

LITURGICAL CATECHESIS

FOR THE
RITE OF CONFIRMATION

Catechesis for confirmation continues to be controversial, at least on the pastoral level where one can find a variety of theologies and an assortment of catechetical practices. This was made clear by the results of the 1992 survey conducted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Ad Hoc Committee for the Canonical Determination of the Age of Confirmation sent to bishops, pastors and diocesan and parochial personnel.

There are many reasons why we find ourselves in this situation. Partly it is because we tend to confuse sacramental preparation with religious education. Often this turns confirmation into a moment that marks completion of complete religious education or a carrot used to keep youth in our programs. In some areas, a grade in school becomes the requirement for confirmation rather than a specific age. We also tend to confuse sacramental moments with psychological development and make confirmation a time when one makes a personal commitment to the church or has the opportunity to otherwise make decisions about faith. We tend to let less important activities, like choosing a confirmation name or doing service projects, overshadow the primary conversion process of transforming people into the sacramental mystery of confirmation. Finally, the divergent opinions on the appropriate age for confirmation and its proper place within the order of the initiation sacraments for those baptized Catholic in infancy have resulted in different understandings of the meaning and purpose of confirmation. The bottom line is that we have a propensity to change the theology of confirmation to fit our catechetical structures. We have subjected confirmation to a sort of sacramental "idolatry," that is, we have let our pastoral needs shape the sacrament, instead of allowing the powerful grace of the sacrament to shape us. Indeed, the sacraments are full of very human symbols that help us love and know God more deeply and sanctify us as people of God.

Regardless of when confirmation is received, we have a fundamental obligation to remain faithful to its meaning and purpose as set forth by the church. The USCCB legislation established sixteen as the age of discretion for the Latin Rite. The starting point for developing a catechesis for confirmation is in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)* and the *Rite of Confirmation (RC)*. In an age marked by diversity of opinion on confirmation, these provide a fundamental

source for understanding the intrinsic nature and purpose of confirmation for our catechetical programs today that should permeate our catechesis no matter at what age or order confirmation is received. Careful reading of the General Introduction to the *RCIA*, the *Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation (AC)* that accompanies the *RC*, the introduction to the *RC*, the orations and the Biblical readings, and an understanding of the symbols and gestures of the rite, give us five basic characteristics of confirmation from which we can develop a conversion catechesis for confirmation.

First, confirmation is a sacrament of initiation. The *Constitution on the Liturgy (CSL)* called for the revision of the *Rite of Confirmation (RC)*. In doing so, it clearly set forth the orientation this revision was to take: "The rite of confirmation is also to be revised in order that the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of Christian initiation may stand out more clearly" (#71). This directive set the stage for the revision of the rite of confirmation. It also provided the main criterion for renewal of the sacrament: confirmation should be a sacrament of initiation. As a sacrament of initiation, confirmation is intimately linked with baptism and the Eucharist. Thus, the *Rite of Confirmation* states, "Those who have been baptized continue on the path of Christian initiation through the sacrament of confirmation" (*RC*, #1).

Catechesis for confirmation begins by showing confirmation's intimate connection with baptism. For those baptized Catholic in infancy, this is an opportune time to deepen their awareness of their baptismal identity and what this means for their lives today. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* states, "From this fact, Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace" (#1303). It is important that the candidates understand confirmation is not a reaffirmation or ratification of a previous baptism, nor is it a time when they decide to make a personal commitment to the church.

Conversion catechesis for confirmation provides a special opportunity to enable candidates to grow in their commitment made at baptism. It is not a time for them to choose or decide but, rather, it is a time for them to grow more fully into their baptismal identity. In the *Statement on Christian Commitment* by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, it is noted that "Christian initiation, while happening once and for all through the initial participation in the paschal mystery of Jesus, must also be a moment-to-moment process of saying yes to the Lord at

each step in life's pilgrimage.... All these special moments along the path of life demand decisions rooted in a Christian life of committed faith."¹ Consequently, catechesis for confirmation is focused on enabling the candidates or those "continuing on the path of Christian initiation" "35 Years," 616, to proceed in their journey by growing more fully into their baptismal identity.

Catechesis for confirmation, then, provides a wonderful opportunity for leading candidates to a renewed appreciation of their baptism as the basis of Christian living. (For more on this, see Pope John Paul II's talk "Rediscover essential role of Baptism" in *L'Ossevertore Romano*, November, 1997). It is a gifted moment to help candidates strengthen and persevere in their baptismal commitment and the covenanted relationship begun in baptism within the context of their lives. We can enable candidates to deepen their identity as members of the body of Christ who share in the divine life of Christ.

Second, confirmation bestows the gift of the Spirit. This is the primary purpose of confirmation. The *AC* states that receiving the Holy Spirit as a gift is the "very essence of the rite of confirmation." This was the reason the old formula—"I sign you with the sign of the cross and I confirm you with the chrism of salvation"—was changed to "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit."

As such, one of the primary catechetical activities for confirmation is to unfold the reality of the Spirit in the lives of the candidates. It is a special time when the church leads the candidates to understand the meaning of the gift they will receive in the sacramental celebration—the Holy Spirit itself. Many adults, let alone children and youth, have a poor understanding of the Spirit. In many instances, the image of the Spirit is reduced to that of a dove or bird. In other cases, the Spirit is associated with charismatic activities. Few understand the transforming power of the spirit in their lives.

Conversion catechesis for confirmation should excite a renewed interest in the role the Holy Spirit plays in our lives. It should empower candidates to recognize the workings of the Spirit in their lived activity. More importantly, it should lead them into a profound relationship with this sacramental

mystery. If you question how this can be done, the *CCC* provides the answer: "Liturgical Catechesis aims to initiate people into the mystery of Christ (It is 'mystagogy.') by proceeding from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the 'sacraments' to the 'mysteries'" (#1075). Any catechesis for confirmation, then, needs to unfold the rich depths of the many symbols of the spirit. These are water, anointing, fire, cloud and light, the seal, the hand, the finger and the dove (#694–700). Catechesis needs to connect our human experience of these with their salvific significance in order to lead candidates to an awareness of profound implications of receiving the Spirit in confirmation.

Third, confirmation endows us with the special strength of the Holy Spirit. The *AC* states that "faithful are born anew by baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of confirmation, and finally are sustained by the food of eternal life in the eucharist." Catechesis for confirmation should lead people to embrace more fully the "treasures of divine life." A major component of these treasures is set forth in the prayer that accompanies the laying on of hands before the anointing with chrism:

All powerful God, Father of our
Lord Jesus Christ,
by water and the Holy Spirit
you freed your sons and daughters
from sin
and gave them new life.
Send your Holy Spirit upon them
to be their Helper and Guide.
Give them the spirit of wisdom and
understanding,
the spirit of right judgment and courage,
the spirit of knowledge and reverence.
Fill them with the spirit of wonder and
awe in your presence.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.²

Imagine the transformation that can take place when one begins to see how the gifts of wisdom and understanding and the spirit of right judgment, courage, knowledge, reverence, wonder and awe serve to strengthen candidates when they face the realities of the world in which they live.

Fourth, confirmation makes us anointed Christ figures. The essential action in the celebration of the sacrament is the anointing. By means of this anointing, those who are confirmed "share more completely in the mission of Jesus Christ and the fullness of the Holy Spirit with which he is filled, so that their lives may give off 'the aroma of Christ'" (*CCC*, #1294). Any catechesis for confirmation must unfold the many levels of meaning inherent in the symbol of oil. Both oil and the action of anointing are rich in meaning and mark a candidate's total belonging to Christ. The *CCC* emphasizes this when it states:

In treating the rite of Confirmation, it is fitting to consider the sign of *anointing* and what it signifies and imprints: a spiritual *seal*.

Anointing, in Biblical and other ancient symbolism, is rich in meaning: oil is a sign of abundance and joy; it cleanses (anointing before and after a bath) and limbers (the anointing of athletes and wrestlers); oil is a sign of healing, since it is soothing to bruises and wounds; and it makes radiant with beauty, health, and strength.

Anointing with oil has all these meanings in the sacramental life. (*CCC* #1293, 1294)

To lead the candidates into the deeper realities signified by the chrism, catechesis should begin with an activity that allows them to see the profound impact oil has in their lives by enabling them to explore their experience of oil in their world. By means of this, they see how the symbol in creation "sheds light on the mystery of God's saving power and is in turn illuminated by it" (*National Catechetical Directory [NCD]*, #46).

Next, the candidates should be led to explore the symbol of oil from our biblical experience in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The Bible contains hundreds of instances where oil is part of the interaction between God and his people. By exploring the use of oil in the Bible, the candidates can see the varied and wonderful ways God has revealed himself in and through this symbol and are, thus, invited into relationship with those who composed and transmitted these holy writings "as a testimony to their beliefs and their experience of grace" (*NCD*, #43). This activity also serves to unite them more deeply with the community of believers.

Catechesis should also open up the symbol of oil from our ecclesial experience, which allows the candidates to have a two-fold understanding: it helps them see how the oil has been used in the life of the church and leads them to see how the church has expressed its understanding of the symbol from the time of the apostles and how this teaching has developed over time with the help of the Holy Spirit.

The ecclesial experience of oil is made real if catechesis for confirmation includes participation in liturgical actions where oil is used when the church assembles: in the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, the Rite of Baptism, the Anointing of the Sick, Ordination or the diocesan celebration of the Chrism Mass.

If confirmation is to be a conversion experience, catechesis must lead candidates to understand the profound implications of their anointing. One of the suggested Gospel readings for confirmation provides an excellent source for this catechesis:

He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-22)

Conversion catechesis for confirmation proclaims candidates will be anointed to bring glad tidings to the poor. It enables them to see the poor in their midst, opening their eyes to those who are economically poor and who daily endure the pangs of hunger or the pain of going without shelter, or the poor in spirit who have lost faith in God, the church or their fellow human beings and whose lives are wracked with emptiness. It shows them the way to pro-

vide words and works of glad tidings.

Conversion catechesis for confirmation proclaims candidates will be anointed to give liberty to captives. Catechesis opens their hearts to the plight of captives: those who are prisoners of injustice or captives of illness or addiction; those who are prisoners of complacency or coldness of heart; those who are held captive by depression or reject conversion in their lives. Furthermore, it shows them the way to provide words and works of liberation.

Conversion catechesis for confirmation proclaims candidates will be anointed to give sight to the blind. Catechesis awakens an awareness of the blind in our midst: those who cannot see a way to forgive others; those who cannot see the injustices in the world; those who are blind to their own faults and failings; those who are blind to the needs of others; those who are blind to the gifts of those from other cultures, age groups and genders; and those who cannot see the presence of Christ in the world. It shows them the way to provide words and works to give sight to those who live in darkness.

Conversion catechesis for confirmation proclaims candidates will be anointed to let the oppressed go free. Catechesis stirs the souls of candidates to compassion for those who are oppressed. It enkindles in them care and compassion for those who suffer the indignity of spousal abuse, be it physical, mental, verbal or spiritual; for those who are alienated and marginalized; for those who are exploited because of age, intelligence or weakness; for those who have no idea where their life is going or are adrift on the sea of apathy; for those who are weighed down by the responsibilities of life and family or are plagued with doubts about their own self-worth. It shows them words and works to set them free.

This is the transformation that catechesis for confirmation should bring. It is more than requiring service hours; it is about leading the candidates to take on their identity as anointed Christ figures who bring a special fragrance to the world because they have been signed with the Sacred Chrism.

Lastly, confirmation, as a sacrament of initiation, is intimately bound to the Eucharist. The *AC* states that "confirmation

is so closely linked with the holy eucharist that the faithful, after being signed by holy baptism and confirmation, are incorporated fully into the body of Christ by participation in the eucharist." Confirmation leads to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist completes initiation. For this reason, the rite states that "Ordinarily confirmation takes place within Mass in order to express more clearly the fundamental connection of this sacrament with the entirety of Christian initiation. The latter reaches its culmination in the Communion of the body and blood of Christ" (*RC*, #13).

The relationship between confirmation and the Eucharist is emphasized repeatedly in the *RCIA*. The General Introduction begins by emphasizing the inherent unity of the initiation sacraments:

Baptism incorporates us into Christ and forms us into God's people.

By signing with the gift of the Spirit, confirmation makes us more completely the image of the Lord and fills us with the Holy Spirit, so that we may bear witness to him before all the world and work to bring the Body of Christ to its fullness as soon as possible.

Finally, coming to the table of the eucharist, we eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man so that we may have eternal life and show forth the unity of God's people. By offering ourselves with Christ, we share in the universal sacrifice, that is, the entire community of the redeemed offered to God by their High Priest, and we pray for a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit, so that the whole human race may be brought into the unity of God's family.

Thus the three sacraments of Christian initiation closely combine to bring us, the faithful of Christ, to his full stature and to enable us to carry out the mission of the entire people of God in the Church and in the world. (#2)

Thus, any catechesis for confirmation is incomplete without a catechesis on the Eucharist. "To this end catechesis for Confirmation should strive to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, the universal Church as well as the parish community" (*CCC*, #1309). Something is inherently wrong with our

catechesis and catechetical structures when people leave thinking this is the end of their faith formation in the church and their liturgical and apostolic responsibilities to the body of Christ.

When conversion catechesis for confirmation links this sacrament with the Eucharist, the end result should be a more full and active participation in the life of the church, which is most fully manifested in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. It is through the eucharistic celebration that we repeatedly renew our commitment made in baptism and strengthened in confirmation. It is through the eucharistic celebration that we continue to join in to call down the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the gifts of bread and wine and pray that we, too, may continue to be transformed. It is through the eucharistic celebration we are constantly fed and nourished so we may have strength to continue to be true witnesses of Christ in the world.

The rites provide a profound theology of confirmation that should permeate any catechesis for confirmation. The theology of confirmation is not dependent on our catechetical structures or age and order when the sacrament is received. We should not catechize one way for those who are not

baptized and are journeying toward the initiation sacraments through the catechuminate proper and another way for those preparing for the sacrament after being baptized Catholic in infancy.

Catechesis for confirmation should transform people's lives. It should not be used as a tool to keep people in religious education or as a strategy to have them earn a sacrament. We need to examine our structures for sacramental catechesis. This should be a special time in the life of the parish when we prepare those receiving the sacrament for the first time and encourage the participation of the entire community so they may deepen their own spirituality of confirmation. We should use celebrations of the word as the first formation for each catechetical session that uses the rich variety of biblical readings found in the rite. We should nurture catechists passionate about the rich meaning of confirmation so they are able to lead others into the sacramental mystery.

Our catechesis for confirmation should so thoroughly transform others that the Prayer After Communion in the Rite of Confirmation may be fulfilled:

Lord,
You give your Son as food

to those you anoint with your Spirit.
Help them to fulfill your law
by living in freedom as your children.
May they live in holiness
and be your witnesses to the world.
(*Sacramentary* 836).

© 2005 Oregon Catholic Press. All rights reserved.

Divine Providence Sister Linda L. Gaupin was the associate director of the Secretariat for the Liturgy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (BCL) from 1991 to 1994 and is director of religious education for the Diocese of Orlando, Florida. Linda is the project manager for the confirmation series *The Spirit Sets Us Free* published by William H. Sadlier. She holds a PhD in religious studies from the Catholic University of America.

Works Cited

¹ *35 Years of the BCL Newsletter 1965–2000*. Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004.

² *The Sacramentary*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1985