

Parents – You Promised!

Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan

Every year, around this time I receive a few letters inquiring as to why, in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, children have to wait until they are in high school to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation while some neighboring dioceses grant the Sacrament in elementary years or younger. I am asked if I would consider changing the Confirmation age because it would be easier on the parents to ensure their children are confirmed.

I know of a handful of dioceses throughout the country that confirm before First Communion. I am among those who feel strongly that we should not move Confirmation to a time before the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. That would put Confirmation in the 3rd Grade for them. I believe it is pastorally harmful to deprive our teenagers of the opportunity to make a commitment to their faith as they receive the Sacrament of the Holy Spirit at a time in their lives when they can understand it and need it badly.

We have over 300,000 Catholics in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe and about 3,500 teenagers are confirmed every Spring after Easter. It would be a terrible thing to deprive those teenagers of that experience. They have one or two-year program of religious education, prayer, community service, retreat, and Reconciliation prior to receiving Confirmation. Has anything been found to replace that wholesome process?

Some say that there could be a new rite of passage prepared for high school students to replace Confirmation in the later years. I've been hearing that story for a long time and nothing has been created that would involve 3,500 teenagers in my Archdiocese every Spring and give me the opportunity to have a pastoral relationship with them that I presently have. Such a rite would draw just a handful.

Let me confess when I was Bishop of Lubbock, Texas (1983-93) I actually experimented at our Cathedral with the earlier Confirmation age having it at the same Mass when they received First Communion. The rector worked very hard to prepare the children. But I'm afraid the children didn't have a clue what was going on! The experiment was eventually abandoned for Confirmation in high school where the youth had a better understanding of the Sacrament.

Some will say that many teenagers don't get confirmed because they get involved in work or school and they fail to be confirmed but if they were confirmed before Holy Communion we would have a higher percentage of them and they need the grace of Confirmation early on. I would rather focus on the grace of the Sacrament of Baptism and Eucharist which seem to me should provide the graces that are needed, if used.

Some will say we should follow the traditional order of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. But to me, the pastoral needs of teenagers in our secular world trumps the traditional order big time. Is Confirmation then to be a graduation rite or a Sacrament connected to psychological

maturity? Of course not, but in this day and age if we remove the opportunity for deepening the faith of countless teenagers at a moment when they need that grace, we are going to lose countless thousands of young people to secularism or other churches. Confirmation in high school years is much more pastorally sensitive to our youth.

I feel, as you can see, very strongly that Confirmation belongs in the high school years where it makes a deep impression on the young people. If they have received all their sacraments by the third grade you're going to see very few of them again!

Some might say that there are many kids that fail to get confirmed, but I would say that it is the job of the parents, as you promised on the day of your marriage and on the day you baptized your children, to make sure that your children are formed in our Catholic faith and part of that includes ensuring they receive Confirmation.

As parents, you need to encourage your high school children to seek the Sacrament of Confirmation. Of course it is up to the individual Confirmandi to decide if they are ready. It may be that some will decide to concentrate on school and work activities at this time and seek Confirmation in later years. But parents, please keep your promise – ensure your children are formed in our Catholic faith and receive all their Sacraments.