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Bishop Aquila addresses order of the sacraments in Hillenbrand lecture

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Bishop Samuel Aquila delivered The Liturgical Institute's Hillenbrand Distinguished Lecture June 24 in Mundelein, Ill. Entitled "The Sacrament of Confirmation," the lecture noted the history of the order of the sacraments for Catholics baptized as infants and reasons why the sacrament of confirmation should be received prior to first Eucharist.

In August 2002, Bishop Aquila issued a pastoral letter on the sacrament of confirmation and restored the order of the sacraments in the Diocese of Fargo. Children now receive the sacraments in this order: reconciliation, confirmation and Eucharist. They receive first reconciliation in their parishes when they are in second grade. When they are in third grade, they receive both confirmation and first Eucharist during a Mass celebrated by the bishop.

As Bishop Aquila studied the order of the sacraments in his early years as a priest, he said, "I began to recognize that placement of confirmation after first Eucharist only muddled the primacy of the Eucharist as the completion of initiation into the Church and the lifelong nourishment of the relationship established with the Trinity and the Church in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation." He cited documents of the Catholic Church and the words of Pope Benedict XVI in support of receiving the sacrament of confirmation before first Eucharist.

He spoke of the many arguments for confirming children at an older age, such as the discussion around spiritual maturity. "I have found the third-graders to be most receptive to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and their childlike trust and wonder is beautiful to behold. Many times, their ability to see the truth and have complete trust in God is strikingly better than our own," he said, noting that confirmation in third grade allows for "a deeper receptivity of the graces of the sacrament."

He continued, "We can ask the following of those who advocate a later age for confirmation. 'Should a free, unmerited gift of God, the sacrament of confirmation, be treated as a reward, or worse, as something earned or deserved for attendance and work in a parish catechetical program? Should the fear of not receiving a sacrament ever be used as a means to keep a young person involved in the life of the Church? Should the gift and strengthening of the Holy Spirit be denied young persons in their formative years?' And, finally, 'is confirmation, because of the special attention given to it and the length in preparation for its reception, perceived by many to be a more important sacrament than baptism and Eucharist?'"

Bishop Aquila said that those who speak of the sacrament of confirmation as "a way for the young person to make a personal commitment to their faith" distort the sacrament. "Confirmation is not marked by a choice to believe or not believe in the Catholic faith.

Rather, as disciples, we are chosen by God to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit, to be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit generously bestowed by God, and we are called to cooperative with that grace.”

He also said, “Spiritual maturity cannot be identified with biological maturity and children do have the spiritual maturity necessary to receive confirmation, just as they have the spiritual maturing to receive the Eucharist at the age of reason.”

The full lecture can be read at

www.fargodiocese.org/bishop/HillenbrandLectureOnConfirmation.pdf. Bishop Aquila’s 2002 pastoral letter on confirmation can be found at

www.fargodiocese.org/bishop/chancellor/confirmationpdf/confirmation.pdf.