



## The Agony and the Ecstasy: A Pastor's Perspective on Confirmation

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For those who like books, "the agony and the ecstasy" calls to mind a novel by Irving Stone based on the life of the famous Michelangelo Buonarotti of Florence. For many pastors, the phrase describes the task of preaching. For me, and many, many other pastors, the agony and the ecstasy refers to confirmation.

For the past twenty-five years, almost every Wednesday afternoon and evening from September through May has put me face-to-face with groups ranging from seven to as many as forty eighth and ninth graders. Some days I eagerly anticipated the opportunity I had as a pastor to teach and share the faith with the young people of the congregation, and, at the end of some of those days, I was almost ecstatic! Most of the class had seemed genuinely interested in what we were doing and actually participated. They asked questions, they offered astute observations, they knew the assigned memory work! Learning seemed to be taking place. As I turned off the lights and left the room to go home, I was convinced that the Spirit of God had been at work in that place and that, perhaps, I had been an instrument of the Spirit.

But other days, there seemed to be no spirit. There was little preparation on the part of the catechumens, no pertinent questions, and no apparent interest in what we were doing; worse, there was little, if any, respect for what we were trying to do or, for that matter, for the building or teacher. What there was a lot of was discipline. On those days, I left worn-out, angry, and almost in a state of depression, wondering whether or not the confirmation enterprise—at least as I and my colleagues on the pastoral staff were experiencing it—was worth the time, energy, and emotional stress. Indeed, there were many days when I was certain that it was not—that confirmation was counterproductive, that instead of assisting young

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people in their journey of faith and leading them toward fuller and more responsible participation in the Christian congregation, it was turning them off to faith and away from the Christian congregation.

But then would come another of those sessions that made it all worthwhile, when the agony of those "other days" would be swallowed up by the ecstasy of a catechumen saying, "Hey, wait a minute! Do you mean we don't have to do *anything* to be forgiven?" or "If I'm a saint, how come I keep on sinning?" Or...

Moments like that are rare but they do happen, as any pastor or catechist knows—perhaps more often than we recognize. When they do, they are powerful reminders of how the Spirit of God works even when we are convinced that nothing is working. Such moments are also reminders of what a rare opportunity confirmation presents for the educational ministry of the

church and for pastoral ministry.

## I. THE TRADITION

Pastors who are part of denominations having a strong tradition of confirmation are fortunate, for they have the support of the wider church, the congregation, the parents, and to a certain extent even the children themselves (although they often go kicking and screaming) for an extended period of special instruction in the Christian faith, usually taught by the pastor, leading to participation by the youth in some kind of public rite. I am part of such a denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and even though confirmation has been understood by Lutherans in a variety of ways over the last 450 years, it continues to be regarded by most Lutherans as essential for every young person.

While a sacramental understanding of confirmation is rejected by Protestants, in practice confirmation takes on a similar importance. In the popular theology of the pew, confirmation is that time when the young people of the parish are instructed by the pastor, and the public rite is the time when the young people say for themselves what their parents said for them at baptism. Although the church officially rejects the notion that the rite of confirmation in any way complements or completes the sacrament of baptism, for most parents and for some participants that is precisely what it does; this may explain why people whose connections with the church have become loose over the years renew a connection when their children reach the age for confirmation instruction.

Confirmation in the Lutheran church is a “sacred cow.” While most pastors recognize this, they discover just how sacred it is when they try to make a change in the way the public rite is conducted (i.e., with or without robes, as a “class” or as individuals in small groups, in the spring or the fall), in the length of the instruction period, or in who will do the bulk of the teaching (the pastor or lay catechists).

I am reminded just how cherished the tradition of confirmation is whenever one of my catechumens announces to me—usually at the conclusion of instruction—that he or she does not want to be confirmed in the fall. “I just don’t believe it” or “I don’t want anything to do with the church any more” are the reasons most often stated. Of course, I am distressed when one of my catechumens makes that decision—not because I feel that I have failed in my pastoral educational ministry to that young person, but because it means that we are losing (even if only for a time) one of the flock. But, on the other hand, I am pleased at the honesty, integrity,

and courage evident in the decision, for it usually is announced to me after we have discussed, usually in private, the meaning of the public rite in which they can now participate. During the course of confirmation instruction, they have come to recognize that they cannot stand before the congregation and state with honesty and integrity that they believe in God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They cannot confess the Apostles’ Creed; nor can they publicly state that it is their intention to “continue in the covenant God made with [them] in Holy Baptism” (which, as the rite goes on to clearly imply, means active participation in the life of a Christian congregation, including worship and striving to live the Christian faith in their daily lives).<sup>1</sup>

The first time this happened in my ministry, the parents were furious. As parents, child, and pastor met to discuss their child’s decision, however, I quickly realized that their anger was

not directed at their child, her lack of faith, or her decision not to participate in the church. Those matters were not as important as what grandmother would think! “This will break grandma’s heart,” the young woman’s father said. “You don’t know how much it means to her to have all of her grandchildren confirmed.” Nor was their anger directed at the young woman as much as it was at me for standing by and supporting her in her decision.

“But,” said the father, “she’s gone to classes, she’s done the work, so she should get confirmed. If she doesn’t want to go to church after she’s confirmed, that’s her business. I want her confirmed.” He demanded that I confirm her and threatened to transfer the family’s membership if I did not.

The parents themselves were members in name only, attending two or three times a year at most. It was immaterial to them whether or not their daughter participated in the church after she was confirmed. It made no difference whether she was being honest or not when she participated in the public rite, confessing the faith of the church as her own and announcing her intention to participate more fully in the life and mission of the church. What was important to them—and this is the point—was that this young woman, along with their other children, be confirmed. Confirmation meant *something*. It was significant enough that the family saw to it that their children took confirmation instruction.

The strong tradition of confirmation presents the church and the pastor with a child to teach, someone to tell the good news of their redemption in Christ. Whether the parents are members or non-members, active or inactive, and whatever their understanding or lack of understanding of confirmation, they present their child to church and pastor for a period of time (up to three years!), giving congregation and pastor an opportunity to teach those children the faith, to help them learn something about the Bible, the catechism, and Christian beliefs, to help shape their faith, and to draw them into the life of the Christian community where the Spirit of God can lead them to greater understanding of who they are as baptized children of God.

These strong traditional feelings about confirmation are a gift working for the church. Confirmation is a moment for pastoral ministry. It is an opportunity for word and Spirit to nurture the faith of the children and their relationship to the congregation. Parents send—or bring—their children to church, providing con-

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<sup>1</sup>*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 201.

gregations and their pastors a unique opportunity for teaching and sharing the faith. It is an opportunity that pastors and congregations dare not let slip by.

## II. THE PROBLEMS

Yet often the opportunity does slip by, because however cherished, however sacred, the tradition and practice of confirmation in our congregations are fraught with problems.

For one thing, we operate with too many theologies of confirmation. Even though most everyone wants confirmation, few people involved have a clear understanding of what it is or what we are trying to do. Parents and pastors frequently have different assumptions about what confirmation is, and many catechumens, even though they are “there,” don’t think about what they are doing at all! Mom and/or Dad said to go, and so they go. But for most of them, it is clear that what they are going to is simply something that adolescents have to endure for a few years,

like pimples and curfews.

The problem could be stated this way: most everyone in the congregation wants confirmation, but few understand what it is. For some—despite Lutheran teaching to the contrary—confirmation has a sacramental character, somehow communicating the Holy Spirit anew and bestowing grace for the journey of life. For others, confirmation is a necessary preparation for admission to communion, despite the 1970 report of the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation suggesting that communion is part of the church's confirmation ministry and not an end for which confirmation serves as preparation.<sup>2</sup> For still others, confirmation is a subjective commitment to believe in Jesus Christ and lead a Christian life, an act of renewal completing baptism—despite Lutheran theology's rejection of any suggestion that baptism is not complete in and of itself. And for many in the pews and pulpits, confirmation is still a rite of passage—from immaturity to maturity, from adolescence to adulthood.

Before the church can develop a confirmation program that will be helpful to the catechumen and the congregation, it needs a common understanding of confirmation—how the church understands the rite, what the purpose and goals of confirmation instruction are, why what is done is done—as well as some consistency in practice from parish to parish. Although the ELCA has a theologically adequate definition of confirmation to guide its practice,<sup>3</sup> apparently this has not been adequately communicated, understood, or accepted by those involved in confirmation ministry.

A second problem undermining confirmation ministry in the church and contributing to the agony of pastor and catechumen can best be stated this way: most everyone in the congregation wants confirmation, but few want to do it.

The young people want to be confirmed, because it signifies that they have reached “adult” status in the church, or that they no longer have to go to worship, Sunday school, or confirmation classes; but they do not want to “do” confirmation instruction. In fact, the majority of catechumens are simply there, occupying space,

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<sup>2</sup>*The Report of the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970) 25-27.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

putting forth very little effort, and consequently learning very little. Adults and parents also want children to be confirmed and to have confirmation instruction—after all, they were confirmed, and so were their parents and grandparents!—but they want the pastors to do the instruction. The pastors, too, would like to have the young people instructed and confirmed. It is after all a rare opportunity to “develop a relationship with the youth,” to teach them the faith, to discuss the meaning of church membership, and to guide them toward participation in a rite in which they affirm their baptismal faith and state their intention to participate more fully in the life and mission of the congregation. But pastors do not always enjoy the burden of instruction or relish the role of disciplinarian, a role thrust upon them by parental abdication and lack of support for the task. Pastors frequently feel that parents have relinquished their responsibility to teach their children the faith and transferred the religious education of their children to the church and, more specifically, to the pastor.

In my opinion, a major factor in the catechumens' confusion and disinterest—in their lack of effort and learning, understanding and growth—is the detachment of the parents, their lack of involvement and support for this aspect of Christian education. Confirmation, as it is practiced in too many congregations, involves pastor and unmotivated catechumens shuffling along in a largely unsuccessful catechetical effort with the parents hardly aware of the struggle. This is real agony. But in my experience, such agony can be transformed into ecstasy by the interest and involvement of parents in the church's confirmation ministry and instruction—when parents are directly involved with their children in confirmation instruction, and when parents, pastors, and lay catechists perceive themselves as partners in teaching catechumens the faith.

Each time I open my copy of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* (still a staple of my confirmation instruction), I am struck by the subtitle: "A Handbook of Basic Christian Instruction for the Family and the Congregation."<sup>4</sup> Luther wrote the catechism to counter the dismal ignorance of basic Christian concepts among the parishes of Saxony; it was written for parents, for "the head of the family,"<sup>5</sup> to teach their children, and to learn for themselves, basic Christian truths. Luther recognized, as have the people of God from the days of Moses, that it is the primary and God-given responsibility of the home to transmit and teach the faith to the children—"a responsibility it cannot transfer."<sup>6</sup> Such an understanding is implicit in most of the baptismal liturgies of communions that practice infant baptism—including the ELCA's, where parents and sponsors promise to teach the child the basics of the Christian faith.<sup>7</sup> And yet, in effect, most homes have transferred this responsibility to the church—at great cost.

As a pastor who teaches confirmation weekly and who sees it as an opportunity for teaching and transmitting the faith, I covet the presence and participation of parents in learning and teaching confirmation because it tells the catechumens that their parents are interested in their religious education and their

<sup>4</sup>Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 1.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 342.

<sup>6</sup>Arthur C. Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964) 205.

<sup>7</sup>*Lutheran Book of Worship*, 121.

growth in faith. Although not every parent has the gift of teaching, their mere presence in a teaching-learning situation tells the child that the parent places value on the Christian faith and on Christian education and reflection. Their presence can help foster a classroom atmosphere more conducive to learning and reduce discipline problems. An added benefit is that parents are then involved in learning and reflecting themselves, actively involved in fulfilling the vows made at their children's baptism: to "provide for their instruction in the Christian faith, that, living in the covenant of their baptism and in communion with the church, they may lead godly lives until the day of Jesus Christ."<sup>8</sup>

C. Richard Evenson, Executive Director for the Division of Parish Education in the former American Lutheran Church and, in retirement, a member of the parish I serve, suggests another problem in the way most parishes do confirmation. No matter what we say, Evenson contends, confirmation instruction, like school, is perceived as something that youth do, complete, and then graduate from. What they graduate from is either Christian education or

participation in the church, or, at worst, both. He suggests that churches must dispose of the premise that confirmation ministry is for children and youth only, and work instead from the premise that everyone in the congregation should be engaged in life-long learning.<sup>9</sup> Actively involving every parent in their children's confirmation instruction, whether as participants in class or in some way as teachers, would be a step in that direction.

### III. THE PROMISE

Confirmation is a significant ministry of the church. Because it has been, and continues to be, such a highly valued part of the individual's and the congregation's life, it presents the church with an opportunity that it must seize and fully use. The disinterested and unmotivated, of course—parents, children, and unfortunately even some pastors—we will have with us always. But if we can come to a clearer understanding of what it is that we are doing and trying to accomplish through the church's confirmation ministry, if we can involve the congregation and specifically the parents in a partnership of teaching and learning with pastor and catechumens, the number of disinterested and unmotivated can be reduced, and the balance shifted from agony to ecstasy for all who are involved in this essential pastoral and educational ministry of the church.

We might even be surprised to see the Spirit at work—calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying parents, children, and pastors—in a setting where many no longer even entertain such a possibility.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>C. Richard Evenson, oral presentation at Zumbrota, Minnesota, March 14, 1991.