

27th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (October 8, 2023)

First of all, I remind you that the sacrament of confirmation will be celebrated next Saturday, October 14:

- Bishop Pates will be the main celebrant (one of his last official acts before Oct. 18)
- confirmation Mass will be celebrated at 4 p.m. next Saturday at I.C. parish in Elma (change in the usual weekend Mass schedule—Elma and Lourdes will ‘trade’ their usual Mass times (E—Sat. 4 p.m.; OLL—Sun. 7:15 a.m.; R & NH Masses at usual times)
- large confirmation class (30+), thus, many parents, grandparents, family members will be there; Elma church has limited space—so, if you are not part of a confirmation candidate’s family, please consider attending one of the three other cluster Masses that weekend (full schedule, as always, is in bulletin)

Today’s readings aren’t focused specifically on confirmation, but the reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians recommends attending to whatever is ‘true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious’—all of which sounds very much like the fruits of the Holy Spirit that he mentions in his letter to the Galatians (love, joy, peace, patience, and so on). With our confirmation Mass coming up next weekend, this is a good time for a brief recap on this sacrament.

Confirmation is one of the three sacraments of initiation along with baptism (the first sacrament anyone receives—the beginning of one’s life in Christ) and Eucharist (by which we are nourished and strengthened by his Body and Blood). In confirmation is received the special power and gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, and the five others) that we need to live out more fully the mature life as a disciple of Jesus. For those who were baptized as infants (as most if not all of us were), confirmation is celebrated at a later age. I was in sixth grade when I was confirmed, and I remember being told ahead of time that we would be renewing our baptismal promises. I was scared because I had no idea at that time what those promises were. I had visions of the bishop saying something like “OK, Jerry, renew your baptismal promises”, and me standing there like a dummy. Well, that didn’t happen and, in fact, I survived!

Our present general practice is to celebrate confirmation at age 15 or 16, which I think is a very good idea. At that point in a young person’s life, confirmation is a more personal and mature decision and commitment that can be more freely and intentionally made, more so than in one’s grade school years. I have been the sponsor for two of my brother Tom’s children who were confirmed in their high school years, and I know that they had a lot better understanding of their Catholic faith and the sacrament of confirmation than I did when I was confirmed in sixth grade.

I recently visited with some of our confirmation candidates who had given me a lengthy list of questions—really good questions--they had about their Catholic faith and this sacrament in particular. Some were about specific Church teachings and practices (e.g. ‘why do we have confession; why can’t we just confess directly to God?’). But other questions went deeper; for example, ‘what if I’m not sure about my faith or what I believe? What if I decide not to go to Mass as an adult?’ These were good, thoughtful, real-life questions—and the first thing I said to them was “don’t ever be afraid of asking questions”! Such questions show real thought and pondering, trying to make sense of a faith in a world and culture that mocks faith—especially Christianity—and wants to force it to the sidelines.

In confirmation we received the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but those gifts don’t do what they are intended to do unless we put those gifts to good use. Confirmation is not some kind of spiritual ‘magic wand’

that makes us fully active and loving disciples of Jesus all at once. It's like any other gifts or talents that God has given us; for example, one may have a gift for music—but unless one puts in the hours of discipline, practice, and rehearsal, that talent is basically locked up in a closet, never to see the light of day. It is the same with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We need to use what the Spirit has given us to have an active, genuine relationship with Jesus Christ and an authentic prayer life. By fostering those things, the Spirit's gifts will come alive in us and grow much like our recent rains brought our brown, dried-out lawns back to a vivid, bright green.

I'm directing these words first to our confirmation candidates, but not only to them—also to all of us who have already been confirmed. This sacrament makes it possible to grow in our lives in Christ, but we have to cooperate with and use those gifts—and do so intentionally and regularly. We sometimes hear the idea that confirmation is the end of our religious education. That is completely, totally, and unconditionally wrong! Confirmation prepares and strengthens us for ongoing, lifelong growth in our love for Jesus and in our knowing and living our Catholic faith. We've all heard the phrase 'practicing Catholics'. Well, in a major way we are all 'practicing Catholics'...and the practicing and the growth never stops. We are all, every one of us, a work in progress—the learning never stops, our growth in holiness and in our love for Jesus and in loving service to others never stops

Candidates, you will receive those seven gifts of the Holy Spirit next Saturday, October 14. Don't forget about those gifts on October 15, 16, or any other day thereafter. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you with whatever questions, fears, or doubts you may have...especially if you are tempted to think you don't need God or that he doesn't have any special place in your life. And I say these very same things to all the rest of you, to us (including myself). Those gifts come from God and in a special way through the sacrament of confirmation. But they won't become fruitful unless we want them to be fruitful and we act on that desire on a regular basis. I ask the Holy Spirit on pretty much a daily basis to guide me in this task or that conversation; in other words, I'm also a work in progress. And believe me: I've got a whole lot of progress yet to be made! But thanks be to God, we don't have to do it ourselves; in fact, we can't do it ourselves. And that's exactly why God gave us his Son and why he gives us the Holy Spirit and those gifts of great and mighty power.

I want to close with a traditional and powerful prayer to the Holy Spirit, and I invite you to join with me—you can find it on the back cover of *Breaking Bread*. Let's offer this prayer first for our confirmation candidates, but also for the rest of us as well:

"Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth. O God, who has instructed the hearts of your faithful by the light of the Holy Spirit, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may have a right judgment in all things and evermore rejoice in his consolations. Through Christ our Lord. Amen."