

Sacrament of confirmation: not same old (Jan. 7, 2018)

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Bishop Higi and I will be traveling to many parishes “doing confirmation” this year. First, I want to let you know to whom this column — and this sacrament — are aimed. Second, I will make three suggestions that may help parish and personal preparations to be coherent and effective.

Catechumens and candidates, both adults and young people, will often receive sacramental confirmation at the Easter Vigil. Another grouping will be mostly teens who will experience the sacrament on various dates through the year. The next overall audience that I address here is the parish membership as a whole. No sacramental liturgy is private — if there is a seat available, consider yourself invited. More about this in a minute.

Now for my suggestions. First, being confirmed is a statement that a person is ready to respond to God all the time, not only when the bishop or his delegate anoints foreheads. Believing in God’s action in us entails a commitment to moral living because of who we are. The third Mass preface for the Nativity (Christmas) summarizes nicely a core truth of Christ’s Incarnation: “When our frailty is assumed by your Word not only does human mortality receive unending honor, but by this wondrous union we, too, are made eternal.” The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit promised by this sacrament enliven our faith so we can assist others to live their own goodness. No spiritual gift comes to life unless it is applied.

Second, confirmation seems irrelevant if we imagine that it is something that we ourselves are doing or completing. Any sacrament is about God’s initiative, about God’s prior invitation and then our response. I have mentioned to our pastors that the whole parish should be invited to confirmation. (In a few parishes, the candidates, sponsors and families almost take every seat.) The confirmation Mass should be listed in the Sunday bulletin — its omission implies that we don’t think it is important. Worse, that our young people don’t deserve a turnout for this once-in-a-lifetime event. There is a lot of hand wringing these days about young people not staying with the Church. But have we stayed with them?

There are not enough Sundays in the year to schedule all confirmation Masses on that day of the week. But when they happen, “Mass on Sunday is Sunday Mass” whether you are involved in the confirmation or not.

Third, make a habit of getting your proper amount of sleep. I have a theory that one factor in diminishing religious practice, much less faith comprehension, is a lack of sleep. We read about sleep deprivation as it affects health, work and safety issues. There is a growing amount of data that shows that sleep is anything but time lost. Abby Smith Rumsey’s 2016 book “When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future” speaks to this in a secular context. In sleep and dreams, “vast realms of reality normally inaccessible to us take center stage ... the mind sorts the rubbish of the day from the riches we grab and keep forever” (p. 112). Experts tell us that we can’t “bank” sleep and we can’t really “make up for it” on the weekends.

Various books of the Bible portray sleep and dreams as sacred spaces. Many people, including Abraham, Jacob, Daniel, St. Joseph and even the wife of Pontius Pilate, each experienced divine promptings while asleep. Psalm 127 is one of my favorites for telling us, “God gives to his beloved in sleep.”

Now you don't have to accept my little riff on sleep as some official teaching of the Church. Maybe it has not been formalized because it just seems too obvious. I do not intend to review all of this when I speak at upcoming confirmations. I do hope that parishioners, parents, confirmands and catechists will talk about some of these concerns of mine. And if this column put you to sleep before you reached this ending, I hope you were visited by a refreshing dream.