

## From the desk of Fr. Jim

### ON THE FOUNDATION OF THE SACRAMENTAL LIFE PART 13: THE LITURGY OF CONFIRMATION

As with all the sacraments, much can be learned by studying the liturgical actions associated with the celebration of Confirmation. The Church prays what we believe, so we can discern our own understanding through the words and actions of the liturgy.

The Confirmation liturgy almost always takes place in a Mass, but the most important day is Holy Saturday at the Vigil service. We need to remember three important connections. First, Confirmation is intimately connected to Baptism, and in the case of the Baptism of adults, Confirmation is celebrated along with Baptism. Second, Confirmation, together with the Mass, form the sacraments of initiation. This means that until one has received all three of these sacraments, a person is not fully incorporated into the life of the Church. This may be confusing, because Confirmation is not, strictly speaking, “necessary for salvation.” In fact, for whatever reason, there are many adult Catholics who are not confirmed. Once again, the place of Confirmation is best understood in the context of an awareness of our vocation. All Christians are called to carry out the “apostolate of the laity.” This is a deeply important aspect of our shared and individual spirituality.

The mission of the Church pertains to the salvation of men, which is to be achieved by belief in Christ and by His grace. The apostolate of the Church and of all its members is primarily designed to manifest Christ’s message by words and deeds and to communicate His grace to the world. This is done mainly through the ministry of the Word and the sacraments, entrusted in a special way to the clergy, wherein the laity also have their very important roles to fulfill if they are to be “fellow workers for the truth” (**3 John 8**). It is especially on this level that the apostolate of the laity and the pastoral ministry are mutually complementary.

There are innumerable opportunities open to the laity for the exercise of their apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very testimony of their Christian life and good works done in a supernatural spirit have the power to draw men to belief and to God; for the Lord says, “Even so let your light shine before men in order that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (**Matt. 5:16**).

However, an apostolate of this kind does not consist only in the witness of one’s way of life; a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith, or to the faithful with a view to instructing, strengthening, and encouraging them to a more fervent life. “For the charity of Christ impels us” (**2 Cor. 5:14**). The words of the Apostle should echo in all hearts, “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (**1 Cor. 9:16**). (1) (*Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 6-7*)

So, the work is outlined, but there is a need to have the tools in place to accomplish this work. The first step, in fact, is the preparation that is done before the day of Confirmation. This involves catechesis, to provide those preparing for Confirmation with an adequate understanding of the teachings of the church. It also involves the formation that comes from an active spiritual life. Within the context of the parish church, this catechesis and this life of prayer involves a lengthy period of preparation. As well, the parish community shares in the encouragement of those being confirmed through their sponsors and the presentation of the candidates in the liturgy. This is the first movement in the liturgy, to present the candidates. In ancient times, this acted as a screening step to insure that those being presented would not scandalize the community or prove themselves too weak to endure the hardships of the Christian life. Today, this sponsorship is an expression of support to the newly confirmed, as well as an expression of their share in the apostolate of the laity.

The address to those about to be confirmed sets forth the nature of the gift and the responsibility that they will receive:

The gift of the Holy Spirit which you are to receive will be a spiritual sign and seal to make you more like Christ and more perfect members of his Church. At his baptism by John, Christ himself was anointed by the Spirit and sent out on his public ministry to set the world on fire. You have already been baptized into Christ and now you will receive the power of his Spirit and the sign of the cross on your forehead. You must be witnesses before all the world to his suffering, death, and resurrection; your way of life should at all times reflect the goodness of Christ. Christ gives varied gifts to his Church, and the Spirit distributes them among the members of Christ's body to build up the holy people of God in unity and love. (*From the Liturgy of Confirmation, Excerpted from the Bishop's address to the candidates*)