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Veni Sancte Spiritus (Come Holy Spirit)

This weekend marks the end of the Confirmation Season here in the diocese. I have visited 51 parishes of the diocese, and will have anointed with Holy Chrism the foreheads of over 1,700 young women and men. They are junior and seniors in high school who commit themselves to follow the way of Jesus Christ through active participation in the life of the Catholic Church. I like to schedule Confirmations during the Easter season, primarily because I consider Confirmation to be an Easter sacrament. Also, this time of year gives parishes good opportunities to prepare their young people for the celebration.

I like the opportunity to be present at liturgy in one-third of the parishes each year. The diocese has 150 parishes and missions. I also like having personal contact with young people who spend two years in preparation for receiving the sacrament. In the first year, they systematically review the truths of our faith. In the second year, they concentrate on spirituality, their own personal relationship with the Lord. Each candidate for confirmation has his or her own sponsor, hopefully chosen from the parish community, who spends quality time guiding and answering faith questions.

Many candidates often remark that they entered the two-year program with reluctance, or simply to please their parents. Somewhere during the process, especially as the result of retreat experiences, they come to view confirmation as a personal commitment and one of their own choosing. Their faith comes alive. They begin to take personal ownership of the faith choices they make.

For myself, I find the confirmation ceremonies a wonderful experience. I love having contact with young people who soon will be going to college where again critical faith choices have to be made. It is most important that these young people, who are growing to maturity and leaving the home environment, leave high school feeling good about the Church, and knowing that the Church, and especially the parish community, really cares about them.

In my confirmation homily, I like to emphasize the importance of young people coming to terms with their own personhood, so that they feel good about themselves. Perhaps a key word would be respect. Young people come to value and respect themselves because their actions, attitudes and choices all reflect

their own healthy self-image. We tend to live out and reflect the way we value and respect ourselves. There is an old theological principle that "grace builds on nature." The more fully human a person is, the more divine the person becomes.

I like to emphasize that in confirming themselves, and in committing themselves to their Catholic faith, young people need the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They need the Spirit to strengthen them in their resolve to be their own person, to take responsibility for the decisions they make and to become a person for others. If they see themselves as gifted, they are willing and even anxious to gift others by reaching out to others. Hopefully, they will see themselves as an instrument of God's grace and that the Holy Spirit, dwelling within them, brings God's life and grace to others. At confirmation, the Church sends them forth just as Jesus said to the disciples on that first Easter night, "As the Father sends me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit."

Confirmation is that witness sacrament, witnessing to our faith by living that faith. The newly confirmed have a real sense of God in their lives. Each writes a letter indicating why he or she wants to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. Here are sample phrases from some letters:

- "Confirmation completes the process of being fully Catholic; it begins the process of being Catholic."
- "I chose confirmation in order to continue searching for God and trying to understand and comprehend my faith."
- "I want to be confirmed so that I can have a sense of belonging. I have been soul searching and Catholicism helps me in my search."
- "I used to hide the fact that I am a practicing Catholic. Now I am proud of my faith and not ashamed of it."
- "Because of the Confirmation process, I have come to the simple conclusion that I need Jesus in my life."
- "I want to be confirmed because I am ready to give something back to my parish community. I am ready to serve others as they have served me throughout the years. I will take a more responsible and active part in the community."
- "The Confirmation program has helped me to discover who I am and where I am going."
- "I look forward to confirmation with anticipation and excitement. Considering my decision to live my faith the rest of my life, two years of preparation does not seem very long."

- "I want to be confirmed because I need God. I have to have God to live. God has always been there for me and I want to be there for God."
- "The Confirmation program has opened my eyes to my Catholic faith. Being Catholic is to participate in one's faith."

I am certainly grateful to our parish communities which support our young people in their faith journey. So many persons volunteer their time as catechists and sponsors to help parents in the faith journey of their children. All of us can be justly proud of the 1,700 young people willing to commit their lives to the person of Jesus Christ.

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