

The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults

by Fr. Antony

Confirmation: The Sacrament of Spiritual Strengthening

We define Confirmation as the sacrament of spiritual strengthening; it strengthens the supernatural life we receive in Baptism. Confirmation increases our sanctifying grace in every way, but mainly in deepening our capacity to remain spiritually alive. It gives us the power of resistance: the ability to resist dangers, and the strength to become more Christ-like until the dawn of eternity. Confirmation confers the character of assimilation to Jesus Christ, the priest, teacher, and king.

Christ instituted this sacrament, not by performing it, but by promising it. He said *“If I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you”*. (**John 16:7**) Christ instituted the Sacrament of Confirmation so that His followers would witness to Him, *even to the ends of the earth*. (**Acts 1: 18**)

The biblical grounds for our faith in Confirmation are Christ’s promise to send the Holy Spirit on the apostles. Jesus told His disciples, *“And behold I am sending the promise of my Father up on you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with the power from on high”*. (**Lk 24:49**) And again, in the Acts of the Apostles, we see Jesus’ promise, *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes up on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”*. (**Acts 1:8**) The Apostles laid hands on the newly baptized Jews, because they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. (**Acts 8:17**) The Catholic Church continues this Apostolic Tradition.

The sacramental character of Confirmation can be described by calling it the sacrament of witness to Christ, in the Church and before the world. In other words, we can say that Confirmation is the sacrament of fearless apostolic zeal. In the words of Pope John Paul II, by the sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized are “made strong and more firmly obliged by word and deed to witness to Christ and to spread and defend the faith.” Through this we receive the superhuman courage to witness to Jesus Christ. We have the Apostles as best examples for this. (**Acts 2**)

“But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord”. (**Is 11:1-3**) Though these words of Isaiah specifically refer to the Messiah, the Tradition of the Church is that these gifts are extended to all of the faithful through the sacraments of Baptism and especially Confirmation. (**CCC. 1303**)

In the administration of the Sacrament of Confirmation, the bishop prays, extending his hands over the candidate,

“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. Amen.”

Then, the bishop confirms each candidate, making the sign of the cross with holy chrism on his forehead, and saying,

“Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

As we see in the prayer of the ‘imposition of hands’, through the sacrament of Confirmation, we receive the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. Traditionally, the gifts are listed as fear of the Lord, piety, knowledge, understanding, counsel, wisdom and fortitude as we see in the book of Isaiah. These gifts are present to the person as long as he/she remains in a state of sanctifying grace, and help a person attain sanctification and bring to perfection virtues, both the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity), and the infused virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance). “The moral life of Christians is sustained by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are permanent dispositions which make man docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit.... They complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations”. **(CCC. 1830-31)**

Generally, Confirmation is administered in a church during the Holy Mass; however, for a just and reasonable cause it may be celebrated apart from Mass, and in any fitting place. **(Canon 881)** After the “liturgy of the Word” the pastor presents the candidate to the bishop. In the Latin Rite, the essential words (form) for the Sacrament are: “*N., be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit,*” while the essential action (matter) is the anointing with the Sacred Chrism on the forehead performed by the imposition of hands. Then the celebrant wishes the candidate saying,

“Peace be with you”

and the candidate responds,

“and also with you”.

At the time of anointing the sponsor places his/her right hand on the shoulder’s of the candidate and gives the candidate’s name to the bishop.

The Sacrament is usually administered by a bishop; however, priests may also confirm if they possess the requisite faculty “either from the universal law or by way of a special grant from the competent authority”. **(Canon 882)** Priests are called the extraordinary ministers of the sacrament and are obliged to use chrism blessed by a Catholic bishop. In the danger of death, any priest may, and should, confirm.