

Pastoral Letter of the Archbishop of Liverpool appointed to be read at all Masses celebrated on the Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time – Saturday 16/Sunday 17 July 2016.

Dear friends,

Over the last several years our Archdiocese has been discerning the best way to prepare children and families for the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Our Baptismal resource is now well established in several areas of the Archdiocese and the With You Always programme in preparation for Reconciliation, Confirmation and First Eucharist has brought family catechesis into the forefront of our diocesan life. As part of this process the Sacrament of Confirmation was brought forward from the teenage years to be celebrated before First Holy Communion.

Having visited many parishes and listened to priests, deacons, religious, teachers, catechists and parents, I have decided to move Confirmation back to the teenage years. Despite this creating yet another change in our sacramental practice it will allow us a pastoral opportunity to engage with teenagers and to help them respond to the demands of their Christian calling at a very crucial moment in their lives. It also allows for a greater sense of unity with the other dioceses in England and Wales, many of whom celebrate Confirmation in the teenage years. I will also restore the role of bishop as the primary minister of the Sacrament of Confirmation – given the fact Confirmations will no longer be restricted to a particular time of year, Bishop Tom Williams and I will have a greater freedom to visit your parish and confer the Sacrament of Confirmation for you.

These last few years have taught us much about how best to prepare for and celebrate Christian Initiation. We have been reminded that the sacraments are gifts given, not things to be earned or merited like an award or a graduation. It will be important to keep this in mind when preparing teenagers and young adults to receive Confirmation in the future. Our time of reflection and discernment has also reminded us of the call made by the Second Vatican Council to put families at the centre of passing on the Faith to their children. The Council Fathers put it like this:

"Graced with the dignity and office of fatherhood and motherhood, parents will energetically acquit themselves of a duty which devolves primarily on them, namely education and especially religious education." (Gaudium et Spes, 48)

In practice what this means is that family catechesis is here to stay. From September the year-long With You Always programme will continue to be used but solely for the preparation of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and First Holy Communion. The With You Always resource has been adapted to accommodate this change and it will be available for order soon in the normal way.

As the first large groups of 13-year-olds to be confirmed will not take place until 2020 we have plenty of time before then to reflect and prepare a new Confirmation preparation resource to be used in the parishes of the Archdiocese. In the meantime Confirmations will still be a part of diocesan life because some teenagers will have missed Confirmation at an earlier age, and there are always adults to be confirmed. As we have seen in recent years the method of family catechesis in the With You Always resource has led many parents and adults to request Confirmation for themselves.

My hope is that by offering the Sacrament of Confirmation to our teenagers they will deepen their love of the Eucharist, and that their faith in our Lord Jesus Christ will be strengthened.

With my prayers and every good wish for you and your families for the summer months ahead

Most Rev Malcolm McMahon OP
Archbishop of Liverpool