

The History and Development of the Sacrament of Confirmation

The Spirit is present in the Church, moving and breathing where he wills, but allowing historical events and cultures to shape our practice and understanding of the faith. A striking example of this is the history and the theology of the Sacrament of Confirmation. Through the centuries the way we have celebrated the sacrament and understood its meaning has undergone many changes. It is almost universally accepted as a celebration of the Spirit within us and a time for affirming our Baptism. Yet different schools of thought exist concerning its meaning, its purpose, and the age at which it is to be celebrated.

Confirmation in the Early Church

In the early Church the three Sacraments of initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist—were celebrated in the same ceremony by adult catechumens at the Easter Vigil. The catechumens descended into a pool where they were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They ascended, were clothed with a white robe, and the bishop laid hands on them and anointed them with oil. They then proceeded to a place of honor among the community where they participated in the Eucharist for the first time. Initiation thus consisted of one event with several moments. The climax was the celebration of the Eucharist.

The separation of the bishop's anointing from Baptism occurred for a number of reasons in the Western Church. Constantine's proclamation making Christianity the state religion in the fourth century meant that many more people were being baptized. Christianity also spread from the cities into the countryside. It became impossible for bishops, who were now also involved in governing, to preside at every Baptism. The bishops of the East solved the problem by delegating the Sacraments of Initiation to the presbyter, reserving for themselves only the blessing of the oil used in the rite. To this day the Eastern churches initiate with all three sacraments at once. The bishops of the West also delegated Baptism to priests, but retained the function of performing the initial anointing and laying on of hands. This they would do whenever they visited a particular locality. Thus, in the West the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation was done at a later time than the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism.

The Theology of Confirmation

Baptism was the sacrament of the initial gift of the Spirit, while Confirmation was the sacrament of the fullness of the Spirit with his seven gifts. When in the Middle Ages it became the practice to confirm close to adolescence instead of infancy, theologians began to teach that Confirmation was the sacrament of maturity. Those who received it were regarded as old enough and ready to live active, responsible Christian lives. The Christian was sealed as a witness for Christ in Confirmation and fortified by an increase of the Spirit's gifts to fight, suffer, and die for the faith. The notion of the sacrament making a person a soldier of Christ prevailed. The sign of peace in the rite was even replaced by a gentle slap on the face to indicate readiness for life's battles.

Theology of Confirmation Today

Some people today still look on Confirmation as the sacrament of maturity. But this sacrament does not imply that the candidate is completely mature in the faith. Nor does the signing with chrism instantaneously produce maturity in the candidate. Conversion to Christ is a gradual process to which Confirmation gives added strength. Through it the confirmed person is strengthened for this lifelong journey.

Current thinking of Confirmation has been given direction by recent Church documents that see Confirmation as integrally related to Baptism and Eucharist. Together these sacraments constitute a process by which the Spirit brings the believer to full union with the community. Confirmation does not complete Baptism in the sense that Baptism left something incomplete. Rather, the two sacraments are united in the initiation process. *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states, "The Rite of Confirmation is to be revised also so that the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of Christian initiation may more clearly appear" (71). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, quoting the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, says, "by the sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit." (1285)

Confirmation is also associated with the Eucharist, where the People of God unite to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ. When Confirmation preceded First Holy Communion, it was easily seen as a preparation to full celebration with the community. Then in 1910, when Pope Pius X made it possible for seven-year-old children to receive Communion, Confirmation became the last Sacrament of Initiation to be celebrated. Now Confirmation's role of leading to the Eucharist must be emphasized in ways other than chronological. The church accomplishes this through catechesis, the words of the rite, and celebrating Confirmation within Mass.

Confirmation celebrates the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The Spirit of Jesus, the same Spirit that transformed the apostles, comes upon the members of the Church. According to the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, through Confirmation Catholics are "more perfectly bound to the Church" and are "as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread the faith by word and deed." Confirmation seals believers in the Spirit, anointing them and empowering them to carry on the mission of Christ.

