

*Archdiocese of Winnipeg*  
**Synod Focus Commission on**  
***Sacramental Preparation, Prayer and Devotional Life***

**Focus Commission Report**

Revised July 5, 2017

**PREAMBLE**

Through the sacraments of Christian initiation, the faithful become Disciples of Christ, part of the Church, a prophetic, priestly and royal people called to worship God in spirit and in truth (cf. *John* 4.23). The Church exercises this task through Christ in the Holy Spirit, not only in the Sacred Liturgy, especially in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist and all the other sacraments, but also in other forms of Christian life, among which are numbered various form of prayer, piety and devotional life. Anointed by the Holy Spirit, disciples are given the ability to offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God, to offer prayer and entreaty to God, so as to make of one's life "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (*Romans* 12.1, cf. *Hebrews* 12.28).

**IDENTIFIED CONCERNS CONSIDERED**

The Synod Secretariat, following an initial review of the Listening Sessions and the meeting of Clergy on pastoral concerns for the Synod, suggested that the *Focus Commission on Sacramental Preparation, Prayer and Devotional Life* address the following concerns from the perspective of both the local Church and parish communities: (1) sacramental preparation for current realities; (2) relation between schools and parishes in sacramental preparation; (3) nurturing prayer and devotional life; (4) living a sacramental life. Thereby, what follows is the synthesized result of this Focus Commission's discussions, reflections and discernment on the various concerns addressed.

**SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION FOR CURRENT REALITIES**

Parents are the primary educators of their children in the ways of the faith. Parishes must remind parents that they are accepting the responsibility of training their children in the practice of the faith. At the same time, parishes must do what they can to provide parents with the tools and resources in order to fulfill their role in their children's spiritual formation.

Parents of those children receiving sacramental preparation benefit from receiving their own catechesis, either along with their children or by themselves. This preparation could take place as the children are participating in their own preparation sessions. Parents could receive catechesis on the particular sacrament their child is receiving, but such sessions could also include catechesis on other basic teachings of the Catholic faith.

The last revised comprehensive Archdiocesan Guidelines regarding the reception of the Sacraments of Penance, Confirmation and Eucharist seem to have been published in June 1989. The programs and resources outlined in this previous set of guidelines are almost completely out of date. The time is ripe

to prepare new guidelines which encourage to a greater extent the involvement of the entire parish in the preparation and celebration of the sacraments. Such new guidelines for sacramental preparation must address the various realities of current times and should suggest contemporary tools and resources to facilitate the preparation of the initiation of disciples of Christ today.

## **THE SACRAMENTS OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION**

### ***Baptism***

Parishes should not look at baptismal preparation as merely a preparatory meeting, but rather an opportunity for evangelization. To this end the Archdiocese would do well to provide guidelines for the preparation of the baptism of children and the formation and training of baptism preparation teams. The preparation for the baptism of infants and little children is a wonderful time to (re)evangelize parents, as well as godparents, who tend to be excited and open to guidance in the midst of the experience of bringing a new life into the world. Baptism preparation programs should take into consideration current realities, including diverse circumstances concerning the relationship of parents and family life today.

Canon law provisions on sponsors (godparents) note there is to be one male sponsor or one female sponsor or one of each (cf. *CIC* cann. 872-874). However, increasingly in our Archdiocese there are those who by cultural custom add more “secondary sponsors” or witnesses who stand with the principal or primary sponsors during the baptism liturgy. In some parishes, principal sponsors (godparents) are encouraged or required to attend baptism preparation sessions. Whereas secondary sponsors are not. Revised Archdiocesan norms could provide some guidance here as to who should participate in baptism preparation sessions and also set a reasonable limit to the number of secondary sponsors.

The baptism of adults and children of catechetical age follow the norms provided in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). However, some of the same principles and concerns as mentioned above concerning infant baptism should be considered. As noted in the *praenotanda* of the RCIA, “the entire community must help the candidates and catechumens throughout the process of initiation” (no. 9). Archdiocesan norms should accentuate and encourage the role and involvement of the whole faith community in the process of Christian Initiation.

### ***Confirmation***

By confirmation, the baptized are linked more closely to the Church, strengthened, and more firmly obliged to be witnesses to Christ by word and deed and to spread and defend the faith (can. 879). The sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Holy Eucharist are so related to each other that all are required for full Christian initiation (can. 842, §2). Confirmation is a continuation of the journey of Christian initiation (can. 879).

“Unless there is a grave reason to the contrary, immediately after receiving baptism an adult is to be confirmed, to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist and to receive Holy Communion” (can. 866). For the purposes of Christian initiation, children who have reached the use of reason are considered to be adults (can. 852, §1). As far as possible, their formation follows the general pattern of the ordinary catechumenate with the appropriate adaptations permitted by the ritual. As in adult initiation, children of catechetical age who are baptized are to be confirmed and to receive first Holy Communion in the same ceremony. This applies to everyone seven and older with the use of reason. Only a serious reason

excuses from this obligation, such as in danger of death when a presbyter does not have the sacred chrism when he baptizes or when a deacon or lay person baptizes in an emergency.

For Latin Catholics baptized as infants (i.e. baptized before the age of discretion): “The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion, unless the Bishops’ Conference has decided on a different age, or there is a danger of death or, in the judgment of the minister, a grave reason suggests otherwise” (can. 891). In Canada, for Latin Catholics baptized as infants, confirmation is conferred at *the age determined in the approved catechetical programs*. Since the diocesan Bishop has the authority to approve catechetical programs, this means that the Bishop may determine the age for confirmation in his diocese for those baptized as infants.

It is interesting to note that a baptized child with the use of reason who is prepared for and wishes to receive confirmation has a right to it even if he or she is under the age at which children in the diocese normally are confirmed. In such cases, the Holy See has ruled that the elements of local legislation must give way to the fundamental right of the faithful to receive the sacraments.

Reviewing and reflecting on teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* concerning the Sacrament of Confirmation, it is clear that when considering the issue of age for Confirmation the unity and sequence of the sacraments of initiation must be taken into account. A growing number of dioceses are returning to celebrating confirmation at about the age of discretion prior to or at the same time as First Communion. The members of this Focus Commission ask: Is it time for the Archdiocese of Winnipeg to make this adjustment?

The long-standing practice of Eastern Churches (both Orthodox and Catholic) may have something to teach us. The efficacy of sacraments is not entirely dependent upon the faith of those receiving. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us” (no. 1131).

Should not the same reasons that moved Pope Saint Pius X to offer the Holy Eucharist to children at the age of discretion also apply to the Sacrament of Confirmation? As a child is fed physically from its earliest years, should not the child also be given, sooner than later, the full grace of the Holy Spirit to assist and sustain him/her on his/her journey of faith?

Today, unfortunately we find that there are many adult Roman Catholics who have never received the Sacrament of Confirmation. Also, too many of those confirmed in their teenage years tend to disappear from active parish life immediately after being confirmed. Confirming at the age of discretion might mitigate such regrettable circumstances.

Of course, the members of this Focus Commission readily acknowledge the challenges that fully restoring the proper order of the sacraments of initiation would entail. Change is always difficult and would take time. Adequate formation of the whole Archdiocesan community would be needed. Nevertheless, such change and formation could bring a greater openness to focusing more time, energy and resources on the ongoing evangelization of our young disciples. So, for example, the main emphasis for the entire Year 2 of faith formation could be on sacramental preparation for the completion of Christian Initiation. Then the focus in the following years of faith formation clearly would be on discipleship, on forming and evangelizing young disciples to reach out to others and take their part as fully-initiated Christians in building a better world.

## ***Eucharist***

The 1989 Archdiocesan guidelines for the Sacrament of the Eucharist, besides quoting the related canons and stating that children are to be admitted to the Eucharist when they reach the age of reason, note that “Children should be properly prepared for Holy Communion. They should understand that they receive Jesus, the Risen Lord, in Holy Communion. They should understand that the bread and wine are changed into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of the Risen Lord. They should understand that this change takes place by the power of the Holy Spirit during the Eucharistic Prayer and more specifically ‘during the Consecration.’ It is not enough for children to understand that they are receiving holy bread. They should also understand why and in what sense it is holy and when it becomes holy.” The teaching on the Eucharist as given in the 1989 guidelines remains relevant. Nevertheless, as already suggested, the various approved resources listed are no longer available and need to be updated.

In discussing “sacramental preparation” concerning the Eucharist, Focus Commission members thought not only of the requirements concerning those preparing to receive the Holy Eucharist for the first time, but also of the importance of suitable preparation, wherever possible, for every celebration of the Eucharist. The involvement of many joyful and well-prepared ministers can encourage a more full, conscious and active participation of all the members of the assembly. What is said here concerning preparation for the celebration of Mass, also applies for a more fruitful celebration of the other Sacraments and rites of the Church.

It is suggested that the Archdiocese give more emphasis to training various ministers for liturgy, possibly on a deanery or archdiocesan level. Concerns were noted, for example, that many Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion could benefit from sessions or retreat days which would give them a more theological and spiritual grounding to facilitate a deeper understanding of the actions appropriate to their ministry. Such sessions for ministers could be seen as a type of “sacramental preparation”.

Among other things, the importance of singing in the celebration of the sacraments was noted. Singing can be a powerful tool in preparation classes, especially with children. The effective use of modern technology not only for clarity of proclamation, but also in other suitable ways was discussed. The Church should not be left behind in the development of science and technologies, but rather be open to using these modern gifts to facilitate and maximize the fruits of evangelization in the classroom, the worship space, and beyond.

## **THE SACRAMENTS OF HEALING**

### ***Reconciliation***

The members of this Focus Commission agreed that the Sacrament of Reconciliation, although one of the most beautiful and healing of all the Sacraments, has often taken a back seat to preparation for First Communion. If we wish to restore proper importance to this sacrament, we need to ensure that children who are getting ready for this sacrament are not only prepared to confess their sins, but also understand the process and the special gift of grace that comes with this sacrament. We need to be more flexible and focus not simply on the proper age and time for this sacrament, but more on the gift of Reconciliation. How do we achieve this? By teaching adults and children together, by providing tools that help teach the entire family of the value and gift of Reconciliation, by encouraging families to form a habit together of receiving the gift of pardon and peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

## ***Anointing of the Sick***

Increasingly in recent years, there has arisen some confusion with respect to prayers for healing, especially concerning the difference between liturgical and non-liturgical prayers, i.e. the difference between the rites and blessed oil associated with the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and other oils and prayers, usually more spontaneous, associated with other various prayers for healing often held during special prayer meetings organized for such purpose. While it is licit for every member of the faithful to pray to God for healing, it is important that various distinctions be made so that confusion between non-liturgical prayers for healing and the rites proper to the administration of the Sacrament of the Sick be carefully avoided. It would be wise to develop some diocesan guidelines concerning prayers for healing and, as suggested in canon law, for the diocesan Bishop to issue suitable norms regarding communal celebrations of the Anointing of the Sick in the Archdiocese (cf. can. 1002).

**RECOMMENDATION 1: Prepare and publish updated Archdiocesan Guidelines for the preparation and celebration of the Sacraments which address current realities concerning the Sacraments of Christian Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) and the Sacraments of Healing (Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick). These guidelines should make appropriate provisions so that eventually the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Archdiocese of Winnipeg, conferred on either children or adults, would be restored to its proper place and understanding within the whole process of initiation.**

## **RELATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND PARISHES IN SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION**

Catholic Schools can be an important component in the evangelization as well as the on-going catechesis of our young people. This includes a foundational preparation upon which sacramental preparation can be built. In parishes where Catholic schools exist, those teachers who may be facilitating sacramental preparation should be invited to be part of the parish sacramental preparation team.

Suitable and effective sacramental preparation requires the involvement of families, schools (if the child attends a Catholic School) and the parish. As such it is *family-focused, parish-based and Catholic school supported*. Sacramental preparation in each of these venues must be rooted in prayer, acts of Christian charity and with an understanding that regular participation in Sunday Eucharist leads to an ever-deepening relationship with God along the whole of life's journey (*lex orandi; lex credendi; lex vivendi*).

Reviewing the policies and guidelines of several other dioceses and various applicable canons, including those which affirm the role of the pastor as responsible for ensuring adequate catechesis for the celebration of the sacraments in accord with the norms laid down by the diocesan Bishop (cf. cann. 776, 777), this Focus Commission makes its second recommendation.

**RECOMMENDATION 2: Preparation for the Sacraments of Confirmation, First Eucharist, and First Reconciliation should take place within the context of parish community life. Whether proximate preparation for these sacraments takes place in the school, home or parish proper, it must be linked to the parish community, especially through the pastor and the parish coordinator of sacramental preparation. Whenever possible, sacramental preparation should involve the members of the whole parish, who welcome, support and nurture the faith life of parents and their children receiving the sacraments. Efforts should be made to account for various cultural and other legitimate customs as well as the particular needs of those receiving the sacraments for whom special allowances must be made based on physical or other special needs.**

## NURTURING PRAYER AND DEVOTIONAL LIFE, LIVING A SACRAMENTAL LIFE

Saint John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 38, invites a renewed commitment to prayer:

**If in the planning that awaits us we commit ourselves more confidently to a pastoral activity that gives personal and communal prayer its proper place, we shall be observing an essential principle of the Christian view of life: *the primacy of grace*. There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan. God of course asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that "without Christ we can do nothing" (cf. *John* 15:5).**

**It is prayer which roots us in this truth. It constantly reminds us of the primacy of Christ and, in union with him, the primacy of the interior life and of holiness. When this principle is not respected, is it any wonder that pastoral plans come to nothing and leave us with a disheartening sense of frustration?" We then share the experience of the disciples in the Gospel story of the miraculous catch of fish: "We have toiled all night and caught nothing" (*Luke* 5:5). This is the moment of faith, of prayer, of conversation with God, in order to open our hearts to the tide of grace and allow the word of Christ to pass through us in all its power: *Duc in altum!* On that occasion, it was Peter who spoke the word of faith: "At your word I will let down the nets" (ibid.). As this millennium begins, allow the Successor of Peter to invite the whole Church to make this act of faith, which expresses itself in a renewed commitment to prayer.**

The members of this Focus Commission discussed extensively the need for prayer, the need for disciples of all ages to find time to be still, to abandon themselves to God, to balance old ways of praying with new ways of praying, to recognize the connection to and the centrality of the Eucharist as the source and summit of our lives. The reading of Sacred Scripture is an indispensable and inexhaustible source of inspiration for nurturing prayer and devotional life. God speaks to the Church in the Liturgy of the Hours as she praises him without ceasing and intercedes for the salvation of the whole world.

Pope Francis in an address to the Catholic Biblical Federation, 19 June 2015, stresses the importance of Scripture in communicating the "Joy of the Gospel" to the farthest ends of the earth:

**There are places in which the Word of God has not yet been proclaimed or, although proclaimed, has not been accepted as the Word of salvation. There are places where the Word of God is drained of its authority. The lack of support and force of the Word leads to a weakening of Christian communities of long established tradition and slows the spiritual growth and missionary fervour of young Churches. We are all responsible should "the message run the risk of losing its freshness and cease to have 'the fragrance of the Gospel'" (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 39). Therefore, there is an open invitation to exercise an intense commitment to ensure the central role of the Word of God in ecclesial life, by promoting biblical reading throughout the pastoral ministry. We must ensure that in the usual activities of every Christian community, in parishes, in associations and movements, there actually be at heart the personal encounter with Christ who communicates himself to us in his Word, because, as St. Jerome teaches us, "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 25).**

**RECOMMENDATION 3: Since the Church is built on, and grows through, listening to the Word of God, the Christian faithful should acquire a familiarity with Sacred Scripture and be imbued with its spirit. To this end, ministers presiding over liturgical rites and administering the sacraments according to the**

**provisions of the liturgical books should not omit, except in grave circumstances, the proclamation of at least a short passage of Sacred Scripture. The faithful should be encouraged to have and treasure their own copy of the bible and to reverence and ponder the Word of God in communal and personal prayer. As well, biblical commentaries and bible study groups should be made available that help disciples of Christ to discover the harmony between the Old and New Testaments and to interpret one in the light of the other in harmony with the Church's authentic tradition.**

This Focus Commission also recognized the need to develop mentors, youth and young adult leaders/facilitators to encourage prayer, bible study, sharing, and faith formation. We need more to become church outside the church walls. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down on all (cf. Acts 2.1). We are called to build circles of relationship and prayer, not pyramids of power. In living out a sacramental life we must seek reconciliation with our indigenous brothers and sisters, with people of all ages and cultures, and with our brothers and sisters of other Christian churches and traditions.

**RECOMMENDATION 4: Prepare and publish an Archdiocesan Instruction to inform, properly guide and encourage the faithful towards popular devotions and forms of piety which harmonize and flow from the liturgical life of the Church and extend sacramental life so that, as disciples sent in Christ, we may more effectively take our active part in the New Evangelization.**

This recommended Archdiocesan Instruction could, for example, include suitable guidelines to encourage Eucharistic Adoration and greater lay participation in the Liturgy of the Hours (especially the hinge hours of Morning and Evening Prayer), the promotion of appropriate forms of devotion to Christ (e.g. the Divine Mercy, the Sacred Heart), authentic forms of veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the other saints whose example and intercession sustain us, public religious processions, ecumenical gatherings and ecumenical forms of prayer, the administration of sacramentals and the celebration of other various blessings.

**RECOMMENDATION 5: Facilitate and encourage the holding of various retreats and spiritual conferences throughout the Archdiocese, both for youth and adults, which invite faithful disciples to a deeper experience of God in their lives and a renewed commitment to prayer. To this end, the provision and designation of suitable venues readily accessible for personal and communal prayer is of great importance. As well, we should continue to welcome into the Archdiocese those Catholic lay ecclesial movements whose goals renew and strengthen Christian values, address current realities, and serve the spiritual needs of the people of God here in this local Church.**

## **IN CONCLUSION**

The members of this Focus Commission respectfully submit the above reflections and recommendations for the consideration of the members of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Winnipeg. Given the themes and concerns assigned to other Focus Commissions, members of this Focus Commission decided that direct recommendations regarding preparation for the Sacraments at the Service of Communion (Holy Orders and Matrimony) would be left to other Focus Commissions to discern.

We pray that through the work of this holy Synod, God's divine will for this local Church may be discerned and much fruit be harvested for the honour and glory of God and for the good of God's people!