

September 17, 2017,  
Catechetical Sunday

# Homily Guides for the Sunday Assembly: Lifelong Faith Formation



## Week 1: The Goal is Lifelong Faith Formation

A new model of faith formation has been developing over the last 40 years. We have become accustomed to the classroom-instructional model. This model assumes that it is enough for young people to learn facts about the faith, once a week during their formative years. We all know that it takes much more than this for children to develop a strong foundation in their Catholic faith. The new model emphasizes that the community is at the heart of all faith formation. “Faith is communicated by a community of believers and the meaning of faith is developed by its members out of their history, by their interaction with each other, and in relation to the events that take place in their lives.” (C. Ellis Nelson, Where Faith Begins, p.10)

The life of our Church is centered in events that have the power to educate and transform individuals and the whole community. As Catholics, these include Church year feasts and seasons, sacraments and liturgy, justice and service, prayer and spiritual traditions, and community life. We know that these events are important to us, but we have to constantly learn how to participate in them so that we can understand them more fully. Only then will they have the power to change us both personally and as a parish community

Lifelong faith formation is a process of growing in the faith that begins with baptism. Immersed in the life of the Trinity, we are adopted sons and daughters of God our Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit.

Like all human relationships, developing and deepening our relationship with the Trinity happens gradually and over time. Consequently, lifelong faith formation provides opportunities and experiences throughout the entire life span to strengthen our relationship and knowledge of God, Jesus and the Spirit; to enhance our understanding of Scripture, Tradition and doctrines of our faith; and to sustain us in living as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Catechesis is no longer for children only. If we are to be a church of missionary disciples, we all need to enter into the process of deepening our faith by continually learning and experiencing what it means to be a Catholic Christian.

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## Week 2: Sequence of the Initiation Sacraments

Many dioceses are in the process of restoring the sacrament of Confirmation to its rightful place in the initiation sequence: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. This honors a very ancient tradition and reflects the sequence in which these sacraments are celebrated in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA).

For much of this century many parishes have been postponing Confirmation. They thought that in junior high or high school the young people were better able to make a personal decision and an "adult commitment" to Christ and to the church. Thus, we separated Confirmation from its real roots as a sacrament of initiation into the faith community. We threw it out of its historical sequence. We tried to make it stand out there by itself. There were some very positive pastoral results when we did this: more participation in faith-formation programs until a later age and a more mature experience of sacramental life.

But, there is wisdom in the ancient tradition of having the three sacraments of initiation celebrated in their traditional order: Baptism, Confirmation, and then Eucharist. In Baptism, we are immersed in the death and resurrection of Christ. In Confirmation, we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Eucharist, we sit with the community at the banquet of life which prepares us for the eternal banquet. Eucharist is, and should be, the ultimate peak of our sacramental life.

Now we need to reassess what we are doing with sacraments in the church. Our ancient tradition has much to teach us, as is evident from our experience with the RCIA in our parishes. The way we initiate new members into the church can also teach us how our own children should experience the sacraments of initiation.

Since the 1970s we have had two contrasting sacramental practices in our parishes. On the one hand, those becoming Catholics, including children as young as seven, celebrated all three sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. On the other hand, in some parishes the children raised from infancy as Catholics were told that they wouldn't be ready for Confirmation until they were teens. Restoring the traditional sequence of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist for Catholic youngsters will make us consistent in our practice.

Parishes are being asked to study this whole question and to begin preparing for the implementation of this restoration. Many people need to be brought into the discussion and the planning. A parish cannot bypass its members when it attempts major changes such as this.

Parents need to be deeply involved in these discussions. Each year as the children's catechetical process begins in kindergarten and first grade level, consideration needs to be given to this issue of initiation sacraments



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### Week 3: Eucharist as the Culmination Sacrament

The Eucharist is the summit and center of our lives in the church community. In its celebration we become rerooted in the mystery of the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. We anticipate the heavenly banquet already here on earth. All the other sacraments either lead to the Eucharist or flow from the Eucharist.

By our pastoral adaptations during the twentieth century, we seemed to treat Confirmation as the "crowning sacrament," not the Eucharist. We did this especially by delaying its celebration and requiring longer and more elaborate preparation.

Baptism and Confirmation prepare us for the celebration of Eucharist. By Baptism we have been given access to the family of God's New Covenant people. In Confirmation we have been sealed in the relationship of community in the body of Christ. Thus, we have a right to sit at the "family table" on Sundays and share in the Body and Blood of the Lord.

So, Confirmation functions as a sealing of Baptism and as a qualification for the Eucharistic assembly.

Confirmation, therefore, should be celebrated *between* Baptism and Eucharist-*before* Eucharist, not *after*.

A number of adult Catholics have never been confirmed in the church. There is something missing, spiritually, in the lives of those who have not been sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

The church in this diocese will restore the traditional order in which the sacraments of initiation are celebrated: Baptism in infancy, usually, and Confirmation and First Communion at the age of discretion (about age seven). Then the weekly celebration of the Eucharist will truly become a feast of the family, with all its members being fully initiated.

Parents and catechetical leaders are being asked to reflect on this view of what it means to be confirmed. And as we adjust our perspective on the place of Confirmation, the preeminent place of the Eucharist is more clearly highlighted.



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### Week 4: A Little History about Confirmation

Oftentimes after Confirmation some of our young people feel that they have *graduated* from the religious education programs of the parish. Their parents have made great efforts to get them confirmed, and then breathe a sigh of relief, "At least we got that done!"

Is that what Confirmation is about? Something to get done? Why have Confirmation at all? Does it have anything to do with youth ministry?

In the Western church, when the bishop could not be present for the Baptism, Confirmation, and First Communion with new Christians, priests were allowed to baptize and to preside at the Eucharist in the name of the bishop. But, bishops reserved the celebration of Confirmation to themselves in order to give witness to the unity of the church family in a diocese. Thus, people could be baptized in a parish where there was a priest. But, Confirmation was delayed until the bishop could be present. Gradually, it was delayed so long that it started to be regarded as a "sacrament of maturity." That had not been its original meaning.

Confirmation was meant to emphasize the Spirit Christians of the East, Catholics and Orthodox, have continued to celebrate Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist even for infants and very young children. Their practice has preserved the sequence and interconnection of the initiation sacraments.

We know that Christian growth is a lifelong transformation through the grace of Christ. The danger we run into when Confirmation is celebrated in the teenage years is that it may be considered as some kind of "graduation" from church involvement. Youth ministry has its own singular importance and place in the church. It should not be used as a preparation for Confirmation. Once youth ministry has been liberated from the burden of Confirmation programming, it will find its own authenticity.

The history of the church's Confirmation practice demonstrates that Confirmation belongs before Eucharist. We need to find a way to get it back where it belongs.



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### Week 5: A New Way of Seeing Confirmation

In this diocese we are making plans to relocate the celebration of Confirmation to its rightful place as a sacrament of initiation: after Baptism and before First Communion.

Parents and catechists will prepare the children to experience both Confirmation and First Communion at the age of eight or nine. This is not an added program, but simply a new way of seeing. In fact, it is important to clear our heads of the notion that some body of knowledge is needed before Confirmation can be received. Sacraments are gifts, not something we earn.

So, our teaching about Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist must take a new perspective. The combination of these three sacraments initiates us into the community of faith which is the body of Christ. We enter into church membership and fellowship through this initiation process. In the church, which is the body of Christ, we encounter the living Christ who is our Lord and our Savior. Sacraments are not *things* that we receive;

they are *experiences* of a living organism, a living community of many members alive in the Holy Spirit with Christ as our head.

The primary sacrament of God is the Lord Jesus Christ. In him, God has become visible and is communicated to the world. The church is the sacrament of Christ. In the church, we encounter Christ who connects us to the heavenly Father. The seven sacraments of the church are those special experiences of the faith community when the church celebrates and becomes what it is meant to be: the body of Christ in the world. Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist mark the beginning of that process for each of us.

The family environment is the normal place and context for religious formation. Parents must be awake to their increased responsibility for the faith development of their children now that Confirmation will have been celebrated at an earlier age.

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## **\*Week 3: Living Respect Life Sunday**

As many of you know, today is Respect Life Sunday, a day in the life of the Church when we call to mind in a special way the inalienable God-given dignity of every single human being. For a better sense of what's at the heart of Respect Life Sunday, consider this quote from Pope Benedict XVI: "God's love does not differentiate between the newly conceived infant still in his or her mother's womb and the child or young person, or the adult and the elderly person."<sup>1</sup> In short, everyone is loved by God. So today on Respect Life Sunday, amidst our new diocesan initiative to strengthen lifelong faith formation and return the Sacraments of Initiation to the restored order, let us consider a few ways to witness to God's love for all.

Our witness to the value of human life must begin with prayer, offering praise and thanksgiving to God for the invaluable gift of human life. Pray with little ones in thanksgiving for the presence of siblings and other family members in their lives. Pray for all expectant mothers and their pre-born children. Even toddlers can begin to appreciate the beautiful and delicate nature of life in its early stages. Families with older children and teens may pray together for elected officials and for our society, to foster a greater respect for all human life, from conception to natural death. You may

consider offering more formal, structured prayers such as those listed on the [USCCB Pro Life Prayers webpage](#) – just Google search "USCCB Pro Life Prayers." We cannot overestimate the value of prayer. Even little ones make a big difference.

In addition to prayer, God also calls us to act. Like little prayers, even little actions can make a big difference. Take children to visit grandparents or the elderly in nursing homes, for example. Consider taking older children to a local soup kitchen to serve those in need. While there, speak to the people – hear their stories. Others may visit abortion centers to offer a peaceful and prayerful witness. For other great ideas on how to make a difference, check the diocesan [Public Policy Office's "Take Action" webpage](#).

These things aren't just for today. Respect must be our way of life. Recent popes have said that in our world, there is a "culture of death." Only through prayer and living more respectfully can we make a change and bring about a Culture of Life. A renewed respect for the gift of life must be a part of our new diocesan initiative. These are exciting times in the Diocese of Manchester. Confident in the help of the Holy Spirit, let us remain open to God's grace as we walk forward together in faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Participants at the 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life and Congress on "The Human Embryo in the Pre-Implantation Phase" (February 27, 2006), <https://goo.gl/AIBt3d>.