

Youth Alpha and Confirmation at Holy Innocents' Orpington

Dear Parents/Guardians

We all want our children to grow up with a strong faith. But it's a sad fact that across the country, Catholic parish populations are ageing.

Faced with so many demands, young parents have little time for themselves, let alone for God. Even without the impact of the pandemic, it's hard to bring the children to church when they are young; and even harder as they get older and start complaining that church is "boring" and not for them.

It's not surprising, then, that families drift away from regular attendance before or after First Holy Communion. Often they return for Confirmation, only for it to live up to its depressing nickname, as the "sacrament of exit". This has been a problem for us at Holy Innocents', as it is for parishes across the country. The statistics are frightening.

Back to basics

Despite all of the devotion and hard work of our catechists over many years, our sacramental programmes have not been stemming the tide. The model is broken; and we need to fix it. That's what we have been trying to do at Holy Innocents' over the past few years.

Father Victor's starting point was to go back to basics, highlighting a simple truth taught by the Church – that **sacraments are for disciples of Jesus, for those who have committed their lives to Him**, rather than a mark of being attached to a church and having reached a certain age.

Applying this in practice

This emphasis on discipleship applies at all stages of the sacramental journey. In relation to preparation for First Holy Communion (FHC), for example, it means that we focus on the involvement and example of parents. Because, as we all know, children at FHC age have little hope of being sustained in their fledgling discipleship without the strong support and example of their parents.

Moving on to Confirmation

When it comes to Confirmation, parental support remains important – but it can no longer be determinative. In putting themselves forward to be confirmed, a teenager must not be acting to please, placate or obey their parents. It can no longer be parents (or sometimes, grandparents) making a decision for a child: it has to be the young person making a decision for themselves.

Or rather, two decisions. Because sacraments are for disciples of Jesus, for those who have committed their lives to Him. So before asking, "Would I like – am I ready – to be confirmed?", each young person needs to respond to a threshold question: "Have I committed, or am I ready to commit, my life to Jesus Christ? In other words, am I, or am I ready to become, His disciple?"

Only when they have made that discipleship commitment should they go on to ask whether the time is right for them to be confirmed. Not as an end in itself, but to receive the anointing and support of the Holy Spirit on their ongoing road of discipleship.

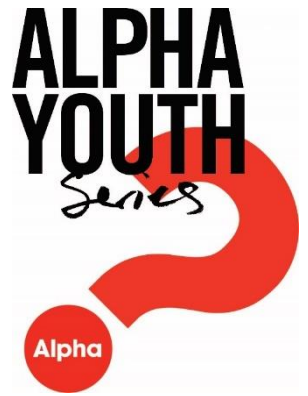
Which is why we divide the journey to Confirmation into two parts, two stages:

Stage 1 – conversion and commitment to discipleship; followed by

**Stage 2 – preparation for and reception of the sacrament of Confirmation,
as a consequence of and to support that conversion and commitment.**

The two stages

- **Stage 1 – Youth Alpha:** Youth Alpha is a great experience for teenagers from Year 8 up to 19 (and even a little older). It focuses on the basic truths of our faith, the “kerygma”, and explicitly invites those taking part to conversion and making a commitment to Christ. That’s why we ask any young person considering Confirmation to start off by coming to Youth Alpha.
- **Invitation to commitment:** then towards the end of Youth Alpha, we ask the participants who have not been confirmed to think and pray about whether they have made, or are ready to make, a commitment to discipleship, to hand their lives to Jesus.



At this point, we also give them the opportunity to meet Father Victor to have a chat about this and to discuss whether or not it’s the right time for them to move on to prepare for Confirmation. There is no set timetable for this – for each individual, it might be right to go ahead or it might be right to wait for a while, all in God’s good time.

- **Stage 2 – Confirmation preparation:** for the young people who are ready, we invite them to move into the second part of the Confirmation journey, with sessions aimed at preparing them for Confirmation, building on what they have learned and experienced at Youth Alpha.

Engaging with young people

Pope Francis has said, “I want to state clearly that young people themselves are agents of youth ministry.” We try as hard as possible to make that happen in Youth Alpha:

- **Focus groups:** groups of youngsters helped us design aspects of how we run Youth Alpha.
- **Young leadership:** we invite regular attendees from one Youth Alpha to volunteer to help in the planning and leadership of the next course. Last time, we had an amazing response to this invitation, illustrating the popularity of Youth Alpha with the young people who participate. We are hoping for the same this time.
- **More listening:** we also try to involve those volunteers in planning the Youth Alpha weekend and the content and style of the Confirmation sessions in the second stage.
- **Young people learning from each other:** Youth Alpha is not about adults teaching young people. It’s about the young people sharing their own experiences and learning from each other, as they gather in small discussion groups each week to answer questions arising from the Youth Alpha films, which were produced specifically for young people. This approach works well with adults – and brilliantly with Youth Alpha.

Your support is vital

Please pray for your youngsters and support them in attending regularly, including the weekend away.

In addition, Father Victor strongly encourages you, if you have not done so already, to attend Alpha yourselves. “In doing so,” he says, “you will not only deepen your own faith. You will be accompanying your children on their faith journey in a very special way. And providing a great example of how journeying in our faith, developing and deepening our relationship with the Lord, is a lifelong task for all of us.” We hope to run our next adult Alpha course in the first half of 2023.

Finally, please pray for us, and be patient with us when we get things wrong. We are trying our best!

Holy Innocents’ Youth Alpha and Confirmation teams