt.

The committee has contacted other dioceses that have made the change and is compiling resources and catechetical materials. Several “pilot” parishes will begin the process in September, to determine the best ways to implement the change for the rest of the diocese, explained committee chair Agnes Rolheiser at a recent diocesan workshop. In addition, the committee will undertake a general education of the whole diocese, and will prepare catechists and parish leaders for the change, she said.

The bishop has also decided that reconciliation will be celebrated before first Eucharist.

This may mean students in Grade 2 will spend the first part of the year preparing for first reconciliation, and the second part of the year preparing for confirmation and first Eucharist.

Preparation will be family-focused and age-appropriate – for instance, the Grade 2 confirmation preparation would not be what was offered at the Grade 6 level, the bishop noted.

“Many teachers have said it is a huge amount to do,” said LeGatt at the April 20 workshop. “I recognize that, and it will be part of our piloting and part of the monitoring we do as we go to look closely at that.”

LeGatt said he recently consulted with the bishop of Alexandria-Cornwall, a diocese that has implemented the same changes. “It seems to be working ... so let us have the experience of it and take it step by step,” LeGatt said.

Faith formation continues throughout life

Becoming a fully-initiated member of the faith through baptism-confirmation-Eucharist must be seen as a beginning in the Christian life, not a “graduation” with all things understood and accomplished. Therefore, moving the sacrament of confirmation to Grade 2 does not mean parishes and families will be finished with the faith formation of older children and teens, stressed LeGatt.

The planned change in the diocese of Saskatoon provides a clear invitation for a renewed focus on youth ministry and on ongoing catechesis, he said.

Parishes and families can continue to do all the same activities with youth in the Grade 6 year, simply without attaching them to the sacrament of confirmation, LeGatt noted. All the catechesis, the community service, the growth in knowledge and understanding can still be part of a young person’s ongoing Christian journey.

He added that parishes across the diocese could also hold celebrations for young people in about Grades 6-8 and possibly in Grades 11-12 to make a public reaffirmation of faith.

There is a fear that without the reception of the sacrament of confirmation to prompt them, families of older youth will have no reason to continue faith formation, said Bishop Gerald Wiesner at the April 20 workshop. But it is not the role of the sacrament to serve as a “tempting carrot” for catechesis, he said, adding that no one is ever finished growing in faith.

The “drop-off” rate after confirmation is not tied to the celebration of the sacrament but to the faith of the family and the attitude of the child, added LeGatt. “But we work with who we have, and work to deepen the faith of those who take part.”

Eucharist is the culmination of our Christian initiation, Christian life and Christian mission, says Bishop LeGatt

The Year of the Eucharist is an appropriate time to recall the importance of the Eucharist in the initiation process of baptism-confirmation-Eucharist, according to Bishop Albert LeGatt.

“It’s central to both expressing and bringing about the truth of our lives as disciples of Christ, and the truth of the Church as the gathered community of those disciples made one and challenged to be one,” he said.

All of the sacraments and all of the dimensions of the church’s mission to be priest, prophet, shepherd-king, lead to the Eucharist and flow forth from the Eucharist.

“We are baptized to be a Eucharistic people, and we’re sealed with the Holy Spirit in confirmation to be a Eucharistic people. In the Eucharist we are joined once more to the power of God’s love, offered to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Then through the same Eucharist, we are transformed and enlivened by the Spirit to go out and live out that paschal mystery in our daily lives and in our world,” LeGatt said.

“The Eucharist is the culmination of initiation precisely because it is the culmination – ‘the source and summit’ – of our whole Christian life and mission.”

Thus plans to restore the order of the sacraments of initiation in the diocese of Saskatoon to baptism-confirmation-Eucharist has a great potential for deepening understanding of the celebration and living out of the Eucharist, the bishop noted.

“The Eucharist is the fullest expression of the mystery of God’s love and the mystery of God’s covenant, of how we are called to share in the mission of Jesus,” he said. “Initiation is a free gift of Christ’s life in us, through the growing act of the Spirit. Then the rest of our lives are about understanding, embracing and deepening the truth of that initiation as baptism-confirmation- Eucharist.”



In Humboldt, children are confirmed by the bishop at the same celebration in which they receive first communion, completing their initiation into the Church.

Humboldt celebrates sacraments of initiation in the restored order of baptism-confirmation-communion

One parish in the diocese of Saskatoon is already celebrating the sacraments of initiation in “the restored order” of baptism-confirmation-Eucharist.

For the past decade, children at St. Augustine’s parish in Humboldt have received the sacrament of confirmation at the same celebration as their first communion, at the age of about seven years.

The change was made when St. Augustine’s was still part of St. Peter’s Abbacy. Sr. Loretta Konlup, OSU, attended a Western Conference of the Catechumenate (WCC) gathering in Edmonton in the early 1990s and heard Bishop Gerald Wiesner of the diocese of Prince George, B.C. speak about the restoring the order of initiation.

“There were catechists there from all over Western Canada, many of them looking for another approach,” said Konlup, describing how most were preparing youth for confirmation in their early teens, in the face of peer pressure and other teenage attitudes.

When she returned, she spoke to the pastor, Fr. Lawrence DeMong, to Abbot Peter Novecosky and to the principals of the two Catholic schools in Humboldt about the possibility of making a change to restore the order based on the RCIA model, and provide the sacraments of confirmation and first Eucharist at the same time in Grade 2.

“I think at first they were a little bit skeptical, but Abbot Peter talked to the other Saskatchewan bishops... and it was decided to pilot it for three years, and then reassess

it,” she said. After reviewing the program and the evaluations from parents, it was decided the change should be implemented.

“One of the biggest difficulties was to convince the parents that it wasn’t a matter of knowledge,” she said. “One of the things is to convince the parents to let the Spirit take over. After all, what does a child know when they are baptized?”

Parents and children are prepared for the sacrament together through the parish, meeting over five weeks with the pastor, Konlup and teachers. Some sessions include parents and children together, while others feature separate parent/child gatherings.

The involvement of the parents is crucial, said Konlup, adding that it also seems very natural to parents of this age group who are often so involved in the many other aspects of their child’s life, whether it be dancing, sports, school or lessons.

“For our sacramental preparation classes we usually have 100 per cent attendance. The parents learn too,” she said. “One of the things that I find very positive is that at this age, the little ones can’t do it all themselves and that becomes an incentive for renewal for the parents when they have to become involved.”

The support of the pastor is also important, Konlup said, describing how the presence of Fr. Murray Kuemper is much appreciated and makes a big statement to the parents and children.

As with the RCIA model, the group gathers again after the sacraments are received, getting together for a potluck at which the newly-initiated children receive certificates and prayer cards.

At first it was difficult to find books and resources, but better materials are becoming available, with preparation for confirmation at a Grade 2 level, she said.

When someone new moves into town there might be older candidates for confirmation, in which case they are provided with age-appropriate material, and periodic meetings are held..

“I don’t think that any one particular approach has all the answers, there are always weaknesses and strengths,” she said, adding that she always tries to make the connections with the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) and what was done in the early church.

She also stresses the need for ongoing evaluation and faith formation. “Each Catholic adult needs a lot of catechizing,” she said, adding faith education must not be something that ends in Grade 2, Grade 6 or at any age. “Parents and children must carry on with faith formation, recognizing that parents are the prime teachers .”

Vatican II directives restore initiation process, and the unity of baptism-confirmation-Eucharist

**By Dolores Crawford
Diocesan Coordinator of Christian Initiation**

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is the result of the Second Vatican Council’s directives for restoring the original catechumenal process of the church.

Church leaders at that time looked very carefully at the current state of initiation and at its long and complicated history. They wanted the initiation sacraments to better serve the needs of the contemporary church while remaining faithful to their ancient roots. After much study, the Rite was promulgated in 1972 by Pope Paul VI, and it marked a significant shift in the practice of initiating adults into the Catholic Christian community. With its emphasis on conversion, the gospel, the role of the community, celebratory rites, and discipleship, it also provided a model for all parish sacramental and educational programs.

The RCIA restored the original order of the initiation sacraments- that is, baptism, followed by confirmation, and culminating in the Eucharist, all to be celebrated at one time, preferably the Easter Vigil. Our initiation journey leads to the Eucharist. Baptism and confirmation prepare the Christian to receive and be transformed by the body and blood of Christ more fully. With the RCIA, confirmation was restored to its original intention- the final anointing of baptism. After being baptized and confirmed, a catechumen was then immediately led to the table, and was thus fully initiated.

The grace of baptism begins the journey of incorporation into Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The principal outpouring of the Spirit is in baptism, and confirmation deepens and strengthens this initial gift. The Eucharist is the summit of Christian initiation and the center of the sacramental life of the church. These rites are all related and they are part of an ongoing process. Our faith journey does not end at confirmation or first communion but continues throughout our Christian life.

It may surprise people to know that the RCIA process also applies to all unbaptized children of catechetical age (seven and up). There is only one Rite of Initiation and it is adapted for children and for baptized Christians coming into full communion with the Catholic Church. Seven-year old children being initiated into the church through the RCIA process are fully initiated, receiving all three initiation sacraments - baptism, confirmation and Eucharist- at one liturgy.

The completion and perfection of baptismal grace found in the sacrament of confirmation is not dependent upon age or knowledge of the person being confirmed. The grace conferred is a free gift of God and strengthens that child for life as a Christian. It makes no sense to postpone this essential grace to a later time. Children need this grace to follow Jesus in today's world.

The RCIA opened the door to restoring the order of first sacraments for all children. Confirmation is not an adult commitment to living one's faith. It is a completion of the sacrament of baptism, and together with the Eucharist, these sacraments call us into and strengthen us for a life of living the gospel.

Just catechizing children for the sacraments is not enough. Full initiation calls us to discipleship. How does one live as a fully initiated Christian at age seven? Fourteen? Twenty-nine? Fifty-four? Seventy-eight? Are we providing resources and support for a life-long faith journey for people of all ages in our parishes? This is our challenge.