



## Report from Confirmation Listening Sessions

**Recap:** The Secretariat for Evangelization and Discipleship (SED) held a series of seven listening sessions for parish leaders from February 27 to March 7. At these listening sessions participants were invited to answer the following questions:

1. What does it mean to be prepared to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation?
2. What opportunities does this change present for family and youth ministry in your parish?
3. How can the archdiocese support you through implementing this change?
4. Participants were also invited to share memories of their own confirmations.

The stated objective of these meetings was to provide an opportunity for the SED staff to listen to the parish leaders who are currently, or will soon be, responsible for preparing adolescent candidates for the Sacrament of Confirmation. It was also an opportunity for parish leaders to hear from each other and ultimately for all of us together to listen to the Holy Spirit and to be open to His promptings throughout the process.

### **What did we hear?**

What follows is a synthesis of the themes which surfaced in these meetings. Although attendees had a variety of opinions and face differing circumstances, these main themes were consistent throughout:

We heard **Love**.

All the participants consistently and firmly spoke with great love. Love for the Lord and for his Church. Love for the sacraments and the sacramental life. Love for their faith and for their ministries. And love for the young people and families they serve in their parishes.

We heard **Desire**.

A strong desire to evangelize the youth of their parishes and to invite them into a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ and the Church. A desire for young people to know that they belong to the larger community of the Church and that the grace of the sacraments are gifts for them and a source of hope, peace, and healing. There was also a strong desire that the young people cultivate and articulate their own desire for this relationship. That young people have an encounter with the Holy Spirit and can respond to him in a free and authentic way.

There was a desire for clarity and consistency about the sacrament itself, about the reason(s) for the decision to change the age, and the expectations around what it means and how it should be implemented. There was a desire for support from the Pastoral Center; for resources, guidance, and accompaniment. There was a desire for connection and partnership among parishes and throughout the archdiocese.

We heard **Concern**.

There is widespread concern that too many young people preparing to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation are not connected to parish life. Concern that too many families are not worshipping regularly at Sunday Mass, praying together, or having meaningful conversations about faith in their homes. Concern that Confirmation is too often viewed and experienced as an end of a journey, a “graduation,” and not the beginning that it naturally is as a Sacrament of Initiation.

There is concern that an unintended effect of the age change could be an end to parish ministry to high school students. Concern that parishes, either through neglect or lack of resources, will shift attention to middle school sacramental preparation and abandon efforts to engage and accompany the newly confirmed throughout their high school years.

There was also concern expressed that, without clear guidance and consistency, differing practices between parishes could cause unnecessary tension.

We heard **Hope**.

Hope that the graces from the Sacrament of Confirmation given at a younger age will bear fruit in the lives of young people. Hope that the younger age for Confirmation will further enhance the efforts of family-based catechesis growing throughout the archdiocese. Hope that removing sacramental preparation as a focus of high school youth ministry may enable ministry to high school teens to flourish in ways that will produce greater fruit by meeting young people where they are and accompanying them on a lifelong journey of faith aided by their integration into the life of the community. Hope in the Holy Spirit and in his guidance over the Church and our archdiocese.

We heard **Gratitude**.

There was gratitude for the opportunity to come together to listen and to be heard. Gratitude for the support of the Office of Lifelong Faith Formation and for the knowledge that there is someone to call when there are questions or concerns, someone who will be a partner and accompany parish leaders through this transition. Gratitude in the knowledge that they are not alone and that opportunities exist to connect and to partner with each other. Gratitude for the change, for the willingness to change and to try something new. Not being bound by the way things have always been done, but being open to the way things could be.

There was gratitude for flexibility. For the recognition that communities are different and that parishes will need the freedom to try things and see what bears the most fruit.

Gratitude for the privilege of accompanying young people and their families on the journey of discipleship.

## Observations

We observed that the line between youth ministry and confirmation preparation has blurred significantly over the years, to the point that for many people they are indistinguishable. People are unsure what high school ministry can look like without confirmation preparation. This is evident in the long list of practices included in many sacramental preparation programs which, while beneficial for growth in discipleship, are not required for the reception of the sacrament.

Both the hope and the concerns articulated by many participants are rooted in the separation of confirmation preparation from youth ministry. The *concern* is captured in the sentiment that if we aren't preparing high school students for Confirmation, we will lose the opportunity to accompany them on their faith journey. In many parishes, the only ministry for high school teens has been confirmation preparation, which, when removed from high school, may eliminate the only ministry offering for this group. Conversely, the *hope* is captured in the sentiment that if we confirm students in middle school, we will be free to accompany high school teens on their faith journey without the focus being on what is "required" or with an end date of sacramental celebration.

It seems the tendency for people, when discussing confirming in middle school, is to focus on high school youth ministry. This is understandable since our practice had been confirming high school students since the 1980s. We recognize that a fruitful approach to this change might be to focus on faith formation in the years before confirmation preparation, with a particular emphasis on family engagement and formation. Preparation for Baptism and Eucharist, done with a focus on accompanying families and encouraging participation in the life of the parish community, could lay a foundation that will both facilitate confirmation preparation and create an environment that naturally leads to fruitful high school youth ministry.

A final observation is that this change in age could be an invitation for parishes to assess how their approach to Baptism and First Holy Communion preparation can be understood as connected with confirmation preparation; a recognition of the inherent connection between all three Sacraments of Initiation.