

Confirming Erik: Hebrews 4:12-16

by [Stephen Paul Bouman](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

When Erik confessed his faith on the festival of Pentecost, the entire family of believers watched and strained to hear his confession. His chubby fingers were surprisingly dexterous as he signed the words, and he also spoke, as if what he was signing was bursting through the silence of his deafness. This is what he said on the day of his confirmation: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not die but have life forever."

He paused, fished a card from the pocket beneath his robe, glanced at it and put it back. Then he continued in his combination of sign language and garbled verbal speech: "What does this mean to me? It means that Jesus died for my sins. It means God loves me. It means when I die I will go to heaven."

He smiled nervously and returned to his place in the line of confirmands. Then he looked at me, passed his hand over his head and rolled his eyes in a sigh of relief.

The moment bore witness to the grace of a God who brings "light from darkness, life from death, speech from silence."

We call the process of forming Erik's faith *catechesis*. The partnership between the home and the church, the sheer effort by all involved in Erik's catechesis is a parable of confessional witness in a culture indifferent or hostile to an active and living word. The Book of Hebrews gives us a glimpse into the pastoral and evangelical life of another confessional witness. What was the organizing principle in the early church? What was expected of converts? What sustained their faith? What was at the center of the early Christian movement?

Several years ago Erik was slipping into a lifetime of silence, becoming progressively more morose and combative as his isolation deepened. His mother began to fight for her son, first against a local public school system that takes a cookie-cutter approach to children, then against the county and state. She won on many fronts through her persistence. Erik entered appropriate programs and began to learn. She learned sign language. He learned to read.

She enrolled him in a Sunday school for the deaf in an Episcopal church, and found materials that gave appropriate sign language for religious concepts and vocabulary. How many mothers like Erik's, in the time of the early church, became models of the great high priest, whose solidarity with us in all things human inspired bold witness and teaching of the paschal mystery?

When it was time for Erik's catechesis, his mother and I worked out a home tutoring schedule. Each Wednesday we sat around the dining room table. His mother interpreted. I learned some sign language so that we could communicate the chief parts of Luther's catechism. We had to match theological concepts to Erik's signs, and our catechesis was filled with analogy, story, wild gestures, his mother's manual continuo as she translated our efforts into Erik's language. I traced the looks of consternation on Erik's face until they reflected the joy of recognition. When he grasped a concept he would read it back to us in sign and agitated verbalizing. Sin was "bad things" or "bad relationship." I taught the sixth commandment as "Don't have sex unless you are married." The ninth and tenth commandments became "Be happy with what God has given you." You get the idea.

Erik's catechesis was a communal matter of greatest importance. His father would come home from work and join us at the table for a report of his son's progress. His brother would watch the dog and do his homework. On Erik's big day, family, Sunday school teachers and neighbors joined him at church.

The catechesis of Erik is an example of what Stanley Hauerwas calls a "truthful community" or "community of character," a community capable of hearing the story of God and willing to live faithfully by it. Catechesis is immersion in the narrative that shapes the life of the church. The story of Israel, the story of Jesus and the story of the church become Erik's story.

What is instructive here is the passion of those involved. Our church needs to see itself in the role of Erik's mother, as a relentless advocate for the faith formation of its people. I think of the pastor in Jersey City who walked the streets of his neighborhood before the opening of his confirmation classes to visit families. When one child did not show up for liturgy and Sunday school, he went to the housing project where the child lived and walked into the middle of a dope deal. One of the men whirled, pistol in hand, ready to shoot, then saw the pastor's collar and blurted out, "Jesus Christ, Father, I almost killed you!" The pastor nodded, walked up the stairs and completed the call. We need to believe that the upbuilding of the faith of

the people is a task worthy of giving our lives.

When pastors from our synod gathered with our national leaders after the September 11 tragedy, I told them that we had been ordained and baptized for this moment. I meant the immediate ministry of comfort and renewal as we attended to this tragedy among us. But I also meant the continuing work of our great high priest, helping to provide meaning to this altered world from the depths of our faith and the biblical drama. It is a priestly ministry of liturgy, articulation, peacemaking, programs of comfort and renewal, justice-seeking—and a ministry of word and sacraments that embraces other faith journeys and a world hungry for a communal story.