

The Order of the Sacraments of Initiation by Rev John McLoughlin, Episcopal Vicar for Formation

The restoration of the traditional order of the Sacraments of Initiation is about to take place in the Archdiocese of Liverpool during the coming year. To the onlooker it may appear that this simply involves conferring Confirmation at a much younger age before First Holy Communion. But here in the Liverpool Archdiocese we have a much greater programme than simply adjusting the age when Confirmation is conferred.

In the autumn of 2007 I was asked by the Council of Priests to give a presentation on the history and theology of the Sacraments of Initiation in order to stimulate a discussion about our pastoral approach to the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. As a result Archbishop Patrick Kelly was asked to consider restoring the traditional order of the Sacraments of Initiation. He made the decision to do so in 2008 but chose not to make any immediate change until our archdiocese had time to consider its implementation. As a result a Working Party was established to reflect on how best that implementation might come about. After much prayer and reflection, which involved examining dioceses in the USA and other parts of the United Kingdom which have already brought about the change in the Sacramental Order, we discovered one very important fact:

'Simply restoring the order of the Sacraments of Initiation will not address the issues that cause concern. A major change is needed in the way we celebrate and bear witness to our faith through our sacramental practice. This will require a fundamental shift in our approach from merely delivering programmes of preparation for the Sacraments to developing opportunities for ongoing celebration and formation for Sacramental living.' (Working Party Report: January 2010)

This understanding took shape in various ways, but mainly through reflecting again on the sacramental theology of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. This led the Working Party to reengage with the fact that Sacraments are 'gift', not 'works'. The Sacraments are part of God's gift to us, not works that we do as Pope John Paul II insisted when speaking of Confirmation. Confirmation, he reminded us, even if it is delayed to the teenage years, must be appreciated as a celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit and not confused with an opportunity for young people to make a commitment.

We also came to the realisation that we have not fully engaged with the aspirations of the Second Vatican Council in knowing, understanding and seeing 'parents as the primary educators of their children in faith'. The clergy, catechists and teachers, like the godparents at baptism and the whole Christian community, are there to help and support parents and families as they carry out this responsibility, not to do it for them.

This has been a constant theme of Pope Benedict XVI in 2011. In his homily for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, the pope stated: *'Therefore, it is necessary that parishes increasingly strive to support families, the little domestic churches, in their work of passing on the faith.'* (9 January 2011)

And again in his address to the bishops from the Philippines during their 'Ad Limina' visit Pope Benedict XVI said: *'As you continue to strengthen catechesis in your dioceses, do not fail to include in it an outreach to families, with particular care for parents in their role as the first educators of their children in the faith.'* (3 March 2011)

All of this is firmly rooted in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (7 December 1965), we read; *'...with their parents leading the way by example and family prayer, children and indeed everyone gathered around the family hearth will find a readier path to human maturity, salvation and holiness. Graced with the dignity and office of fatherhood and motherhood, parents will energetically acquit themselves of a duty which devolves primarily on them, namely education and especially religious education.'* (Gaudium et Spes; Part Two: The Dignity of Marriage and the Family, No 48)

This same understanding underpins 'The Rite of Baptism for Children' (8 September 1969). In the introduction it states; *'After baptism it is the responsibility of the parents...to assist the child to know God...to prepare the child for Confirmation and participate in the holy Eucharist.'* (Introduction, No 5) We see here also the clear intention to place the Sacraments of Initiation in the order in which they were intended. Our major theological

difficulty is not the age when the Sacraments are conferred but rather that many children are not Confirmed before they are admitted to the Eucharist.

The problem is one of Sacramentality. By receiving Eucharist before Confirmation children are not being deprived of grace by having to wait for Confirmation, but the reality of that grace is not being given Sacramental visibility in the way the overwhelming tradition of Christian liturgy and doctrine has wanted. Concern for the correct sequence of the Sacraments of Initiation is not a matter of liturgical faddism or rogue dioceses wanting to do their own thing. Grace is given in Sacramental order, which is of God's designing. Sacramentally, the Eucharist is the eschatological, messianic banquet celebrated for and by those who belong to the final age of grace. The Eucharist is the food of the strong not of the childish. Sacramentally speaking it is for the Confirmed. Sacramentally, there is a real loss in not preparing children for Holy Communion by Confirming them.

So what we are about in Liverpool Archdiocese is not simply changing the age of Confirmation but re-examining our whole approach to lifelong faith formation. We are about taking seriously that parents are the first educators of their children in the ways of faith. We are about taking seriously the fact that *'catechesis for adults, since it deals with persons who are capable of an adherence that is fully responsible, must be considered the chief form of catechesis. All other forms, which are indeed always necessary, are in some way oriented to it.'* (General Directory for Catechesis 59) And we are also about taking seriously, in our approach to sacramental preparation, the overall definitive aim of catechesis: *'...to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ.'* (Lumen Gentium 64)

This has also been highlighted recently by Pope Benedict XVI in his address to the Latin Rite bishops from India during their 'Ad Limina' visit. The Holy Father stated; *'...priests, religious and lay catechists need to know how to communicate with clarity and loving devotion the life-transforming beauty of Christian living and teaching, which will enable and enrich the encounter with Christ himself. This is especially true of the preparation of the faithful to meet our Lord in the sacraments.'* (16 May 2011) And again in the Holy Father's address following a concert held in honour of the sixth anniversary of his election, *'...the Christian faith does not say "I believe in something", but rather, "I believe in Someone", in God who is revealed in Jesus; in him I perceive the world's true meaning.'* (5 May 2011)

This is crucial to our sacramental catechesis. In an interview (28 January 2010), shortly after becoming president of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, Cardinal Turkson stressed that Christianity, is about an event, an experience and ultimately conversion. He said that too often catechesis has been taught in a way that limited Jesus to information and ideas rather than about teaching an experience of him.

Changing the age of when Confirmation is conferred here in the Archdiocese of Liverpool is therefore only one part of our huge undertaking. We are beginning this year with Baptism. We are in the process of preparing a new resource which hopefully moves us away from simply preparing for a 'sacramental event' to opportunities for 'sacramental living'. The baptismal resource will be an opportunity for adult catechesis for those requesting baptism for their child based on the RCIA model. This shift, from merely gathering parents to talk to them about the rite of baptism for their child to presenting them with an opportunity to discuss and engage with their own faith journey, will help parents to be ready to take on their responsibility of being the first educators of their child in the ways of faith.

We hope, that this fundamental shift in our approach to baptismal preparation, will allow us to take seriously the 'Instruction on Infant Baptism' (Pastoralis Actio: 1980) from the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, which gives careful attention to the assumption that has always been in the tradition, even if it has not always been reflected in practice, that infant baptism only makes sense to the Church when the parents of the child want it and are ready, with the help of the Church, to ensure that the child will be formed in accordance with the life that has been bestowed to it in baptism.

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