

# Confirmation Work and Theologizing

## Spiritual empowerment

Confirmation work aims at spiritual empowerment that arises from the message of baptism: You are God's beloved child. That means: You are much more worthy than you can believe yourself. And – just as important – you shall lead your life just like the Son of God, who is concerned about the whole of creation. So the message of the baptism is, on the one hand, a word of blessing and on the other hand an assignment: You have the capability of healing the world and you should live your life accordingly.

Both aspects of this message must be embodied (“incarnated”) in order to really become true. You might have a “bad spirit” in your mind that urges you to dislike yourself – and the whole world – and to think very lowly of yourself and your own capabilities. This bad spirit has to leave your mind when you're baptized; when you become a sister or brother of Jesus. It is a kind of “exorcism” initiated by the Holy Spirit, the spirit of love. The result of this transformation is confirmation - a strong belief to lead you in your life. But, of course, this does not happen in one point in time, during one particular rite. Rather, it will be a life-long process. The specific rite of confirmation just performs and thus demonstrates the meaning of this transformation process in a very dense manner.

A good deal of this process is achieved by working with young people in puberty, because the human belief system is developing between the ages of 14 to about 25. In this period those parts of our brains are being confirmed that represent our attitudes and orientations. And our brains will be formed according to our experiences: We base what we believe in on whatever we have experienced as relevant and viable.

A lot of adolescents don't really like themselves. They don't like their bodies which are changing in a dramatic way. And they really think badly of what and who they are – maybe because they have been bullied by their peers or have heard bad comments from them. Yet there are others who seem to like themselves too much. They don't care about other people and only pursue their individual aims. Nevertheless, all of these youngsters have to be confirmed as brothers and sisters of the Son of God – in order to empower them to take part in a caring community.

## Offering religious traditions

In my opinion confirmation work is not just about making young people believe in what our ancestors believed in. What people relied on in former days must not necessarily be a reliable basis for faith today. Therefore learning by heart can only make sense in certain contexts, for example when it comes to enable confirmands to take part in the worship service. When the congregation uses traditional language or set liturgical phrases, the young people should be able to join in.

By the way, worship services are good opportunities for the empowerment by the Holy Spirit: Services persist, Sunday after Sunday, far beyond the confirmation class. So, one can grow spiritually by finding new impulses and ideas for one's coping strategies in the liturgy or in the sermon. This is also reinforced by the church building. Whenever you're visiting a church during



your holidays or just in a break, the building has the potential to offer confirming or transforming impulses for your belief system.

In fact, our whole tradition is a great offer: the rites, the pictures, the places and other religious constructions are offers to the confirmands throughout their entire lives. They can try out and get a “taste” of what it means to be Christian in order to build and rebuild their own belief system. By making such offers we help the youngsters “theologize”, i.e. to think and talk about the big questions of life.

## Theologizing

“Theologizing with kids and adolescents” is a rather new approach in Germany. The idea is that confirmands are confronted with parts of the Christian religion and give their own responses to them, from their present point of view. Or, reversely: they utter their current opinion to a relevant question – e.g. what comes after death? What is the meaning of life? Or: How should we treat the problem of refugees coming to Europe? In practice, as facilitator, I will invite the young people to express their thoughts, write them down briefly, draw a picture, choose a specific place in the church building or identify with and act in the role of a given person.

Whatever the young people “produce” in these situations, has very much to do with their own belief system and their understandings of religious issues. We can therefore speak of “personal theologies” of children and adolescents as a result of their own experiences. They have built up theological “constructions” on their own lives so far. To some extent these constructions overlap with the theological constructions of the religious tradition. But the personal theology (that is mostly unexpressed and unformed in the mind of the individual) is always a specific re-construction of the Church’s theological constructions – which are, by themselves, nothing else but a system of re-constructions with specific means at the various times in the past.

So, theologizing is about communicating different theological constructions. The aim of this approach is to assist young people in finding a viable belief system that is inspired by the spirit of baptism. To get there, we should first of all be interested in and curious about what adolescents really think. We should get accustomed to ask “real” questions. “Real” questions are questions to which there is no “right” answer. “Real” questions address the experience and specific belief system of an individual. And as interlocutors we should perceive the answers and constructions with an open mind so that we get an idea of what the young people probably mean.

Of course, as a partner in conversation I will not hesitate to bring in my own beliefs when necessary; for example, when somebody shows an attitude that I cannot bring together with the message of baptism. However, I should be careful with interventions in order not to give the young people the impression that there is only one “right” answer – the answer that I own. My answers, too, are but offers to the confirmands. They may accept them as useful impulses or transform them to suitable answers for their own faith. And this is what confirmation work should be aiming at.

