

BISHOP'S MESSAGE – MARCH 2018

A Reflection on Confirmation, Reception and Reaffirmation

In the past fifty years, the Episcopal Church has struggled with the place and purpose of the sacramental rite of Confirmation in our common life. As the Catechism (The Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer 1979) teaches: "The two great sacraments given by Christ to his Church are Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist" (page 857). These two Sacraments are thoroughly bound in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and are essential to the life of the Church. As the Catechism in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (Church of England) put it regarding the number and meaning of these Sacraments: "Two only, as generally necessary to salvation; that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord."

Confirmation is placed with ordination, holy matrimony, reconciliation of a penitent (private confession) and unction (anointing the sick) in the category of "sacramental rites" (see The Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer 1979, page 860). These rites are a means to strengthen the believer – a means of grace. They are not "Sacraments" necessary for the believer as marks of faith or essential to the Church. They are provided to aid the individual believer and strengthen the Church's common life.

Of the five sacramental rites, confirmation is the most problematic. What is its purpose and meaning in the 21st century? The Episcopal Church teaches that: "Confirmation is the rite in which we express a mature commitment to Christ, and receive strength from the Holy Spirit through prayer and the laying on of hands by a bishop" and that "[i]t is required of those to be confirmed that they have been baptized, are sufficiently instructed in the Christian Faith, are penitent for their sins, and are ready to affirm their confession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord." (see The Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer 1979, page 860). Or as noted in the rubrics for the rite itself: "In the course of their Christian development, those baptized at an early age are expected, when they are ready and have been duly prepared, to make a mature public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their Baptism and to receive the laying on of hands by the bishop. Those baptized as adults, unless baptized with laying on of hands by a bishop, are also expected to make a public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their Baptism in the presence of a bishop and to receive the laying on of hands" (BCP 1979, page 412). Confirmation is an expectation for members of the Episcopal Church.

The Reverend James Turrell, professor of liturgy at the School of Theology of the University of the South, notes: "The 1979 Book of Common Prayer describes baptism as 'full initiation,' demoting the rite of confirmation from its previous status as the completion of the initiatory process.... [T]he revisers of the Book of Common Prayer [1979] tried initially to eliminate confirmation entirely... then created a repeatable rite of reaffirmation..., before allowing a nonrepeatable confirmation rite to return by inches.... It is now a 'pastoral rite' that publicly marks the mature affirmation of faith made in the presence of the bishop" [*Celebrating the Rites of Initiation: A Practical Ceremonial Guide for Clergy and Other Liturgical Ministers* (New

York: Church Publishing, 2013), page 22]. He also notes that: “Confirmation is now joined by two cognate rites, reception and the reaffirmation of baptismal vows.... Liturgically, the two forms are virtually the same as confirmation: the only difference is in the formula said over the candidate and the omission of the rubric requiring an accompanying hand-laying at reception and reaffirmation, in contrast to confirmation” (Turrell, page 23). In practice, I administer confirmation, reception and reaffirmation with the laying on of hands as a sign of blessing.

As might be expected, the Episcopal Church is still trying to discern the place of Confirmation in our common life. Historically, Confirmation was understood to be something of a rite of passage for young adults. In fact, a person was expected to be Confirmed before receiving Holy Communion: “And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed, or be ready and desirous to be confirmed” (BCP 1928, page 299). That is no longer the case and even infants receive a “taste” of the Sacrament at Baptism. My adult sons, for example, have no conscious memory of not being welcome at the Holy Table. Frankly, that is my hope for all children baptized in Episcopal churches.

In some other Christian traditions, local pastors administer confirmation. That has never been the case in the Episcopal Church (or in the Anglican tradition). I agree with Leonel Mitchell (the late professor of liturgy at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary) and Ruth Meyers (currently professor of liturgy at Church Divinity School of the Pacific): “There is a pastoral merit in having every Episcopalian come into personal contact with the bishop, and the rubric [directing all members of the Episcopal Church or individual congregations to seek confirmation as noted above] may be seen as enjoining an ‘old Anglican custom,’ but it is difficult to see the theological significance. One possible theological explanation would be that it is the baptism, not the person, which is being confirmed. This is not without historical precedent. Its origin lies in the recognition that the bishop is the normative minister of baptism, and that when a priest baptizes in place of the bishop, it is the bishop’s prerogative to ‘confirm’ that action by personally receiving the baptizand’s profession of faith and adding the episcopal benediction through the imposition of hands” [*Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Books, revised edition, 2016) page 139]. The bishop is the symbol of the Church Universal offering affirmation, welcome and blessing.

With this in mind, where are we now? These are my thoughts on the administration of Confirmation/Reaffirmation/Reception in the Diocese of Hawai‘i:

- ❖ If it is the congregational norm, I welcome all youth (age 13-15 depending on the maturity of the individual) to be presented for confirmation after appropriate preparation.
- ❖ I hope (and even dare to expect) all adults (16 and older) who have become baptized members of a congregation to be presented for confirmation/reaffirmation/reception. Preparation of adults making this commitment is essential.
- ❖ I prefer to administer the rite during Eastertide at Regional confirmation liturgies. Why?
 - First, I think the connection with the Paschal Mystery is best made in that most holy season. The tradition of congregational confirmations seems to me to disconnect the rite from Easter (the historic time for Baptism) and the seriousness of the liturgical act. I

will, however, offer the rite at other times if candidates have been prepared and there is a pressing pastoral necessity, and other congregations in the region are invited to participate. Likewise, this rite can be administered at the Cathedral at the Easter Vigil or on Pentecost Sunday.

- Second, I think it important to disconnect the rite from the local congregation in order to highlight the connection to both the Baptismal Covenant and the Church catholic. It is meant to be an expansion of the sense of 'ohana in Christ as well as to make pastoral connection with the bishop. I hope the regional gatherings help the candidates understand that their spiritual journey calls them beyond the local congregation into the broader Church and world.
 - Third, this is the one time a year that I ask congregations in a region to come together with me. As Bishop, this is the season in which I seek to be with the whole Diocese through the Regions. If it were practical, I might like to have diocesan Confirmation services at the Cathedral. Being a diocese of islands, that is not practical. Having the regional services provides a connection beyond the parochial setting of individual congregations. The Cathedral can still be the venue for the rite at the Easter Vigil and the 10:30 Pentecost Day Eucharist.
- ❖ I look on all that is done in the rite (confirmation/reaffirmation/reception) to be “reaffirmation” of our Baptism.
 - ❖ I hope all presented will have been prepared in the faith with a working knowledge of the Book of Common Prayer 1979 and the Holy Scripture [in translation, either the Common English Bible (my current preference, see <http://www.commonenglishbible.com>) or the New Revised Standard Version]. There are several programs available for youth and adult preparation.
 - ❖ Realistically, though less theologically, this rite is also a symbolic act of becoming a “full” part of the Episcopal Church. It has an element of denominational identity tied to the presentation before the bishop and its historic antecedents for Episcopalians/Anglicans.

Please know, I welcome your comments on what I have written.

I have been asked if there might be a need for a diocesan-wide confirmation program (perhaps online and perhaps using available resources) for youth and adults. What do you think? Do we need common confirmation materials for the Diocese?

Lastly, I hope every Episcopalian will gather at the Regional confirmation/reaffirmation/reception liturgies as being locally planned. This is our opportunity to gather as Episcopalians on an island or in a region. Yes, this can be somewhat of a burden, especially on the Big Island (the very Region that initiated these regional gatherings in 2008), but I think that is an important part of our common life and I ask all churches to participate (and for the clergy to vest and take part). I look forward to gathering with you after Easter at these regional events. The schedule for the 2018 Confirmation liturgies are:

- **Maui:** Saturday, April 14, 10:00 am at Trinity By-the-Sea

- **East Honolulu:** Friday, April 20, 6:30 pm at Holy Nativity
- **Downtown Honolulu:** Sunday April 22, 4:00 pm at St. Elizabeth's
- **Big Island:** Saturday, April 28, 10:00 am at Holy Apostles.
- **West Oahu:** Date, time, and location TBD weekend of May 4-6.
- **Windward Oahu:** Date, time, and location TBD weekend of May 4-6.
- **Kauai:** Date, time, and location TBD weekend of May 11-13.

Again, I look forward to being with the Diocese throughout April and May.

Yours faithfully,

+Bob