

Restore•Renew•Proclaim

The Hope that is Christ



Sequence of the Initiation Sacraments

Many dioceses are in the process of restoring the sacrament of Confirmation to its rightful place in the initiation sequence: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. This honors a very ancient tradition and reflects the sequence in which these sacraments are celebrated in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

For much of this century many parishes have been postponing Confirmation. They thought that in junior high or high school the young people were better able to make a personal decision and an "adult commitment" to Christ and to the church. Thus, we separated Confirmation from its real roots as a sacrament of initiation into the faith community. We threw it out of its historical sequence. We tried to make it stand out there by itself. There were some very positive pastoral results when we did this: more participation in faith-formation programs until a later age and a more mature experience of sacramental life.

But, there is wisdom in the ancient tradition of having the three sacraments of initiation celebrated in their traditional order: Baptism, Confirmation, and then Eucharist. In Baptism, we are immersed in the death and resurrection of Christ. In Confirmation, we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Eucharist, we sit with the community at the banquet of life which prepares us for the eternal banquet. Eucharist is, and should be, the ultimate peak of our sacramental life.

Now we need to reassess what we are doing with sacraments in the church. Our ancient tradition has much to teach us, as is evident from our experience with the RCIA in our parishes. The way we initiate new members into the church can also teach us how our own children should experience the sacraments of initiation.

Since the 1970s we have had two contrasting sacramental practices in our parishes. On the one hand, those becoming Catholics, including children as young as seven, celebrated all three sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. On the other hand, in some parishes the children raised from infancy as Catholics were told that they wouldn't be ready for Confirmation until they were teens. Restoring the traditional sequence of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist for Catholic youngsters will make us consistent in our practice.

Parishes are being asked to study this whole question and to begin preparing for the implementation of this restoration. Many people need to be brought into the discussion and the planning. A parish cannot bypass its members when it attempts major changes such as this.

Parents need to be deeply involved in these discussions. Each year as the children's catechetical process begins in kindergarten and first grade level, consideration needs to be given to this issue of initiation sacraments.