

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

With this letter, I wish to share with you my decision to introduce a uniform age for Confirmation in the Archdiocese of Ottawa, namely when candidates for Confirmation are in the sixth grade. This policy, which supersedes the present practice in which some parishes celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation in grade two and others in grade six, will take effect with the 2009-2010 Pastoral Year.

I am taking this decision for two reasons principally: to promote unity in the celebration of the sacraments in our diocese and to resituate the ministry of the bishop in the sacraments of initiation by the bishop's presence at the celebration of Confirmation.

In returning to a later age for Confirmation, I do not want to lose what was gained by the change in practice in recent years; namely, the emphasis put on Confirmation as part of Christian initiation of which the Eucharist is the summit, and the essential role played by the parish community in the preparation and celebration of the sacraments.

You see, we face in the Church a difference of perspective concerning the role of Confirmation in the process of initiation. Some voices in the Church espouse the restoration of a closer link between Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist (Confirmation at an earlier age). This is the case in our neighbouring diocese of Alexandria-Cornwall. Other voices advocate retention of a long-standing custom of Confirmation at a later age (Confirmation at the end of elementary school, in junior high school). This is the practice in all the other dioceses in Ontario. In either case, sharing the faith with the children and their families at the time of sacramental initiation is crucial.

Upon my arrival in 2007, I wanted to be present to our parish communities in the celebration of the sacraments. As had been my practise elsewhere, I intended to offer a service as the ordinary minister of Confirmation. For practical reasons, I was able to do so mainly in our francophone parishes starting in the fall of 2007.

With experience, I have learned that there are special difficulties with the mixed-age policy, especially when parents worship at a parish which has one practice but their children attend a school associated with a parish that has a different practice. Parents who are aware of a difference of practice in surrounding parishes sometimes find themselves conflicted when their preference regarding the age at which they feel their children should be confirmed is not that of their parish.

One effect of this decision will be to underline the role of the bishop as the ordinary minister of Confirmation. It will also take some pressure off our school teachers, parish catechists and families who have been faced with the challenge of preparing children for three sacraments within a short time frame. As well, it will allow us time to help teachers draw out of the children's experience the fruits of contact with the Lord—initially in First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion and their later encounter with the Lord's Spirit in Confirmation—what is known as the mystagogical dimension of the sacraments. Ideally, grasping the significances of these graces would also be shared with the parents of our children. Finally, it will allow our parishes and Catholic schools to work more closely together in preparing our children for Confirmation.

Clearly, at this time, there is a need to strengthen the bonds among the three pillars of our faith community: the home, the school and the parish. Our schools have a key role in developing remote preparation for sacraments, whereas our parishes have the task of developing the proximate preparation of parents and children for celebrations of sacraments in the parish. Home and school both need to draw all more closely into the parish's evangelizing mission.

Before closing, I want to thank the many people who were engaged in the process of consultation which led to this decision. In particular, I acknowledge the contribution of the members of the Council of Priests, the pastors who took a particular interest in this question and our Catholic educators who have shared with me and my advisors the accomplishments they realized and the difficulties they faced in recent years in sacramental preparation.

My episcopal vicars and I look forward to working closely with our parish priests and their catechists as well as with the educators in our schools in carrying out this policy.

Please pray through the intercession of Our Lady that our forthcoming harmony of practice may foster a greater unity of minds, hearts and spirits to God's greater glory and the good of souls.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Terrence Prendergast, S.J.
Archbishop of Ottawa