

## On Confirmation

Baptism is the first sacrament of initiation, not initiation into a club but a new beginning. There are three sacraments whereby a person is fully initiated into the Body of Christ; Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist.

In the Western Church, when entire communities had become Christian, and infant baptism became the norm, it became the practice to delay Confirmation until the child was older. Both Confirmation and Eucharist became separate events to be celebrated later on, when the child had reached the so-called "age of reason".

The Holy Spirit is received at Baptism, and the baptized person becomes the dwelling place or "temple" of the Spirit. When we speak of Confirmation as a fuller outpouring of the Spirit, it is not to suggest that the Spirit is somehow divisible. Every sacrament is a sign from the one God of His continuing love that is given to us.

In the Western or Roman church, Confirmation came to be seen as the sacrament of Christian adulthood, or the sacrament which marks the transition from childhood to maturity. The sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation were still seen as closely associated in terms of purpose and meaning, although separated by many years.

### The biblical background

The Holy Spirit comes first to a person in baptism (see Acts 2:38), but the book of Acts also mentions a prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit accompanied by the external, visible sign of a "laying on of hands".

Later we read that Peter and John were sent to new converts in Samaria and *"prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had 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"* (Acts 8:15-17).

Later again in Acts, Paul baptized some disciples in the name of the Lord Jesus, and then *"when Paul laid hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied"* (Acts 19:6). Some theologians think the reason why these people lacked the Holy Spirit was because they were initially baptized only in the name of Jesus, and not *"in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"*. (Matt 28:19).

The early Church came to recognise that there was a prayer for the sending of the Holy Spirit that was distinct from baptism. Christians often received the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit through the prayer and "laying on of hands" of the apostles or their associates. Later an anointing with oil was added to the sacrament, and this is how the sacrament of Confirmation originated. The commitment to Christ was thus "confirmed" or strengthened in the life of the baptized Christian.

The sacrament is also based on the life of Jesus, on whom the Holy Spirit descended when he began his public ministry (Mark 1:9- 11), who breathed upon his disciples after his resurrection with the words, "receive the Holy Spirit..." (John 20:22), and who sent the Holy Spirit in power upon them at Pentecost (Acts 2).

It was at Pentecost, according to the Book of Acts, that Jesus fulfilled his promise to send the Holy Spirit. Confirmation is to Baptism what Pentecost is to Easter. Just as Scripture draws a close connection between the resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit, so too the sacrament of Confirmation receives its proper emphasis when it is seen in close association with the sacrament of Baptism.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles is really a record of the activity of the Holy Spirit from Pentecost on, guiding and directing the growth of the Church in its early years. The sacrament of Confirmation makes Pentecost a permanent event in the life of the Christian.

### **The gift(s) of the Spirit**

It is the same gift of God's love and life which the baptized person receives at Confirmation. The candidate renews his or her baptismal promises, and the bishop (or delegated priest) anoints the candidate on the forehead with consecrated oil, saying the words: "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit".

To be "sealed" means to be authoritatively marked or stamped as someone's property. The oil is the sign of the strength which the sacrament gives. The "gift of the Holy Spirit", a share in God's life and love, is of course a single gift, but it will manifest itself in a multitude of ways.

A traditional list of "gifts" of the Spirit is taken from the prophecy of Isaiah (11:2-3), where the prophet numbers seven gifts. It should be remembered that the number seven in biblical symbolism stands for fullness, completeness and perfection. In the Rite of Confirmation the bishop or his delegate prays that the candidates should receive the "*spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence, and the spirit of wonder and awe.*"

St Paul also speaks of a number of effects of living by the Spirit: "*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*" [Gal 5:22- 23]. But ultimately there is no limit to these gifts or fruits, just as there is no limit to love. The way of life proposed by Christ for his followers is a life of unlimited generosity.

### **Call to service and witness**

Finally, through the sacrament of Confirmation, the Holy Spirit empowers God's people to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, to live that message, and to continue Jesus' ministry and mission in the world. Just as the Spirit descended on Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry and transformed the fearful disciples at Pentecost, so the Spirit equips every Christian for a life of service and witness.

To sum up, Christian initiation begins with Baptism, is sealed by Confirmation and is continued through the Eucharist. Baptism and Confirmation draw us into Christ's life, and empower us to continue his saving work. They are signs that our lives have been radically influenced by Christ, and the demands they make as far as conversion (radical change) is concerned are constant. But these sacraments also assure us that we are never alone on our pilgrimage, and that God -Father, Son and Holy Spirit -is our constant companion.