



Diocese of Austin

Office of the Bishop

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Religious Education Directors
Confirmation Directors
Youth Ministry Directors

(Copy to: Priests & Deacons
Liturgy Directors
* For Your Information)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

I am deeply grateful to the Religious Education Directors, Confirmation Directors, Catechists and Youth Ministers who prepare our young adults for Confirmation. One of the greatest privileges I have as bishop is to travel the Diocese and to celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation.

Thank you for the very important ministry that you provide in leading and serving God's people. By preparing our young people for Confirmation you help them to grow in faith and to open wide their hearts for the gift of the Holy Spirit. You provide an essential ministry in the Church and I remain grateful for all that you do.

In many ways, Confirmation is celebrated with much reverence, joy and dignity. This is, of course, our goal as it gives praise to God and invites people to deeper faith. I extend thanks not only to the catechists, but also to those who work very hard on the liturgy and provide prayerful and joyful music, and a celebration that is orderly and focuses on God thus inviting us to pray.

There are many positive elements about the celebration of Confirmation in our Diocese. At the same time, I do see some ways to improve the celebration in some parishes which I have experienced during the past season and I bring the following to your attention. I invite your comments and ask you to help me to implement these suggestions and ideas.

I. Attire

Over the past two years there seem to have been an improvement in the attire of the candidates for Confirmation. Within the last year, it is my opinion that this has become an issue of concern in two ways:

1. There are girls who are immodestly dressed.
2. There are candidates who are inappropriately dressed; for example, blue jeans, tennis shoes and t-shirts, shirt tails hanging.

I know the old argument that no matter how we dress God loves us, and I agree with that. At the same time, by the way we dress we say something about the value that we place on the event.

This is an opportunity to teach values and the importance of faith. Some would say that I should just ask that Confirmation gowns be worn by everybody throughout the Diocese. I will not take that stance. For those who wish to use Confirmation gowns, that is fine but a Confirmation gown can hide the problem. We should be teaching modesty in our Confirmation classes and we should require that of our candidates. We should teach them that it is important to dress in an appropriate way. I am not suggesting that everybody has to wear a coat and tie, etc. but torn blue jeans and tennis shoes are inappropriate. Likewise, thong or shower flip-flops are not appropriate for the Confirmation ceremony for candidates.

II. Reverence

On more than one occasion, the newly confirmed come up to receive communion chewing gum and at one celebration during the prayer over the candidates one of the candidates blew a bubble with his gum. Once again, God understands and I'm sure has a sense of humor, however, it is an opportunity for us to teach people reverence in the celebration.

III. Sponsors

A requirement of Church law is that anyone who serves as a Confirmation sponsor should be fully initiated into the Church, that is having received the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Communion, be a practicing Catholic and able to receive communion. Once again, in our Diocese we have begun to slip in this regard. I have lost track of the number of sponsors this past year who have not come up to receive communion. I see this as a serious issue. By allowing non-practicing Catholics to serve as sponsors, we are saying that anybody can support someone in faith. The obvious question is, how can someone be a sponsor and say that they are willing to support another person in faith when they are not living their faith? Church law makes a great deal of common sense: only people who are active in the Catholic Church should sponsor another person in their faith. Once again, this is an opportunity to teach. I also know that some parishes, by explaining this, have seen people come back to the Church and others have asked to have their marriages annulled so that they could become active Catholics. These are all teachable moments.

IV. Confirmation names

It is the tradition of the Church that candidates choose a confirmation name – to be added to the baptismal name. This is a good idea and an opportunity for the candidate to learn more about the saints.

Therefore, I prefer that all candidates choose a saint for their confirmation name. Please help them in this choice.

For example, Guadalupe is not a person, but a place; Mary of Guadalupe is a person. The same is true of Fatima, Lourdes, etc. Another example, Christopher is based on a person but a legend. Nicknames, such as Sally, Pete, Drew, are not saints' names. Please help the students learn about the saints and to choose appropriate names.

V. Liturgy

Regarding the liturgy, whatever can be done to prepare the servers is greatly appreciated. If the servers do not know what to do, I would be happy to meet with them ahead of time to explain the ceremony and to prepare them. Just let me know. For example, a deacon or priest should never be a server. A server, or acolyte, should hold the book, wash the hands of the priest or bishop and help at the altar. It is important that we observe liturgical guidelines and that the ministry of server be adhered to and not confused with the priest or deacon.

Please be reminded that pre-recorded music played on CDs, tapes, etc. is not ordinarily acceptable for liturgy.

VI. Pictures

I prefer to be lax with pictures. My rule is that as long as pictures are taken in a respectful way I would not complain. However, the practice of taking pictures has become a problem. For example, pictures should not be taken during the "Prayer of Confirmation." That is a most sacred moment. If they are taken during the anointing, which I do not mind, they should be taken orderly by one photographer. On occasions there have been numerous people standing almost next to me while I was anointing. This is distracting and takes away from the dignity of the ceremony. Please instruct people with the following before the ceremony:

"If you wish to take pictures during the ceremony, please do so in a respectful and dignified way that will not take away from the importance of the Sacrament of Confirmation. When the bishop is anointing the confirmands' foreheads, please do not go into the sanctuary and do not go any closer than the side aisles" (you can adapt that to your own parish).

You might also want to give the ushers instructions on how to regulate what one person called the "mommeparatzi."

I am more than happy to take pictures after the ceremony individually or as a group. I would only request that someone be appointed to coordinate this so that it is done in a way that is efficient.

Conclusion

As I conclude these suggestions, I once again offer profound, heartfelt thanks for your ministry and for all that you do to help us as a local church celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit with reverence and dignity. The number of beautiful celebrations in our Diocese is countless. At the same time, there are

other experiences that I have had that are distracting. It would be difficult to say that the celebration invited people into prayer. It is in these cases that I think that we can make some changes for the sake of good liturgy and for the praise of God.

I would invite your comments and critique of these suggestions. In the meantime, be assured of my prayers and deep appreciation.

Wishing you God's blessings, I am

Gratefully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. Aymond". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Gregory M. Aymond
Bishop of Austin

GMA/lm

Encl.