

# The Sacrament of Confirmation

**M**any readers will remember a time in Ireland (in the days before Rachel Allen and Donal Skehan), when there was really only one place that you bought olive oil and that was in the chemist shop. The oil was really only used for medicinal purposes. Now you can buy all types of olive oil and it is no longer limited to one particular use. It's good for us, we use it more and more, and in a variety of ways.

Every Holy Thursday in Cathedrals the length and breadth of Christendom, olive oil is mixed with Balsam and is consecrated as Chrism for use throughout the diocese for the anointing of newly ordained priests, newly baptised children and for you those who will celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation.

Like the olive oil, we were often limited in how we interpreted this day of Confirmation. We talked about being a 'Soldier of Christ' and being an 'adult' in the Church. These expressions are very limiting in an understanding of Confirmation. We then spoke about the child receiving the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, and being assisted in the future journey of the Christian life. Nothing wrong with those sentiments, but how much do they really mean to the child of eleven or twelve today?

Secular notions often appear subtly into an understanding of the Sacrament: it marks the end of a child's time in Primary School; it is seen as a graduation ceremony and as an end in itself. Often it can be the last occasion that children are seen in the parish church as they move into their teenage years and lose interest in the things that had engaged and fascinated them in primary school.

So what is the sacrament of Confirmation in twentieth-century Ireland and how can we look at it with fresh eyes. Am I in favour of moving Confirmation to another time in the child's life? Not particularly. Personal experience and anecdotal evidence from America where children tend to be older doesn't lead me to think it would make a huge difference. In Scotland, where some diocese restored the correct order



of the Sacrament of Initiation and the children received the Sacrament of Confirmation before First Holy Communion seemed to be the way a while back, but some of those dioceses are looking for the old way to be returned. Faraway hills seem always to be greener.

I think it might be good to gently remove the predominance of preparation in the schools and move it more and more to a parish based preparation. Not because I think the schools are not doing a good job, but rather because they are doing too good a job. The work that teachers undertake in the primary school in terms of sacramental preparation is colossal. Sadly, they are often doing it in isolation, and it is time for the other partners to step up to the plate and take a more active role. We've been down this road before, but we need to retrace our steps. One of the emphases in the new primary school programme *Grow in Love* is a role of the parent. We have started in good intentions and so we should continue. Parents, the primary educators of their children, the first and (hopefully) best teachers of their children in the ways of faith, should have a much bigger role. The community, into which the children is being initiated should play a greater part in this sacramental preparation to reaffirm the fact that this is not a private 'family and close friends only' affair, but a moment of grace in the life of a parish. There are terrific programmes of preparation for Confirmation available to parishes and we could do with many

more.

## Language and the Diviner

The story of Pentecost is the story of a group of terrified disciples afraid to face the world. The wind came, the fire came and the courage came. The Holy Spirit was poured into the hearts and souls of the disciples, so much so that the upper room couldn't contain them anymore. They burst out of the room and began to speak. This was the miracle, people could understand them – each person heard their own language being spoken. Language was the point of contact back then, and it is the point of contact today. The story of sixth class in primary school can be the story

also of a group of pupils afraid to face the world and its future. We teach the language of the sacrament – the symbol, the ritual and the story, but we need to be able to connect our sacramental language with the language of the children being confirmed. Though not in a 'trying to be cool', 'getting down with the kids' type of idea, because nothing is hollow or more false. We begin to teach them the language of faith which counters adversity; the language of courage which counters peer pressure; the language of hope which counters angst; the language of community which counters isolation, self-doubt and fear of the future. Dwayne Huebner writes, 'Without education the community could not maintain its pilgrimage beyond a single generation. It would die along the way and foreclose the rest of the journey.'<sup>1</sup> We are one generation away from extinction, one generation away from these languages becoming lost. There is a lovely image in the early part of *Alive-O*, of Jesus the Diviner. Not a traditional Christological title, but the diviner is a person who looks for what is hidden (water) and brings it to the surface. Jesus was one who found what was hidden in people and brought it to the surface. Teachers are very familiar with this work. As parents and parishes we can begin this work also – by finding the seed of faith planted at baptism and helping and nurturing its growth, we bring it to the surface. We are not in the business so much of handing on the faith,



but in the business of drawing that faith to the surface. Picture the scene: your child comes home from school. You ask them what they did in school today. They might grudgingly tell you. Ask them what they did in religion or to prepare for their Confirmation. When they tell you, let them know that you did that too when you were ‘making your Confirmation’. All of a sudden, they realise that the sacramental language that they are learning in school, is a language their parents also know. When I was a primary diocesan advisor, children in school were often amazed that I knew the prayers and hymns. ‘Why wouldn’t I’, I used to say, ‘I learned them just like you.’

### **Witness and the Παιδαγωγός**

No one is asking you to take your place in the market square of your local town, stand on an orange box with a megaphone in one hand and a bible in the other, and preach! Being a witness can be far more subtle than that. In fact, in their constant struggle and unending responsibility, parents are living witnesses to the gospel and should be affirmed in that. Affirmed and also challenged. *Christifideles Laici* says, regarding the vocation of the laity: ‘We come to a full sense of the dignity of the lay faithful if we consider the prime and fundamental vocation that the Father assigns to each of them in Jesus Christ

through the Holy Spirit: the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity. Holiness is the greatest testimony of the dignity conferred on a disciple of Christ.’ As a parent, as a parish community, the way we live our Christian vocation is different, but it is ultimately the same vocation – the call to holiness. One of those occasions when this becomes a reality is the journey toward Confirmation for your child. You can lavish gifts on them before, during and after the ceremony, but you can also show them a deeper meaning of what they are about to celebrate. In the ancient world there was a slave in the wealthier households who accompanied the boys to school. Known as the *paidagogos*, he would often teach the boys various lessons along the way. The role was that of accompaniment and this is no different today. Csinos proposes that ‘educators, parents, pastors, and other adults can best nurture the spiritual lives of children by walking with them on the journey’ and that they have to ‘become co-learners with children in our quests to know God.’<sup>2</sup> According to him, the adult should sometimes lead ‘the child forward along the path,’ and at other moments the child should guide the adult as they ‘seek together the presence of the living God.’ While driving to the shopping centre, parents might try teaching their child a lesson that will last a little longer than

the next pair of shoes: comments about other drivers; reaction to the homeless; generosity to those less fortunate. Life lessons are not always learned at the kitchen table or the school desk, but in the everyday journeys where children can often see the real adult!

Confirmation like many things in life, is an opportunity. The day has built up a whole mythology separate to the religious, and the horror stories regarding the day are legion. But it needn’t always be like that and the first steps to a meaningful Confirmation, both in preparation and celebration is remembering the many ways to use olive oil.

### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> ‘Toward a Remaking of Curricular Language.’ In *Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, and Curriculum*, edited by William Pinar (McCutchen, Berkeley, California 1974) page 41.

<sup>2</sup> Csinos, David M. (2011) *Children’s Ministry That Fits: Beyond One-size-Fits-all Approaches to Nurturing Children’s Spirituality*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock., 11-12

<sup>3</sup> Reynaert, Machteld (2014) ‘Pastoral power in nurturing the spiritual life of the child’. *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*. 19:3-4, 184.

Rev John Paul Sheridan  
St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, Co Kildare