EMPOWERED BY THE SPIRIT

A Pastoral Letter on the Age of Confirmation in the Diocese of Evansville

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the final words spoken by our Lord before he ascended into Heaven, the Church is instructed, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."[1] In His Great Commission, Christ reveals the purpose and destiny of the Church. So that His apostles would be prepared for this all-important mission, Jesus told them to remain in Jerusalem and to await the "promise of the Father," the Holy Spirit.[2]

This promise was made manifest for the apostles on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon them in signs of a driving wind and tongues of fire. Empowered by the Spirit, the Church burst forth from the upper room and went forth into the world to boldly proclaim the gospel. The apostles would later lay hands upon the baptized to confer the same Holy Spirit, continuing the graces of the Pentecost event and strengthening and empowering the faithful for their mission to evangelize the world around them.

From the beginning, the sacrament of Confirmation has made real Christ's promise to be with us always until the end of the age. "The gift of the Holy Spirit at Confirmation makes Christ present in our very souls so that our relationship to him is intimate, interior, and experiential."[3] In our time when large numbers of people are distancing themselves from Jesus Christ and the Church, the need for the faithful to be enkindled by the Holy Spirit to be missionary disciples, to fulfill the Great Commission, is a great imperative.

The normal age for receiving Confirmation has greatly varied over the centuries in the Latin Rite of the Church, depending on local needs and circumstances (Eastern Rite churches normally confirm at the time of baptism). It was the judgment of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2001 that Confirmation "shall be conferred between the age of discretion (7) and about sixteen years of age."[4] Since then, our diocese has adopted various ages, from 8th grade to most recently confirming in or around 10th grade. However, this practice seems not to

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[1] Mt. 28:19-20 (All scriptural citations are from the *New American Bible* translation)
[2] Acts 1:4-5
[3] *Come Holy Ghost: A Pastoral Letter on the Holy Spirit*, Most Rev. Steven J. Lopes, Feb. 14, 2020
[4] USCCB decree, 2001; Cf. Code of Canon Law 891

have borne the desired spiritual fruits, and the situation of our diocese has mirrored that of many others throughout the Church in the United States.

In his general audience on October 30, 2024, Pope Francis shared how this struggle with Confirmation often presents itself: "The problem is how to ensure that the sacrament of Confirmation is not reduced, in practice, to 'last rites', that is the sacrament of 'departure' from the Church."[5] Regrettably, our situation also reflects the reality that many of our young people leave before they receive Confirmation. A study of our diocesan records shows that over 30% of our youth who are baptized as infants do not receive Confirmation once they have come of age.

For several years, many who work in catechetical ministry and serve in our parishes have shared that while sacramental preparation has its share of challenges, Confirmation preparation has been especially challenging. In addition, many of our youth who receive Confirmation in 10th grade then detach themselves from ongoing faith formation and even the practice of their faith. For those who remain, their formators are often left with insufficient time to prepare the newly confirmed to live a life of bold and faithful witness to the gospel.

In recognition of these considerations and after assessing the needs of our diocese through an extended period of prayer, observation, extensive consultation and discernment, I have decided that the normative age children will receive the sacrament of Confirmation in our Diocese will be 10 years old. In practice, this means that they will receive this sacrament in the 5th grade.

Broadly speaking, children at this age are more or less as mature as they are going to be before they enter into adolescence, yet they still retain the sense of awe and wonder so often observed in young children. Although it does not always equate to chronological age, the humility of a child-like faith is the ideal condition to receive Christ within one's self through the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that Christ said to his disciples, "Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."[6] Having the ability to recognize what is being offered through the sacrament of Confirmation and the growing sense of agency burgeoning in the youth are ideal conditions to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation with the vision that Confirmation is given as a gift to the faithful to prepare him or her for the mission to evangelize. The hearts and lives of these children are fertile ground to plant the seeds of apostolic witness. This reality has been an element of my discernment to adjust our diocesan norm.

[5] Pope Francis, General Audience, Oct. 30, 2024
[6] Mt. 18:3

Baptism is given so that we might "be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called."[7] Even considering its dynamic effects upon humanity, Baptism alone is ordinarily insufficient for our faith to reach full maturity, as "for all the baptized, both children or adults, faith must grow *after* Baptism."[8] Confirmation is not only "necessary for the completion of Baptismal grace"[9] but the moment by which the faithful are now "more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed."[10]

It can thus be said that the aim of Confirmation is two-fold: for the growing conformity of the Confirmand to the person of Christ, and for the equipping of the Christian to evangelize and carry out the Great Commission. Full initiation into the Church is to be understood not as a "choosing of one's faith for one's self," but rather as an ordinary condition for fruitfulness and ever-greater conformity to Christ in the pursuit of holiness. The essential relationship between holiness and mission was pointed out clearly by Pope Benedict XVI as he said, "My dear friends, you must be holy and you must be missionaries since we can never separate holiness from mission."[11]

We know that in our day and age, our youth face both ancient and novel threats to living and practicing their Catholic faith, many of which come through unprecedented access to technology and a culture that is, in many ways, "post-Christian." In the Western world, the average age of exposure to the dangers of pornography occurs by the age of 12.[12] By the United States national average, most children will have a cell phone by the time they turn 12.[13] A 2018 study showed the median age of a youth who disaffiliated from the Church was only 13 years old.[14] I believe there is great wisdom in engaging the gifts of the Holy Spirit by making Confirmation available to our youth at a younger age to enable them to better prepare for the temptations and storms that are part of everyone's life.

As we seek to bring about this vision, there will undoubtedly be challenges. In the process of discerning this decision, several dioceses that have moved their Confirmation age were contacted so that we could learn from their experiences. Feedback was collected from our parents, priests, catechetical leaders, youth ministers, principals, other parish leaders and diocesan directors. Some of the received comments expressed fears about problems that could

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[7] Cf. Council of Trent: DS 1514; cf. Col 1:12-14; CCC 1250
[8] CCC 1254
[9] Order of Confirmation, Introduction 1, CCC 1285
[10] LG 11, cf OC, Introduction 2, CCC 1285
[11] Pope Benedict XVI, XXIII World Youth Day, cf. *Redemptoris Missio, 90*
[12] British Board of Film Classification. (2020). *Young people, pornography & age-verification.*
[13] Richter A, Adkins V, Selkie E. *Youth Perspectives on the Recommended Age of Mobile Phone Adoption: Survey Study*. JMIR Pediatr Parent. 2022 Oct 31;5(4)
[14] *Going, Going, Gone: the Dynamics of Catholic Disaffiliation*, St. Mary's Press (2018)

emerge after making this change. I certainly recognize and understand these concerns. However, I see this initiative as an opportunity to prepare our children at a younger age for the evangelical mission that is entrusted to all the confirmed and to set them firmly on the path of spiritual growth through the graces of this sacrament.

In order to meet the needs of our people and assist parish catechetical leaders in this transition, our diocese will be adopting a multi-year rollout plan to provide sufficient time for the variety of our parish situations to achieve conformity. Over the next five years, starting in the fall of 2026, we will begin the period of transition with the aim of reaching diocesan-wide conformity to the new age by the fall academic year of 2029:

- 2025-2026: Year of Preparation—continue to confirm 16-year-olds (10th grade)
- 2026-2027: Year 1—confirm 14-16 year-olds (~9th-10th grade)
- 2027-2028: Year 2—confirm 12-14 year-olds (~7th-9th grade)
- 2028-2029: Year 3—confirm 10-12 year-olds (~5th-7th grade)
- 2029-…: Diocese-wide conformity to Confirmation age of 10 years old (5th grade)

With this transition, it is anticipated that parish catechetical programs serving children grades 6-12 will need to adjust their ministries, including the discernment of youth ministry programs for such children, in order to best serve the formation of their youth and facilitate their engagement in the evangelizing mission of the Church. It is also anticipated that even after the Confirmation age is moved to 10 years old, there will arise situations where youth who are over 10 years old will seek to receive Confirmation (e.g., baptized converts to the Catholic faith or older youth who have moved into our area from other dioceses), and parishes will need to be prepared for this ahead of time.

A holistic and comprehensive effort to form and support not just parents and their children, but all members of the community must be made at every one of our parishes if we are to see the merits of this shift realized to their fullest potential. Further communications and concrete best practices on how parishes should proceed moving forward will be communicated through the diocesan offices. Likewise, the diocesan offices will be assisting our parishes in implementing these changes.

Our Lord’s Great Commission is for every Catholic disciple, and the sacrament of Confirmation is an essential catalyst for fostering a culture of lifelong faith formation and evangelization. It is my hope and prayer that engaging children at a younger age will enable parents and parishes to help the confirmed to use the Gifts of the Holy Spirit to deepen their life of faith as they mature to become the bold missionary disciples Jesus has called us all to be.

I entrust this initiative and its implementation to Holy Mary, Mother of God, patroness of our diocese. As she was in the Upper Room on Pentecost as the Church was born, may she be with our local Church as we seek a renewal of Pentecost in our time and place through a greater use the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed in Confirmation.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Joseph M. Siegel, DD, STL
Bishop of Evansville

January 12, 2025
Feast of the Baptism of the Lord