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Confirmation: A Sacrament in Search of Meaning

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Confirmation: a sacrament in search of meaning

"Confirmation became associated with high-school graduation," says one priest, "and unfortunately kids saw it as graduation from the church rather than deeper initiation into the church."

Kathleen Cahalan

"Um, I don't remember," says 34-year-old Joan Lester.

Seventeen-year-old Michael Conroy says, "We had to go to church for six weeks before the Mass and learn about different stuff. Then, at the Mass this guy came who I didn't know and touched our heads. That was it."

"We had booklets with different Bible stories and different situations that you were supposed to decide about," says Cathy Walz, youth minister and mother of four. "One I remember was a story about being lost in the woods with a baby. All you had with you was a can of chicken noodle soup. It is getting later and darker and you can't find your way out. What should you do? Most of us said, feed the baby the chicken noodle soup. But the correct answer was to baptize the baby with the soup in case you both died so the baby could be saved. That was our Confirmation program."

"We had stories that our mom and dad read to us; and when we went to church, we were blessed and ate the bread like everyone else," says Melissa, age 7.

"Is that the one where you get slapped?" asks 25-year-old Ed Lawry.

"Our Confirmation program was great. We went to a soup kitchen in the city and helped elderly people in the parish. We even got to help make Christmas baskets for a neighboring parish. It was a lot of fun; that's what I remember," says Nicky Bolton.

When people are asked what the

preparation and ritual of Confirmation meant to them, few can recall their experience or the meaning of the sacrament. Is it receiving the Holy Spirit or the gifts of the Spirit? Is it when you become a Catholic or a full member of the Catholic Church? Or does it mark the change from childhood to adulthood?

Much confusion about Confirmation persists today. Diocesan guidelines vary widely as to what age Confirmation should take place, and there is no single practice among parishes or mandate by the church regarding the sacrament of Confirmation.

In the United States, Confirmation programs can be found at the first-grade level up to senior year in high school and may emphasize completion of initiation into the church, strength necessary for adulthood, or making an adult commitment to the Christian faith.

Religious educators, pastors, and diocesan administrators must face two crucial questions: when should Catholics confirm, and what does Confirmation mean today to Catholics?

The Vatican's 1971 "Decree on Confirmation" stated that the age of Confirmation could be left up to each individual bishop, and in 1972 the U.S. Catholic bishops set the age at early adolescence. Confirmation around the ages of 10 to 12 became the dominant practice in the U.S. At the same time, however, religious educators were becoming familiar with

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), which was formed after Vatican II called for a revision of the sacraments along the lines of biblical and early church practices and theology.

Age is a factor

The RCIA, presented in 1972, retrieved and restored the early Christian community's process of initiation, which meant that Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist were to be received in the same ceremony. The yearlong RCIA program, which cul-



minates in the Holy Saturday liturgy, mirrors the process of the adult initiation of early Christians. According to RCIA, the meaning of the sacraments of initiation are to bring a person into full church membership.

Early Christians became full members when they made an adult commitment to the faith. Religious educators began to recognize the difficulty of explaining to 11- or 12-year-olds what it means to confirm baptismal vows and dedicate oneself to the Christian Church.

Some people argued that Confirmation was not effective for this age and should be received later in teen years when participants could more easily understand their own faith and the faith of the church. High schools developed Confirmation programs, and many dioceses set down guidelines that only persons 16 years and older could be confirmed.

"My parish started a teen Confirmation program, and it was a wonderful experience for me," says Rick Moldow. "I was really lost as a teenager and didn't connect with people well. My parents forced me to go to the program, but that program opened up a whole new world for me.

"It made me think about what being

a Christian is all about and what promises are. The decision was left up to us about whether we wanted to take this next step in our faith. It was the first time I thought about whether I wanted to be a Christian and what my life was going to be based upon."

Kieren Sawyer, S.S.N.D., author of *Confirming Faith* (Ave Marie Press, 1982), developed one of the first high-school Confirmation programs in the early 1980s. With her book still in print, Sawyer is among the strongest advocates for confirming adolescents in high school.

"I see Confirmation in the totality of initiation. Initiation is that process by which a person comes into mature faith. What is happening in the church today is that RCIA is defining what initiation is, and I agree with that if we are talking about adults. However, when we begin to talk about initiation beginning with infancy, that is a different process.

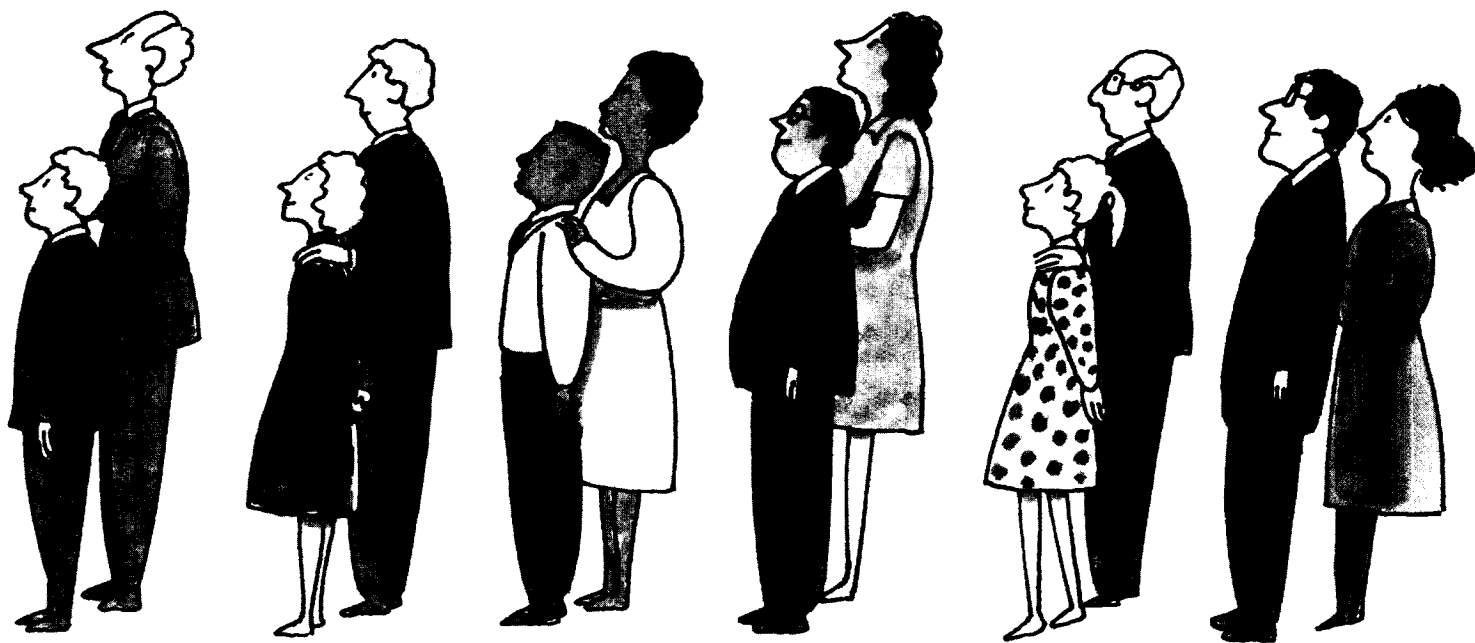
"Infant baptism sets up a different paradigm. The Rite of Baptism for Children was written for persons who are not yet capable of mature faith. The RCIA was written for adults who are being initiated into the community as full members, and the theology and practice fits what adults need."

The Rite of Baptism for Children states that infants who are baptized must be formed in the faith, and this formation is the primary responsibility of the parents and the community. "It is our responsibility to bring these persons to the point where they can, as the rite says, 'accept for themselves the faith in which they have been baptized,'" argues Sawyer.

Sawyer sees Confirmation as the necessary concomitant to infant baptism because, unlike the RCIA model, infants cannot make a complete commitment to the faith. "The main point in the Rite of Baptism for Children is that infants be allowed at some point to accept for themselves the faith. That's where sacramental Confirmation fits.

"I think we can learn important things from the RCIA for initiating children," says Sawyer. "The sacraments should fit into the life of the person and the process of initiation into the Christian community should be ritualized. But when we try to ritualize the faith of the infant using the ritual of the adult, that is a problem."

Sawyer's Confirmation program stresses that Confirmation assists the transition into adult faith rather than stressing the idea of "commitment to



the faith." She says, "It develops experiences of faith based upon both the individual and the community. And if the kids understand that the transition into a more mature and deeper faith is a lifelong process, then Confirmation can be seen as the beginning and not the end of religious education."

This model of Confirmation in the late teen years with an emphasis on adult faith has shaped many Confirmation programs in the U.S. Many programs of this kind have been successful, but many have failed.

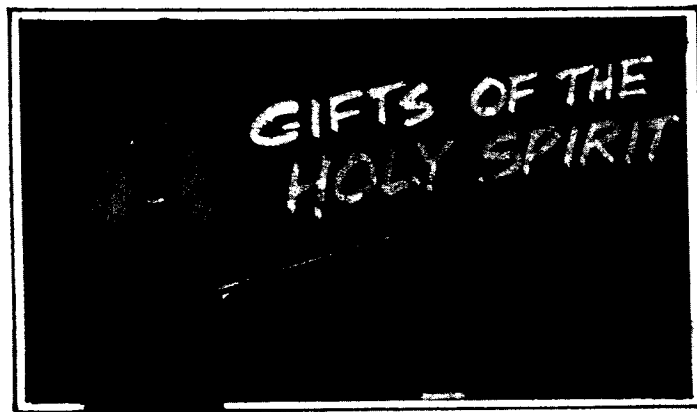
"I argued with my daughter every Wednesday evening about going to Confirmation class," says Rosalind Ferry. "She was 16 years old, a good student, played volleyball and softball, and was involved in the theater. When it came to one more activity to be involved in, she just refused. I wanted her to see that church involvement was just as important as these other activities, but it was useless. Going to church for a 16-year-old girl is not quite the same as everything else she can do. I battled with her all year.

"When my next child came up for the program," adds Ferry. "I didn't have the energy to put up a fight and force him to go. He probably attended half the sessions. In the end, I don't think either had a good experience."

Many teen Confirmation programs have broken down because of conflicts between teens, parents, and parish staffs. Practical issues are the main source of failure: teens are involved in school activities and often work; parents feel their children have to receive the sacrament and pressure them to attend a program; parish staffs often use Confirmation programs as a way to keep teens involved in the church.

Why wait?

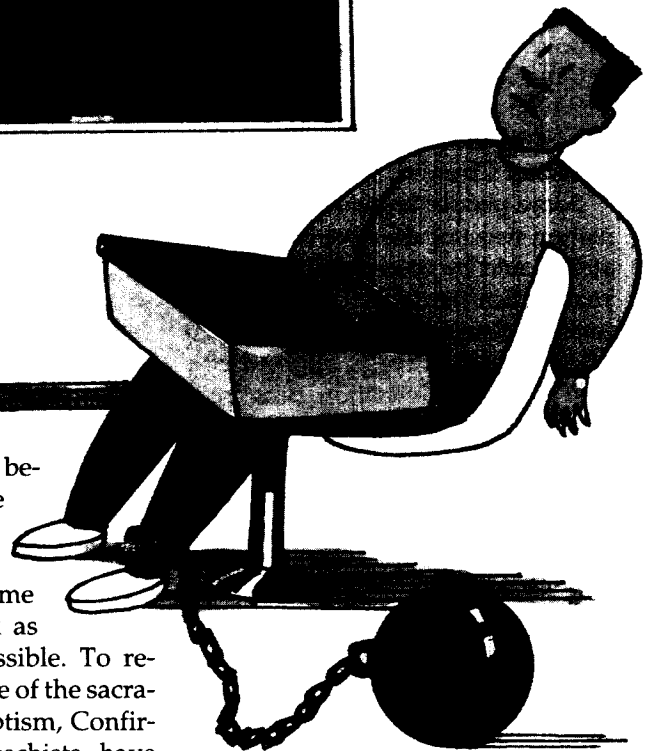
As more people were disgruntled with their teen Confirmation programs, they began looking to RCIA as a model for the preparation of the sacraments.



Religious educators began to argue that the sacraments of initiation should not be spread over a long period of time but should be received as closely together as possible. To restore the initial sequence of the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist) catechists have started to develop programs in which Confirmation and Eucharist are received together at about the age of 7.

Terri Monaghan McKenzie of St. Peter's Church in Spokane, Washington was among the first to develop a combined Confirmation and Eucharist program for children. "We began looking at the process of Confirmation about nine years ago," says McKenzie. "We found ourselves with a situation that wasn't working. We were confirming eighth graders but the program had turned into a constant battle between the kids and the teachers. We found that there was no connection between their lived experience and what we were celebrating in the sacrament. The kids were not responsive to the sacrament and parents were struggling to get them there.

McKenzie's parish began a year-long task force to look at the issue of Confirmation; and, she says, after studying the theology and history of



the sacrament and the psychosocial development of children, they decided to move the sacrament back to a younger age. "Children's moral development is shaped by the time they are 10 years old, so we decided it would be important to shape their sense of morality and give their parent's an opportunity to guide their moral development before it was set solidly in their minds.

"It was a difficult decision," adds McKenzie, "because we didn't know of anybody else in the U.S. who was confirming before First Communion or at the First Communion liturgy. The first thing we did was educate the parish because changing Confirmation turned out to be a highly emotional issue. We now celebrate Confirmation and Eucharist in the same ceremony, but the emphasis is less on Communion and Confirmation than on celebrating full initiation into the Catholic community."

McKenzie has assisted other parishes in shifting Confirmation from high school to early grade school. Msgr. James Comiskey of the Cathedral of Christ the King in Lubbock, Texas began a high-school Confirmation program for teens but soon met with resistance and anger. "We ended up making both the kids and parents mad at us," says Comiskey. "High-school kids are the busiest people I've ever known. The staff was angry, too, because every time they tried to schedule something, it conflicted with prom, homecoming, or some other school activity. Confirmation at high school became associated with high-school graduation, and unfortunately kids saw it as graduation from the church rather than deeper initiation into the church."

McKenzie shared her program "Becoming Church" with Comiskey's parish; and with permission from the bishop, Comiskey started a pilot program in 1989. "Our goal in adopting this program had been to restore the sequence of the sacraments of initiation that had been the practice of the church for centuries: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. We wanted to prepare third graders for Confirmation and Eucharist at their level of understanding. They are at a wonderful age. They still trust, and they still can take delight in the various actions and ceremonies built into the program."

There has been a flurry of response to early Confirmation programs. Those who have had successful high-school programs built upon an understanding of commitment to the faith cannot see how a 7-year-old child can make such a commitment. Those who have met with failure in high-school programs are open to the notion of Confirmation at an earlier age.

Kate Ristow, a nationally known speaker and author on religious education, has argued that Confirmation and Eucharist in second grade is still not the original practice of the church. "Confirmation should either be returned to Baptism and infancy, or it should be a sacrament for late teens or young adults. I see no reason for confirming children at First Communion.

No one would understand that—kids or parents. Each sacrament deserves its own separate, concentrated preparation.

"By confirming in the upper high-school grades, we are allowing kids to make a commitment to the promises their family and community made to God. The person can say I will speak for myself now. I don't think a 7-year-old can do that.

"Confirmation isn't magic," adds Ristow. "It is one of the many transitions that are part of a young person's life. It marks your awareness that this is the lifestyle you have chosen and will continue to grow into. A good Confirmation program should not involve intensive catechesis—that should have been done beforehand—but more reflection and a large variety of service opportunities so that the young people can begin to put their faith into action."

One of the criticisms of confirming young children is that teens are left with nothing: no ritual to celebrate their place in life and the transitions that they are experiencing. McKenzie's parish has responded to that problem by developing a high-school program for teens that is voluntary.

"We have developed a program for teens on what it means to be Catholic," explains McKenzie. "We didn't have to make this fit into a sacrament.

"My own personal bias is that the church has maintained Confirmation as an adolescent sacrament because we are afraid to change," says McKenzie. "We don't know what else to do with these kids, and many people are scared of teens. We don't have much control over them; so Confirmation becomes a hook, a way of keeping them in the church."

Comiskey's parish also started a voluntary high-school program: "We have developed a program for teens that emphasizes living their faith," says Comiskey.

"It is also important to celebrate the ritual of coming of age," explains Comiskey, "so our parish staff is developing a program for people in their late high-school or early college years to make public their commitment to Christ through the Roman Catholic

Church. It will present our young people with an opportunity to celebrate a public acceptance of faith in Jesus Christ. All of us will celebrate with them our call to live out the sacraments of initiation as we continue our faith journey."

But Sawyer questions the difference between these teen programs and a high-school Confirmation program. She is opposed to the present movement to restore the order of the initiation sacraments and confirm children at their First Communion.

"I see no reason for confirming 7-year-olds," says Sawyer. "A 13-year-old is barely beginning to make that transition into adult faith. Many people who are confirming at an earlier age still recognize that teens need something that replaces what Confirmation has been doing. But I always ask, 'What are you adding to an 7-year-old's experience? When you are confirming a 7-year-old, what are you confirming?'"

What'd they do before?

The history of the sacrament of Confirmation sheds some light upon the split over the practice and meaning of Confirmation. Confirmation as a separate ritual from Baptism did not exist before the year 200, and it was not recognized as one of the seven sacraments until the Middle Ages.

In the early Christian community, Baptism was the primary sacrament of initiation. The baptismal ritual consisted of three parts: Baptism in water, anointing with oil, and a eucharistic celebration. The way this rite was celebrated varied greatly among the churches in the East and West; however, the meaning of the rite was clear: through this ritual a person received the gift of the Holy Spirit and thus became a member of the believing community of Christians.

It is interesting to note that Christian theologians did not debate whether the rite should be uniform among all the churches. They were primarily concerned with determining at what point in the ceremony the person received the Holy Spirit: through washing with water or sign-

ing with oil or by the imposition of the hands. The early church leaders were not concerned with the appropriate age to receive these sacraments, either, because most people converted to Christianity as adults.

The role of the bishop in the baptismal ceremony was the linchpin for the development of the sacrament of Confirmation. The presence of the bishop at the initiation ceremony was a symbol of both the local community and the universal church. The power of the bishop to confer the Holy Spirit was connected to his direct relationship with the apostles. Because the apostles granted the Holy Spirit to converts in the New Testament, it was understood that only those who were directly in line with the apostles could continue this practice.

Due to the growth of Christianity in the third and fourth centuries it was not always possible for a bishop to be present at every initiation ceremony. In the East a priest could stand in place of the bishop because the bishop was represented by the oil that he had consecrated.

In the West some churches adopted this practice;

however, in other churches, including the church in Rome, priests were allowed to baptize and distribute the Eucharist; but the anointing was reserved for the bishop and thus delayed until a bishop could be present.

Episcopal practices of anointing changed further with the soaring numbers of people requesting entrance into the church once Christianity was accepted by the Roman Empire under Constantine in 313 and gained official status under Theodosius in 380.

In addition, missionaries began to travel northward into Europe and convert Germanic tribes. Large numbers of converts were baptized, but they did not receive the episcopal blessing if no bishop were present.

During this period of rapid growth in the spread of Christianity, Saint Augustine provided a theological argument for infant Baptism based upon

his understanding of original sin. Because Baptism was necessary to remove original sin from the

soul, he argued, infants should be baptized as soon as possible after birth. Therefore, infant Baptism became the universal practice of the church after the fifth century.

The church soon advised bishops to make the rounds in the countryside and complete the baptismal initiation by confirming children. People, however, were reluctant to leave their work and travel when a bishop was in the area just to receive his blessing.

Moreover, the anointing was often haphazard and lacked any deep meaning. It was not uncommon for the bishop to ride through town on a horse and confirm the children as parents held them up to receive the anointing. To encourage people to bring their children for Confirmation, Christian writers of the time used the argument set forth by Bishop Faustus of Riez in 460: Confirmation was necessary for additional strength needed to fight against sin and the devil in adulthood.

By the thirteenth century, the practice of Confirmation had become widespread and was considered a sacrament separate from Baptism with its own ritual and theology. In 1274 at the Second Council of Lyons, Confirmation was named a sacrament in the list of seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. The council's justification was that Confirmation was the gift of the Holy Spirit given for strength and could only be administered by the bishop who represented the universal church.

The catechism published by the Council of Trent in 1566 did not introduce a new understanding of Confirmation, but it determined that the sacrament should be received sometime after the age of 7 (because a child younger than 7 could not understand or remember the ceremony) but before the age of 12. The only other change introduced after Trent and before Vatican II (1962-1965) was the designation of the order in which the sacraments should be received.

Because of Pope Pius X's goal to encourage the reception of the Eu-



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charist on a more regular basis, he declared in 1910 that Communion should be received prior to Confirmation. That practice became the norm in the 20th century, and Confirmation came to be understood as the sacrament that prepared young people for an active Christian life as "soldiers of Christ."

When Vatican II called for a revision of the initiation rituals for children, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship published the "Decree on Confirmation." While the decree stresses more clearly the unity of the three sacraments of initiation, it also emphasizes the medieval understanding of Confirmation as granting a "special strength."

The decree states: "The faithful are born anew by baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation, and finally are sustained by the food of eternal life in the eucharist. By means of these sacraments of initiation, they thus receive in increasing measure the treasures of divine life and advance toward the perfection of charity."

But while the church sought to restore the original intention and meaning of the sacrament, it did not say in its decree that the sacraments of initiation were bound to a certain age: "... the administration of Confirmation is generally postponed until about the seventh year. For pastoral reasons, however, ... episcopal conferences may choose an age which seems more appropriate, so that the sacrament is given at a more mature age after appropriate formation."

Confirmation rated PG

The question is whether we need uniformity in the practice of the sacrament of Confirmation. It seems possible, based on its history, to accept that Confirmation could be practiced in different ways in different places in response to the needs of the local community.

One point in the Confirmation debate that is clear and consistent among catechists, who may disagree about everything else, is that parental involvement is key. "The ideal situ-

ation," says Ristow, "is that the family truly lives the faith, and Mass is not an obligation but a real cause of community. Parents have to be involved for any sacrament to make sense."

Parents' attitudes are very important, says Ristow. "Parents always say they want their children to have good experiences, but so often they gripe about parent meetings. If parents act as though attending meetings to update their faith and learn about sacramental preparation is a terrible waste of time, what message are they sending their children? We are always saying that parents are the primary educators, but I'm not sure parents believe that."

Asking parents to be involved in sacramental preparation often requires that they be updated about the church's teaching on the sacraments. After several decades of changes in the church, this can either leave people feeling in a state of flux or lead to a deeper appreciation of the church's rituals and faith.

Peggy Swanson, who had three daughters confirmed in three years, says, "The exciting thing about Confirmation for me has been being a mentor. I go to each of the sessions, and it has been a source of renewal for me. I have come to a better understanding of the changes in the church, and it has made my faith more real to me. Being aware of what they are learning in Confirmation class has allowed me to pull that material into their life experiences and the things they are faced with on a daily basis.

"In seventh or eighth grade, they are long past the age where you do homework with them," she explains. "But Confirmation preparation allows me to sit down with them again and go over their lessons. They might come to me when they are stuck on a problem or question, and it allows us an opportunity to discuss something about the Catholic faith."

The junior-high Confirmation program that the Swanson girls attend is built around reflecting on scripture. This task has led to an interesting development for the family. "The girls are required each Sunday to reflect

upon the scripture readings," explains Swanson. "It is not easy for them to express what the gospel means, but it has caused them to listen to the homily. Now the whole family discusses the homily after the liturgy. The girls are more interested in how the homilist interprets the scripture and if their understanding was similar to his."

The Confirmation programs developed by Sawyer and McKenzie are also centered around parental involvement. For high-school students Sawyer does not just emphasize the parents of the teen but all the parents together as the adult members of the community.

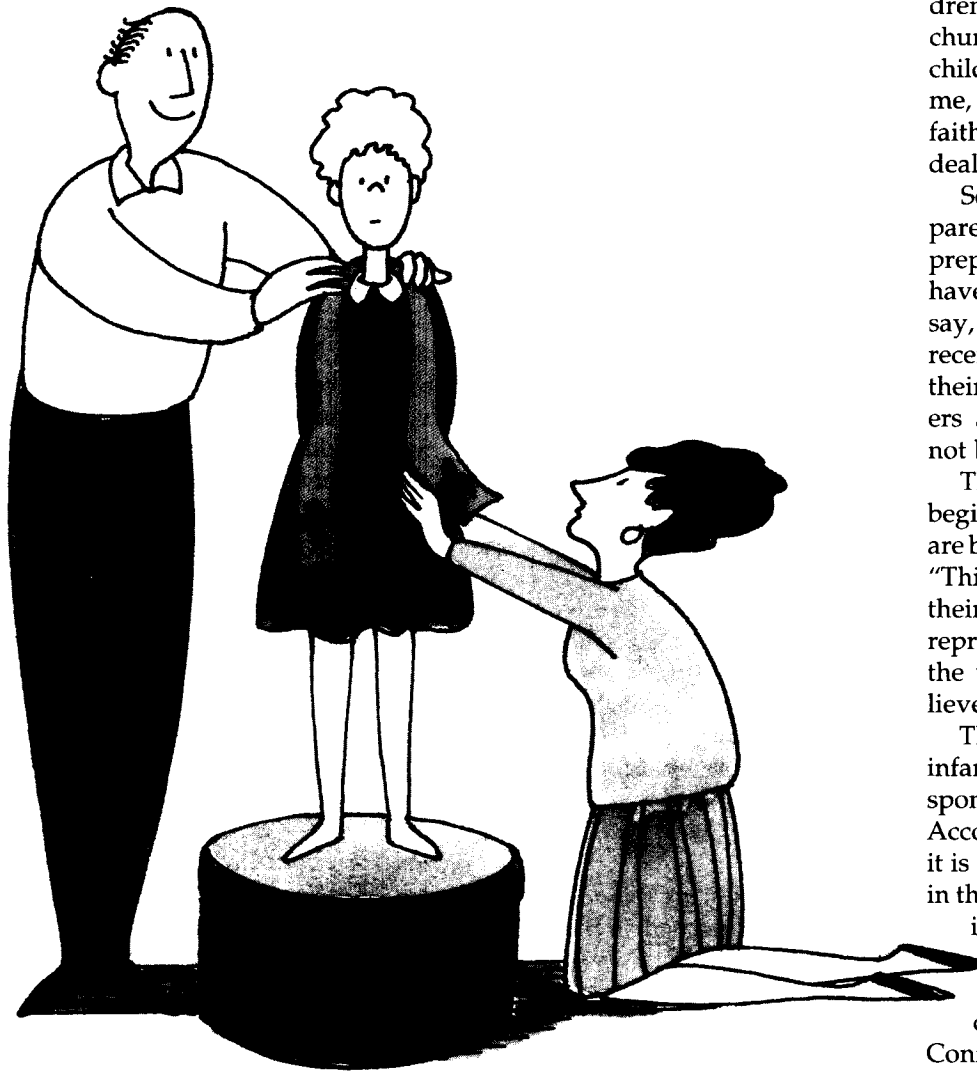
"When you confirm kids in their teen years," says Sawyer, "their faith community has expanded beyond their mother and father. The parents and the community must be involved in the entire confirmation program so that teens see that faith is alive within the community.

"The goal of our program is to allow opportunities and experiences for adults and teens to share their faith experiences so that teens can begin to make that transition into adult faith," she says. "All the parents I've worked with feel uncomfortable talking about religious beliefs and faith with their kids, but I can create an opportunity for them to exchange ideas and experiences.

"We all have some sense of God in our hearts," adds Sawyer, "but we often don't share it. We love to be asked questions about what is important to us, what we value, and what we believe. If we have the tools, we can do it."

Sawyer says that there are many ways to involve the whole community. For example, teens can be paired up with elderly persons or families in the parish who sponsor and pray for them. "It is also important to introduce the candidates to the entire community at a liturgy," insists Sawyer. "Then the whole community sees who is being confirmed and shares in praying for them."

Sawyer says having adults attend Confirmation-preparation sessions is also important. "In my program, I



like one adult for every six teens," she says. "But I encourage them to invite any adult they like—a neighbor or teacher—so that I have a group of adults who regularly come and a group of guests. This gets the whole community involved in the faith dialogue."

The Confirmation/Eucharist program at St. Peter's Church in Spokane is also built upon parental involvement. Not only are parents required to participate in the program but the decision on when the child is ready to receive the sacraments is left to the parents.

"We pulled sacramental preparation out of the classroom and put the decision on the parents because parents know their children and know when they are ready and when they can make the choice," explains McKenzie. "We have some second graders, some third graders; but some parents

wait until the child is in fifth grade. I've even had parents start their child in the program but then decide the child is not ready and postpone it until the next year."

Joint effort works best

McKenzie says that her parish's decision to confirm at a younger age has also made it easier to get students and parents working together. "We've found wonderful ways to involve the parents at this age level, which we could not do with adolescents. Young children are more willing to talk to their parents about things that are important to them. And parents often want to talk with their children about religion and faith but don't know how.

"In working with younger children, we found that we could provide an avenue for parents and chil-

dren to talk about belonging to the church. Parents could say to their children, 'This is what is important to me, and I want you to be a part of this faith.' Of course, parents learn a great deal through this process also."

Some worry that requiring that parents be actively involved in the preparation of the sacrament could have its drawbacks. Perhaps, some say, a few children would end up not receiving the sacrament because of their parents lack of interest. But others argue that that situation might not be so bad.

The Rite of Baptism for Children begins by emphasizing that infants are baptized in the faith of the church: "This faith is proclaimed for them by their parents and godparents, who represent both the local church and the whole society of saints and believers."

Thus, any parent who baptizes an infant in the church accepts the responsibility of developing that faith. According to the rite, "After baptism it is the responsibility of the parents, in their gratitude to God and in fidelity to the duty they have undertaken, to enable the child to know God, whose adopted child it has become, to receive Confirmation, and to participate in the holy eucharist."

"The Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation" reiterated this same idea: "The initiation of children into the sacramental life is for the most part the responsibility and concern of the Christian parents."

Based upon this teaching, parents, out of a sense of love, are obligated to continue enriching and guiding the faith development of their children. In fact, many would argue that parental involvement is more crucial in sacramental preparation than the age of child.

A solid program for children, junior-high students, or teens may all be equally effective if the program is geared to the level of the participants and is based on parental involvement; but the discussion of faith between child and parent seems most likely to determine whether the faith of the child will continue to grow. □