

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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A CONFIRMATION PROBLEM

Recently Bishop Larry Silva of Honolulu instructed his diocese to start the process of returning the Sacraments of Initiation to their proper order: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist. Presumably, that means no more confirmations for junior or senior high school Catholics.

That sounds like a good idea. After all, many of us remember those years as tough times: challenging periods with self-esteem questions, adolescent hormonal turmoil, initial sexual impulses, peer pressure, identity crises, doubts about being accepted, approval needs... the list really does go on and on. And our current society in the USA forces those confusing issues onto even younger kids.

Not the ideal setting for confirming our belief in God, Christ and the Catholic Church. Moving Confirmation out of that transitional time period makes sense to me. And I understand Bishop Silva's (and many others) argument about Confirmation as part of the initiation flow into Catholicism.

But my personal opinion is to leave Confirmation for adults who are more likely capable of making a genuine, life-time commitment to the Catholic version of Christianity. Not for infants or teenagers. Any time during adulthood would be fine with me, and baptized Catholics would not have to be confirmed to be full members of the community. I think that practice would be more honest and more effective. The Holy Spirit would have less trouble activating the grace of the sacrament with confirmed and committed adult Catholics.

Right now the Spirit has to get through all that pre-teen and adolescent stuff to plant the grace and seeds of a confirmed Catholic life. Whew!

Frankly, though, that's not my main problem with Confirmation. My primary concern now is with the celebrant, the Bishop. There are bishops who, because of their arrogance, terrorize the *confirmandi*, intimidate their catechists, berate their pastors, infuriate their parents, scandalize the community, pulverize the gospel, stiff-arm the Holy Spirit and re-crucify Jesus.

You don't believe me? I'm exaggerating? I can name names and catalogue anecdotes, parish by parish. And it is not just one diocese or one bishop.

We shouldn't be surprised. After 30 years of selecting bishops who did not become bishops because of their pastoral skills, we end up with bishops who don't recognize a pastoral moment when it slaps them in the face. They were selected for their doctrinal loyalty, chancery office experience, and their rigid personalities. They officiate at Confirmations but they don't "confirm".

I know bishops who are warm human beings and who view the annual parish Confirmations as opportunities to visit with familiar faith communities, really confirm the people in their faith, and welcome the *confirmandi* into a new dimension of their Catholicity. They do not grill the students for how well they remember their catechism answers. They do not fuss over their confirmation names. They do not kick out adults whom they judge did not receive sufficient instruction.

Instead, these pastoral bishops rejoice in being among their friends, including the pastor, whom they don't get to see too often, and they encourage the students, their parents and the faith community to deepen their faith, to rejoice in the Christ who saves, comforts and challenges us, and to expand their love for God and others because God first loved us.

For these wonderful bishops, Confirmation is not about them, their authority, theological brilliance, proper procedures, or the hierarchy. For them, Confirmation is about the people and their needs, their desire for community, their intention of passing on the faith experience to a younger generation, and their concerns and joys. These bishops are like shepherds who know their flock.

The immediate issue with Confirmation is not when it should be celebrated. In my opinion, Confirmation is a sacrament in search of an identity, somewhat like an adolescent. Does it really belong as an extension of baptism, even infant baptism, or as a standalone, voluntary, adult faith experience? I hope the Church makes that decision sooner rather than later. Our current practice is probably the worst time to confer it.

In any case, it doesn't matter much if your bishop is the arrogant, me-first, cold personality, doctrine trumps everything, righteous type of bishop. The immediate damage these bishops do when they come to a parish or region for Confirmation far outweighs the immediate impact of the Holy Spirit on the *confirmandi* and the parish.

By the way, it is clear which type of bishop Pope Francis demands.