

Confirmation is the Perfection of Baptism

Although, in the West, Confirmation is usually received as a teenager, several years after making First Communion, the Catholic Church considers it the second of the three Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism being the first and Communion the third). Confirmation is regarded as the perfection of Baptism, because, as the introduction to the Rite of Confirmation states: *'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'*.

The Form of the Sacrament of Confirmation

Many people think of the laying on of hands, which signifies the descent of the Holy Spirit, as the central act in the Sacrament of

Confirmation. The essential element, however, is the anointing of the confirmand (the person being confirmed) with chrism (an aromatic oil that has been consecrated by a bishop), accompanied by the words "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit" (or, in the Eastern Catholic Churches, "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit"). This seal is a consecration, representing the safeguarding by the Holy Spirit of the graces conferred on the Christian at Baptism.

The Minister of the Sacrament of Confirmation

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church points out, "The *original minister* of Confirmation is the bishop." Each bishop is a successor to the apostles, upon whom the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost—the first Confirmation. The Acts of the Apostles mentions the apostles imparting the Holy Spirit to believers by the laying on of hands (see, for example, Acts 8:15-17 and 19:6).

The Church has always stressed this connection of confirmation, through the bishop, to the ministry of the apostles, but She has developed two different ways of doing so.

Confirmation in the East

In the Eastern Catholic (and Eastern Orthodox) Churches, the three sacraments of initiation are administered at the same time to infants. Children are baptized, confirmed (or "chrismated"), and receive Communion (in the form of the Sacred Blood, the consecrated wine), all in the same ceremony, and always in that order.

Since the timely reception of Baptism is very important, and it would be very hard for a bishop to administer every baptism, the bishop's presence, in the Eastern Churches, is signified by the use of chrism consecrated by the bishop. The priest, however, performs the confirmation.

Confirmation in the West

The Church in the West came up with a different solution—the separation in time of the Sacrament of Confirmation from the Sacrament of Baptism. This allowed infants to be baptized soon after birth, while the bishop could confirm many Christians at the same time, even years after baptism. Eventually, the current custom of performing Confirmation several years after First Communion developed, but the Church continues to stress the original order of the sacraments, and Pope Benedict XVI, in his apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, has suggested that the original order should be restored.

Eligibility for Confirmation

Even in the West, priests can be authorized by their bishops to perform confirmations, and adult converts are routinely baptized and confirmed by priests. All those who have been baptized are eligible to be confirmed, and, while the Western Church suggests receiving the sacrament after reaching the "age of reason" (around seven years old), it can be

received at any time. (A child in danger of death should receive Confirmation.)

A confirmand must be in a state of grace. If the sacrament is not received immediately after Baptism, the confirmand should participate in the Sacrament of Confession before Confirmation.

The Effects of the Sacrament of Confirmation

The Sacrament of Confirmation confers special graces of the Holy Spirit upon the person being confirmed, just as such graces were granted to the Apostles on Pentecost. Like Baptism, therefore, it can only be performed once, and Confirmation increases and deepens all of the graces granted at Baptism.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church lists five effects of Confirmation:

- it roots us more deeply in the divine filiation [as sons of God] which makes us cry, "Abba! Father!"
- it unites us more firmly to Christ;
- it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us;
- it renders our bond with the Church more perfect;
- it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross.

Because Confirmation perfects our baptism, we are obliged to receive it "in due time." Any Catholic who did not receive Confirmation at baptism or as part of his religious education during grade school or high school should contact a priest and arrange to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation.