That All Might Receive His Grace:
A Letter to Ministers Regarding Confirmation
November 9, 2017

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With gratitude for your dedication
Every year, catechists prepare thousands of the faithful to receive the sacrament of Confirmation in our Archdiocese. Your hard work and dedication are essential to enabling young people to properly receive the extraordinary gift of the Holy Spirit. Archbishop Sartain is truly grateful for your efforts. He wants to strengthen and encourage you in your work. He also looks to you for wisdom and guidance as the Archdiocese of Seattle takes a close look at our process for preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation. Archbishop wants to consult with you and learn from your experience. He also wants to share with you some of what he has observed over the past few years.

Creating opportunities for the Holy Spirit to transform
Less than half of the children baptized in the Archdiocese of Seattle receive the sacrament of confirmation (See appendix 2 below). As a sacramental Church, these statistics represent a serious concern. The sacrament of Confirmation has real and profound effects on those who receive it and the Church. The most important effects of Confirmation come, not by our action, but by the work of the Holy Spirit. If Catholics are not receiving this sacrament, a very important opportunity is being missed. Our job is to find a way to increase reception of the Sacrament.
In his invitation to consider the age of confirmation, Archbishop Sartain has asked Pastors and ministers to consider ways in which we can help ensure that more youth receive the grace of the sacrament of Confirmation. Evaluating the age of confirmation is only a part of what Archbishop wants us to consider. He also invites us to renew our familiarity with the true meaning of the sacrament with an openness to how the Holy Spirit may be calling us to help ensure more people enjoy the benefits of the sacrament.

**Initiation, not graduation**

Archbishop has observed that many parents and youth refer to the sacrament of Confirmation as a sort of ‘rite of passage’ to adulthood or a public recognition of having achieved a ‘mature’ understanding of the faith. While there is nothing bad per se in a rite of passage, interpreting the sacrament primarily as a rite of passage or sign of the recipient’s maturity can obscure its true meaning by shifting emphasis from the action of the Holy Spirit to the action of the recipient.

With our current age of confirmation aligned closely with the latter stages of High School, a time of life when youth focus intensely on earning a High School diploma, it is not surprising that youth and parents might perceive the sacrament of Confirmation as “some kind of ‘graduation’ from church participation.”1 Whatever the age of Confirmation, we have an important obligation to communicate how the Sacrament is one of initiation not graduation.

In addition to the problematic association of a sacrament of initiation with a ceremony that signifies the end of participation in High School, relating Confirmation with graduation can lead to treating the Sacrament as a goal to be achieved. This association, combined with the busyness of life, can lead parents and youth to approach the requirements of a parish Confirmation preparation program in the same way they would receive High School Graduation requirements, as hurdles to overcome. Thus, Archbishop Sartain has noted that, despite good intentions, an emphasis on ‘completing the preparation program’ serves to “reinforce the mistaken impression that Confirmation is tantamount to graduation.”2

Archbishop Sartain asks us to help move parents and youth from thinking in terms of graduation, merit or maturity to an awareness of the true gift of the Sacrament: “the inexpressible gift, the Holy Spirit himself.”1 In doing so, he is shifting our focus from our actions as catechists, parents or confirmandi to a focus on what our Lord is doing through the Sacrament.

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1 Archbishop Sartain  *The Age of Confirmation: A Proposal*
2 Archbishop Sartain, *The Age of Confirmation: A Proposal*
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Instead of focusing on the merits of the recipient of the sacraments the Church reminds us that “the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God.” This is why the Church’s sacramental theology does not emphasize the maturity, merit or competency of a potential recipient but rather emphasizes the rights of the faithful to the “word of God and the sacraments.” Additionally, the Church affirms that “Since the sacrament of confirmation is necessary for full initiation into the Church baptized members of the faithful are entitled to this sacrament.”

When Canon Law speaks of obligations related to the sacrament of Confirmation, those obligations more commonly fall upon the ministers of the sacrament than the recipient. For example, Canon 885 instructs “The diocesan bishop is obliged to take care that the sacrament of confirmation is conferred on subjects who properly and reasonably seek it.”

As catechists, we help our bishop fulfill this obligation. In particular, Archbishop Sartain asks us to help move parents and youth from thinking in terms of graduation, merit or maturity to an awareness of the true gift of the Sacrament: “the inexpressible gift, the Holy Spirit himself.” In doing so, he is shifting our focus from our actions as catechists, parents or confirmandi to a focus on what our Lord is doing through the Sacrament.

**Disposing candidates to receive the grace of the Sacrament**

The Church’s sacramental theology helps us to understand the primacy of God’s action in the sacraments. At the same time, it advises us as recipients of the sacraments that “the fruits of the sacraments also

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3 St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* III, 68,8  
6 *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 885  
7 Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation
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depend on the disposition of the one who receives them.” God’s gift is gratuitous, nonetheless, He invites our full, conscious and active participation in receiving that gift.

Thus, our reason for preparing recipients for the sacrament of Confirmation remains the same as any other form of sacramental preparation: “in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain.” This suggests that preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation should not be presented as a ‘class’ preparing students for a milestone to be achieved and overcome. Rather, preparation should seek to facilitate awareness of how the Holy Spirit will act in the Sacrament, deepening a relationship with the recipient, a relationship which began in Baptism and will be renewed repeatedly through the Eucharist.

This emphasis on the primacy of Grace and an ongoing encounter with the mystery of the Holy Spirit is part of what makes good sacramental preparation so different from what happens in school. In school, the teacher acts first, presenting information to the student, who must then demonstrate the ability to master and use that information. Once the student demonstrates mastery, the student moves on to new teachers and other more challenging material.

Sacramental participation is different. Here, our focus is on God’s action. Not ours. Through the Church, God invites the recipient to receive grace. We are helpers and facilitators who help to clear the way for God to act in the life of His people.

As leaders of sacramental preparation programs, we assist the Church in helping confirmandi to be well disposed to the grace offered in the Sacrament. Throughout this process, we act more as witnesses than remembering that the confirmandi “listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”

**Focusing on the action of the Holy Spirit**

Given the enormous spiritual challenges our youth face at earlier and earlier ages, our Archbishop ardently wishes that they should have the assistance of the Holy Spirit so they may overcome those challenges and grow in faith. He also wishes that we as catechists communicate the very real power of the Holy Spirit so that confirmandi may know the powerful support our Lord intends to give them in the Sacrament.

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8 CCC 1128
9 Sacrosanctum Concilium #11
10 Evangelii Nuntiandi
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Unfortunately, as human beings, we tend to focus on our action and forget to pay attention to God’s action. This is why Archbishop Sartain has asked us to shift the focus “in our catechesis of the sacrament from a personal choice of the candidate to the freely given grace of God, who desires all the baptized to share fully in the Paschal Mystery through Confirmation.” If we are able to do this we will succeed in what may be our most important role, facilitating full and active participation in the Sacrament by the confirmandi.

Naturally, our catechesis will provide intellectual formation to help confirmandi understand the nature of the sacrament. We will also invite them to a well formed awareness of the offer of grace made by the sacrament.

At the same time, we must be cautious about making personal choice the primary emphasis of our sacramental preparation. It takes a lifetime to truly begin to understand the meaning of the sacraments of initiation we receive in our faith. No words of ours will be able to fully describe what God intends to give our confirmandi in the Sacrament. Consequently, our catechesis should recognize the mysterious nature of Confirmation and advise confirmandi that, if they are aware of a certain incompleteness in their comprehension of the Sacrament, that awareness may, in fact, be a good sign, rather than an impediment.

More important than any curriculum or experience we can offer to confirmandi is an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit. Our performance measure is not perfectly formed comprehension and consent but conscious and active participation in the Sacrament. This should take some of the pressure off of us as catechists.

It is also why Archbishop Sartain tells us that Confirmation preparation must never be ‘about the program.’ A focus on the program, takes attention away from what matters most, the action of our Lord. The fact that God is working in the lives of our confirmandi should encourage us and inform what we do in formation.

Our work as catechists should emphasize what Pope Francis calls the “‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other.” The youth and parents we hope to evangelize will not understand nor care about intellectual formation, liturgical practice or parish engagement until they believe that

“A proper shift [should] occur in our catechesis of the sacrament from a personal choice of the candidate to the freely given grace of God, who desires all the baptized to share fully in the Paschal Mystery through Confirmation.”

11 Archbishop Sartain The Age of Confirmation: A Proposal
12 cf. Sacrosanctum Concilium #14
13 Evangelii Gaudium #169
these things really lead to a relationship with Christ. Thus, it’s important that our first encounters with potential confirmandi and their parents make a good first impression.

If we are careful, it is very easy to fall into a blasé almost bureaucratic approach to our ministry which suggests to parents and confirmandi that, when they walk through our door, we see them as a nothing more than an administrative detail to dispense with. Whether we are welcoming engaged parishioners or people with no parish connection, our encounter with them should feel more like the prodigal son’s return to his Father’s embrace than an application for a building permit.

Archbishop Sartain knows the innate kindness and generosity of the catechists of our Archdiocese and he wants us to work together to develop policies and procedures that free our catechists to practice the art of accompaniment. Going forward, our policies and procedures will seek first to facilitate the practice of this art by encouraging parish catechists to adapt preparation programs appropriately to facilitate reception of the Sacrament.

**A new relationship with the parish and the universal Church**

Confirmation makes the recipient “more closely bound to the Church.” It not only prepares us to participate more fully and actively in the Eucharist and it may even serve as a way into service in parish life. Our formation programs offer an opportunity for youth to consider the Gifts God has given them for service and to see where those gifts could be offered in the parish.

In the same way that preparation can help confirmandi find their place in their home parish, it can help understand how the Sacrament makes them part of the universal Church. Explaining why a Bishop administers the Sacrament is a good opportunity to do this. “Normally a bishop administers the sacrament so that there will be a clearer reference to the first pouring forth of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. . . Thus the reception of the Spirit through the ministry of the bishop shows the close bond that joins the confirmed to the Church and the mandate received from Christ to bear witness to him before all.”

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14 Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation
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The Bishop’s primary role in confirmation connects the confirmandi to the Apostles as well as the larger Church. Catechists who emphasize this point not only correctly identify an important part of the character of confirmation, they anticipate the pastoral reality that many of those who receive this sacrament in as youth will, in the not too distant future, leave their parish boundaries. By establishing a connection with the Archdiocese for the confirmandi catechists can also lay the groundwork for the recipient to remain engaged in the life of the Church though the transitions of youth and young adulthood.

Evangelists in word and deed

The rite of confirmation emphasizes how the confirmed, as part of the Church, receive the Holy Spirit for the purpose of bear witness to the whole world: “This giving of the Holy Spirit conforms believers more fully to Christ and strengthens them so that they may bear witness to Christ for the building up of his Body in faith and love.”16 In this way, confirmation plays an essential role in effecting the initiation of believers who “As members of the living Christ, incorporated into him and made like him by baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist, . . . have an obligation to collaborate in the expansion and spread of his Body, so that they might bring it to fullness as soon as possible.”17

This strengthening to bear witness is meant to be more than living lives of virtue, acting as good citizens or contributing to the improvement of the temporal order. Though all these things are good, the rite calls the confirmandi to recognize that “By the sacrament of confirmation they are more perfectly bound to the Church and are endowed with the special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.”18

In this way, Confirmation preparation can offer confirmandi inspiration to go forth as missionary disciples in service. Furthermore, it can provide them the context they need to interpret their service as a response to the love of God. Not only will they be more eager to feed the hungry or comfort the afflicted, they will come to see Jesus in the people they serve.

17 Ad Gentes #36
18 Lumen Gentium #11
A cornerstone for a life of faith

Canon law establishes a norm of parishes obtaining, recording and reporting data regarding confirmandi. Provided we obtained consent from parents, the occasion of Confirmation could be an appropriate time for the Archdiocese to collaborate with parishes to obtain contact information for the confirmandi that the Archdiocese could then use to maintain contact with them over the course of their lives, inviting them to events, reminding them of sacramental anniversaries and preserving a point of contact between the confirmandi and the universal Church. While this sort of record keeping may seem mundane, it can play a critical role in sustaining a lifetime practice of faith and help the sacrament of Confirmation to realize its potential as an introduction to a life of faith.

A process for Consultation

During the September 6, 2017 Fall Gathering of Youth Ministers and Pastoral Assistants for Faith Formation (PAFFs), Bishop Mueggenborg presented a helpful exploration of the history and theology of confirmation. Additionally, we had the opportunity to learn from you as catechists about how we might go forward as an Archdiocese in fostering the best possible norms for Confirmation preparation.

Among the things you told us were the following:

- Conduct listening sessions for youth to talk about their experiences with Confirmation and Confirmation preparation
- Conduct listening sessions with catechists
- Conduct listening sessions with parents
- Research best practices in other dioceses
- Provide time and formation to support any changes to policy
- Encourage parental involvement in catechesis
- Provide catechists continuing formation
- Provide a thorough teaching of the meaning of Confirmation to parents, youth and catechists
- Encourage a life-long approach to the faith

CAN. 895† The names of those confirmed with mention made of the minister, the parents and sponsors, and the place and date of the conferral of confirmation are to be recorded in the confirmation register of the diocesan curia or, where the conference of bishops or the diocesan bishop has prescribed it, in a register kept in the parish archive.

- Code of Canon Law, Canon 895
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Over the next year, we encourage everyone as catechists to participate in the following events to foster a fruitful dialogue regarding how we can best foster proper reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Archdiocese:

- **September 29 and October 27, 2017** – Formation days for ministers during which Fr. Mike Raschko will share some of the Church’s theology regarding the Holy Spirit and the Trinity.
- **November 11 & 12, 2017** – During the Annual Catholic Youth Convention, we will survey youth and volunteer catechists regarding their experience with Confirmation formation and their thoughts about what we could do better.
- **December 5, 2017** - During our formation day with Paul Walker, a Youth Minister from the diocese of Memphis, TN who will speak on best practices in Youth Ministry, we will further consult with catechists regarding best practices in Confirmation preparation.
- **February 22, 2018** – Continued dialogue with catechists and development of recommendations for norms regarding Confirmation Preparation.
- **May 17, 2018** – A meeting with catechists to identify strategies for implementation of any revised policies or procedures.
- **June 7, 2018** – A meeting with catechists to identify strategies for communicating revised policies or procedures.

**We want to hear from you**

Archbishop Sartain remains truly grateful for the hard work and dedication that parish catechists invest in sacramental preparation. While exploring the question of the appropriate age of Confirmation he hopes to foster an ongoing dialogue with catechists regarding how he and his delegates can best to support your work and learn from your insights.

Should you have questions or observations that might be helpful, please take a moment to contact us and share them. In order to best receive and integrate your observations please direct them as follows:

- **Pastors**, please contact Deacon Eric Paige, Executive Director of Evangelization Formation and Discipleship at [eric.paige@seattlearch.org](mailto:eric.paige@seattlearch.org)

- **Youth Ministers**, please contact Daria Lobato, Director of Parish Youth Ministry Services at [daria.lobato@seattlearch.org](mailto:daria.lobato@seattlearch.org)

- **Pastoral Assistants for Faith Formation**, please contact Anne Frederick, Director of Faith Formation [anne.frederick@seattlearch.org](mailto:anne.frederick@seattlearch.org)
Appendix 1: Archbishop Sartain’s Age of Confirmation Proposal

Over the past several years, a number of priests and laity have approached me requesting reconsideration of the age of Confirmation in the Archdiocese of Seattle. The overarching concern has been the importance of the grace of this sacrament for young people, who are experiencing challenges and trials at a much younger age than previous generations. Another concern is that preparation for Confirmation during high school years confronts a number of obstacles in the lives of students, most especially the amount of school and extracurricular activities in which they are typically involved. Adding a sacramental preparation requirement during these busy years presents a challenge not only to students but also to their parents and those involved in catechetical ministry.

Unintentionally, the present practice often serves to reinforce the impression that Confirmation is some kind of “graduation.” A similar difficulty could result if the age of Confirmation were 8th grade.

I concur with these observations and would add another: I have noticed in my 17 years as a bishop that, with the best of intentions, we have put so much emphasis on “completing the preparation program” that we have not only reinforced the mistaken impression that Confirmation is tantamount to graduation; we have also neglected the more important aspect of preparation— to dispose the candidates to receive the powerful grace of the sacrament of Confirmation. Current practice can lead one to think that completing the program is more important than the grace God is giving the candidates in the sacrament.

Another fact to take into consideration is that parish high school youth ministry programs often revolve around preparation for Confirmation. This has been done with the best of intentions. In other words, we have desired to have quality youth programs for our young people while also making sure that they receive the sacrament of Confirmation. One of the factors in this approach has been a mistaken notion of Confirmation as a “sacrament of maturity,” meaning that it has sometimes been understood merely as a time of choice for the young person, who “confirms” his or her faith by requesting to be Confirmed. Unintentionally, this approach has served to underplay the fact that the sacrament is first and foremost about God’s initiative in giving the candidates the gifts of the Holy Spirit to help them to be more perfect disciples of Jesus. Moreover, when the Church teaches that Confirmation is the completion of Christian Initiation, it means that the reception of the sacrament is a completion of the candidate’s sharing in Christ’s Paschal Mystery, which culminated in the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In recent discussions during Presbyteral Council meetings, which took place at my request following discussions in some deaneries over the past several years, a consensus seemed to emerge that the age of Confirmation in the Archdiocese of Seattle should be lowered. There would be several advantages to such a change:
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- A proper shift would occur in our catechesis of the sacrament from a personal choice of the candidate to the freely given grace of God, who desires all the baptized to share fully in the Paschal Mystery through Confirmation.

- Receiving the grace of the sacrament at a younger age would equip our young people with the gifts of the Holy Spirit they need to advance through adolescence to adulthood.

- A younger age, at a period when candidates are not engaged in high school demands and activities, would be a time more conducive to preparation for the sacrament.

- A younger age would help avoid the “graduation” mentality often associated with Confirmation.

- A younger age would increase the number of candidates receiving Confirmation.

- Candidates younger than the current age of Confirmation are capable of understanding the concepts taught in preparation for the sacrament, and they are certainly capable of disposing themselves to receive the grace of the sacrament.

- Confirmation at an earlier age would allow the newly Confirmed to “live out” their Confirmation through various ministries in the parish during their high school years.

Members of the Presbyteral Council also expressed interest in having some flexibility in the age of Confirmation – if, for example, a younger person presents him/herself as desirous of the sacrament and is willing to meet preparation guidelines, the pastor could make a judgment that the young person is ready and present him/her as a candidate to the bishop at an age earlier than the 7th grade.

Proposal

That the normal age for reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Archdiocese of Seattle will be the 7th Grade.

That the archdiocese assist parish youth programs to improve their outreach to high school youth through a variety of youth ministry programs designed to engage them more fully in the life of the parish.
Questions to be answered

- The effective date of this change

- The best means of preparing and celebrating the sacrament for those candidates already past the 7th grade, to ensure that no young people “fall through the cracks” and do not receive the Sacrament.

- What adaptations need to be made in the archdiocesan sacramental preparation guidelines to address candidates of a younger age?

- Could it be appropriate for Catholic school students to undergo preparation for Confirmation during school hours rather than outside school hours, while giving PRE students an excellent preparation process and finding ways to bring the entire Confirmation group (Catholic school and PRE candidates) together 2 or 3 times for community-building activities such as retreat, special speakers, etc.?

- What would be the most appropriate means of giving pastors discretion to present candidates of an even younger age to the bishop if he deems them ready?

- In light of this possible change in the age of Confirmation, what kind of assistance do parishes need from the Archdiocese to improve their outreach to high school youth in youth ministry programs?

- Other matters to be considered?

Archbishop Peter Sartain
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Appendix 2: Statistics for Participation in the Sacrament of Confirmation

Progression in Child Sacraments 1996-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Baptized</th>
<th>Received First Communion (+ 7 years)</th>
<th>Confirmed (+ 16 years)</th>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>6,371</td>
<td>6,038</td>
<td>3,016</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>6,545</td>
<td>6,249</td>
<td>2,690</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>6,927</td>
<td>6,014</td>
<td>3,367</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>6,644</td>
<td>6,156</td>
<td>2,701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>6,721</td>
<td>5,868</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>6,832</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>7,107</td>
<td>6,126</td>
<td>2,929</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>6,815</td>
<td>6,488</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>6,878</td>
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<td>2,929</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>7,262</td>
<td>6,437</td>
<td>2,762</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>6,613</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5,877</td>
<td>5,670</td>
<td>2,762</td>
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Percent of baptized who received later sacraments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Baptized</th>
<th>Received First Communion (+ 7 years)</th>
<th>Confirmed (+ 16 years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>6,371</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6,545</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>6,927</td>
<td>86.8%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>6,644</td>
<td>92.7%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
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<td>6,721</td>
<td>87.3%</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
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<td>6,832</td>
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<td>86.2%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
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<td>6,815</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>6,878</td>
<td>94.3%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>7,262</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>89.1%</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
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Provided by the Office of Planning and Research, the statistics on the progression of sacraments of initiation for children born from 1994-95 to 2014-15.