Catechesis on the Sacraments: CONFIRMATION

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One of the most frequent ways I get to meet parishioners throughout the Diocese of Trenton as Bishop is when I have the privilege of administering the sacrament of Confirmation to their children, usually around eighth or ninth grade.  These are joyful occasions and parents are rightfully proud of their daughters and sons as they take this important step into Catholic Christian adulthood.
Of course, they are not technically “adults” as society understands the term but they are capable of making some decisions for themselves and with the support, guidance and help of their parents — the first and most important teachers of their faith — and with the instruction they receive in Catholic school or parish religious education programs, the decision to present themselves for reception of the sacrament of Confirmation is (or should be) a very important moment in their lives of faith.  Here, again, the attitude and influence of Catholic parents cannot be overstated.
I received my Confirmation in fourth grade but, unfortunately, I do not remember anything about the day.  I do not recall the identity of my Confirmation sponsor.  Those were different times (early 1960s) and one or two of the eighth grade boys was/were chosen to be sponsor(s) for all the boys.  Although the practice has been adapted, during those years, only the bishop could confirm.
I attended a Catholic elementary school, under the tutelage of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, so I am sure I was well prepared.  Instruction in religion and the Baltimore Catechism was absolute and the reason we went to Catholic school.
Since that time and the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council (1963-65), much has changed “about” the teaching of religion and deeper insights have evolved regarding ways that the sacraments of the Catholic Church are presented, given and received.  That is certainly true of Confirmation.  It is now given at a later age than when I was confirmed and priests may be designated to assist the bishop in its administration.
The Sacrament of Confirmation itself, however, has not changed.
The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) notes that:
Baptism, the Eucharist and the sacrament of Confirmation together constitute the “sacraments of Christian initiation,” whose unity must be safeguarded.  It must be explained to the faithful that the sacrament of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace.  For ‘by the sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit.  Hence, they are true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed (CCC, 1285).’
In his Jan. 29, 2014 public audience, Pope Francis reminded the Church that Confirmation:
… unites us more firmly to Christ.  It strengthens our relationship with the Church, and it gives us a special strength from the Holy Spirit to defend the faith and confess the name of Christ.
He continued to explain that Confirmation:
… together with Baptism and the Eucharist, is one of the sacraments of Christian initiation … through which we are gradually inserted in Christ, dead and risen, and we receive a new life, making us members of the Church.
Confirmation, he emphasized:
ratifies baptismal grace.  … through the sacramental sign of anointing with sacred chrism, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in order to be more closely conformed to Christ, God’s ‘anointed one.’ … We are also strengthened — ‘confirmed’ — in the grace of our baptism and in our mission of bearing daily witness to Christ and his love … (and Confirmation) … ensures that our life be embodied in the image of his Son, for us to love like him, infusing his Holy Spirit.  This Spirit acts with strength within us, within all people and during one’s whole life … when we receive him in our hearts, Christ makes himself present and takes shape in our lives.
CCC states that “the effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted the apostles on the day of Pentecost (CCC, 1302).  When I preach the homily at Confirmation, I often remind those to be confirmed and their parents, sponsors and those present, “This is your Pentecost!”
Confirmation, among other things:
1. Increases and deepens (confirms) baptismal grace;
2. Unites us more firmly to Christ;
3. Increases the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit within us, as identified in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah 11: 1-2:  wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord or “wonder and awe;”
4. Makes our bond with the Church stronger and more perfect;
5. Renders us true witnesses of Christ, able to spread and defend our Catholic faith by word and action.
Like Baptism, Confirmation can only be received once because, like Baptism, its effects are meant to last a lifetime.  That’s what is meant by the unique, indelible “sacramental character” that these sacraments impart.  I mentioned in a previous catechesis that “sacraments follow us through life’s significant moments.”  Baptism parallels our human birth as a “new life” in Christ.  Confirmation parallels the rite of passage into adulthood as a “confirming or strengthening” that life.  The Holy Eucharist parallels our daily nourishment throughout life as “the Bread of Life,” Jesus Christ.
These reflections provide some ideas — much more could be said — about the Catholic sacramental theology upon which our understanding of the sacrament of Confirmation is based.  As I have mentioned in an earlier catechesis, the Catholic Church is a community of faith and sacraments but it is also a community of law.  We don’t make it up as we go along.  Here are some of the requirements of Church law regarding the reception of the sacrament of Confirmation:
1. The “outward sign” of the sacrament of Confirmation is the anointing with sacred chrism — oil that must be blessed by the bishop at the Chrism Mass during the most recent Holy Week — by the imposition of hands and through the words, “(confirmation or baptismal name), be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit (canon 880);”
2. The custom and practice of choosing a “confirmation name” is not a requirement in canon law; it is a longstanding, good and honorable practice, invoking the patronage of a special saint who may be meaningful to the one confirmed; like Baptism, however, the name chosen should not be foreign or offensive to the Christian mentality (canon 855); a number of dioceses and parishes prefer simply using the baptismal name;
3. The sacrament of Confirmation is ordinarily conferred by the bishop (or auxiliary bishop if there is one) of the diocese or by those priests specially delegated or chosen by the bishop for this purpose (canon 852); that would include priests who admit candidates for baptism and/or confirmation who are considered adults (canon 853); any priest can give confirmation to a person in danger of death;
4. While it is encouraged to celebrate Confirmation during Mass, it is not required; in the Diocese of Trenton, after consultation by the bishop with the priests of the diocese, the sacrament of Confirmation is given outside of Mass according to the approved and prescribed liturgical texts.  This is done so that the nature and purpose of the sacrament can be specifically emphasized by an entire ritual act; it also eliminates the possible occasion (or embarrassment) for those attending the ceremony who are not regularly practicing Catholics (or who are not Catholic) from presenting themselves for Holy Communion without adequate preparation and disposition;
5. To be confirmed, a person must:
a. Be a baptized Roman Catholic, sufficiently instructed and prepared for and capable of receiving the sacrament of Confirmation (canons 889, 890); good pastoral judgment is required;
b. Have the use of reason; that is, capable of understanding the nature and purpose of the sacrament; good pastoral judgment is required;
c. Have reached the age of discretion as established by the diocese or the national conference of bishops; in the Diocese of Trenton, the age is ordinarily 8th or 9th grade; candidates can be confirmed at an older age or, even, at a younger age for a serious or grave cause;
6. Church law indicates that the one confirmed “as far as possible … should” have a sponsor present “to see that the confirmed person acts as a true witness to Christ and faithfully fulfills the obligations connected with this sacrament (canon 892); when possible, it is recommended that a person’s baptismal sponsor also serve as a sponsor for Confirmation;
7. The qualifications and restrictions for serving as a sponsor for Confirmation are basically the same ones required for baptismal sponsors (canon 893; see also, my previous catechesis on baptism); a person who is not Catholic or who has not been confirmed, may not serve as a sponsor for Confirmation; it doesn’t make practical sense to do otherwise;
8. Reception of the sacrament of Confirmation should be recorded in the appropriate diocesan and/or parish register for Confirmation.  Once confirmation has taken place, the name person(s) serving as sponsor(s) are not changed or altered in the register of the parish, even if their personal relationship to the one baptized has changed.
As with other sacraments, the pastor of the parish is to see to it that candidates for Confirmation are properly prepared and that all arrangements are appropriately made for its conferral (canon 890).  He shares this responsibility with those in the parish entrusted with catechetical, religious instruction.