

Views conflict on what age to confirm

By Zoe Ryan, *National Catholic Reporter*

May. 13, 2011

Life can be stressful for a Catholic second-grader.

You prepare for reconciliation, and you intensely prepare for first Communion. What if you also were preparing for the sacrament of confirmation?

Earlier this year, the Liverpool archdiocese in England announced that beginning next year, it will be confirming at age 8. In the mid-1990s, a few U.S. Roman Catholic dioceses made the same move, confirming in the second or third grade, directly before children receive first Communion. Most U.S. dioceses confirm in late middle school or high school.

Is 7 too young? Or is 16 too old? Is there a universal age when one is ready to be confirmed?

Dioceses that have confirmation in the second or third grade along with first Communion say that moving confirmation to the younger age is the restored order -- the order the sacraments of Christian initiation were in the early years of Christianity: baptism, confirmation and then first Communion. In the Eastern rite and Eastern Orthodox Churches, babies receive baptism, confirmation and first Communion all at the same time. The Western Church broke from this practice in the fourth century.

The 10 U.S. dioceses with the restored order are Phoenix; Tyler, Texas; Gaylord, Mich.; Marquette, Mich.; Fargo, N.D.; Spokane, Wash.; Portland, Maine; Great Falls-Billings, Mont.; Greensburg, Pa.; and Saginaw, Mich., according to a survey done in 2007 by the Fargo diocese.

Confirmation has always presented a problem, said Joseph Martos, sacramental historian at *Bellarmino University* in Louisville, Ky., and author of *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* and *The Sacraments: An Interdisciplinary and Interactive Study*.

According to Martos, children make their first Communion, they are confirmed in early adolescence and then they stop going to church. "We have this ceremony ... and it doesn't occur when it's at a real change in the person's life", Martos said. "In other words, the problem is not theological. The problem has to do with the nature and purpose of ritual, especially rites of passages and initiation rituals. "Unless people, when they're confirmed, are actually making a passage in their life, like from being not Catholic to Catholic, not married to married ... then there isn't any meaning in the sacrament of confirmation, because the meaning comes from what's going on in the person's life at the time."

Some see confirmation as a sign of mature commitment to the Church, but others make the distinction that it is a gift, not something to be earned, and it is not a graduation from religious education.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace, and that baptismal grace doesn't need ratification to become effective.

"Teaching that the grace received is a 'gift' and not something that is 'earned' helps the children understand that everything we have is a gift from God," Fr. Luke Meyer, chancellor of the Fargo diocese, wrote in an e-mail to NCR. In the Fargo diocese, confirmation in third grade for all parishes started in 2003. Each parish hosts parent-child seminars as well as a retreat in addition to confirmation classes. The Fargo diocesan office also focuses on formation opportunities for teens, but it stresses the key for continued faith education is the parents.

Meyer said he has noticed that kids are facing more challenges at a younger age, challenges such as social media, and confirmation gives them strong gifts of grace at that time of life.

Paul Schroeder, coordinator of children's catechesis in the Saginaw, Mich., diocese, which has been confirming in the second grade since 1995, said that confirmation "is a sacramental celebration. ... It's not this reward for staying enrolled in a religious education program for six, seven or eight years, whatever the case may be." Many dioceses require a year or two of religious education classes before the child can be confirmed, Schroeder said, "so it has almost become a means of enabling parishes to keep registration numbers higher in religious education programs." He acknowledged that in some Saginaw parishes enrollment in religious education after second grade has declined. "There's not a really good understanding that faith formation is lifelong and that we need to, as parents, we really need to ensure that our kids are enrolled in faith formation", Schroeder said.

The trouble with teens

An advantage of confirming early, according to Schroeder, is that religious instructors can focus on formation and don't have to deal with the "typical teenage stuff ... where church and religion is not necessarily cool and then it ends up ... where the kid is just pushing back tooth and nail."

Joe Paprocki, who teaches an eighth-grade confirmation class and was a director of religious education for seven years, said confirmation can bring opportunities in those turbulent years when young teenagers are "on the brink of adolescent rebellion". "It's a challenging age to bring them to confirmation", he said. "At the same time, there are a lot of pluses involved with that because you want the Church to be present at that time because they're going through so much change and transition and questioning." "It can be a great opportunity to awaken commitment of faith when they're entering adolescence", Paprocki said. "That does happen. On the other hand, there are the kids who just go through the motion because they're not all that interested but their parents want them to go.

"A pressing challenge facing youth ministers is the lack of sustainable teen programs in the church, Paprocki said. In some cases, confirmation is the only youth ministry program.

"I think that tends to be the biggest fear: How will we keep them if we don't have the sacraments?" Paprocki said. "The problem with that is the sacrament of confirmation shouldn't be a carrot on a stick. It shouldn't just be the way we keep them. If we can't keep them without confirmation, then I think there's something wrong there. I think it would force us to reevaluate and look more closely at what we're offering them."

Confirming at a younger age could present the opportunity to think of creative teen programs and focus more on intentional discipleship, Paprocki said.

For Martos, the question is how one lives out the sacrament. He suggests that confirmed people take more active roles in the Church and fill the growing need for lay involvement in Church ministries.

Confirmation could be seen as a rite of passage signifying a transition into the ministry of service, something that now does not exist, Martos wrote in an unpublished article *The New Confirmation Debate: Resolving the Dilemma*.

Preparation challenges

While liturgists may get excited about the restored sacramental order, Joe Paprocki, a national consultant on

faith formation at Loyola Press, said, "Catechists sometimes are a little more challenged, wondering exactly how do I teach confirmation to an 8-year-old?"

Paul Schroeder, children's catechist for the Saginaw, Mich., diocese, which confirms students in the second grade, said that some parishes find the program difficult. "It's a lot to try to do in one year for a 7-year-old as well as for their families." The Saginaw and Fargo dioceses heavily stress parental involvement. The Saginaw diocese especially emphasizes family faith formation and preparing parents for their children's sacraments. The majority of the parishes in the diocese have family-based preparation and view confirmation as a parish celebration, Schroeder said.

Some parishes in Fargo supplement parental instruction and religious education with materials aimed at children in third or fourth grade.

Children as young as 7 may not fully comprehend the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, Schroeder said. "But can these gifts grow with them as they mature into teenage and young adult years? You bet," he said.

Referring to the other six sacraments, Schroeder said, "How many of us really get a thorough understanding or a real grasp of it until we've actually grown into it? ...

A sacrament in history, from the earliest days Confirmation was not a separate sacrament until the fourth century, said Joseph Martos, a sacramental historian at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Ky.

"Going back to the early days, those early centuries," he said, "what you had was a ceremony in which people, after a long period of preparation ... would be baptized, be blessed by the bishop with or without the anointing, and really attend the eucharistic liturgy for the first time. "Especially in the period when Christianity wasn't a legal religion in the Roman Empire, they didn't want these candidates to know who everybody was in the community, just in case there'd be a persecution and they'd rat on them. So they didn't let anyone attend a full eucharistic liturgy unless they were already baptized and confirmed."

In the fourth century, Christians were so numerous that the bishop could not be at all the baptisms, so the priest baptized. Later, when the bishop could visit the area, he confirmed the baptism. In the Middle Ages, baptism began to be viewed as necessary for salvation, but people didn't view confirmation as necessary, Martos said.

Pope Pius X carried a special devotion to the Eucharist, and in 1910, he allowed children to celebrate their first Communion as soon as they were able. He interpreted this "age of discretion" as 7, Martos said.

"So it becomes standard practice to have baptism at birth, first Communion at 7 or 8, and confirmation sometime after that, maybe 10 or 12," Martos said.

After the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), discussions abounded on the purpose of confirmation. In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, liturgists looked back to early history, and they convinced some bishops that the "original sequence" was the proper order to administer the sacraments.

In the early years of the papacy of Pope John Paul II, the pope told the U.S. bishops that they had to settle on definitive norms for the age. The bishops couldn't get a majority to vote either for the early age or for the late age, so they agreed on the range of 7 to 18, which the Vatican approved, Martos said.