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Confirmation – Pentecost Sunday

When young people are preparing for Confirmation, they are often told that this represents their entrance into “adulthood” as a Christian. While their parents and godparents answered on their behalf at their Baptism, so it goes, now they as adolescents are to “choose the faith for themselves.”

In this explanation lies elements that are true mixed with others that are misleading.

For one thing, we know that Confirmation has a deeper value than this because not everyone receives it when they are in sixth or seventh grade after being Baptized as infants. In fact, the Church’s proper understanding of Confirmation can be seen at the Easter Vigil. There, adults being baptized as Christians are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation immediately after. The high point of the celebration comes at the Eucharist, when the neophytes (those baptized and confirmed) receive the Body and Blood of the Lord.

This order of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist goes all the way back to the earliest days of Christianity. It is only in recent history – the past fifty years or so – that first Holy Communion has taken place before Confirmation. In some dioceses in the United States, they are restoring the ancient order, even for young people.

The point of all this is simply to say that Confirmation is more – much more – than a “Catholic Bar-mitzvah.” To say that one can “choose the faith” for themselves during Confirmation prep might somehow imply that one can deny the “yes” of their parents and godparents at Baptism. They cannot; that sacrament marks one as a Christian for eternity.

Now, there is certainly great value to helping our young people take greater ownership of their faith by being exposed to the Church’s teaching and participating in her life in a fuller way. Confirmation bestows a sacramental seal which directs us to this purpose. But it would be a mistake to view Confirmation as a reward for getting test questions right or, worse, as something that I can give to myself. It is a gift from God, meant to strengthen us to witness to the faith and participate in a fuller way in the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19). Confirmation seals what was begun at Baptism and points the way to the Eucharist, which is the food of those who carry out the Church’s mission.

Pentecost Sunday is often called “the birthday of the Church.” Why is that? It is because the first community of Christians – the Apostles and Mary – were gathered in the Upper Room after the Ascension praying for the Holy Spirit. Then, all of the sudden, the Acts of the Apostles tells us that “there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, which filled the entire house in which they were” (Acts 2:2). This wind is an outward manifestation of a spiritual reality: the first Christians experience the sending of the Holy Spirit from the Father through his Son, Jesus. This Spirit is meant to make Jesus present in the Church he created. The Spirit enlivened the Church on that first Pentecost and has not abandoned the Church since.

What us does that account say? “Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them” (Acts 2:3). Pentecost – and the Sacrament of Confirmation which fills us with the gifts of the Holy Spirit – is meant to be like a fire which spreads from person to person. It is the fire of the Gospel. Are we on fire for the Gospel like the Apostles in the Upper Room? If our fires have grown into embers, perhaps today on this Pentecost Sunday, we can ask for the grace for a new kindling!

Finally, we are told that they “began to speak in different tongues as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim” (Acts 2:4). Our parish is blessed to have a diversity of communities here all worshipping together under one roof. These many languages and cultures are a microcosm of the Church on that first day. We don’t have to be charismatics to speak in tongues. Rather, we need simply to treat each other with the charity of disciples of Christ Jesus.

This especially is my prayer for our *Confirmandi*. I pray that they may be filled with love for Christ and his Church. This is what true adulthood in the faith means. And may all of us be filled with the gifts of the Spirit, those stable dispositions which help to direct our lives according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Our parish can live our discipleship well only with those gifts of Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge, Counsel, Reverence, Fortitude, and Fear of the Lord! ~Rev. Eric J. Banecker