

Local News

Sacramental discussion challenges congress participants

By Lee Strong

Does confirmation mark the end of Christian education or the beginning of a process of learning? Should confirmation be considered a rite of initiation or a rite of maturity? What are some of the practical, pastoral problems that could result from implementing the sacramental models theologians are now discussing?

These are a few of the questions Father Robert J. Kennedy posed to religious educators during two segments of the Catechist Congress at Cardinal Mooney High School November 13-14. The former liturgy director for the Diocese of Rochester said his purpose in raising these and other questions was to familiarize the people attending his sessions with current theological ideas about the sacraments and to stimulate grass-roots discussions of them.

What he in fact stimulated were reactions ranging from puzzlement to inspiration. Following both his presentations, during lunch conversations and throughout an afternoon panel discussion, congress participants sorted through the many ideas with which they'd been bombarded. Panel member Kathleen Mahoney summed up participants' reactions in observing that some people seemed overwhelmed by the new ideas and the prospect of having to explain such changes to parents.

But that's exactly the type of reaction Father Kennedy expected. He acknowledged that many of the ideas he presented may not become reality for some time — if at all. And in order for any of them to be implemented, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) will have to become more widespread.

The re-introduction of RCIA in the 1970s, Father Kennedy asserted, focused fresh attention on the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist — linked together as the Rites of Initiation.

"In RCIA, the order of the Rites of Initiation is baptism, confirmation, then Eucharist," Father Kennedy said. "Looking at the sacraments historically, this was the original order. The present order of sacraments is an historical development that is not necessarily the most logical theologically." He cited the current practice of children receiving first Eucharist before first penance — as opposed to the reverse order common a generation ago — as an example of current sacramental thinking. In the future, he suggested, the Church may restore the Rites of Initiation to their original order.

A second, and more significant development coming from the experience of RCIA is the emphasis on readiness rather than a specific age as a requirement for sacraments. Readiness is already a part of sacramental guidelines, but the idea is often misunderstood, according to Father Kennedy.

"Age is not the issue in confirmation. It is a sacrament of initiation, part of bringing a member into the Church, not a sacrament of maturity," he remarked.

Because of tradition, however, the issue has become confused. In many people's minds, confirmation marks a person as a spiritual adult — a soldier of Christ in traditional imagery. Some Catholics still think of the sacrament as a spiritual shot-in-the-arm — a dose of extra grace to inoculate children against temptations they will face as adolescents. In one case, for example, a mother wanted her child confirmed when he was in the sixth grade so that he would be "caught by the Church" before he began to rebel as a teenager.

For many people, confirmation also marks the end of Christian education, a fact Father Kennedy says is in conflict with the sacrament's theological basis. Confirmation, he said, is not an end to the process of growing and learning — it is a part of the process. Each candidate — whether a seven-year-old child or a teenager — should continue to learn and grow after receiving the sacrament. In addition, Father Kennedy noted, each will understand what the sacrament means in a way appropriate to his or her maturity, and each understanding will be equally valid.

The practical, pastoral difficulty with this idea, he acknowledged, is that most current confirmation programs are structured around the traditional concept of confirmation and are designed for high-school age confirmands. All of the educational materials available are also designed for teenagers. A new understanding of confirmation would require religious educators to structure their classes in order to teach students of divergent ages and reasoning abilities.

And even when religious education directors are aware of the new theology — which is not true in all cases — parents frequently are not. Before any changes can occur, therefore, extensive education of parents will be needed. Yet another difficulty is raised by the word readiness. How can readiness be assessed? Who decides if a person is ready? Who resolves conflicting viewpoints?

Despite these difficulties, Father Kennedy believes that changes in confirmation procedures will occur as ideas filter down into parishes and into popular understanding.

A second sacramental area now being reexamined because of RCIA is penance. When RCIA programs begin in parishes, not only do they attract converts, but also people who — for a variety of reasons — have been separated from the Church. These people don't fit into the full RCIA program, Father Kennedy observed, but they do require more than a single confession for immediate return to full membership.

"Very often reconciliation is needed," Father Kennedy said. "(The people returning to the Church) frequently have unresolved conflicts and pain from the separation. Sometimes a long healing process is needed."

At a grass-roots level, some parishes are now beginning to create an Order of penitents — as the process of reconciliation is currently called. Father Kennedy described one Midwestern parish that has used the RCIA as a model for a formal program of reconciliation that has helped 70 people rejoin the Church.

Most parishes are not ready for a program of this sort until an established RCIA program exists — and indeed, the need often doesn't surface until RCIA is implemented. In addition, Father Kennedy noted that the parish program he cited is an experiment, and that many such programs will have to be tried before a more standardized procedure is developed.

In a wider context, the sacrament of penance itself is just beginning to receive a new flood of attention. Theologians are already attempting to resolve a basic area of difficulty in discussing the sacrament — defining exactly what sin and penance are. Referring back to RCIA and the Rites of Initiation, Father Kennedy pointed out that one topic for discussion is the question raised by some theologians' definition of sin as a failure of membership in the community. According to this definition, one cannot sin until fully a member — that



Bonnie Traflet/Courier-Journal

In spite of ongoing debate between theologians, parents and catechists over how to determine sacramental readiness, one religious educator at last Saturday's diocesan Catechist Congress pointed out that ultimately the presence of God's grace is the essential ingredient.

is, until one has been baptized, confirmed and received first Eucharist.

Father Kennedy acknowledged that many of the ideas he presented are still in the discussion stage, and that some will not prove useful on a pastoral level. His purpose in discussing these ideas, he said, was to make congress participants aware of current directions in sacramental considerations, and to promote continued discussion and awareness.

According to a number of people who attended his sessions, he achieved his goal.

"People were stimulated," said Marilyn Smith, religious-education coordinator at Church of the Resurrection in Fairport. Smith observed, however, that some of the changes Father Kennedy mentioned would cause practical problems at the parish level. "It would be

a nightmare to have classes with varied ages," she said. "It could be done, but there would have to be a lot more material available."

Mary Wallace, religious education coordinator at Mother of Sorrows Church in Rochester, said she was familiar with many of the ideas discussed at the congress, but believed that implementing them would be difficult.

"These ideas would cause quite a controversy; change doesn't come easy." Yet, she remarked, people are not happy with the varied approaches to confirmation that already exist. "Parents hear what different parishes are doing and they're puzzled," she said. "Some even begin to shop around to find parishes that fit their ideas."

It may be years before the Diocese of Rochester... **Continued on Page 18**

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