

UNDERSTANDING
THE
SACRAMENTS

Confirmation

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What Is a Sacrament?

Most Catholics recognize that sacraments are an important part of life in the church. They see them as significant moments that mark transitions in life. They bring their babies to be baptized and send their second graders to prepare for First Communion. They come to the church to be married and ask for the anointing when someone is seriously ill.

Sacraments, however, are much more than mileposts in the spiritual life. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) called for a renewal of the liturgy that included revising all the sacraments. The purpose of the revision was to re-think our understanding of these basic actions that shape our identity in the church. In their first document, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, issued in 1963, the council fathers spoke of the importance of the sacraments for the Christian life:

The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify people, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to worship God. Because they are signs they also belong in the realm of instruction. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called sacraments of faith. They do, indeed, confer grace, but, in addition, the very act of celebrating them is most effective in making people ready to receive this grace to their profit, to worship God duly, and to practice charity.

It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the faithful should easily understand the symbolism of the sacraments and eagerly frequent those sacraments which were instituted to nourish the Christian life (no. 59).

Helping people to readily understand the sacramental signs is the goal of this series of booklets.

Though this booklet focuses on the sacrament of confirmation, there are basic principles that can help us to understand all the sacraments, for they share some fundamental characteristics.

In confirmation, anointing with the scented oil, called chrism, symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit.

SACRAMENTS ARE HUMAN ACTIVITIES

First, the sacraments are human activities. We often think of the sacraments in terms of the elements of creation that we use: water, oil, bread and wine, etc. Yet the sacraments are better understood as the actions that we do with those elements, and those actions are all basic human gestures. We wash bodies, anoint foreheads, eat bread and drink wine, touch and caress the sick, lay on hands as a gesture of conferring power, etc. These human actions become the means of encountering the Lord.

These actions have become rituals; we follow familiar patterns of movement and gesture and recite the official words of the rite. We perform these rituals as our ancestors did. Nonetheless, rituals are revised and updated from time to time to keep them fresh and true to their original purpose.

Our ritual actions are symbolic, giving us a real and concrete way to experience or express something that is otherwise abstract. A symbol contains the reality it expresses. A kiss, for example, somehow contains the love it expresses, though it does not exhaust that love. So, too, the Eucharistic meal contains the presence of Jesus, though it does not exhaust that presence.

Scripture clarifies the symbols we use. "I will give you a new heart and place a new Spirit within you" (Ezek 36:26).

All the sacraments also rely on the word of God. The prayers and formulas of the rituals have been drawn from the Bible, and the celebrations always include a formal proclamation of the word of God. The word clarifies the meaning of the symbols we use. Proclaiming God's word in the celebration also reminds us that our actions are always a response to what God has done for us.

SACRAMENTS ARE ACTIONS OF THE CHURCH COMMUNITY

The ritual actions that we carry out in the sacraments are always communal actions. This may be the most important realization in our renewed understanding of the sacraments. They are the actions of the church community, not just of the presider or the recipient. As the Constitution on the

Sacred Liturgy puts it: “It is very much the wish of the church that all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (no. 14). Liturgy is the public worship of the church in its various forms. Though we may celebrate around an individual or a group of people receiving a sacrament, we all celebrate the sacrament together. A sacrament is the action of the church, and its meaning and effects are not limited to those around whom we celebrate.

One primary effect of any sacrament is to form us for mission. Each sacrament, in its own way, strengthens us to carry on the mission of Christ in the world today. Sacraments, then, are necessary to the life of the community and the furtherance of its mission. They make the church what Christ intends it to be, and they make each of us what Christ intends us to become.

SACRAMENTS ARE THE ACTION OF CHRIST

At the same time, because the church is the Body of Christ, the action of a sacrament is also the action of Christ. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy puts it this way: “By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes” (no. 7).

The church has long taught that the power of a sacrament is not dependent on the ability or holiness of the priest, bishop, or deacon presiding. The sacrament is effective even if the minister is unworthy or sinful. It does not ultimately depend on the minister, for it is Christ who acts through the gathered community, which is his Body.

The encounter with Christ in the sacraments is possible only through faith. That’s why baptism is the first sacrament and the precondition for all the others. It is the sacrament of initial faith, which is a response to God’s grace calling a person to belief. The sacraments express our faith and also nourish and strengthen faith, because they bring us into contact with the living Christ.

The tradition speaks of sacraments giving grace. That is ultimately a way of saying that they bring us into contact with Christ and enable us to deepen our friendship with the Lord. Grace is, at root, that relationship,

“Liturgy” comes from the Greek meaning “work of the people” and refers to the various forms of public worship of the church.



and the encounter with Christ in a sacrament deepens that friendship.

Sacraments are a part of our relationship with God, a part of our faith life. They express what God is already doing in our lives and move us further along the road of conversion and spiritual growth. Sacraments should never be viewed as isolated moments in our lives. They depend on a process that leads up to the moment of celebration and flows from that moment into our future. Sacraments require preparation on the part of the individual and on the part of the community. Sacraments affect the life of the individual and the community far beyond the celebration itself.

Confirmation

Celebrating the Spirit of God

As I was working on this booklet, I heard on the radio a quote from a Western diplomat talking about elections in Lebanon. He said: “If you think you understand Lebanese politics, it obviously hasn’t been explained to you properly.” Many people feel that something similar could be said about the sacrament of confirmation. Explaining it properly is no simple task, and the explanation may still leave us less than certain of this sacrament’s meaning.

Many people experience confusion about this sacrament at the parish level. The age for confirmation varies from diocese to diocese and from one parish to the next. Even in the same parish, some young children are confirmed when they are baptized at the Easter Vigil, while children baptized as infants are required to wait for confirmation until they are older. Picking up different books and listening to different speakers talk about confirmation makes one wonder if they are all discussing the same sacrament.

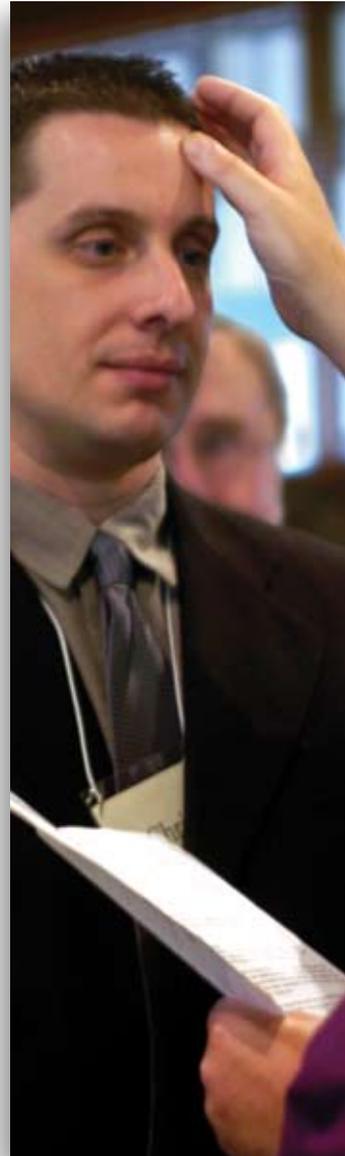
One short statement from the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963), however, provides us the key to understanding confirmation: "The rite of confirmation is to be revised also so that the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of Christian initiation may be shown more clearly" (no. 71). In other words, confirmation does not stand alone. Whether or not they are celebrated at the same time, confirmation, baptism, and Eucharist are intimately connected. This sacrament is called "confirmation" because it confirms or reaffirms the significance of baptism (whether that was celebrated a few minutes or several years earlier) and the gift of the Holy Spirit received in baptism.

A Look at History

This sacrament has had a difficult life. Through the centuries people in the church have used it to serve many different needs. These uses are so different from one another that it is easy to understand why the meaning of this sacrament is a puzzle for many people today.

Paul Turner, in his excellent study entitled *Confirmation: The Baby in Solomon's Court* (Paulist Press, 1993), has described no fewer than seven different rituals in use in various churches today, all called confirmation. He sees these seven as deriving ultimately from three different models in early Christianity: the completion of the rite of baptism, the reconciliation of heretics, and the post-baptismal anointing postponed until some time after baptism. All three of these models are in use in the church today. Adults and children old enough for instruction are confirmed when they are baptized. Those baptized as infants are confirmed years later. And those who join the Catholic Church who were baptized in another denomination are received with a rite that includes confirmation (these people aren't called heretics today, but that was the term used in early Christianity).

A look at church history reveals the context for these three ancient roots of confirmation. Evidence



from the early days of the church is very limited. We naturally look to the New Testament to see how the first Christians celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit. However, despite various hints about the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians, the New Testament gives us no real evidence for any rite that we would recognize as confirmation. For several centuries after the New Testament period, Christians would have been very puzzled if we had asked them about the sacrament of confirmation. What we have come to know as a separate sacrament was for them simply a part of the rite of baptism, the celebration of initiation by which a person became a Christian.

ANCIENT INITIATION RITUALS

The celebration of initiation varied from place to place and from time to time, so it would take a large book to describe it in detail in all its variations in these centuries. Instead, we will examine here a typical outline of elements that can give us a sense of the experience. Such a rite, normally celebrated at the Easter Vigil for candidates who had long prepared for initiation, would begin with the candidates leaving the assembly to go to the baptistery, often a separate building near the entrance to the church. Once there, they would renounce Satan, perhaps facing the west and spitting at him; then facing the east, they would commit themselves to Christ. After this they would strip completely, leaving their old life (and old clothes) behind. They would be anointed with oil over their whole bodies, preparing for the crucial contest with the power of evil like athletes being rubbed down before a match. After the blessing of the font, which would be big enough for the person to be immersed, the candidates would enter the water, perhaps going down three steps into a pool. There they were immersed three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Coming out of the water, they would be clothed in white garments.

At this point the candidates would return to the full assembly, where the bishop was waiting with the faithful. Greeted with acclamations, they would then be anointed by the bishop with the oil called chrism and greeted with the kiss of peace. Now members of the faithful, they would join the full assembly for the celebration of the Easter Eucharist, sharing in Communion for the first time. The

anointing by the bishop after the baptismal bath is the ancient root of what we know as confirmation.

As this description of initiation suggests, this anointing was a brief part of a much larger rite. It was unique, however, in that it was done by the bishop, while the earlier parts of the rite were the responsibility of the presbyter (priest) or deacon (or deaconess). It is the required presence of the bishop that led to confirmation becoming a separate sacrament in the West.

SEPARATION FROM BAPTISM

As long as dioceses were small and the bishop always presided at Easter initiations, there was no problem. But when that was no longer possible due to the increasing size of the church, the question arose about what to do with that portion of initiation when the bishop was not present. In the East the decision was made that whoever presided at the Easter rites would do the anointing. Thus among Eastern churches, the anointing or chrismation is, to this day, celebrated immediately after the water bath of baptism, whether the initiate is an adult or an infant.

In the West, however, Pope Innocent I insisted in the year 412 that this anointing had to be done by the bishop, so it was delayed until he was available. Thus it became separated from the baptismal ritual. This is the first time we find the ritual being called confirmation, as the bishop was confirming the baptism at which a priest had presided.

At first confirmation was still celebrated shortly after the Easter Vigil, during Easter week or at least in the Easter season, but gradually it began to be pushed back further and further. Through the centuries we can see the normal age for this completion of initiation getting older and older, until it was generally celebrated at age fourteen.

As this happened, First Communion was often also delayed, since it was properly received only after confirmation. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Pope Pius X lowered the age for First Communion to seven to encourage more frequent Communion, and confirmation was left hanging, as it were, in midair, now fully removed from the initiation celebration in most people's minds.

So the first of Turner's historical models was an anointing that was clearly part of baptism. Moving that anointing until later, eventually many years after baptism, is seen as

Those baptized into other Christian churches are welcomed into the Catholic Church with the Rite of Reception, usually including confirmation and First Communion.

a separate model because it lost its roots in initiation and came to be seen as a sacrament of Christian maturity.

The third historical source of confirmation is the reconciliation of heretics and schismatics. Even before confirmation was separated from baptism, the church was using similar rituals to readmit those who had broken their union with the church (schismatics) and those who had been baptized by heretics (those who rejected some part of Catholic belief). Heretics or those baptized by them were generally reconciled with an anointing, while schismatics were commonly reconciled with the laying on of hands. Even though we don't call them heretics today, this model is reflected in the contemporary practice of confirming those who join the Catholic Church after having been baptized in another Christian denomination. Their baptism is recognized as valid baptism, but they still require an initiation rite to become Catholic.

Multiple Patterns in Place

Turner suggests that the church needs to decide just where confirmation belongs. As we noted at the beginning of this booklet, the Second Vatican Council called the church to recover the baptismal character of this sacrament. Yet the revised rites continue to support several understandings of confirmation. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), issued in 1972, takes a strong stand for unifying baptism and confirmation: “. . . adults are not to be baptized without receiving confirmation immediately afterward, unless some serious reason stands in the way. The conjunction of the two celebrations signifies the unity of the paschal mystery, the close link between the mission of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the connection between the two sacraments through which the Son and the Holy Spirit come from the Father to those who are baptized” (no. 215). To make these confirmations possible, the rite authorizes the presider at the initiation of adults to confirm them, whether that is a bishop or a priest.

It is important to note that this principle applies not just to adults but also to children old enough to receive instruction. Such children go through a process of preparation

similar to the adult process, and they are baptized, confirmed, and given First Eucharist at the Easter Vigil along with the adult initiates. This rule is not optional but required by canon law; it is not permitted to delay the confirmation of such children until the “usual age” for confirmation of those baptized in infancy. Since they are old enough for formation, they are to receive all three sacraments of initiation in the same celebration.

The celebration of the sacraments of initiation has not been unified for children baptized as infants. This means that most parishes have two patterns of confirmation for children: immediately after baptism for child catechumens and separated from baptism by many years for children baptized as infants. And the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults provides for reception of people baptized in other churches with a rite that includes confirmation. So all three of the ancient models are being used in the contemporary church.

Initiation and Conversion

Nevertheless, we should always remember that this sacrament is closely linked to baptism. The revised Rite of Confirmation issued in 1971 reflects this linkage in several ways. The candidates for confirmation renew their baptismal vows during the celebration. They are encouraged to have their baptismal godparents as sponsors for this sacrament as well, and they are also encouraged to use their baptismal names as confirmation names (although another sponsor or name may be chosen). The sacrament is now regularly celebrated within the Eucharist, thus reminding us of the ancient practice of celebrating baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist as one initiatory rite.

Because confirmation is a sacrament of initiation, it is about conversion. Conversion is an ongoing process of conforming to the Christian way of life. We all are called to a life of continual conversion, gradually rooting out sin and selfishness and giving our lives more and more completely to Christ. Nevertheless, one’s



The link to baptism is expressed by the renewal of baptism vows.