

The Sacrament of Confirmation

By Jim Seghers

Introduction

The sacrament of Confirmation has been identified by many different expressions over the centuries:

- Mystical Chrism (Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, A.D. 350)
- Sanctification by Chrism (Pope Saint Leo the Great, 440-461)
- Laying on of the Hand (Innocent III, 1198-1216)
- The Anointing of the Forehead with Chrism (Innocent IV, 1243-1254)
- The Holy Chrism of Confirmation (Council of Trent, 1545-1563)
- Rite of Confirmation (Vatican Council II, 1962-1965)
- Rite of Chrismation (Eastern Rite Churches)
- Sacrament of Christian Maturity (Modern Times)
- Sacrament of Courage (Modern Times)

Chrism

Chrism is mixture of pure oil of olives and balsam that is blessed by a bishop. It is the matter for the Sacrament of Confirmation. In addition it is used in the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Orders, in the consecration of churches, chalices, patens, altars, altar-stones, and in the solemn blessing of bells and baptismal water. The oil signifies the copious outpouring of grace and strength. Balsam typifies the sweetness of Christian virtue, which protects from the corruption of sin

Overview

Confirmation is the second of the three sacraments of initiation. Like Baptism, which we studied last lesson, Confirmation imprints an indelible (meaning incapable of being deleted or obliterated) *character* or spiritual *seal* on the soul (CCC 1295-1296).

2 Cor 1:21-22

“It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has *commissioned* us; he has put his *seal* on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”

This character or seal “marks (1) our total belonging to Christ, (2) our enrollment in his service for ever, as well as (3) the promise of divine protection in the great eschatological trial [at the end of our life and at the end of time]” (CCC 1296). Confirmation “is the sign that Jesus Christ has permanently marked a Christian with the seal of his Spirit by clothing him with power from on high so that he may be his witness” (CCC 1304).

CCC 1305

This “character” perfects the common priesthood of the faithful, received in Baptism, and “the confirmed person receives the power to profess faith in Christ publicly and as it were officially (*quasi ex officio*).

Therefore, like Baptism, Confirmation can be received only once. Confirmation increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit, enriching us with supernatural strength and courage to boldly confess the name of Christ, empowering us to spread and defend the Christian faith by word and deed. Given this full outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the sacrament of Confirmation has rightfully become known in the Western Churches as the “Sacrament of Courage.”

Biblical Foundation

The prophet Ezekiel foresaw the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that occurs in the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation:

Ezekiel 36:25-27

I will *sprinkle clean water* upon you, and you shall be *clean from all your uncleannesses*, and for all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a *new spirit* I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put *my spirit* within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.”

Jesus clearly promised that the Holy Spirit would come to strengthen his followers.

Luke 12:11-12

“And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

Acts 1:8

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”

John 14:16-17

“And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.”

Confirmation is clearly seen as a separate rite from Baptism in the incident of the Deacon Philip with his Samaritan converts. Philip baptized them, but the special reception of the Holy Spirit awaited the administration of Confirmation by the Apostles.

Acts 8:14-17

“Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it has not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.”

A similar separation between the rites of Baptism and Confirmation is evident in St. Paul's journey to Ephesus.

Acts 19:1-6

“While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ And they said, ‘No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ And he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They said, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ And Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.”

These passages show that from the time of the Apostles there existed in Christ's Church a rite for conferring the potency of Holy Spirit that was distinct from sacramental Baptism. The early Christians terms: “the laying on of hands,” “receiving the Holy Spirit,” “commission,” “seal,” and “anointed” were commonly used before the end of the first century. These expressions are rooted in God's revelation. Thus St. Paul wrote:

2 Corinthians 1:21-22

“But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has *commissioned* us; he has put his *seal* upon us and *given us his Spirit* in our hearts as a guarantee.”

Ephesians 1:13-14

“In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were *sealed* with the *promised Holy Spirit*, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”

Ephesians 4:30

“and do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were *sealed* for the day of redemption.”

The author of Hebrews informs Christians that they are no longer treated as neophytes because their foundation in Christ was laid in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation.

Hebrews 6:1-2

“Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions [baptism], the *laying on of hands*, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.”

St. John also refers to the anointing of the Holy Spirit in his first letter:

1 John 2:20

“But you have been *anointed* by the Holy One, and you all know. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and know that no lie is of the truth.”

1 John 2:26-27

“I write this to you about those who would deceive you; but the *anointing* which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you as his *anointing* teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him.”

Confirmation’s Relationship to Sacramental Baptism

These two sacraments compliment each other as is evident in Sacred Scripture. Baptism is fundamental, but Confirmation “is *necessary* for the completion of baptismal grace” (CCC 1285). Jesus uses this marvelous sacrament, “which in a certain way, perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church” (CCC 1288).

Historical Development

In apostolic times the anointing with perfumed oil (*chrism*) was added to the laying on of hands to better signify the gift of the Holy Spirit.

CCC 1289 “This anointing highlights the name ‘Christian,’ which means ‘anointed’ and derives from that of Christ himself whom God ‘anointed with the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38). This rite of anointing has continued ever since, in both East and West. For this reason the Eastern Churches call this sacrament *Chrismation*, anointing with chrism, or *myron* which means ‘chrism.’ In the West, the term *Confirmation* suggests that this sacrament both confirms Baptism and strengthens baptismal grace.”

In addition to the New Testament the Sacrament of Confirmation appears in other historical documents as a distinct rite from Baptism by the end of the second century. Pope Cornelius (251-253) affirmed this clear distinction in the middle of the third century. “By the fourth century, Confirmation, whether conferred by anointing or laying on of hands, was everywhere a separate rite.”¹ However, long before the fourth century separate customs regarding the administration of the sacrament were followed in the East and in the West.

East and West

In the East it was the normal practice for the priest to administer the Sacrament of Baptism followed immediately by the Sacrament of Confirmation, but the link to the bishop was maintained because the priest could only confirm with the *myron* consecrated by the bishop. In the West the desire to reserve Confirmation to the bishop caused a separation in time between the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Even in the West, however, the bishop may delegate the administration of Confirmation to a priest.

¹ John A. Hardon, *The Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic Church*, p. 515.

The Rite

“In the Latin rite [West], ‘the sacrament of Confirmation is conferred through the anointing with chrism on the forehead, which is done by the laying on of the hand, and through the words: “*Accipe signaculum doni Spiritus Sancti*” [Be sealed with the Gift of the holy Spirit]” (CCC 1300).

Effects of Confirmation

In this sacrament the Holy Spirit gives a great increase of grace, which develops a more intimate union with his indwelling presence and deepening the transforming union into Christ. The Holy Spirit inflames our hearts and enables us to become valiant soldiers in Christ’s army so we can fight successfully against the world, the flesh and the devil thereby professing our faith by the manner we live our lives.

Confirmation gives us the fullness of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. These stupendous gifts are: Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, and Fear of the Lord (Is 11:2). These gifts are superhuman powers that enable us to faithfully live a Christian life in a ways that would be impossible except for the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Many Christians throughout the centuries have reflected on these marvelous gifts. In particular, the insights of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Frances de Sales form a beautiful treasure that enrich our understanding of these marvelous gifts.

Wisdom

Wisdom is the highest of the gifts because it corresponds most to the virtue of love, which is the loftiest of the virtues. It directs the intellect, moderates the passions, corrects the affections and directs the will. Wisdom leads us to judge all things by their relationship to God, not so much as an intellectual enterprise, but from the perspective of our loving relationship with God. Therefore, it enables us to focus on eternal truths, to make correct judgments in the light of eternity, and to delight in the things of God. In this way the Holy Spirit prevents us from becoming preoccupied with human culture, the flawed politically correct thinking of this world, and the latest theological fads. Wisdom helps us understand that all that glitters is not gold. On the contrary it helps us marvel at the graces given in the humblest exteriors. Wisdom reminds us, in the words of Cardinal Newman: “A thousand difficulties do not make a doubt.” The gift of wisdom brings peace because all of life, even in its difficulties, is viewed from God’s perspective.

Understanding

Understanding helps us penetrate the mysteries of salvation. It makes the Bible come alive in our hearts. Similarly the gift of understanding enlightens us during sermons, conferences, religious classes, and when reading spiritual books. It develops a profound appreciation of God’s saving grace through the sacraments. Understanding develops contempt for the world and tutors us to advise and lead others. This gift helps a person appreciate their vocation in life so they can faithfully live it. According to St. Augustine understanding cannot exist in a high degree without a

great purity of heart, which corresponds to the beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8).

Counsel

Counsel gives us a readiness of will to do the better thing even when it is the hardest choice. It gives the capability to prudently decide about the concerns of God and salvation. What must I do? Should I silently preserve in patience, should I show meekness, or should I act with firmness, even boldness? The Holy Spirit guides us through the gift of counsel. He fortifies us against rash impulsiveness on the one hand and cowardness on the other. With the gift of counsel the Holy Spirit harmonizes the apparent contradictory virtues: prudence and simplicity, fortitude and meekness, frankness and reserve. The gift of counsel leads to harmony, kindness, and peace. It undermines the enemy of our soul who creates discord by making mountains out of trifles.

Fortitude

Isaiah placed fortitude above knowledge because it is vital to have the strength to avoid evil and do good without becoming discouraged. The world, the flesh and the devil are powerful, subtle and perfidious enemies. Fortitude gives us the courage and strength to be steadfast and patient in the midst of our trials and temptations. It gives us the bravery to proclaim our fidelity to Christ during times of persecution or ridicule. This is the gift that sustained the martyrs. Lastly, fortitude gives us the determination and energy needed for perseverance. In all the struggles of life the gift of fortitude leads us to rely totally on God’s strength, not our weakness and natural ineptitude.

Knowledge

Knowledge enables us to see and use temporal things in a way that will help others and us toward our eternal salvation. The gift of knowledge helps us avoid sentimentalism and the illusion of control and self-sufficiency that can so easily dominate the imagination. With this gift the Holy Spirit vividly shows us the vanity of all passing things: honors, titles, praise of man, wealth, position, and power. Knowledge exposes the emptiness and deception of the world. It also shows us the infinite gravity of mortal sin (2 Jn 5:16-17), and it produces profound sorrow for having offended God. Unlike human knowledge, which can easily lead to self-confident pride and presumption; the gift of knowledge motivates us to place all our trust in God for he alone can save us. This gift creates the balance between discouraging pessimism and the optimism of vanity that relies on self.

Piety

Piety gives us the disposition to serve God with tenderness and devotion. It helps us love all others because they are God’s children for whom Jesus died on the cross. Piety compliments the fear of the Lord because it inclines our heart with a wholly filial affection for God. Piety brings disinterestedness for sensible consolations in prayer by giving us peace during times of distractions, dryness and aridity. In this regard St. Paul wrote: “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into

fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship... Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but he Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:15, 26).

Fear of the Lord

This gift is not the servile fear that dreads God’s punishment, but the reverential loving fear of the Father’s sons and daughters who dread offending him by sin. Servile fear diminishes love because it views God as the punishing avenger rather than our loving, merciful Father. The fear of the Lord is an extension of our love for God. This holy horror of sin is the “beginning of wisdom” (Ps 110:10) because it leads us to surrender to God in everything. Often this gift is the first manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s influence in the soul when it experiences a genuine conversion.

Question

If these gifts of the Holy Spirit are so powerful, why is it that some Christians exhibit little indication that they are active in their lives? They appear to have no habits of mortal sin, but they take offense at trifles, show great eagerness for praise and attention, and live according to worldly standards. These people lack recollection and are not attentive to the inclinations of the Holy Spirit because they are spiritually stunted by attachment to venial sin. They experience disquiet in their soul because they surrender to spiritual inertia. The solution is found in Psalm 95:7-8: “O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts.”

Fruits of the Spirit

In contrast to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the fruits of the Holy Spirit are the result of our cooperation with the grace of the gifts. The gifts are the sources. The fruits flow from their exercise. St. Paul enumerates the fruits in his Letter to the Galatians 5:22-23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

Love

The word love may be the most misunderstood common word in the English language because in the popular understanding it is defined by feelings and hormones. Authentic love is an act of the will. Genuine love has two essential elements: self-sacrifice and commitment. Perfect love is total self-sacrifice and complete commitment.

The Holy Spirit teaches us to live with self-sacrificing love because he is the divine Person of Love. This virtue is so important that St. Paul called it greater than faith and hope (1 Cor 13:13). Jesus declared: “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 15:34-35).

St. Paul also gave his practical insight into the virtue of love: “Love is *patient* and *kind*; love is *not jealous or boastful*; it is *not arrogant or rude*. Love does *not insist*

on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:4-7).

To examine your behavior in this important area substitute your name for the word “love,” and you will quickly discover the areas you need improvement!

Joy

The prophet Nehemiah declared: “the *joy* of the Lord is your strength” (Neh 8:10). The author of Hebrews wrote: “Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the *joy* that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). The fruit of joy is the awareness of that God is our strength and protector because we abide in his love. This inner joy is undisturbed by the negative circumstances that may surround us. Joy is rooted in the truths that Christ has redeemed us, and he will never abandon us.

Peace

Peace is the compliment of joy; together they are like the two sides of a coin. St. Paul addressed the subject of peace twice in his letter to the Romans. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have *peace* with God through the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1). “May the God of hope fill you with all *joy* and *peace* in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom 15:13). The peace of the Holy Spirit is the inner tranquility, even amid great hardships, that comes from our reliance on God who is all-powerful and always faithful.

Genuine peace comes from living confidently in the present moment with God rather than with anxiousness about tomorrow’s problems, which are not yet ours to bear.

Patience

Patience is the virtue that helps us calmly bear our troubles and preserve with serenity amid the sufferings of life. Patience mitigates sorrow and staves off excessive anger and complaining. St. Paul prayed: “May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and *patience* with *joy*, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Gal 1:11). In his letter to the Ephesians he wrote: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all *lowliness* and *meekness*, with *patience*, forbearing one another in *love*, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of *peace*” (Eph 5:1-3).

Kindness

Genuine kindness stems from authentic love because it inclines a person to give to others without counting the cost. The kind person is other-directed. Some of the words that describe the facets of kindness are: benevolence, compassion, goodwill, generosity, and altruism. St. Paul describes kindness as a characteristic of authentic Christians: “but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments,

tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, *kindness*, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left” (2 Cor 6:4-7).

Goodness

Human actions are said to be good when they conform to the proper moral order according to the natural and divine law. A person is said to have the characteristic of goodness when their actions pursue all that is good and avoid all that is evil. This is the first principle of sound practical reasoning. In St. Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians he wrote: “To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his call, and may fill every *good resolve* and work of faith by his power” (2 Thess 2:11).

Faithfulness

Faithfulness is the ability to remain true to our Christian vocation to the end of our life. This is extremely important, because if we abandon Jesus at the end of our life it negates all that went before. This is consistent with the adage: “It is not he who begins the race well who is commended, but he who ends it well.” Jesus proclaimed: “But he who *endures to the end* will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

Gentleness

Gentleness and meekness are synonyms. The gentle person shuns actions based on the principle, “might is right.” He does not insist on his own way. Jesus set the standard with the words: “learn from me; for I am *gentle* and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29). Then he lived this lesson during the terrible ordeal of his passion and death. St. Peter instructed: “Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of robes, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a *gentle* and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious” (1 Pet 3:3-4).

Self-control

Self-control is achieved through the virtue of temperance. This is a very important virtue because it gives us the power of the Holy Spirit to control all our appetites, particularly chastity, which it is a major challenge today. St. Peter touched on self-control in his second letter: “For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with *self-control*, and *self-control* with steadfastness [*faithfulness*], and steadfastness with goodness [*goodness*], and goodness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with *love*. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful (See: Jn 15:2) in knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins [Baptism]. Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election [*faithfulness*], for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided by you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet 1:5-11).

Preparing for Confirmation

In preparing for Confirmation, the candidate should be developing a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit: his actions, his gifts, and his biddings – in order to be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of Christian life. To achieve this you need to develop a sense of prayer throughout the day. Ask the Holy Spirit to deepen your faith and fill you with his love for Jesus and for others.

To receive Confirmation one must be in a state of grace. If the candidate is not being baptized before receiving the sacrament of Confirmation, the confirmand should receive the sacrament of Reconciliation in order to be cleansed for the reception of gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Using the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The fruits of the Spirit cannot flourish unless the gifts of the Holy Spirit are exercised. The sacrament of Confirmation brings a power with the fullness of the Holy Spirit. That power is the radiating presence of the Holy Spirit. Like the electricity that flows into our houses, the switch must be turned on to light up its rooms. Similarly, we throw the switch of the power of the Holy Spirit when we rely on his potency rather than on ourselves. God's strength never fails, but we must rely on his awesome power in our daily living.

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