

world but not being a part of it. Within the entire priestly people, by divine plan, one finds a special ministerial priesthood, whose specific task it is to nourish the entire Church with Word and sacrament. If ordained priests fulfill their ministry, the laity will serve as "priests" to the world, in their turn. Confirmation strengthens Christians to assume their rightful place in the midst of that entire priestly people, which is the Church of Jesus Christ.

When should one receive this "sacrament of maturity"? Infant Baptism is a beautiful and ancient tradition in the Church, but we must admit that it poses one serious difficulty: At some future moment, a child will have to affirm personally all the values and beliefs he has received. In recent years, this awareness has led to a renewed emphasis on the Sacrament of Confirmation. Careful preparation of candidates is vital, to ensure that they understand what they are about to do and also that they really want to do this (CCC 1309). Confirmation can never simply be another social amenity or else it will devolve into a meaningless ritual. Maturity and conviction must be demanded of every candidate.

However, two cautions seem in order. First, most parents and educators agree that the attainment of maturity is a highly individualized phenomenon (CCC 1308). Therefore, hard-and-fast rules would appear to be imprudent and at times even unjust. Secondly, in recent years we have seen demands made on Confirmation candidates that are sometimes so excessive as to make preparation for the sacrament unpleasant and at times nearly impossible. As in so many areas of life, a sensible middle road must be used in how and when a young person is made ready for the sacrament.

One final consideration is the necessity for growth in one's understanding of the Catholic faith. So often people end their theological education the day they are confirmed or leave a Catholic school for the last time. Such people may have a doctorate in physics, but only the most rudimentary grasp of their faith. This is embarrassing to the Church and should be embarrassing to the individual.

The Spirit received in Confirmation is, above all, the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:13), whom Jesus promised as a teacher for his Church. The ongoing presence of a teacher implies the ongoing

presence of students, and all members of Christ's Church need constant education in the things of faith. This process can occur through formal classes, through the private and prayerful study of the Scriptures, or through a deliberate, personal program of reading the history of the Church, the lives of the saints, the teachings of the Magisterium today, and the writings of good Catholic authors.

Although this is a serious obligation resulting from one's Confirmation, it should also be seen as a privilege and joy. *Fides quaerens intellectum* (Faith seeking understanding) has always been the Catholic way because a growth in knowledge leads the believer to a deeper appreciation of the object of faith—the Beloved himself (CCC 158). Continuous education in faith, then, is a lifelong commitment taken up with the assistance of the Spirit of truth, who is received in a special way in Confirmation.

Several times in the Gospel of John, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Paraclete, the Greek word with a double meaning: Advocate (defense attorney) and judge (CCC 692). The evangelist did not choose this word haphazardly, but with purpose, for the Holy Spirit is indeed both our advocate and judge. He pleads our cause, but also judges us. The permanent character of Confirmation, which marks us off as a chosen people, works in much the same way. On the Last Day that sacramental seal will be a witness for us or against us, depending upon how well we have responded to the special graces we have received.

The hope of the Church is that all her children live their lives in such fidelity to the grace of this sacrament and that they deserve to have the Holy Spirit as a most kindly Advocate.

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# Confirmation

**Rev. Peter M. J. Stravinskias**

*Turning Outward with a Concern  
for the Salvation of the World*

The sacrament of the Holy Spirit, the sacrament of completion, the sacrament of maturity, the sacrament of Christian witness. All of these descriptions are attempts to capture the essence of Confirmation, but, like the Spirit himself, the sacrament cannot be pinned down and neatly compartmentalized. And so, we conclude that Confirmation is all these things—and more.

Confirmation is the sealing of the baptismal commitment, or better, the baptismal covenant (CCC 1285; 1295-96). Because of the close link, much of the same symbolism is repeated. To highlight this connection, the revised Code of Canon Law urges that the Confirmation sponsor ideally be the same person who stood up for the candidate at Baptism (CCC 1131).

It has become common to explain this sacrament as the personal affirmation of one's Baptism. While there is much to recommend this approach, we must also be careful not to overstress the role of the recipient. Therefore, it is necessary to view this sacrament as the action of the Spirit sent by Jesus to be our Paraclete, as well as the action of the whole Church begging her Lord to overtake this person completely with his gifts of grace. Confirmation gives the Christian permanent and full status in the family of the Church (CCC 1303, 1316).

## The History behind Confirmation

In the early Church, the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist were all received together, forming a unified rite of Christian initiation (CCC 1212, 1290, 1298, 1306). This sequence is still followed by the Eastern rites of the Church, so that even babies are baptized, chrismated (confirmed), and communicated (although a child's "second communion" is often delayed to the age of reason).

In the Latin rite, certain ethnic groups preserve this order of the sacraments, although they spread them out over a period of years. Some readers may recall that they were confirmed at the age of ten, and only at some later date did they receive their First Holy Communion.

The notion behind this practice is that it seemed strange to allow the reception of the Eucharist before one was a "full-fledged" member of the Church. The new Code of Canon Law appears to envision a rather early age for Confirmation, unless the national bishops' conference decrees otherwise. However, the point about full membership in the Church should not be pushed to an extreme, for Baptism does indeed incorporate the believer into the Body of Christ (the Church). Thus, reception of the Body of Christ, (the Eucharist) is not really out of order.

As a successor of the apostles, the bishop (except in certain circumstances) administers Confirmation to highlight the relationship between the first Pentecost in the early Church and our own personal Pentecost experience through the sacrament today. The Bishop's presence also illustrates that the faith we make our own goes back to the teachings of the apostles. Therefore, Confirmation not only stresses the unity of the Church's members today, but also points out our unity with all believers throughout the ages.

An interesting historical anomaly is that while the Eastern churches have preserved the original order of the sacraments of initiation, it is a priest who is their ordinary minister (CCC 1290, 1312). Although the Latin rite has separated the three sacraments from each other and changed their order, Confirmation has maintained the Bishop as the ordinary minister of Confirmation (CCC 1290, 1292, 1313). In an effort to keep some relationship among the three sacraments of initiation, the Latin rite calls for the renewal of baptismal promises during the Confirmation ceremony and sees the administration of the sacrament as ideally situated within the context of the Mass.

From earliest times, a special ritual for the imparting of the Holy Spirit is in evidence (cf. Acts 8:14; 19:6). However, even theologians are sometimes hard-pressed to explain the differences between Baptism and Confirmation. Some suggest

that the degree of incorporation into the Church is the difference, which has already been discussed. Others locate the uniqueness of Confirmation in its being the preeminent sacrament of the Holy Spirit, or in the communication to the recipient of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. However, the Spirit is operative in all the sacraments (CCC 1091-92). So perhaps the best way to look at the situation is through the recipient and the sacrament's effect.

### **The Work of the Holy Spirit**

The special work theology traditionally assigns to the third Person of the Blessed Trinity is that of sanctification. In Confirmation the recipient is given a particular grace to be open to the operation of the Spirit, so that there is a special turning to the Spirit in the same way that our Lord, Mary, and the apostles opened themselves up to the promptings of the Spirit and thus performed the works of the Spirit (CCC 1303). Baptism is concerned with the salvation of the individual; Confirmation takes that saved individual and turns him outward with concern for the salvation of the world.

Through the ancient biblical gesture of the imposition of hands, the ritual formula ("Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit"; CCC 1300, 1320), and the anointing with chrism, the Christian is marked with a special, permanent character, setting him apart for a life of public witness (CCC 1304, 1317). The Anglican theologian William Temple once observed that "the Church exists for those who are not yet members of her." This insight is particularly useful here. A Christian vocation that is not missionary is, by its very nature, defective. A living out of one's baptismal and Confirmation commitments requires one to share the gospel with others and to invite others to experience the fullness of life known only through membership in the Church.

### **Answers to Three Modern Questions**

The Sacrament of Confirmation helps provide some answers for three modern questions, questions relating to the priesthood of the faithful, the

approximate age for reception of the sacrament, and the need for continuing theological discussion.

In "the old days" we used to speak of Confirmation as making people into soldiers of Christ (cf. CCC 1295). One may balk at such military imagery, but an important point was being made—namely, that Confirmation gave a Catholic certain responsibilities, that one was sent on a mission.

This work includes both "offensive" and "defensive" elements, to continue with the military metaphor. Offensively, it means making a positive effort to communicate the gospel message and the significance of life in the Church, most especially through the joyful example of a good Christian life (CCC 1305). Included in this form of witness is reaching out to others and asking them to consider life in the Church. While this may be characterized as taking the offensive, it should never be done aggressively but rather with sensitivity, charity, and respect for the dignity of the other.

Defensively, it means providing an explanation of Church teachings, particularly when they are misunderstood or misrepresented. Questions from inquirers should not be perceived as attacks on oneself or on the Church but as a genuine effort to come to a knowledge of the truth.

This twofold process, of course, is that of attracting converts to the church—one of the most important areas for lay involvement and the one most sadly and frequently neglected today. Priests would generally agree that the vast numbers of converts brought into the Church in the 1950s came through committed laypeople who took seriously the responsibilities flowing from their Baptism and Confirmation. After the apostles received the Gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday, they immediately went out to preach with courage and conviction. The result, St. Luke tells us, was that three thousand people were added to the Church that day. Confirmation does indeed give its grace to the individual for the salvation of the world.

The First Epistle of Peter speaks of Christians as a royal priesthood and a people set apart from their pagan environment (CCC 901, 1141, 1268). They are to be "counter cultural agents", living in the