

Lesson 16: Confirmation

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Just as Baptism **gives** new life, Eucharist **nourishes** life, and Reconciliation **restores** life when it is broken, Confirmation **strengthens** that life by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is about strengthening what God has given, and continues to give, to His sons and daughters.

Confirmation is not about coming of age. Reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation does not mark the end of formal religious education. We never outgrow a need for a deeper knowledge and appreciation of our faith.

The Sacrament of Confirmation is not a rite of passage, nor a graduation from religion class, nor a ratification of a personal faith choice. Rather, it's all about what God is doing for His beloved daughters and sons.

And what is God doing? Strengthening the divine life which He gave at Baptism, nourishing us in the Eucharist, and reconciling with us in Penance. Why? So that the individual can better defend and witness to the faith through the gifts and workings of the Holy Spirit. And there are—and will be—many situations where we are called upon to defend and witness to our faith. And we need all the help we can get!

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem so that they could be baptized by the Holy Spirit. When Jesus' disciples were gathered the Holy Spirit came in the form of wind and fire. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples understood that God was anointing them for a special mission.

The early Christians made sure, then, that whenever they brought people into the Church, they would baptize them with water and then anoint them with oil. Why oil? Oil had been used in the Old Testaments to anoint priests, prophets, and kings. The early Christians realized that their community was “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9). Each new member was anointed with oil after being baptized with water.

In the early Church, Baptism and Confirmation were celebrated in a single ceremony. It is still done this way in the churches of the East. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of the West, the two sacraments gradually separated. The Church in the West wanted the bishop to complete a person's initiation. As the Church grew and the bishops ministered over ever larger territories, the bishop could not be present for every Baptism. So began the custom of gathering groups of baptized Catholics together later so that the bishop could confirm them all at one time. In the process over time the reception of the Eucharist came before the celebration of Confirmation.

Receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation, the Christian's relationship with God is made stronger. The Gifts of the Holy Spirit are strengthened: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. In this way the Christian is equipped to become a better witness to Christ in the world.

A bishop is the usual celebrant of the Sacrament of Confirmation. During the celebration of Confirmation, the bishop extends his hands over those to be confirmed and calls upon God: “Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide.” Then each person to be confirmed is anointed with chrism on the forehead as the bishop says, “Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.”

In Confirmation, the Christian becomes more closely united with Christ. With the strengthening of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit the Christian is able to accept new responsibilities for witnessing Jesus to the world.

We are born spiritually in the sacrament of Baptism. We become sharers in the divine life of the most Blessed Trinity. We begin to live a supernatural life. As we practice the virtues of faith and hope and love and as we unite with Christ in his Church in offering worship to God, we also grow in grace and goodness.

But at this stage our spiritual life, like the life of a child, is largely self-centered. We tend to be preoccupied with the needs of our own soul, with the effort to “be good.” We cannot be wholly self-centered, of course—not if we understand what it means to be a member of Christ’s Mystical Body, and not if we understand the significance of the Mass.

When we are confirmed, we receive a special grace by which our faith is deepened and strengthened, so that it will be strong enough not only for our own needs but for the needs of **others** with whom we shall try to share it.

Just as the “mark” or character of Baptism made us sharers with Christ in his role of priest, giving us the power to participate with him in divine worship, so also the character of Confirmation makes us sharers with Christ in his role of **prophet** or teacher.

We now participate with Jesus in the task of extending his kingdom, of adding new souls to his Mystical Body. Our words and our works are directed not merely to our own sanctification but also to the purpose of making Christ’s truths alive and real for those around us.

The Rite of Confirmation

The essential part of the Confirmation Rite is when the bishop or priest places his hand upon the head of each individual.

The bishop traces the sign of the cross on the person’s forehead—having first dipped his thumb in the holy oil called *chrism*—and says, “Be sealed with the Gifts of the Holy Spirit.” The newly confirmed person responds by saying, “Amen.”

Chrism is one of the three kinds of holy oil which a bishop blesses each year at the Chrism Mass on the Tuesday of Holy Week. The other two kinds of holy oil are the oil of catechumens (used in Baptism) and the oil of the sick (used in Anointing of the Sick). The holy oils, all of them, are composed of pure olive oil.

From ancient times, olive oil has been looked upon as a strengthening substance; so much so that athletes were accustomed to bathe in olive oil before taking part in athletic contests. The

significance of the holy oils used in the administration of the sacraments is then very evident: the oil represents the strengthening effect of God's grace.

Besides the distinct and special blessing which each holy oil receives, Chrism has another difference: balm has been mixed with it. Balm is a fragrant substance procured from the balsam tree. In the holy Chrism it symbolizes the "sweet odor" of virtue; it tells of the spiritual fragrance, the *attractiveness* that should characterize the life of him who puts his Confirmation graces to work.

THE 7 GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT



FORTITUDE

Helps us to overcome difficulties with faith.



PIETY

Moves us to treat God with the trust with which a child treats his Father.



FEAR OF GOD

Compels us to flee from sin and always choose to please God.



COUNSEL

Encourages us to follow the solution that most matches the glory of God and the good of others.



UNDERSTANDING

Helps us understand the Word of God and the doctrines of faith.



WISDOM

Makes us see all things in light of God and impels us to seek Him above all things.



KNOWLEDGE

Helps us see the world from God's perspective.