

The Confirmation Conversation
By Trish Keller
What about our school-age children?

As the word spreads about the possible change in the age of Confirmation for youth in our diocese, questions and concerns trail in its wake.

After all, established programs for sacramental preparation already exist in our parishes. Volunteer catechists? Check. Teaching materials? Check. Designated time and location? Tables and chairs set up? Parents know when to drop off and pick up? Check, check, and check.

Doubtless, the reordering of the sacraments of Christian initiation—Baptism, then Confirmation, then First Eucharist—while theologically sound, evokes some genuine concerns at the level of practicality.

Will young children even grasp the meaning of Confirmation? Is Confirmation preparation required? How do we squeeze it in the midst of preparation for First Reconciliation and First Eucharist? How do we keep these children in religious education programs without dangling the carrot of Confirmation? It might help to begin with the end in mind.

Father Paul Turner's presentation on Confirmation emphasized the effects of the sacrament: the gift of the Holy Spirit given for the purpose of bearing witness. "Like Baptism which it completes, Confirmation is given only once, for it too imprints on the soul an *indelible spiritual mark*, the "character," which is the sign that Jesus Christ has marked a Christian with the seal of his Spirit by clothing him with power from on high so that he may be his witness." (CCC 1304)

We understand that Jesus marks the child with the seal of the Holy Spirit. Jesus does the work here, not parents and catechists. Will young children grasp the meaning of this sacrament? Perhaps that question is unnecessary. With Jesus bestowing graces upon a child, the child gains spiritual strength in a way we parents need not control. The effects of Confirmation will come irrespective to the number of parent-child classes we attend. This begs the question, "Is sacramental preparation necessary?"

Prepare, we must. What we absorb intellectually nourishes our spiritual growth. Think of First Eucharist. Our children might talk about "eating Jesus" or "having Jesus." As they mature, our children's understanding will deepen *if* we parents keep the Mass at the center of our family lives. So, we prepare them for Confirmation *and* keep alive in our homes the idea of Christian mission and witness.

The second grade year seems hectic already as we prepare our children for First Reconciliation and First Eucharist. Plus, the hunt for a First Communion dress or suit and the planning of a celebration take time. Catechists, more than parents, might wonder how a parish finds time for another sacramental preparation class. Father Turner assures us that the Church's requirements for preparation for Confirmation are not excessive. As dioceses look into changes to their approach to confirmation preparation, they have found a number of workable options.

Finally, how will we keep our children in religious education? The delay of Confirmation until eighth grade and higher proved to be a successful tactic. Father Turner drew a distinction between sacramental preparation and religious formation. Preparation focuses on the specific sacrament. It aims to develop the proper mindset in recipients and their parents. Baptism exemplifies this.

By contrast, religious formation is a lifelong process. Whether children or adults, none of us ever stops learning. Religious education programs need not be affected by the reordering of the initiation sacraments. Rather, our children can continue to benefit from catechesis. Already, children who joined the Church through the RCIA (and received Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) continue their religious formation at their parishes.

Because this conversation must include the special needs of teenagers, they will be the focus next time. In the meantime, I invite your questions and comments.

Trish Keller of St. Dominic Parish in Garden City will occasionally address the possible changes in the administration of the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Dodge City Diocese. Your comments are welcomed at stdomoffice@st-dominic.org.