

Church continues to debate age for confirmation

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and made mandatory in all U.S. dioceses in 1988, puts an emphasis on returning to earlier Catholic Church initiation procedures — including the conferring of baptism, confirmation and Holy Eucharist in their original order.

"Confirmation has been hard to position and identify," Bishop Hickey acknowledged. "Some would say it's still a part of baptism (and therefore should come before first Communion), but the church has changed."

Fueling the dispute is the fact that modern church law fails to set any specific age for confirmation, which — along with baptism and Holy Eucharist — makes up the Catholic Church's trio of initiation sacraments.

Canon 891 of the 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law leaves open the question of timing, saying, in part: "The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion, unless the Episcopal Conference (conference of bishops) has decided on a different age."

The episcopal conference of the United States, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, increasingly has come under pressure to make just such a decision.

In June of 1991, the NCCB's president, Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk, asked the Vatican to approve a policy — originally drawn up in 1984 — that would give each U.S. bishop the authority to determine the confirmation age for members of his own diocese.

The proposal was rejected by Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, head of the Vatican Congregation for Bishops, who said he could not approve a norm that did not specify age.

The Vatican action sent NCCB leaders back to the drawing board. If members of a single diocese could not agree about the proper age for conferring the sacrament, how much greater a task would it be to build a nationwide consensus?

That same year, the NCCB formed an ad hoc committee on confirmation, which last month mailed questionnaires to all the nation's bishops, soliciting opinions on various aspects of confirmation.

According to committee chairman Bishop Emil A. Wcela, auxiliary of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, the group plans to present an action item on the age of confirmation at the NCCB's June, 1993, meeting.

This is not the first time the NCCB has struggled to establish a uniform confirmation age. An earlier attempt failed in 1979, at which time then-NCCB president Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco noted that the bishops had been addressing the issue for a decade without success.



Symbols in the Church, ca. 1936
The dove of the Holy Ghost — with its seven flames — signifies the seven gifts conferred during the sacrament of confirmation. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit cited in Isaiah 11 are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord.

Until a national norm is established, each U.S. diocese will continue to follow its own policy. Within a given diocese, in fact, parishes may vary widely with respect to the ages of their confirmation classes.

During the past year, the Archdiocese of Chicago and the dioceses of Greensburg, Pa., and Spokane, Wash., have made policy revisions that allow children to be confirmed at 7, the age of discretion.

Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane has been a strong advocate for administering Eucharist as the final sacrament of Christian initiation.

"Most important, the Eucharist is held in proper focus as the culminating 'moment' of Christian initiation ... we should carefully preserve the Eucharist as the culmination of the sacraments of initiation and of the pastoral and liturgical ministry of the bishop," Bishop Skylstad wrote in March, 1992, paper he submitted to the NCCB's ad hoc committee on confirmation.

On the other side of the spectrum is Sister Kieran Sawyer, SSND, director of the Tyme Out Youth Ministry Center near Milwaukee, Wis. She has been one of the leading U.S. champions of confirming children at a later age.

Sister Sawyer, whose center offers retreats for teenagers preparing for confirmation, argues that candidates for the sacrament must be old enough to grasp fully the commitment he or she will make.

"(Children) can't accept something as dramatic as (confirmation) at the age of 7," Sister Sawyer asserted during a telephone interview with the *Catholic*

Courier. "They're not reflective; they don't think about their thinking. By age 13 or 14, they're just starting to do that."

Father Paul R. Schnacky, pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Wayland, would agree.

He pointed out that that children at St. Joseph's are confirmed in 10th grade — two years later than was the norm when he arrived at the parish in 1979.

Father Schnacky, a member of the diocesan Priests' Council, said he will take a strong stand on the issue when that body begins to address the subject this fall.

"I would fight tooth and nail (to keep the age older)," he declared. "Others might be liturgically correct, but

psychologically and pastorally, I think I'm right."

Sister Sawyer and Father Schnacky both noted withholding confirmation until a later age can also serve as a means of keeping adolescents more involved in the church.

The 1991 book *The Christian Initiation of Children* puts that sentiment in sharper terms.

"For a large portion of young people (confirmation) will be a sacrament of exit from the church," charged authors Robert D. Duggan and Maureen A. Kelly.

The potential for newly confirmed youths to fall away from the church is the reason Patricia Lawlor, consultant to the Finger Lakes Office of Religious Education, believes the real criterion for confirmation is not age but the support others can offer to enhance the sacrament.

"Does the community reach out to continue to form that child?" she asked. "Is there a specific age, or is it an understanding of what confirmation is all about?"

Lawlor noted that some Finger Lakes parishes prepare children for confirmation "whenever they're ready," and that the Cayuga Team Ministry Cluster permits confirmation of children anytime between fourth grade and high school graduation.

Given such a wide range of opinions, Father Schnacky acknowledged, the individual approach might be the only possible solution.

"I think (the NCCB) should just look the other way and let each (diocese) do what they feel is best," Father Schnacky said.

Bishop Hickey wouldn't be surprised if that were exactly what happened.

"They've been talking about it for 24 years and haven't been able to decide on an age. Why should now be any different?" he remarked.

Fisher establishes scholarships to honor late professor

ROCHESTER — St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Ave., has established a scholarship program and an annual award in memory of the late Dr. Boris D. Rakover, professor of mathematics.

Under the scholarship program, two \$1,000 scholarships will be awarded annually to junior and senior mathematics or computer science majors at Fisher. The scholarships will be based on financial need, academic standing and leadership activities. Candidates will be reviewed by a department committee, which will award the scholarships.

In addition to the scholarship pro-

gram, \$500 in cash and a certificate will be presented each May at the President's Dinner to a graduating senior who shows potential for future distinction in the fields of math or computer science.

Dr. Rakover was a Soviet immigrant who taught for 28 years in his native land before joining the Fisher faculty in 1981. He died in 1990.

Funding for the scholarships and awards was initiated by a \$5,000 grant from the Ames-Amzalak Charitable Trust. The college plans to solicit additional funding from other sources to continue both programs.

Therapist landed for S/D/W/R conference in Geneva

GENEVA — Dr. Bruce Fisher, a noted marriage and family therapist, will serve as one of the keynote speakers at the 16th annual New York State Region II conference for people who are separated, divorced, widowed and remarried.

The conference is scheduled for June 26-28, at Hobart and William Smith College.

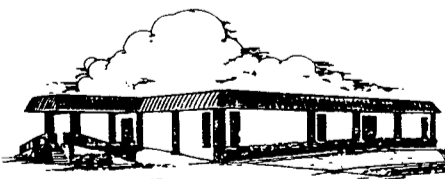
Other scheduled keynote speakers are Paddy Welles, a marriage and family therapist from Big Flats, and Father Bernard Kellogg, a former missionary to Peru.

President of the Family Relations Learning Center in Boulder, Colo., Fisher will speak on "Rebuilding After a Crisis." He is the author of *Rebuilding*, and *When Your Relationship Ends*.

The conference will include a variety of workshops on such topics as: annulments; anger and resentment; loneliness; step parenting; blended families; healing the memories; and trust and risk.

For information about cost and accommodations, write Paul Shumway, 4227 Route 96 South, Waterloo, N.Y., 13165, or call 315/585-6034.

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