

St. Christopher/St. Patrick's Church: Faith Formation Program
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CONFIRMATION PREPARATION

CONFIRMATION is a sacrament of initiation that is closely connected to baptism and Eucharist. It completes the sacrament of baptism, brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace and more clearly shows forth the gifts of the Spirit received in baptism. At the same time, the celebration of confirmation leads us to Eucharist as the way to live out being a fully initiated Catholic. Eucharist is the culmination of initiation.

A WALK THROUGH HISTORY

In the first centuries confirmation generally comprised one single celebration with baptism. When adults and children were received into the church at the Easter Vigil celebration, it was one event. As people emerged from the water, symbolic of dying to Christ, the new life they received was sealed (chrismated) through anointing with oil by the bishop. At the same celebration, they were welcomed to the table of the Lord.

Early in the Church a custom developed in regards to the anointing of the newly baptized by the priest immediately after baptism and a second anointing completing the baptism performed by the bishop. In the West, the desire to reserve this second anointing to the bishop caused a separation of the celebration of the two sacraments. The Eastern Church decided that the bishop or priest who baptized would also anoint. Throughout the centuries, the time lapse between baptism and confirmation grew until confirmation was celebrated around the age of 14. Eucharist was still celebrated after confirmation. Pope Pius X lowered the age of Eucharist to the age of discretion (age 7) but did not address the issue of confirmation. This resulted in confirmation being removed from the initiation sequence.

The Second Vatican Council called for a revision of the Rite of Confirmation that reflected its close connection to baptism. In 1972 The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) was promulgated. In this Rite unbaptized adults and children of catechetical age are to be fully initiated, celebrating baptism, confirmation and Eucharist at the same celebration. As the Rites of Initiation were implemented throughout the diocese, a question surfaced regarding the celebration of confirmation for those baptized as infants. A mixed message was being sent. How could we speak of Confirmation as initiation, on one hand, but practice a theology of maturity on the other?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has stated that, in the United States, confirmation may be celebrated anytime between the ages of 7 and 18, within the limits determined by the diocesan bishop. The Archdiocese of NY Sacramental Guidelines regarding the sacrament of confirmation call for it to be celebrated when readiness exists anytime after the age of seven. The guidelines allow for the joint celebration of confirmation and Eucharist when readiness for Eucharist is discerned. No parish may set an age/grade level of readiness that is not consistent with the guidelines.

THE CONFIRMATION GUIDELINES

The basic principles of the Sacramental Guidelines are:

- Sacraments are celebrations of the community. Confirmation is a sacrament of initiation. The celebration of Eucharist is the culmination of initiation. The baptized, when suitably prepared, have a right to confirmation. The criteria for preparation and celebration is readiness (not age or grade level).
- Parents, in dialogue with the parish staff, have the right and responsibility to determine the readiness of their own child.

PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT

There are several key principles that apply to all sacramental preparation of children. Sacramental preparation is to be separate from the school and the religious education classroom. School or religious education sacramental preparation cannot adequately address the principles of readiness, the role of parents or the parish involvement/responsibility for sacramental preparation and celebration.

Preparation for any sacrament is a journey of the heart to prepare to meet the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. It involves reflection, prayer and faith sharing with other candidates, sponsors and parents. Preparation for a sacrament is not an educational process or time to "make up or catch up" on catechetical material. Immediate catechesis for the sacrament of confirmation is to be short and focused on preparation for the celebration of the sacrament.

The whole of the preparation process is to take no more than three months. It should involve 4-6 sessions prior to and 1-2 sessions after the celebration of the sacrament. The major themes of the preparation process are Jesus; Baptism (belonging to a community and the Gifts of the Spirit); Confirmation (ritual and symbol of anointing with oil); and, Eucharist (being fed for a lifetime and giving life to the world).

After the celebration, sponsors and candidates should gather to reflect on the celebration and examine more deeply how each is called to discipleship. Service projects and retreats may not be required.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTS

Parents are the primary educators of their child/children. In celebrating the Rite of Baptism of Infants, parents publicly commit to forming their children in the life of faith. Parents are addressed: "Parents, you have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring him/her up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and neighbor (RB # 39)."

Parish or school programs of religious formation assist parents in this most important responsibility but must never usurp the rightful role of the parents.

WHAT IS READINESS?

When speaking of the readiness of a child to celebrate a sacrament, there are three areas to address: the family, the individual and the parish community.

- The family is the primary place where children are formed in faith. Does your family participate in the life of the community in the areas of worship, formation (education) and service? Has your child received appropriate formation for his/her age? Does your family pray together at home?
- As parents are you willing to commit to the continuing formation of your child in worship, formation and service?

The readiness of the individual involves the following:

- A person must be baptized and have the use of reason (about the age of seven); (If a person is developmentally disabled, he/she should be confirmed after appropriate catechesis if catechesis is not possible, he/she should be confirmed.)
- Does the person express a desire to celebrate Confirmation?
- Does the candidate participate in the worship life (Eucharist) of the community on a regular basis?
- Has the person been formed in faith in an age appropriate manner?
- Is there a commitment from this person to continue formation and participation in the worship life of the community?

Because sacraments are community celebrations, the parish also has a responsibility in sacramental preparation.

- Does your parish provide you (parents) with necessary support and information to enable you to fulfill your role as primary educator of your child? Does your parish provide opportunities for life-long faith formation?
- Does the community welcome children into its life?

THE ROLE OF SPONSORS

- Sponsors are to have an active role in the preparation of the candidate. Sponsors must be 16 years old, fully initiated (baptized, confirmed and received Eucharist) and a practicing member of a parish faith community. He/she must be willing and able to share their faith and to make the necessary time commitment to fulfill his/her responsibility. It is preferable for the godparent to be the sponsor at confirmation. This manifests clearly the connection between baptism and confirmation. Others may, however, be asked to fulfill this role.
- Parents may not be godparents or sponsors for their children. They have a particular and very important role as primary catechists of their children.

Thanks to the Diocese of Rochester, NY for the articulation of this important teaching of the Church.