Report
Concerning the Determination of the
Normative Age for Confirmation
in the Diocese of Stockton

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Part I: Introduction

While the sacrament of Confirmation has been celebrated at different ages in the Diocese of Stockton, canon 891 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law states:

The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops has determined another age, or there is danger of death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause suggests otherwise.

In accord with canon 891, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops decreed in 2001 “that the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Latin Rite shall be conferred between the age of discretion and about sixteen years of age, within the limits determined by the diocesan bishop and with regard for the legitimate exceptions given in canon 891.”

Under the guidance of the Most Reverend Stephen E. Blaire, Bishop of Stockton, a Task Force was established to begin the discussion of a plan to determine (1) the normative age for Confirmation in the Diocese of Stockton and (2) criteria for Confirmation. In addition to the normative age for Confirmation, the Task Force discussed ten additional issues relating to the roles of parents, sponsors, priests, and staff and the preparation process and content of catechesis.

Part II: Issues Concerning the Normative Age for Confirmation and Preparation for the Celebration of the Sacrament

ISSUE 1: NORMATIVE AGE FOR THE CELEBRATION OF CONFIRMATION

In the Diocese of Stockton, most Catholics are confirmed in junior high school. A smaller number are confirmed while in high school or as adults, usually as part of a parish’s RCIA process. In looking at Confirmation, the Task Force discussed the advantages and

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disadvantages of determining one of three ages as normative: around the age of discretion, in junior high school, or around age 16.

A. Ages 7–8 (“Restored Sequence”)

Canon 891 states that the age of discretion is normative for the celebration of Confirmation in the Latin Church.

Advantages. Because children are dependent on their parents at this age, the preparation for and celebration of Confirmation at this time presents the opportunity for greater parental involvement and family catechesis. The largest number of children would also be confirmed at this age, who, when older, could participate in their parish’s youth ministry.

The single greatest advantage for Confirmation at the age of discretion is rooted in the papal Magisterium of Pope Paul VI, when he writes of Confirmation’s celebration between Baptism and Eucharist:

> Through the sacrament of confirmation those who have been born anew in baptism receive the inexpressible Gift, the Holy Spirit himself, but whom “they are endowed . . . with special strength.” . . . Finally, confirmation is so closely linked with the holy eucharist that the faithful, after being signed by baptism and confirmation, are incorporated fully into the Body of Christ by participation in the eucharist.²

Disadvantages. Three challenges come with confirming children about the age of discretion: (1) the challenge of keeping the young people involved in religious education and youth ministry; (2) the danger of separate programs or liturgies for children in the parish’s school and religious education program; and (3) the challenge for parish leaders to trust that the Holy Spirit can truly work in children at this age and not to succumb to the urge to see Confirmation preparation as a complete course in the Catholic faith.

B. Junior High School

Advantages. The advantages of confirming youth at the ages of 13 or 14 include the continuation of religious education of the candidates and the availability of catechetical text in various languages. As junior high youth are still dependent on their parents in most areas, a large number of candidates would be confirmed.

Disadvantages. Children entering adolescence are pulled in many directions with various school and extracurricular activities. Because of a lack of personal investment for many in the preparation process, catechists have a difficult time engaging the increasingly secular-

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minded candidates. An additional challenge in keeping the newly confirmed in youth ministry.

C. Age 16

**Advantages.** High school students generally possess a more adult understanding of the Faith, which is not true for those in junior high school. Also, middle teens participating in Confirmation preparation are able to take more ownership of the process and make a commitment to live the Faith.

**Disadvantages.** Fewer youth at this age are confirmed because of the pressure of other school and extracurricular activities. To accommodate the candidates, preparation programs are generally abridged. It is recognized that parental involvement is weakest for this age group.

**ISSUE 2: THE ROLE OF PARENTS OR GUARDIANS**

The Church recognizes that parents are the first educators of their children (c. 774, §2). With the exception of Catholic adults approaching the Church for Confirmation, the involvement of parents or guardians is an important part of the preparation process for minors of all ages. Parents have a fundamental responsibility to model the Christian life for their children, especially by participating in Sunday Mass. Regardless of the normative age determined for Confirmation, parents are called to journey with their children during the preparation process and to keep informed about dates and meetings. With younger youth and children, parents will have a larger role because these candidates are dependent on them for participation at Mass and catechetical sessions.

Parents who choose to undertake the catechetical preparation of their children for Confirmation are encouraged to work with the parish Director of Religious Education (DRE) to find age-appropriate materials and resources. In addition, parents are to participate in discerning with the Pastor the child’s readiness to celebrate Confirmation.

**ISSUE 3: THE ROLE OF SPONSORS**

Canon 874 sets forth the qualifications for Godparents for Confirmation, regardless of the age of the one being confirmed. In addition to witnessing the conferral of the sacrament, sponsors should, to the extent possible, endeavor to participate in the catechetical preparation of their candidates.

**ISSUE 4: PREPARATION PROCESS AND CATECHETICAL CONTENT**

Canons 889, §2 and 890 require, for the liceity of the conferral of Confirmation, that candidates for the sacrament “be suitably instructed.” Since universal law permits anyone who “has the use of reason [and is] suitably instructed, properly disposed, and able to renew the baptismal promises” (c. 889, §2) to be confirmed, it is necessary to provide criteria for persons seeking Confirmation outside the normative age.
The following table proposes *minimum* diocesan requirements for the preparation process for five age groups, ensuring a well rounded formation in *kerygma*, *liturgia*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Junior High School</th>
<th>Elementary (Grades 4–5)</th>
<th>Primary (Grades 1–3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sunday Mass</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal interview</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expressed desire for Confirmation</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proof of Catholic Baptism or Reception</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meetings with Sponsor</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Service experience</strong></td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
<td>12 hours</td>
<td>8 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retreat Experience</strong></td>
<td>1 day</td>
<td>1 weekend</td>
<td>1 day</td>
<td>1 day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catechetical Sessions</strong> (minimum hours)</td>
<td>12 hours</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
<td>2 consecutive years of RE or Catholic school at grade level + 12 hours, or 36 hours of supervised, parish-approved sacramental preparation</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted in the table above, the minimum number of hours of catechetical content is determined by the age of the candidates. Whether candidates are prepared in a parish or home-based program, in general the following topics should be covered as part of the catechesis: the Creed (Christology and ecclesiology), sacraments (emphasis on Confirmation/gifts of Holy Spirit), Mass (Eucharist), moral decision-making, social ministry, scripture, and prayer. These topics, each important in its own right, need not and cannot be exhausted in the limited time available. It is not expected that this period of catechetical formation should function as a “graduation” from religious education.

It might also happen that elementary and primary school children seeking Confirmation have not yet celebrated First Communion, preceded by the sacrament of penance. In these cases, parents should also catechize their children in preparation for these two sacraments with an additional twelve hours of supervised parish-approved sacramental preparation in these topics.
ISSUE 5: LOCUS/PROCESS: PARISH-BASED OR HOME-BASED

Preparation for Confirmation rightly takes place in the parish, under the direction of the Pastor, and not in the context of the parish school, parish youth group, or diocesan high school.

Because universal law permits the celebration of Confirmation at the age of discretion, it falls to the Pastor to ensure that persons prepared for Confirmation outside the normal parish process meet the requirements of canon 889, §2. In these cases, the pastor and parents together will discern a child’s readiness for Confirmation. In matters of discernment, the pastor is encouraged to consult the parish director of religious education.

ISSUE 6: INTER-PAROCHIAL PREPARATION AND CELEBRATION

In some cases, it may prove useful for parishes in a given locale to collaborate in the preparation for and celebration of Confirmation.

ISSUE 7: STAFFING

While the Pastor has the ultimate responsibility in the parish to oversee the preparation of the faithful for Confirmation, it will oftentimes be prudent to delegate to one person the task of supervising the entire Confirmation program, i.e., the preparation processes for all candidates regardless of age. This one person, called the Confirmation Coordinator, should be designated by the Pastor.

ISSUE 8: CATECHIST FORMATION

Parents are the first educators of their children. Nevertheless, they work with persons trained in the art and science of catechesis and recognized by competent authority. Every parish is encouraged to have at least one certified catechist for each Confirmation process. The parish Confirmation Coordinator and all catechists must be fully initiated, practicing Catholics in good standing. In addition, they should engage in continuing formation through appropriate workshops, in-services, and journals.

ISSUE 9: RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARISH SCHOOL, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAM, YOUTH MINISTRY, RCIA

Currently, Confirmation preparation takes place in various ministry areas in a parish: adults oftentimes enter the RCIA process, youth ministry oversees teen preparation, and the parish school or religious education program does preparation of children. While these ministries should cooperate with the parish office for religious education, sacramental preparation rightly is located in the parish and is overseen by its office for religious education.

ISSUE 10: ROLE OF THE PRIESTS
Priests who hold the offices of Diocesan Bishop, Pastor, or Parochial Vicar each play a
proper role with regard to the preparation for and celebration of Confirmation. It belongs to
the diocesan Bishop to determine the normative age for Confirmation in his particular
Church as well as celebrate the sacrament personally. The Pastor designates the parish
Confirmation Coordinator and recognizes and supports the catechists working in his parish.
Under the direction of the Pastor, Parochial Vicars and other priests work with the
Confirmation Coordinator.

ISSUE 11: LITURGICAL CELEBRATION OF CONFIRMATION

The parish celebration(s) of Confirmation should be scheduled with the Bishop’s office well
in advance. When the Confirmation Guidelines and Information are sent to the Pastor, these
should be forwarded to the Parish Liturgy Coordination and Confirmation Coordinator.

Recommendations

Over the course of nearly a year, the Confirmation Task Force discussed eleven issues
concerning the determination of a normative age for the celebration of Confirmation in the
Diocese of Stockton, the preparation process and catechetical content and the roles of
parents, sponsors, priests, and others. In light of current ecclesiastical discipline and the
pastoral situation in the Diocese of Stockton, the Confirmation Task Force makes the
following recommendations concerning the preparation for and celebration of the sacrament
of Confirmation.

1. It is recommended that Confirmation be celebrated at about the age of discretion (7 or 8
years old) by the Christian faithful in the Diocese of Stockton.

Canon 891 clearly states the principle that the normative age for Confirmation in the Latin
Church *sui iuris* is “about the age of discretion.” Only as an exception does the universal law
permit conferences of bishops to determine another age.

Both the General Introduction for Christian Initiation (which includes both adults and
infants) and Paul VI’s Apostolic Constitution on Confirmation set forth clearly the
theological position that Baptism, followed by Confirmation, leads to Eucharist. The
celebration of Confirmation following the reception of First Communion skews the
theological value of the second sacrament of initiation.

2. It is recommended that diocesan criteria be established for the preparation and
celebration of Confirmation at various ages.

Regardless of the normative age of Confirmation determined by the diocesan bishop for the
Diocese of Stockton, the faithful may request the sacrament at another age. For this reason,
the Task Force believes that it is important to establish minimum criteria for this sacrament
applicable throughout the Diocese. These criteria should be appropriate to the age and
condition of the candidates for Confirmation.
3. It is recommended that youth ministry be strengthened to provide a supportive role to young people and complement their ongoing religious education.

Youth ministry, for and by young people, provides a forum for teens to come together to share their faith. Unfortunately, it is an all too common practice that youth ministry has taken on tasks of sacramental preparation and religious education. While the Christian life is always in some way catechetical, the primary goal of youth ministry isn’t to do catechesis but rather to engage youth in growing as disciples of the Lord.

To this end, youth ministry offers an opportunity to complement the sacramental preparation and continuing religious education that young people have received. Through Scripture sharing, shared prayer, issue discussions, and social activities, teens come to know Jesus the Lord and his Church.

4. It is recommended that sacramental preparation be seen as separate from (but related to) religious education.

Sacramental preparation does not exhaust religious education. By sacramental preparation is meant the proximate period of intense formation and catechesis prior to the celebration of a sacramental. Religious education, on the other hand, refers to an extended period (one’s lifetime) of formation and learning about the Catholic Faith.

For far too long, sacramental preparation and religious education have been viewed as equivalent by many of the faithful. Removing formal sacramental preparation from religious education will help the faithful understand the obligation they have to continue their Christian formation throughout their lives, while entering a sacramental preparation program when they are ready to celebrate a sacrament. At the same time, and because of the catechetical nature of sacramental preparation, this intense period of formation is not unrelated to religious education. Indeed, the relation between religious education and sacramental preparation is best organized in the parish under the direction of a degreed Director of Religious Education or certified Coordinator of Religious Education.

5. It is recommended that every Pastor appoint a Confirmation Coordinator responsible for overseeing all Confirmation processes in the parish.

Currently, a parish might have two or three separate Confirmation processes: a large junior high program, a smaller high school program, and a program for adults (probably found in the RCIA process). In many cases, these programs are operated independently. With the approval of diocesan criteria for Confirmation suited to the age and condition of the candidate, it would be beneficial to have one person appointed by the Pastor to oversee the processes and catechetical formation of all Confirmation candidates in the parish.

6. It is recommended that parishes—and, to the extent possible, deaneries—work together to share resources and personnel.
Parishes have limited resources and personnel. These resources would be stretched thin in dealing with four or five age-based Confirmation programs. Also, today’s Confirmation candidates—whether adults, youth, or children—lead busy lives that sometime make it difficult to participate completely in parish programs.

This recommendation encourages parishes to explore the possibilities of collaborating with other parishes in a cluster or deanery to share resources and make Confirmation preparation more convenient for the faithful. For example, catechetical sessions might be held in common among the parishes in a city or on different days, so that a candidate missing a session at his or her parish could attend an equivalent gathering at a neighboring parish. The same might be considered for the retreat and social service experiences.

While the preparation for and celebration of Confirmation is located properly in the parish, not every element of the formation process needs to be duplicated in every parish.

7. It is recommended that, prior to the full implementation of any new Confirmation criteria and program for the Diocese of Stockton, a clearly defined period of transition be outlined.

The normative age for the celebration of Confirmation in the Diocese of Stockton has changed twice since 1981. Before making another change in the normative age for Confirmation, or implementing diocesan criteria for Confirmation for those outside the normative age, it is important that a suitable period of time be allotted for Pastors, parish staffs, and the lay faithful to become familiar with and understand the changes to be made and the reasons for the changes.