

SEALED WITH THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: COMPLETING OUR INITIATION IN THE CHURCH

We are privileged to host upwards of 22 **Confirmation Masses** each year at the Cathedral. I enjoy visiting with the priests and greeting Confirmation coordinators and the families at these events. Frankly, I even welcome the “chaos” as the Cathedral is buzzing with activity! They may entail lots of work for our staff, but I think we all enjoy the atmosphere. It is indicative of who we are and our conviction that the Cathedral belongs to everyone. I estimate that nearly 4000 young people receive the sacrament each year here, and ceremonies are also held at the Basilica and several other locations. Most *confirmandi* appear to be between 8th and 10th grade, with a few a little older.

But it is also increasingly the case that our young people “fall through the cracks” when it comes to their full initiation in the Catholic Church. This is not a judgment on my part as much as it is an observation, though statistics support this hunch. In 2006, 8,156 young people were confirmed in this Archdiocese, compared to 7,111 in 2016, representing a **13% decrease**. True, some parishes had combined classes as they re-adjusted to a younger age; we’ll see if the downward trend continues. Families are increasingly mobile, while teenagers are working and/or engaged in numerous school activities. It is equally true that some parents “drop the ball” and do not follow through with respect to their children’s religious education.

When I was a high school chaplain in the early 1990’s, I recall one very confused family whose parish would not exempt their son from any evening Religious Education classes, even though he was enrolled in a Catholic school. But that’s not all—while he was studying chapter 11 on Wednesday morning in my class, he had to attend Confirmation class that same evening, during which the teacher covered chapter 4 of the same textbook! It made no sense and threatened to “turn off” the student completely. I intervened to forge a compromise, but I was quite sympathetic with their frustration. I knew then, and certainly agreed that the student should attend those specific sessions preparing for the sacrament, as well as complete a service project etc. But that is different from general religious education. When some parishes utilize two-year Confirmation programs, it’s a stretch to see the *entire* period as specifically sacramental preparation—it is more properly religious education. We ought not place unnecessary roadblocks in the way of proper sacramental preparation.

In the Sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized person is “sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit” and is strengthened for service to the Body of Christ. Confirmation is intimately associated with both Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. In 1971, Bl. Paul VI wrote an Apostolic Constitution on Confirmation in which he shared that **Confirmation completes the grace of Baptism**. Those who believed in the Apostles’ preaching were baptized and received the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. The Apostles baptized believers in water and the Spirit. Then they imparted the special gift of the Spirit through the laying on of hands. “The imposition of hands is rightly recognized by the Catholic tradition as the origin of the sacrament of Confirmation, which in a certain way perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church.” (CCC, no. 1288, citing Pope Paul VI, *Divinae Consortium Naturae*, no. 659).

Before Vatican II, there used to be a gentle “slap” on the cheek at the time the bishop offered the sign of peace following the anointing. The Roman Pontifical read: “Deinde **leviter** eum in maxilla **caedit**, dicens: Pax tecum” (Then he **strikes** him **lightly** on the cheek, saying: Peace be with you). When the Confirmation rite was revised in 1971, mention of this gesture was omitted. This was probably a very wise move by Pope Paul VI! Today, the sign of peace that concludes the rite of the sacrament signifies and demonstrates ecclesial communion with the bishop and with all the faithful. We now expect our newly confirmed to engage the world with renewed vigor. We desperately need their powerful witness-in their schools, in the Church and in society at large.

The sacrament signals a willingness to engage the world, to bring one’s faith to bear in a wider context. This witness requires courage, and the **Gifts of the Holy Spirit** provide them the means for a more powerful

witness. When teenagers see wrongdoing and muster up the courage to say something, they may indeed suffer some consequences because of it. But in doing so, they taste firsthand what it means to be able to stand up to the crowd, to pay the price of discipleship. As we enter “Confirmation season,” may our young people know of our prayerful and loving support.

- Catholics and Sweden? Not exactly two words that are associated with one another in the ostensibly Lutheran (61%) Nordic nation. But in Motala, Sweden, good things are happening. The Swedish town sold its multi-denomination Church to the Catholic **Diocese of Stockholm**, while they build a new one. The growing Catholic will finally have its own Church.
- I have been overwhelmed by your response to my plea for help for the **Catedral de San Juan Bautista** in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I am extremely excited for my trip beginning one week from tomorrow. I’ll keep you posted on final results.
- An estimated 2,000,000 participated in a **Pro-Life March in Buenos Aires**, Argentina. Its theme was “Life Has Value.” It was a strong showing as the country engages in legislative debates surrounding the legalization of abortion. Pope Francis sent words of encouragement to the marchers: “I ask all of you to be channels of goodness and beauty, so that you can make your contribution in the defense of life and justice ...”
- **Thank you to our staff and volunteers** alike, who ensured that the Sacred Triduum was celebrated with the dignity befitting it and in a manner that honors our valued parishioners and many welcome guests who come through these doors. A special insert is located on the tables near the four piers, containing the names of all in whose honor or memory our beautiful Easter Flowers were donated.
- This past Wednesday marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of **Martin Luther King, Jr.** I have no personal recollection, being still shy of five-years-old, but it remains one of the most sobering moments in American history. May his peaceful approach to raising awareness of racial injustice inspire us to work for a more just society for all, where all people are truly judged by the “content of their character.”
- Next Sunday, you will surely want to head downstairs after the early Masses to claim your Lemon Meringue Pie during the annual Cathedral Lemon Pie Sale. They come in two sizes. I think the smaller size is perfect as a “solo” pie!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector