



SAINTS AMONG US

The Restored Order of the Sacraments of Initiation

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM **ARCHBISHOP SAMUEL J. AQUILA**

OVERVIEW

This pastoral letter is divided into three parts:

- I. The Sacraments of Initiation
- II. The School of the Family
- III. Restoring the Order

Together, these sections will walk the reader through the theology of the Sacraments of Initiation, the role of parents in handing on the faith, and finally, how returning these three sacraments to their original order will help respond to the spiritual needs of our time and foster a culture of ongoing conversion.

Introduction

A brief explanation of the reason for making more grace available at an earlier age (4)

I. The Sacraments of Initiation

A look at how the three Sacraments of Initiation are oriented toward encountering Jesus in the Eucharist and a short history of how the Church has celebrated Confirmation (7)

II. The School of the Family

A teaching on how the family serves as a “domestic church” and the blessings that parents and children experience in this community of love and life (12)

III. Restoring the Order

An explanation of the practical steps that will be taken to restore Confirmation to its original place, insights into how this answers the spiritual problems of our time, and a reflection on how the change presents an opportunity to focus on authentic discipleship (15)



Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

On October 4th, 2014 our country experienced a historic event – the first beatification on American soil. The woman who was declared “Blessed” was Sister Miriam Teresa Demjanovich of the Sisters of Charity of St. Elizabeth.

Sister Miriam Teresa was born in Bayonne, New Jersey in 1901 to Slovakian immigrants. From all outward appearances, her upbringing as the youngest of seven children against the backdrop of New Jersey’s oil refineries was unremarkable.

But God was at work in her heart and in her family to make her holy, and to change the world.

Blessed Miriam Teresa believed that the “imitation of Christ in the lives of the saints is always possible and compatible with every state of life.” Saint John Paul II also emphasized this repeatedly, echoing the Second Vatican Council’s universal call to holiness.¹

Parents and children today face many challenges that Sr. Miriam Teresa would not have known. And God still desires to draw each of us close to him and make us saints – ordinary people who love God with all their hearts and are willing to follow him wherever he leads.

Since I have been charged by Christ with guiding each of you on your journey to heaven, I am writing this letter to explain one of the ways I want to help you with that voyage.

The world needs saints. Even as our society becomes more distant from faith and more forgetful of God, it still hungers for joyful witnesses who have been transformed by Christ. At the same time, new generations of Catholics need grace to sustain them in a non-Christian environment.

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To answer these needs, I have decided to restore the Sacraments of Initiation to their original order, that is, Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. This will make available every sacramental grace the Church has to offer to children who have reached the age of reason.

When I was Bishop of Fargo, I restored Confirmation to its original place in 2002 by issuing the pastoral letter *Send Forth Your Spirit*. I was convinced of the theological and pastoral reasons for doing this, but I was further convinced by hearing from parents and children about the effects of the graces they received.

Grace, the Catechism teaches us, is the free gift that “God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.”²

Many people today live as if God does not exist, or if he does, then only as a remote ruler who rarely intervenes in human affairs. Instead of seeking God’s grace and an intimate relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our society turns to technology, science, and self-reliance to solve its problems.

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This is what restoring the sacraments of Christian initiation to their original order is all about. The ancient order begins with life in Christ through Baptism. This is followed by Confirmation, which perfects the grace of Baptism, fills us with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, prepares us to receive Jesus in the Eucharist, and helps us commit ourselves to be his lifelong disciples.

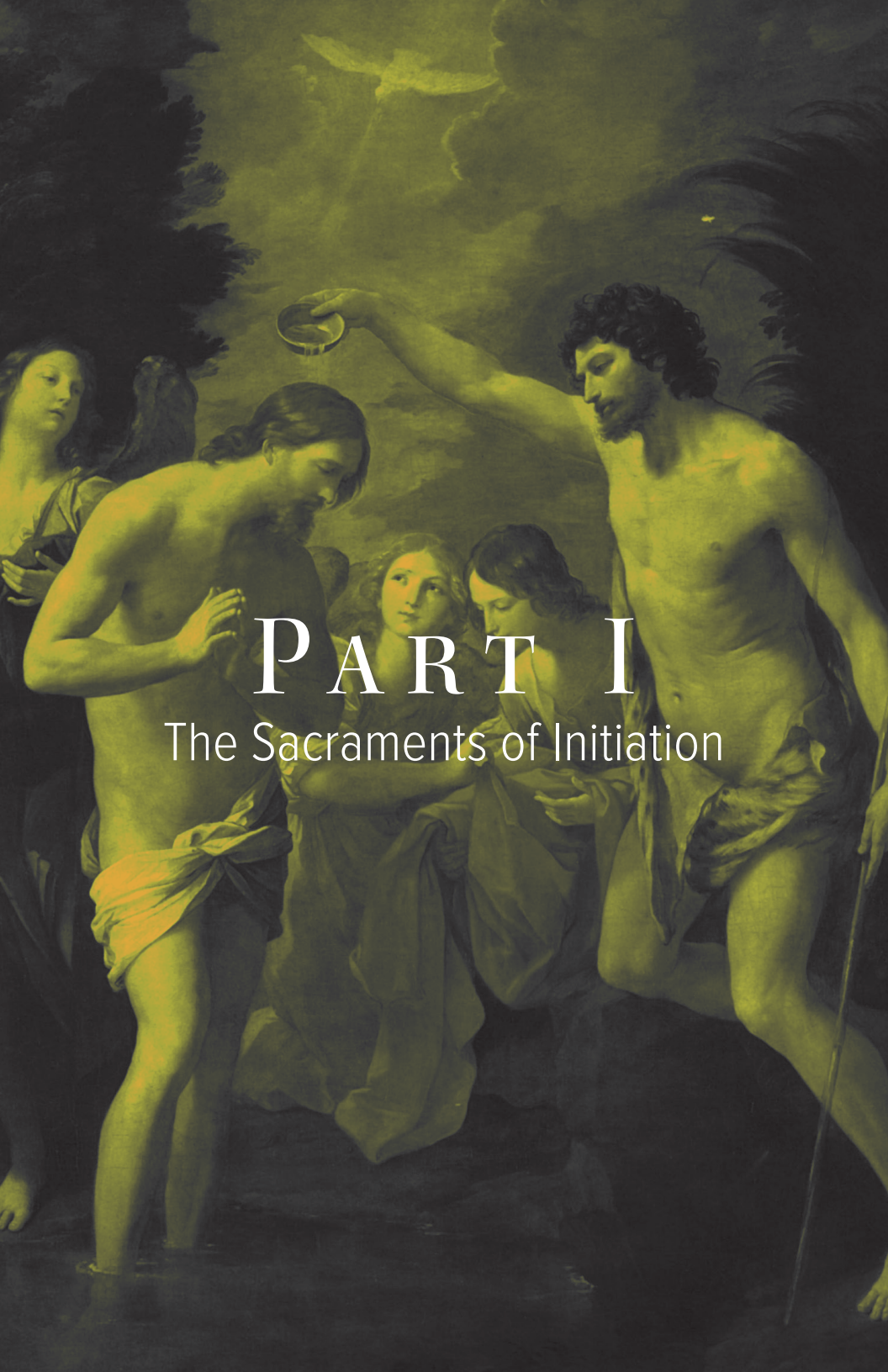
As the Catechism explains, “The holy Eucharist completes Christian initiation. Those who have been raised to the dignity of the royal priesthood by Baptism and configured more deeply to Christ by Confirmation participate with the whole community in the Lord’s own sacrifice by means of the Eucharist.”³

It also beautifully teaches that the other sacraments “are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself...”⁴

Blessed Miriam Teresa was baptized, confirmed and given her First Eucharist when she was five years old. She only lived to be 26, but in that short time, her love for Jesus transformed her and impacted the lives of many.

The strength of her desire for holiness comes through clearly in one of the spiritual conferences she wrote for her fellow sisters. “The saints did but one thing – the will of God. But they did it with all their might.”⁵

The Archdiocese of Denver, and the Church as a whole, need more Catholics who are on fire with their faith. We need more disciples of Christ who love God with “all their might.” For this reason, I am restoring Confirmation to its original place.



PART I

The Sacraments of Initiation

The three sacraments of Christian initiation play an important role in helping all of us become authentic disciples, men and women who are willing to follow Christ and take risks for the kingdom.

In this section I will explain how these three sacraments of initiation are oriented toward encountering Jesus in the Eucharist. I will also recall the Church's history of celebrating Confirmation so that you are able to understand the historical context of its placement.

The Relationship of the Sacraments

Confirmation should always be seen as a sacrament of initiation that is united to Baptism and the Eucharist. Even though it is closely related to Baptism, Confirmation is more than an appendix of Baptism. It is a sacrament in its own right.⁶ In Baptism the Holy Spirit is truly given, yet in Confirmation he is given in a way that completes the graces of Baptism and imparts special strength upon the recipient.⁷

The relationship can be explained by making an analogy with salvation history: "Confirmation puts the seal on Baptism as Pentecost completes Easter."⁸

When we are baptized, original sin is washed away by our sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In rising with him, we receive our identity as sons and daughters of the Father, and become destined for heaven.

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul writes about the change that Baptism brings. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God"⁹

In Confirmation, we are strengthened in our identity by the seal of the Holy Spirit and the outpouring of his gifts. These gifts of the Holy Spirit also help us engage more deeply in worshipping the Father through

Jesus in the Eucharist. The words of the liturgy speak to us when we hear the priest pray, “Through him, with him and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, forever and ever.”

We need the gifts of the Holy Spirit, every day, every hour, every minute and every second to live a life that gives glory to the Father. The goal of the Christian life is neither mere moralism, where rules are defined and followed, nor is it an ideological system in which truths are presented for one’s assent; rather, it is a “living experience with the Lord Jesus in the grace of his Spirit.”¹⁰

History of the Age of Confirmation

The Church’s understanding and practice of the sacrament of Confirmation has developed over the centuries. To better understand our present practice, it is important to retrace our steps along the path of historical development. We see the first references to the celebration of this sacrament in the Acts of the Apostles when Peter and John pray for the Holy Spirit to descend upon the Samaritans.¹¹ Though the Samaritans were baptized, they had not yet received the Holy Spirit.

The letter to the Hebrews develops the idea that the laying on of hands is a distinct and important moment after Baptism.¹² As the early Church grew, the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation were celebrated in one continuous rite of initiation leading up to the reception of the Holy Eucharist. This can be experienced today when anyone over the age of reason (seven years old) enters the Church through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults at the Easter Vigil. This order is also present in the Eastern rites of the Church, where the faithful receive all three sacraments of initiation as infants.

After the fifth century, it became harder for a bishop to make the rounds in his diocese to baptize and confirm all at once. This obscured the intrinsic connection between Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist. Infants were baptized and given Communion by the priest, and when

the bishop was able to visit the parish he would administer Confirmation and the Eucharist to any baptized child. Over time, the infant reception of Communion ceased and Confirmation received even less attention.

In the Middle Ages, children were confirmed at the age of reason, around seven years old, but they did not receive First Communion until the age of 11 or 12. This meant that the order was restored to its ancient practice.

In France during the mid-1700s one bishop decided that young people should be confirmed only after they had received First Eucharist. This was an important shift, since his decision was based on the person receiving adequate instruction, not on his inability to visit every parish. This spread to other dioceses in France, but Rome rejected the practice, and in 1897 Pope Leo XIII reiterated that Confirmation should be celebrated at the age of reason.

Pope Pius X unintentionally began our current displacement of Confirmation in 1910 when he lowered the age of First Communion to seven years old. He said nothing of Confirmation in his letter, *Quam Singulari*, and seemed to assume that the practice of confirming at the age of reason would be maintained. His main concern was that the children have all the resources they need to live a rich spiritual life and carry out their mission as Christians in the modern world. Thus, the custom of receiving First Communion as a second-grader and later receiving Confirmation in middle or high school is a recent practice in the life of the Church.

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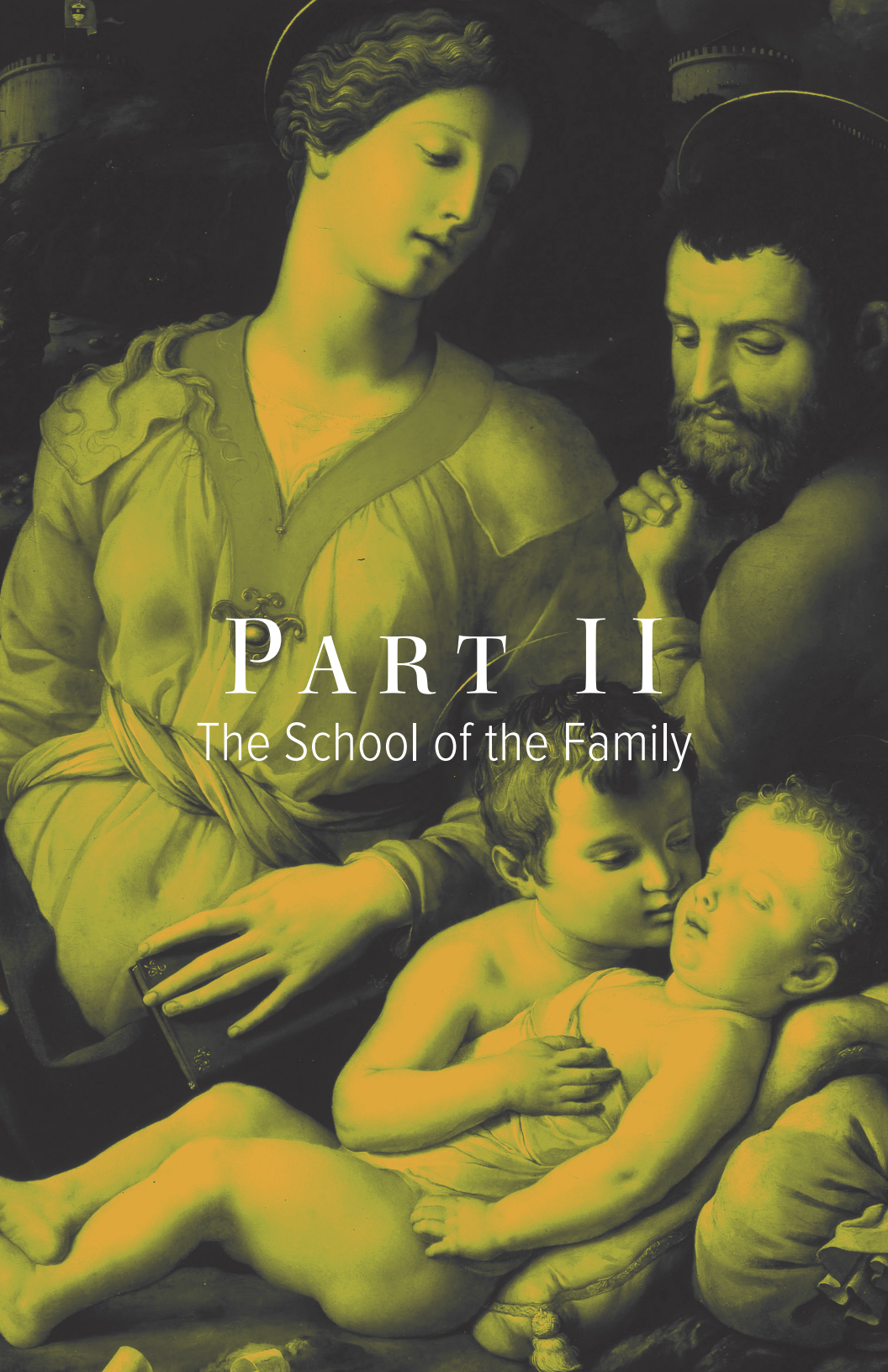
In the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the constitution on the sacred liturgy called for the Rite of Confirmation to be revised. Paul VI clearly stated in the Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of

Confirmation that, “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 Christian initiation, they thus receive in increasing measure the treasures of divine life and advance towards the perfection of charity.”¹³ At this point we see the beginning of the move towards the ancient order of the Church: Baptism, Confirmation and then Eucharist.

This return to the original order has appeared in recent history as well. The 1988 Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* and the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* all use the ancient order of the sacraments of initiation, culminating in the Eucharist.¹⁴

The topic was also addressed by Pope Benedict XVI in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, where he writes, “It must never be forgotten that our reception of Baptism and Confirmation is ordered to the Eucharist. The Holy Eucharist, then, brings Christian initiation to completion and represents the center and goal of all sacramental life.”¹⁵ His concern was to maintain the centrality of the Eucharist, which in many parish catechetical programs is often given less attention than Confirmation.

As Bishop of Fargo, I was able to personally meet with Pope Benedict during my March 2012 *ad limina* visit. I shared with him the process we used to restore Confirmation to its original place in the diocese, and he listened attentively. Then he replied, “You have done what I have always wanted to do.”



PART II

The School of the Family

After I restored the order in Fargo, I met a dad whose son was in the fifth grade and had been confirmed for two years. He explained that every night his son prayed for the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and asked him to do the same. “It’s really helped my faith. And it’s really helped me to desire those gifts more,” the father said. He learned from his son’s faith and fell more in love with the Holy Spirit and Jesus.

I, too, pray daily for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit’s gifts of knowledge, wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, piety, and “fear of the Lord” (or “wonder and awe” of the Lord). These gifts are an indispensable part of the Christian life that prepares us to be disciples who become saints.

The family is the primary school in which saints are formed. Jesus confirmed this by becoming a child and learning the virtues, prayer, and character from Mary and Joseph. Of course, as the Son of God, Christ did not have to come into the world the way he did, but he chose to do so. Joseph and Mary took care of Jesus as an infant, and we are told when they found him in the Temple that Jesus returned home with them, “was obedient to them ... and grew steadily in wisdom, and age and grace before God and men.”¹⁶

God created the family to be a reflection of the communion of life and love that exists within the Trinity. The union of a husband and wife allows them to participate in God’s creative act, and from their love comes children, just as Adam and Eve sprang forth from the love of the Trinity.

But parental love does not stop with creating children. It is “enlarged and enriched by all those fruits of moral, spiritual and supernatural life which the father and mother are called to hand on to their children, and through the children to the Church and to the world.”¹⁷

The Second Vatican Council describes parents as being the primary teachers of the faith for their children.¹⁸ All Catholic parents are called to make their home a “domestic church”¹⁹ where their children meet Christ, grow in virtue, and are prepared for the vocation God calls them to.

This also means that parents are the principal teachers who prepare their children to receive the sacraments, and this requires parents to know and love the faith. If we do not understand our Catholic faith, how can we ever expect our children to understand it? If we are not living our Catholic faith, how can we ever expect it of our children? Each of us must examine our homes and ask ourselves, “Is my home truly a domestic Church?”

When I was a child, anyone who entered our home knew it was Catholic. There were no excuses made. An image of the Last Supper hung in the dining room. Images and statues of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mary, and other saints were present throughout our house. Even when our non-Christian friends came to spend the night, we did not hide the symbols of our faith.

But those images cannot be the only source of teaching for your children or for those who enter your home. One of the most effective ways that parents can hand on the faith is through acts of loving self-sacrifice. It is also important to lead your children in prayer, teach them a love for Scripture and model the virtues for them.

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PART III

Restoring the Order

Restoring the order of the sacraments of initiation will mean making some changes to how we hand on the faith to our children. But in Fargo, as well as the Diocese of Phoenix and others dioceses around the world, these changes bear good fruit.

The Archdiocese of Denver will take five years to restore the order of the sacraments, using a step-down process that will result in all children receiving Confirmation and First Eucharist in the third grade by 2020.

For the next two years, parishes are encouraged to smooth their transition by moving Confirmation up to the sixth grade. This will allow parishes to begin implementing the restored order in 2017.

In addition to giving our children grace earlier, this move will provide consistency across the Archdiocese for the age of Confirmation and the preparation process. The step-down procedure will vary from parish to parish, since size, demographics, resources and other factors will make the transition slower or faster. This decision will also mean that the size of our Confirmation classes will be comparatively large for an extended period of time.

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The New Spiritual Landscape

The most important changes that restoring the place of Confirmation will make are not logistical but spiritual. This is profoundly important, because we live in a different spiritual terrain than our parents or grandparents did. Indeed, the spiritual landscape of modern American society underscores the need for children to receive grace earlier.

In 2009, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton

released a landmark survey of American teens' religious beliefs and practice. The analysis, which was published under the title, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, was the very first of its kind.

The researchers discovered that the majority of American teens, regardless of their faith, believe in what they termed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.²⁰ This means that they believe God exists, that he created the world and watches over it but rarely intervenes; that God wants people to be good, nice and fair; that the main goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself; and that good people go to heaven.

This kind of self-help faith cannot stand, since it is not based on the truth of the human person. The truth is that heaven is not earned; it is a gift of love and intimacy with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But what teens rarely mentioned to the researchers were ideas about the spiritual realm outside of their own subjective experience. "The language, and therefore the experience, of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness and an earned heavenly reward."²¹

This kind of self-help faith cannot stand, since it is not based on the truth of the human person. The truth is that heaven is not earned; it is a gift of love and intimacy with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The truth is that real, lasting happiness only comes from living in accord with how we were created, which was revealed in a divine person – Jesus Christ. Only he "can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity."²²

Restored Priorities

Once Confirmation is restored to its original place, it is my hope and experience that it will not be “the sacrament of farewell,” as Pope Francis has called it, but a profound encounter with each person of the Holy Trinity.

In fact, the restored order has the potential to renew everything from parenting to youth ministry. For example, parents will have the chance to prepare their children for Reconciliation, Confirmation and Eucharist at a time when they are more naturally receptive to the formation and the graces being given. During my time as Bishop of Fargo, I found third-graders to be most receptive to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that “Age of body does not determine age of soul.”²³ Their childlike trust and wonder is beautiful to behold. Many times, their ability to see the truth and to trust God completely surpasses our own, and this allows them to receive the graces of the sacrament more deeply.

Because of their new dignity and spiritual strength, the formation our children receive after they are confirmed will need to be different, too. The Church teaches that the indelible mark they receive at Confirmation directs them toward a life-long proclamation of the faith, acts of charity, and a deepening relationship with Christ.

This means that the focus of middle school and high school youth groups must shift from sacramental preparation to building community, fostering deeper relationships with each person of the Holy Trinity, and preparing them to be witnesses to the poor, those in need, and those who do not know Jesus Christ. I have already seen how this model – based on what Jesus did to form the Twelve Apostles – is bearing great fruit in various parishes throughout the Archdiocese.

In an increasingly secular world, the reality is this: the souls of our children are the battleground. As the shepherd of the Archdiocese of Denver, I must do everything I can to help those who form children win that battle.

Our culture will teach them to be nice, fair, and feel good about themselves, but it will neglect their profound need for salvation and redemption. The dominant worldview claims that if they are just accepting and tolerant, then everyone will be happy and the world will be a better place.

But the moralistic therapeutic deist approach is doomed to failure because it offers no help to those who fall short of being nice or good. It does not offer true healing. And although its adherents speak of an eternal reward, God is reduced to a distant deity who is far from their daily lives, rather than an intimate, personal friend who knows us better than we know ourselves. This deist worldview is ultimately unsatisfying and unconvincing. What truly satisfies is an encounter with God, who is love. It is he who heals hearts and changes our existence.

Called to Eternity

A few months before he died, St. John Paul II wrote to the young people who were planning to join him for the 2005 World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany. His message was directed to the youth, but it applies to Catholics young and old, and is perfectly relevant for us today.

He wrote that “the Church needs genuine witnesses for the new evangelization: men and women whose lives have been transformed by meeting with Jesus, men and women who are capable of communicating this experience to others. The Church needs saints. All are called to holiness, and holy people alone can renew humanity. Many have gone before us along this path of Gospel heroism, and I urge you to turn often to them to pray for their intercession.”²⁴

The world’s need for saints is obvious to anyone who reads the news. Many parents have told me how worried they are about their children growing up in a society that is increasingly less Christian and often anti-Christian.

Raising saints in this environment must start with parents and grandparents – those who provide an example and help children grow into mature disciples.

Few people today have heard of Franciscan Father Leo Heinrichs, who was the pastor of St. Elizabeth's parish in 1908, on what is now Denver's Auraria Campus. He is a great example of the kind of "Gospel heroism" that St. John Paul II spoke about, and one that every parent should strive to imitate.

Fr. Leo had been the pastor of St. Elizabeth's for five months when Giuseppe Alia went up to receive Communion at the early morning Mass. Alia received the Eucharist on his tongue, spat it out and flung it at Fr. Leo. Alia then pulled a gun and shot the German priest in the chest. He was caught by parishioners and a policeman as he tried to flee the church.

Fr. Leo used his last ounces of strength to gather up some of the hosts that had been spilled on the floor and place them in a ciborium on the steps of Our Lady's altar. As he lay on the floor of the sanctuary, his last gesture was to point to the remaining hosts that he was too weak to pick up. Over the next 30 years, Fr. Leo's cause for canonization was introduced in Rome and miraculous favors continue to be reported by those who visit his grave in Totowa, New Jersey.

The murderer later told the police that he didn't know Fr. Leo and had killed him out of a hatred for priests. If he had not been caught, Alia said, he planned to kill three more priests that day.

You may never experience persecution as direct as Fr. Leo's, but his story and the stories of martyrdom we hear today from the Middle East and Africa should prompt you to ask, "How well do I know the Lord? What sacrifices am I willing to make for him? Am I prepared to hand on the faith to my children or grandchildren and be their primary teacher in the faith? What can I do to make my family a worthy domestic church?"

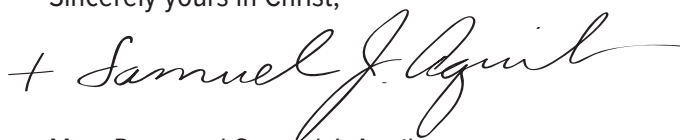
The gifts of the Holy Spirit offer true healing to our wounded hearts and

make our faith tangible. With the presence of the Comforter it is possible to proclaim as the Archangel Gabriel did to Mary, “nothing will be impossible for God.”²⁵ With Mary we can become saints as we surrender ourselves to the Holy Spirit and Jesus, the Word made flesh. With her, we can say to the Father, “Let it be done unto me according to your word.”

With the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the fortifying grace of Confirmation, and the lifelong spiritual nourishment of the Holy Eucharist, I pray that ever greater numbers of saints in the making will fill our Archdiocese. As your shepherd, I ask each of you to support this effort to form our children and all the faithful as courageous, authentic disciples of Jesus Christ. On this Pentecost day, may the Holy Spirit stir into flame the gifts he has placed in our hearts!

Given in Denver on May 14, the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord, in the year 2015.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Samuel J. Aquila". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila
Archbishop of Denver

Endnotes

- 1 Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (LG), 11.
- 2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), paragraph 1999.
- 3 CCC, 1321.
- 4 CCC, 1324.
- 5 *Greater Perfection*, by Sr. Miriam Teresa Demjanovich.
- 6 Arturo Elberti, S.J., “Witness of Christ in the Spirit” in *Rediscovering Confirmation*, ed. Pontificum Concilium pro Laicis (Vatican City, 2000), 42.
- 7 Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation, *Divinae Consortium Naturae* (August 15, 1971).
- 8 Paul Haffner, *The Sacramental Mystery* (Trowbridge, UK, 1999) 72.
- 9 Romans 8:14-16.
- 10 Elberti, S.J., “Witness of Christ in the Spirit,” 65.
- 11 Acts 8:14-17.
- 12 Hebrews 6
- 13 *Divinae Consortium Naturae*, 1.
- 14 Canons 889§2 and 891 of the *Code of Canon Law*, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1212-1419.
- 15 Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 17.
- 16 Luke 2:51-52.
- 17 Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (FC), 28.
- 18 Cf. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 3; FC, 38; CCC, 2225.
- 19 LG, 11.
- 20 Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford Press, pp. 162-163, 2009.
- 21 Ibid, p. 171.
- 22 Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT), 5.
- 23 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1308. Cf. *Summa Theologica* III.72.7ad2.
- 24 Pope John Paul II, “Message to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the 20th World Youth Day,” 7.
- 25 Luke 1:37.

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ARCHBISHOP AQUILA, p. 7



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