

Reflections

by the
Most Reverend Thomas J. Murphy



My First Confirmation

By the time this column is read at the end of January or beginning of February, I will have had the joy of celebrating the Sacrament of Confirmation for the first time as Bishop of Eastern Montana. On January 28th, I celebrated this sacrament with the people of St. Joseph's Parish in Plentywood and the mission parishes of Westby and Outlook. I realize full well the importance this sacrament has to the young people and adults who will receive it, but I also reflect personally on what this celebration means to me.

My thoughts go back some 30 years to a November 1st when I was in sixth grade and waited anxiously to receive this sacrament myself. I was aware of the importance of the sacrament that would make me a Christian adult and a "soldier of Christ," but I was also somewhat fearful of the "gentle tap" that would be given to me by the Bishop as a sign of the commitment I was making to be ready to endure anything for the faith which I professed. I still remember the group of relatives and friends after the Confirmation who gathered at our home to wish me well and to celebrate this important event in my life as a Christian.

But a great deal has happened in the 30-plus years since I received this sacrament of Christian maturity. We have experienced a Church in transition and a world of turmoil. We have also experienced this extraordinary event in the life of the Church called "The Second Vatican Council" which asked for a revision of the sacramental celebrations of our faith to reflect the world in which we live.

The sacrament remains the same, but the emphasis which is given to the sacrament places it in relationship to the other sacraments of Christian initiation - Baptism and the Eucharist. The Church is calling us back to a more traditional understanding of Confirmation as the sacrament which completes and fulfills what began at Baptism and which is continued in the Eucharist. A theology of Confirmation today stresses the mature acceptance of this sacrament as a sign of personal commitment to the Lord Jesus and the Roman Catholic Church with the willingness to live this faith in our daily lives.

Such a commitment is not the decision of parents or the Christian community alone, but it should be the decision of the young person receiving the sacrament who realizes, appreciates and understands the commitment which he or she is asked to profess and live. Parents and the entire Christian community are part of the celebration by the witness they offer to our young people and through the opportunity they have to renew their Confirmation pledge. When Confirmation is celebrated in a parish, no one is allowed the luxury of standing back from the celebration. A celebration of this sacrament affects not only the young people and adults about to be confirmed; it affects the whole parish and the entire diocese.

A celebration of this sacrament reminds all of us that we are called to be mature Christians in faith and prayer. Confirmation should mark the beginning of an adult inquiry into the meaning of our faith which will continue until the day we die. Confirmation is not the end of Christian education; it is rather the beginning in so many ways.

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Confirmation also is the challenge to our life of prayer and spirituality, a prayer and spirituality built not only on emotions or a rigid approach to the Word of God in our lives, but rather a prayer and spirituality rooted in a relationship to the Church as the Body of Christ. Our prayer should not be an individualistic and isolated experience, but rather a prayer in union with a Church in the context of a parish and diocesan community.

Confirmation brings us into adult relationships with a Church which offers guidelines and directions and help to have our prayer life and spirituality grow in the Lord. The high point of this adult relationship is the Sunday liturgy where as a group of believers, we celebrate the mystery of Christ in the Eucharist and relate this experience to our daily lives.

It is a privilege to celebrate this Sacrament of Christian maturity with the people of Eastern Montana. I pray that the celebration of this sacrament will lead all of us to a deeper faith commitment to the Lord and to His Church.

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The trip to Cascade and Fort Shaw was absolutely great, although the new storm prompted many prayers on the way back to Great Falls after a fabulous pot-luck dinner with the people of St. Ann's...The previous week involved meetings in Helena with the Montana Catholic Conference and the dialogue committee between the Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopalian Church in Montana. The dioceses of Helena and Great Falls are fortunate to have the services of Mr. John Franklino as the Director of the Montana Catholic Conference which celebrated its 10th anniversary on January 18th. Montana Social Services, the Catholic Charities organization sponsored by both dioceses in Montana, also offers services which affect the lives of many of our people in Eastern Montana. The dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopalians also proved to be an experience rooted in mutual respect and trust which helps to contradict the divisions which exist in the body of believers in the Lord Jesus.... And during this present week, I hope to be in Sidney and Ashland and Billings which gives me the opportunity to be in contact with the different communities which comprise the Diocese of Eastern Montana...In between all this activity, there are the normal meetings and appointments which fill up a day and a week very quickly. A great deal of time has been given to the preparations for the annual financial appeal by the Diocese in the CARE and SHARE drive which will occur this year on the weekend of March 31st and April 1st. This appeal is most important for the diocese to function as a service to our priests and people. I really hope that the response will be reflective of the enthusiasm and support which I have witnessed in my travels throughout the diocese.