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**Sacrament of Confirmation Returned to Before First Communion**

**By JO ANNE FLORES EMBLETON**

TYLER -- Bishop Alvaro Corrada, SJ, has restored the sacrament of confirmation to its original order, allowing Catholics in the Diocese of Tyler to more fully celebrate the sacrament of Eucharist.

"The place to make your commitment to the Catholic Church is in the Eucharist, not in confirmation," he said. The bishop outlined the change in pastoral practice in an Oct. 7 letter titled *Pastoral Reflection on the Sacrament of Confirmation*.

"The sacraments draw humanity into the truth and love of God revealed in Christ, thereby disposing the faithful to live this love more deeply in their daily lives of Christian freedom and witness," the bishop said. "The relation of baptism and confirmation to the Eucharist becomes clear; each prepares a person to take his appointed place within the life of the church. Baptism makes one a member of Christ's body, the church, sharing in the apostolic mission as a child of God offering him spiritual worship.

"Confirmation is given to strengthen the baptized so that they might be more perfectly bound to the church and, as true witnesses of Christ, spread and defend the faith by word and deed," he said.

This reordering of the sacrament is not an unusual practice, according to Bishop Corrada.

"A good number of dioceses in the United States, Canada and Europe have reordered the sacraments to go back to the usual way, which is baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist," he said. "In our diocese, there is a pastoral need with so many people coming into the church by conversion, and many more from Mexico entering the process of Christian initiation.

"Many of our Catholics (with baptized children) are requesting that confirmation be done before (the sacrament of) the Eucharist, at an earlier age. After discussing this for many months with the priests' council and the deacons' council, with the clergy, the Christian initiation team and the liturgical commission, I decided that it was time to make the change."

Confirmation "is not a sacrament of maturity, where you get old enough to be like a little soldier for Christ," said Linda Porter, diocesan director of faith formation.

"You used to get slapped on the cheek, a sign that you were going to suffer for the faith and that you needed to be strong because you were a soldier for Christ. But that's not the terminology we use now in understanding the sacrament. It's tied very closely to our baptismal promises, and tied very closely to the Eucharist. Confirmation strengthens the gifts that we celebrate receiving at baptism, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and helps us prepare for entering into the celebration of the Eucharist."

According to the bishop's pastoral letter, the early Christians "entered the Communion of the church through baptism and the laying on of hands." These sacraments "introduced Christians into the life of the community and prepared them to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice . . . Receiving the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, they became fully members" of the church.

The practice gradually changed as bishops faced difficulties in visiting the far-flung parishes in their dioceses and were unable to baptize all new Christians, who, for the most part, were infants. The celebration of confirmation was delayed until a bishop could be present.

"In the beginning of the twentieth century," according to Bishop Corrada's pastoral letter, "children would have received first Communion very near the time of their confirmation, generally about the age of 12. When Pope Pius X defined the age for first Communion to be as young as seven, the same age of reason that was used in the celebration of first reconciliation, it was designed to increase liturgical participation and the living of the Christian life. In *Quam Singulari*, Pope Pius X set forth that children in fact had an obligation toward both confession and reception of Communion at the age of reason."

The age for first Communion was lowered, but confirmation remained at age 12.

"They left it up there by itself, and what happened was that publishers came out gearing (catechetical material) toward older children and we adapted to the practice," Porter said. "Then we tried to define our theology based on that practice, rather than the other way around."

As a result, challenges have developed.

The most prominent is a "checklist" mentality, in which confirmation is the final act on a list of sacraments that a child must receive before completing a catechetical program

"The sacraments are separated. We start with this sacrament, baptism, and sometimes we don't see the families again until a child prepares to make his first Communion. Then you might not see them again until they come for confirmation. And once they're confirmed, you don't see them at all because you've got them already in the mind set

that this is school, that these are kind of 'sacramental stations' where you come and get filled up, then you're finished after confirmation. The average Catholic adult has not been back for any kind of formation since he or she was confirmed," Porter said.

"Confirmation cannot be properly looked at as a single event, done and then forgotten, like some type of immunization or graduation," Bishop Corrada agreed. "Confirmation establishes an ongoing relationship with God which animates the ongoing growth in holiness which is the vocation or call of all the baptized."

Another problem area is conflicting theology presented by the RCIA and Christian initiation processes.

"We've ended up with two theologies of initiation," Porter said. "One for those who are baptized Catholic, another for those who are not Catholic. It's confusing and it creates tensions."

Restoring confirmation to the order first adopted by the early Church does not "give uniformity, but greater unity in the church, so that those who were baptized as children may also receive the sacrament of confirmation at an earlier age before they receive the Eucharist," Bishop Corrada said.

A third challenge is providing proper catechesis in an environment where Protestantism reigns.

"Because it's East Texas, and because we're comparing it to other churches, we look at confirmation as what theirs is, but it's not that," Porter said, describing how at an in-service for parish directors of religious education, there were "10 different answers when I asked them to describe the sacrament of confirmation. They all had Eucharist down, and they all knew about marriage and holy orders, but confirmation was like a sacrament looking for a theology. We have to (better) educate our adults, our catechists, the parents and the average person in the pew."

Confirmation isn't about an individual's decision "to embrace the faith of baptism," Bishop Corrada said. "It is not a human act similar to that of non-Catholic Christians who, perhaps in their early teens, choose to publicly profess that they have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

"(It) is not our 'confirming' baptism or our faith in Christ; it is Christ confirming in us the Christian life that we are already living. It is particularly important that we avoid any sacramental catechesis that reflects the notion that confirmation is the time for a person to individually embrace the faith or to become personally engaged in the work of the church," he said.

In restoring the sacrament's order, "we are getting away from a checklist of sacraments and obligations (and moving) to the call to holiness, in which people (experience a sense of) fluidity in the life of the church, in the reception of sacraments and the celebration of liturgy," Bishop Corrada said. "People will understand the sacramental liturgy of the church from the beginning."

Porter agreed. "It makes sense that confirmation be the catalyst, because if we start catechizing in a different way, if our models shift and the pastors are focusing on adult education, parents are focusing on formation of their families and bringing them to the sacrament. They're seeing that sacraments are integrating them into the life of the community, and then those families are going to grow in holiness. And that means a strong relationship with Christ. When people feel that way, they can't help but share the faith," she said.

The new practice flows smoothly into the three processes, which have led people "to understand that the order of sacraments is important in their lives," the bishop added.

"The great advantage of doing it this way is that the sacrament of reconciliation, the confession of our sins, will be brought more into perspective and used in the church," he said.

"I want people to go back to the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation at an earlier age and on a more constant basis. So, for a year, the young people will be encouraged to practice the sacrament of reconciliation before they receive confirmation and Eucharist together," Bishop Corrada said.

As the program is implemented, three groups will be preparing for confirmation.

"One would be a kind of catch-up group. Those kids in a two-year confirmation program in their parish will finish out that program, and everybody else will fall into one of two groups. One is those who have not yet celebrated their first Eucharist, ages seven and older, who would begin a year long preparation for the sacrament of reconciliation, then the following year they'd begin preparing for confirmation and Eucharist together. The other group would be those who have already celebrated their first Eucharist, but haven't been confirmed, again anybody aged seven and older," Porter said. "That is going to be the bigger group, I'm thinking."

Over the next 13 months, her office will put into place resources, information and schedules so that the practice is implemented by Advent 2006.

Bishop Corrada will discuss it at the Oct. 21-22 diocesan discipleship conference, and Porter will visit deaneries in the next couple of months to introduce the new practice. On Jan. 28, she will present a session for catechists and faith formation leaders at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

Daylong sessions are planned in each of the deaneries during February and March, she said.