

THE FAITH WE SHARE – THE FAITH WE PASS ON
THE SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION OF CHILDREN
IN THE DIOCESE OF ABERDEEN
A POLICY STATEMENT

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Introduction

Over ninety parents, priests, teachers and catechists from every corner of the diocese participated in and contributed to the seminar THE FAITH WE SHARE – THE FAITH WE PASS ON held at Keith under the auspices of *The Ogilvie Institute*, on the feast of St. John Ogilvie, March 10th 2001, at which the bishop presided.

There were two questions uppermost in the minds of the participants. The first related to the appropriate age for the reception of First Holy Communion, given the need for fuller preparation for, and experience of, the Sacrament of Penance (first confession). The second related to the appropriate age for the reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation, given on the one hand the experience of the present practice in the diocese, and on the other hand the questions being raised elsewhere.

Fundamental to both questions was the adequacy of our present system of instruction and preparation. We need to bear in mind that there are three overlapping areas of responsibility, namely those of the family, of the parish, and of the school, with their respective catechetical programmes. We could speak of the personal responsibilities of parents, pastors and teachers.

Two important papers were presented at this seminar. Mrs Audrey Hendry, head teacher of St. Joseph's R.C. Primary, Inverness, explored the fruitful connections between families, parishes and schools (and catechetical programmes) as experienced in one parish of the diocese.

Fr. Colin Stewart of St. Michael's Centre, Tomintoul, listed the arguments for the continuation of the present practice of Confirmation within the diocese. Both these papers are attached.

Sacraments of Initiation

The sacraments of initiation - Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist – together lay the *foundation* of the Christian life. By Baptism we are at once freed from sin and reborn as sons and daughters of God. By it we are plunged into the very life of the Blessed Trinity. Through it we come to share the life of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. By it “we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church”, his Body, and made sharers of his mission (CCC 1213). Baptism has been described as the gateway to life in the Spirit and the door that gives access to the other sacraments.

The sharing in the divine nature through the grace Christ gives us in the sacraments is not unlike the origin, development and nourishing of natural life. Through faith, we are born anew by Baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation and receive in the Eucharist the food of eternal life for our journey. “By means of these sacraments of initiation, the faithful thus receive in increasing measure the treasures of divine life and advance towards the perfection of charity” (CCC 1212).

The Presupposition of Faith

Faith is the response we make, in trust and love, to the God who reveals himself in Christ Jesus our Lord. Two things are necessary: That we hear the Word of God, and that we are enabled by grace to accept it. If the proclamation of the Word of God is the essential mission of the Church, then the imparting of grace, through the divinely instituted sacraments, is also an essential task. In between these two poles, there is an extended period of catechesis, or instruction of individuals in the content and import of the gospel message.

Participation in the Church’s mission, and in celebration of the sacraments, extends to all who are members of the Church. While pastors and teachers have a special role in the proclamation of the faith and the celebration of the sacraments, parents remain the primary instructors of their children in the ways of faith. This sharing of faith, this passing on of the faith, is what is meant by catechesis.

Adult Catechesis the normative way

From the very beginning of the Church's life, becoming a Christian has always involved a journey and initiation in several stages. This journey can be covered rapidly or slowly, but, "certain essential elements will always have to be present: proclamation of the Word, acceptance of the Gospel entailing conversion, profession of faith, Baptism itself, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and admission to Eucharistic communion". (CCC 1230) The Second Vatican Council restored for the Latin (Western) Church the catechumenate for adults, comprising several distinct steps. The rites for these stages are to be found in the Rite for Christian Initiation of Adults and this is the normal route for all adults seeking to become full members of the Catholic Church in the diocese.

Children's Catechesis

Infant Baptism remains however the way of entry into the Church for most Catholic Christians. It is celebrated in a form that has become a single act, encapsulating in a very abridged way the preparatory stages of Christian initiation. When the fathers of the Second Vatican Council called for certain reforms in the liturgy, they specified amendments to the rites of initiation. A new rite of Infant Baptism was to be introduced to replace a rite that was too closely modeled on that of adult baptism. In this new rite the examination of faith was to be directed towards parents and godparents, whose subsequent responsibility for educating their children in the ways of faith would be underlined, since "by its very nature Infant Baptism requires a post-baptismal catechumenate. There is need not only for instruction after baptism, but also for the necessary flowering of baptismal grace in personal growth". (CCC 1231) Thus whilst the Christian initiation of adults begins with their entry into their period of instruction called the catechumenate and reached its culmination at Easter in a single celebration of the three sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist – it is the other way round in the case of the initiation of children baptized in infancy. Infant Baptism is followed by years of catechesis before being completed later by the celebration of the Eucharist and Confirmation. In whichever order, these two sacraments *complete* their Christian initiation.

Catechesis, Faith, and the Celebration of the Sacraments

The impact of the Council's reform on the Sacrament of Confirmation was the placing of the profession of faith, in terms of a renewal of baptismal promises, within the rite itself. Faith is a necessary prerequisite for the fruitful reception of all the sacraments. In the case of Infant Baptism it is the faith of the parents, reflecting that of the Church, which is at that juncture significant. At Confirmation the candidate is to profess his or her own faith. The sacraments are conferred on those who believe: *He who believes and is baptized will be saved* (Mark 16:16). *Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God* (John 3:5). The introduction to the Confirmation Rite states: "This giving of the Holy Spirit *conforms believers* more perfectly to Christ and strengthens them so that they may bear witness to Christ for the building up of his body in faith and love."

Children's Catechesis: The role of Parents, Catechists, and Pastors

The introduction to the Rite of Confirmation also states: "Initiation of children into the sacramental life is for the most part the responsibility and concern of Christian parents. They are to form and gradually develop a spirit of faith in the children and, with the help of catechetical institutions, prepare them for the fruitful reception of the sacraments of Confirmation and the Eucharist."

It is a responsibility shared however by the whole people of God, with parish priests having the specific task of seeing "that all the baptized come to the fullness of Christian initiation and are carefully prepared for Confirmation". Theirs is a task of oversight shared with the bishop as the "original minister" of the sacrament.

Formal catechetical instruction is provided both by Catholic schools and parish catechetical programmes.¹

Presentation of Children for the Sacraments of Initiation

In recent years throughout Scotland there has been discussion over the appropriate preparation for, and the order in which, children should receive the sacraments of Christian initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, (Penance), and Holy Communion. The overwhelming consensus reached at the seminar was that in the pastoral circumstances of our

¹ The Diocese of Aberdeen has seven Catholic schools. It also sponsors, trains and commissions Parish Catechists, using the *Maryvale Certificate for Parish Catechists* course, since October 2000 supported by our own Ogilvie Institute.

diocese, parents should be encouraged to present their children to prepare for, and celebrate *First Confession* when they are in *Primary 3*. This was particularly welcomed by parish catechists who, with less weekly contact time than Catholic primary school teachers, needed a year to instruct for this sacrament.

Following *First Confession*, parents, teachers and catechists are to be encouraged to take other opportunities throughout the ensuing year to deepen the children's experience of penance while preparing them for *First Holy Communion* at the *Primary 4* level.

Finally it was strongly recommended that children be prepared and presented for *Confirmation* in the *final year of primary school or the first year of secondary*, as would seem best in each parish circumstance.

The age for Confirmation

Bearing in mind what was said earlier of the responsibility of parents, the introduction to the Rite of Confirmation – and canon law itself – put the age threshold as that characterised by the attainment of the use of reason. The introduction to the rite suggests this is “about the seventh year”. It allows however for the sacraments to be given “at a more mature age after appropriate formation”. The reasons for this are pastoral: “especially to strengthen the faithful in complete obedience to Christ the Lord and in loyal testimony to him”. Reference to the “age of discretion” must be matched by reference to the object of such discretion – in this instance, as we have seen, the bearing of *witness* to Christ “for the building up of his Body in faith and love”. Each sacrament requires its own level of maturity on the part of candidates.²

The instruction to candidates at Confirmation states baldly: “You must be *witnesses* before all the world to his suffering, death and resurrection; your way of life should at all times reflect the goodness of Christ.”

The responsibility thus laid on young shoulders, and the amount of time needed to help them understand and develop the missionary role of every member of the Church, persuaded those who took part in the consultation of the wisdom of maintaining our present practice.

² Pope Pius X, in allowing unconfirmed children to receive Holy Communion, required only that they be able to distinguish the Eucharistic bread from ordinary bread.

Diocesan Programme

Having thus established the guidelines, encouragement is now given to parents, teachers and pastors to review the catechetical practices within each area of their responsibility, with a view to co-operating more fully for the worthy and more effective preparation of our young people for the sacraments, and the Christian life of which these are the basis.

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