



by Jethro Higgins

What is the Sacrament of Confirmation?

The Sacrament of Confirmation is one of the three Catholic sacraments of initiation. Confirmation in the Catholic Church includes the laying on of hands, and anointing in the sign of the cross with Chrism oil. Confirmation is the third and final sacrament which completes Christian initiation for Roman Catholics, as well as eastern Catholic churches, and is also prominent in the Orthodox Church and other Mainline Christian denominations, including the Church of England, Methodist and Lutheran churches.

Within the Catholic faith confirmation is not merely a rite of passage as some think it to be. As one of the seven sacraments, well-defined at the Council of Trent, confirmation is one of these seven ordinary means of grace established by God the Father through Jesus Christ. The confirmands – candidates for confirmation – are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. And he enters the life of the faithful in a unique way after receiving the sacrament. We'll discuss this more in the section on the effect of the sacrament. If you scan the web, you'll find a lot of misinformation about what confirmation means, as secular or non-Catholic sources wrestle with how to describe a sacrament.

Confirmation means...

I use a word association tool when I start to write a blog post just to see what other people are saying around the topic, and I was confused about some of the words that were appearing as related to the topic of confirmation: "words of the day", "related words", "American English", "British English". Then it dawned on me, most people searching for "confirmation" online are actually looking for the definition of confirmation. And most of the results when you search for that word are English dictionary results. The Catholic Encyclopedia New Advent is there and one or two other Catholic websites, but the primary information you will get from Google is secular. So that could explain some of the confusion people often have about what confirmation actually is. But in

the Catechism of the Catholic Church, confirmation is described like this:

"Baptism, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Confirmation together constitute the 'sacraments of Christian initiation,' whose unity must be safeguarded. It must be explained to the faithful that the reception of the sacrament of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace. For '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. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.'" (CCC 1285)

So we can see from the Catechism that through confirmation, we receive the Holy Spirit in a unique way that compels us to spread and defend the faith. Yet, what exactly are we being called to, through the effect of the sacrament?

Effect of the sacrament

Confirmation calls us to live a life of holiness and obedience to God's will. That call is primarily through a renewal of our baptismal promises that were, in most cases, made for us by our parents when we were baptized. Our parents also made a promise at our baptism to raise us in the faith and teach us about our Church. That might take the form of encouragement to pray the rosary or adopt other devotional practices like the Stations of the Cross to deepen our faith. Hopefully, these statements within our creed were made real for us in our home-life, so that when the time came for us to receive the Holy Spirit, we would be prepared to confirm our faith. We receive the Holy Spirit in seven unique ways through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are:

- **Wisdom** – *Helps us to rightly order our interpersonal relationships and the centrality of God and his will in our lives.*
- **Understanding** – *Helps us to comprehend the Gospel and the will of God as communicated through his message.*
- **Knowledge** – *The capacity for exploring and pondering God's revelation along with the awareness that some mysteries of faith are beyond our ability to grasp completely.*
- **Counsel** – *Helps us to choose the path of God when presented with choices that relate to our journey toward him.*
- **Fortitude** – *Also referred to as courage or strength helps us to do what we know is right even when it might be difficult or costly.*
- **Piety** – *Is a strong devotion to God through prayer*
- **Fear of the Lord** – *Is not to be afraid of God, but to be in wonder of his power and might, and to marvel at his majesty.*

The blessing that the bishop gives over the confirmands during the Roman Rite of Confirmation encapsulates all of these gifts beautifully

“All-powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life. Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide. Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord.” (CCC 1299)

Empowered by these gifts and the sacramental grace of God, the confirmed Catholic has everything they need to spread and defend the faith in both word and deed, or as many put it, to be a “soldier of Christ.”

The rite: Administering the sacrament

The Roman Rite of confirmation occurs ordinarily in the context of the Mass. It's fitting that reception of Holy Communion be part of the celebration of the sacrament of confirmation. The Holy Eucharist is, after all, the “source and summit” of our Catholic faith (CCC 1324). Being the third sacrament of initiation, confirmation is reserved to baptized persons that have received their first Holy Communion. The confirmands make a profession of faith by renewing their baptismal vows, at their confirmation,

then receive the blessing (mentioned above) from the bishop, who must administer confirmation ordinarily. And one by one, along with their sponsors, the confirmands approach the Bishop. He receives the confirmation names from the sponsor and then traces the sign of the cross on the confirmand's forehead saying,

“[Name], be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit”

The confirmand then responds, “Amen,” and the bishop extends a sign of peace to the confirmand. All sacraments have matter and form, and for confirmation the matter is the chrism oil, and the form is the above prayer. As you may have read, in the article below on last rites, if a person is in danger of death this sacrament can be administered by a priest as an extraordinary minister. A priest may also administer confirmation during the Easter Vigil, which makes sense. Not all bishops have the power to bilocate like St. Padre Pio did, so it would be hard for them to be in every parish in the diocese at 7:00pm on Holy Saturday. In cases of Adult baptisms through RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), the catechumens receive the three sacraments of initiation during the Easter Vigil Mass where they are baptized, then confirmed, and then they receive the Holy Eucharist for the first time during communion completing their initiation.

Picking a name

In the Roman Catholic church, all of the candidates for confirmation have the opportunity to pick a confirmation name for themselves. This practice provides the faithful with an opportunity to adopt a new patron saint in their devotional lives. Typically, confirmands are encouraged to pick a name that speaks to who they are. So, if your family is Irish, you might pick St. Patrick, or if you are considering monastic life, you might choose St. Benedict. This practice could be traced back to the Lord Jesus Christ who gave Simon the name Peter, or even further back to God the Father who changed Abram's name to Abraham. Another classic example would be St. Paul, whose name was Saul before his conversion. The giving of a new name also identifies that these people were set apart in a special way for the work of God, which is fitting for the Sacrament of Confirmation. Many Catholics include their confirmation names as middle names when referring to themselves to remind themselves of the commission they received at confirmation.

In other faith traditions

As mentioned in the first paragraph confirmation is also practiced in a number of other faith traditions. The Orthodox and Catholic eastern churches, like the Ukrainian Rite, celebrate confirmation, first communion

and baptism all at once for infants. *The Book of Common Prayer* also contains a confirmation ritual for the Episcopal and Anglican churches that is structured very similar to the Roman Rite. Even Reform Judaism, if you can believe it, has a confirmation. Although it was originally a way to refer to bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah with inclusive language and move the coming of age ceremony to the late teen years. The Reform Judaism practice is, of course, not Christocentric and is more of a true rite of passage than a commissioning.

Where is THAT in the Bible?

The best example of Confirmation in the Bible comes to us from the Acts of the Apostles:

Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Then they laid hands on them and they received the holy Spirit."

Because the more visible sign in the Catholic rite is the anointing with chrism oil – olive oil scented with a balsam perfume – it can sometimes be missed when reading through the Bible that "The laying on of hands" refers to confirmation. Another biblical reference to confirmation would be the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles.

Church fathers and the Early Church

It's also clear from the writings of the church fathers throughout church history, but especially in the first centuries of Christianity, that the Early Church had a clear understanding of the essential nature of confirmation as a sacrament. Catholic Answers has an excellent list of a dozen church fathers who wrote in the first four centuries of Christianity about the necessity of confirmation.

Conclusion

Confirmation is often seen as the finish line for the faithful. Parents often have the mind set of, "If I can just get them confirmed..." Which is understandable, confirmation should be a launching off point for a young person – a beginning not an end. So, it follows that parents would struggle toward the goal of getting their children to the starting line for their personal experience of spreading the message of Jesus Christ. However, in the real world spiritual battle, parents fight to keep their children Catholic in an increasingly hostile world towards the message

of Christ. The message often communicated to our teens is that Confirmation is the end. As a result many young Catholics stop participating in their parish after this event, and many drift away from the faith after high school. But confirmation is only the beginning! I love the image from the dream of St. Dominic about his friars. St. Dominic saw a dog with a torch in its mouth setting the world on fire. That's why Dominican's are often depicted as the dogs of Christ. The fire in their mouths is the Gospel message, and as faithful confirmed Catholics, we should be so bold to use the words of our mouths to spread the blazing message of Truth in the Gospel! We are called to set the world ablaze! In the words of Jesus,

"I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" (Luke 12:49)

Music for the sacrament

As I mentioned in a previous post, if we want to change the world we must first change ourselves. We should saturate our lives with content that supports our mission given in confirmation. We become what we consume. So, here are some wonderful songs about confirmation for you to consume. May they set your heart ablaze for the mission of spreading the faith of Jesus Christ.

May You Walk

by Sarah Hart (ocp.org/songs/87563)

Sarah's song off her album "Sacrament" captures the commissioning of Confirmation so eloquently, as her lyrics often do. "May you walk ever in the Lord, and may His Spirit be with you at all times." This is one of those songs that you here in Church at Mass and can't stop singing on your way out to the parking lot.

Jesus Christ You Are My Life

by Marco Frisina (ocp.org/songs/66290)

If you are in a multilingual community this is a great song to incorporate Vietnamese youth from the Eucharistic Youth Movement or your parish's Jovenes group. It's trilingual in Tiếng Việt, Español and English.

Isaiah 61

by Matt Maher (ocp.org/songs/66290)

It's always really fun and inspiring to listen to Matt Maher's Isaiah 61. I've been playing this song on piano from the song book I'm considering it for our own confirmation celebration this year.

This series is intended to provide a more in-depth look at each of the Sacraments their institution in the Bible, current practice, and some beautiful musical suggestions. Explore more from related articles in this series:

- **Baptism:** *What is Baptism?*
- **Eucharist:** *What is the Eucharist?*
- **Confirmation:** *What is the Sacrament of Confirmation?*
- **Confession:** *Sacrament of Reconciliation*
- **Anointing of the Sick:** *Last Rites and the Anointing of the Sick*
- **Matrimony:** *Being husband and wife*
- **Holy Orders:** *What is the Sacrament of Holy Orders?*

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