

“The Sacrament of Confirmation”

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I wish to extend my gratitude to you for inviting me to deliver the 2011 Hillenbrand Lecture here at the Liturgical Institute in Mundelein. This evening I want to reflect with you on the sacrament of confirmation and especially the order of the sacraments of initiation for Catholics baptized as infants.

In August of 2002, after education and consultation with the clergy and laity, I issued a pastoral letter on the sacrament of confirmation, titled *Send Forth Your Spirit*, and as bishop I restored the order of the sacraments of initiation for those children baptized as Catholics in infancy.¹ The education piece played a most important role in the process as many of the faithful were unaware of the history or theology of the sacrament of confirmation and especially of Church teaching over the past 40 years. The order of the reception of the sacraments of reconciliation, confirmation and Eucharist in the Diocese of Fargo are: the sacrament of reconciliation in the 2nd grade, and the sacraments of confirmation and First Eucharist in the 3rd grade, celebrated during the same Mass by me during the Easter Season.²

¹ The local bishop in each diocese is to determine the age of Confirmation for his particular Church. In accord with the norms set by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, that age may range from the age of discretion to about 16. Complementary norm to Canon 891 was approved by U.S. Bishops in 2000 and granted *recognitio* by the Congregation for Bishops May 9, 2001.

² In 2005, Bishop Thomas Olmstead in the Diocese of Phoenix restored the order of the Sacraments of Initiation for Catholic children baptized as infants. See *Gift from on High, Confirmation and First Eucharist, Completing the Initiation of Baptized Children*. There are about another 15-20 dioceses which follow a similar pattern, whether by establishing a diocesan wide norm or by allowing parishes to choose to restore the order on the local level.

The order of the sacraments of initiation was addressed in 2007 by Pope Benedict XVI in his Post Synodal Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*.³ He reminded the faithful that, “It must never be forgotten that our reception of Baptism and Confirmation is ordered to the Eucharist. Accordingly, our pastoral practice should reflect a more unitary understanding of the process of Christian initiation.”⁴ He addressed the centuries long difference in the manner in which the sacraments of initiation are celebrated in the east and west noting that these differences are not of the dogmatic order but rather pastoral.⁵ He then went on to state, “...it needs to be seen which practice better enables the faithful to put the sacrament of the Eucharist at the center, as the goal of the whole process of initiation.”⁶ He called on the Roman Curia and the Bishops’ Conferences throughout the world to “examine the effectiveness of current approaches to Christian initiation, so that the faithful can be helped both to mature through the formation received in our communities and to give their lives an authentically eucharistic direction.”⁷ He then, in paragraph 19, noted the vital role parents play in the process of initiation.

Throughout my priestly ministry in the Church I have experienced many different approaches to the celebration of confirmation. After my ordination in

³ Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, (February 22, 2007) 17-19.

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 17.

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 18.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 18.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 18.

1976, I leaned towards confirmation as a “sacrament of maturity” that should be reserved to high school students only. At the first parish I served, confirmation was reserved to older high school students in the 10th and 11th grades. In the next parish it was junior high school students, and in the parish I served as pastor it was with 8th and 9th graders. However, the more I worked with the sacraments of initiation, and experienced children, who at the age of 7 entered the Church by the reception of confirmation immediately following baptism and then the Eucharist at the Easter Vigil, I began to question the wisdom of the placement of the sacrament of confirmation in high school and junior high.

Those questions became greater when I went for graduate studies in sacramental theology at the Pontifical University of Sant’ Anselmo in Rome from 1987-1990. As I studied the history and the theology of confirmation it became clear to me why the fathers of Vatican II called for the revision of the rite of confirmation so that “the intimate connection which this sacrament has with the whole of Christian initiation is to be more clearly set forth.”⁸ Furthermore, questions of the order of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist became more important as I began to recognize that placement of confirmation after first Eucharist only muddled the primacy of the Eucharist as the completion of initiation into the Church and the life-long nourishment of the relationship

⁸ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 71.

established with the Trinity and the Church in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation.

In my presentation this evening I will examine confirmation as a sacrament of initiation, the effects of the sacrament, and then look at its historical development in the life of the Church. I then will turn our attention to recent Church teaching, make observations on how placing confirmation after the Eucharist obscures the teaching of confirmation as a sacrament of initiation that leads to the Eucharist, and finally make some remarks on possible areas of study for you as graduate students at the Liturgical Institute.

Confirmation as a Sacrament of Initiation

Confirmation is always to be seen as a sacrament of initiation that is placed between baptism and the Eucharist. Even though it is related closely with baptism, confirmation is more than an appendix of baptism; indeed, it is a sacrament in its own right.⁹ In baptism the Holy Spirit is truly given, but in confirmation he is given in a way that completes the graces of baptism and imparts special strength upon the recipient.¹⁰

⁹ Arturo Elberti, S.J., “Witness of Christ in the Spirit” in *Rediscovering Confirmation*, ed. Pontificum Concilium pro Laicis (Vatican City, 2000) 42. The 18th Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity focused on the sacrament of confirmation. In this talk I am indebted to the presentation made by Father Elberti, S.J.

¹⁰ Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation, *Divinae Consortium Naturae* (August 15, 1971). See too *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1285.

The relationship can be made clear by making an analogy with salvation history. “Confirmation puts the seal on baptism as Pentecost completes Easter.”¹¹ “In fact, whereas baptism is rooted in the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Col 2:12), Confirmation is based on the mystery of the gift of the Spirit granted to the disciples at Pentecost, thus inaugurating the life of the Church and the mission of the apostles and believers in the world.”¹²

Confirmation is anticipated by baptism, but the full strength and mission given by the Holy Spirit is lacking without confirmation. This strength conferred permits the specific character of confirmation to emerge.

The gift of the Holy Spirit conferred in confirmation is ordered to the life of worship. St. Thomas Aquinas affirms that the seal given in confirmation qualifies the Christian to participate in worship.¹³ In the teaching of Aquinas one could venture to say that confirmation plays a role in enabling one to actively participate in the Eucharistic liturgy, as we become true worshippers of the Father, united to Jesus in his own worship of the Father. “The Holy Spirit is Author and Master of our holiness; it is he who gives us the power to be ‘true worshippers [of] the Father in spirit and truth.’ (Jn 4:23).”¹⁴

¹¹ Paul Haffner, *The Sacramental Mystery* (Trowbridge, UK, 1999) 72.

¹² Elberti, S.J., “Witness of Christ in the Spirit” 52.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III.63.6 and 65.3.

¹⁴ Elberti, S.J., “Witness of Christ in the Spirit” 81.

Thus, the completing gift of the Holy Spirit given in confirmation then is a strength which orders the person to a more perfect integration into the life of the Body of Christ both as one who is a witness and one who worships the Father in spirit and truth. In this context, one can come to understand how confirmation is ordered to the Eucharist.

It would be odd to have a person participate in the Eucharistic life of the Church, which has the building up of ecclesial unity as one of its goals, if he or she has not received the seal of the Holy Spirit which perfects their personal bond with the community. “An intrinsic dynamism exists between the three sacraments of initiation, as a result of which the one leads to the other, while the sum of the catechumenal and initiatory process has its culmination in the Eucharistic mystery, centre and form of the whole life of the Church.”¹⁵ The “intrinsic indivisibility between the three sacraments demands a certain order of succession.”¹⁶

The restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, which includes children above the age of reason, reveals this dynamism. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* citing the introduction to the Rite of Confirmation notes in paragraph 1285 that “Baptism, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Confirmation together constitute the ‘sacraments of Christian initiation,’ **whose unity must be safeguarded** (emphasis added). It must be explained to the faithful that the

¹⁵ Elberti, S.J., “Witness of Christ in the Spirit” 61

¹⁶ Elberti, S.J., “Witness of Christ in the Spirit” 59-60

reception of the sacrament of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace.”¹⁷

Effects of Confirmation

One can speak of the many effects of confirmation and the impact it makes upon one’s life, but it is always important to remember that the divine person of the Holy Spirit is received in confirmation. The effects follow from this personal encounter with the third person of the Holy Trinity. A discussion of the effects alone can easily run the risk of being impersonal and ineffective.

The special outpouring of the Holy Spirit given in confirmation¹⁸ first and foremost increases the gift of the Holy Spirit in us. The new law of the Gospel is the Holy Spirit himself and his sevenfold gifts provide the inspiration needed not just to lead a good life, but an abundant life initiated by the grace of God. These seven gifts perfect the same human faculties in which the theological and cardinal virtues reside¹⁹ and animate our lives with the power of divine love. Jesus reminds us, “Without me you can do nothing.”²⁰ We need the gifts of the Holy Spirit, every day, every hour, every minute and every second to live a life that gives glory to the Father as Jesus glorified the Father. The goal of the Christian life is neither the mere moralism where rules are defined and followed nor an ideological system in

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1285.

¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1302-1303.

¹⁹ c.f. Jordan Aumann, O.P., *Spiritual Theology* (Sheed and Ward, London, 2001) 96.

²⁰ John 15:5 (RSV)

which truths are presented for one's assent; rather, it is a "living experience with the Lord Jesus in the grace of his Spirit."²¹

In Romans, St. Paul reminds us, "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God"²² Paul further reminds us in Galatians, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit."²³ In confirmation we are more deeply rooted in our true identity as beloved sons and daughters of God so that we may live and walk by the Spirit. Drawing on and summarizing St. Irenaeus' theological anthropology, one could say, "What Jesus Christ is by nature, we are by grace."²⁴ Growing in receptivity to this identity as beloved sons and daughters of the Father is central to our spiritual lives. Without the experience of God the Father loving me as his son, or as his daughter, it is difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill the personal mission God has entrusted to me to be a witness in the world.

It is interesting to see all the books in popular book stores focused on self-help and personal confidence. We long to be secure and confident in order that our

²¹ Elberti, S.J., "Witness of Christ in the Spirit" 65.

²² Romans 8:15

²³ Galatians 5:22-23, 25

²⁴ cf. CCC 460, St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haeres.* 3, 19, 1: PG 7 /1, 939.

lives become successful, but this cannot come from paper, mere positive thinking, or natural optimism, but only when one is enabled by the Holy Spirit to cry out “Abba! Father!” and deepen this relationship in personal prayer. Confirmation enables this growth in relationship to grow deeper in those who receive the sacrament. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* beautifully summarizes the effects of confirmation, “it roots us more deeply in the divine filiation 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 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.”²⁵

Historical Development

To better understand our present practice, it is important to retrace our steps along the path of historical development. We see the first references to the sacrament in the Acts of the Apostles when Peter and John pray that the Holy Spirit comes down upon the Samaritans.²⁶ Though the Samaritans were baptized they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. As the early Church grew, the sacraments of baptism and confirmation were celebrated in one continuous rite of initiation leading up to the admission and reception of the Holy Eucharist. This is

²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1303.

²⁶ Acts 8:14-17

still the current practice in the Eastern Rites of the Church, where the faithful are fully initiated as infants.

After the fifth century, in the west with the principal of the bishop as the celebrant of confirmation, it became difficult for a bishop to travel to the parishes in his diocese to baptize and confirm all at once. Because of this, the separation between baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist grew. Infants were baptized and given communion by the priest and later the bishop would come to administer confirmation. Over time, the infant reception of communion ceased and confirmation received less attention.

In the middle ages, admission to the Eucharist was held off until well after the age of discretion. While confirmation was conferred at the age of discretion, the Eucharist was delayed until the ages of 11 or 12. The order was restored.

Interesting to note is in France, during the mid-1700s, it was decided by a local ordinary that young people be confirmed only after they had received first Eucharist. This was a shift as it was not for the practical reason of the lack of the availability of the bishop but was rather based on adequate instruction. This spread to other dioceses in France. Rome, however, did not approve the practice and Leo XIII in 1897 called for the practice to end and the celebration of confirmation to be at the age of reason.

The displacement of confirmation within the order of Christian initiation was unintentionally begun in 1910 when Pope Pius X lowered the age of first communion to seven. He said nothing of confirmation in his letter, *Quam Singulari*, but his main concern was that the children have all the resources they need to live a rich spiritual life in order to carry out their mission as Christians in the modern world. Thus, the custom began of receiving First Communion as a 2nd grader and later receiving confirmation in middle or high school. This continues to be a recent practice in the life of the Church.

In the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution on the Liturgy called for the rite of confirmation to be revised. Paul VI would clearly state in the Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation that “The faithful are born anew by baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of confirmation, and finally are sustained by the food of eternal life in the Eucharist. By means of these sacraments of Christian initiation, they thus receive in increasing measure the treasures of divine life and advance towards the perfection of charity.”²⁷ Hence we see the move towards the restoration of the order of the sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation and then Eucharist.

²⁷ Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation, *Divinae Consortium Naturae* (August 15, 1971), 1.

Recent Church Teaching and Practice

In recent history, there have been interesting developments as well. In 1983, the new Code of Canon of Law was promulgated. The sacraments of initiation are set up around the traditional order culminating in the Eucharist. Canons 889§ 2 and 891 call for the confirmation of children before the age of discretion who are in danger of death. Canon 891 calls for children to be confirmed at the age of reason, unless the Bishops' Conference has decided a different age.²⁸

In 1992, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was published. The restored ancient order is clearly stated in the presentation and order of the sacraments of initiation.²⁹ The age of reason is given as the historical standard for the age of confirmation, and it is strongly stated that even the youngest in danger of death is to receive the sacrament of confirmation and not “depart this world without having been perfected by the Holy Spirit with the gift of Christ’s fullness.”³⁰ In 1997, the General Directory for Catechesis was published. It makes at least six references that the ancient order is the general operating assumption behind catechetical work in the Church. In the general instruction to the Rite of Confirmation³¹, it gives the age of reason as the suggested age for reception.

Pope Benedict XVI has made comments about the sacrament of confirmation. In his Message for World Youth Day 2008, he affirms the ancient

²⁸ See footnote 1 for norms for the United States.

²⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1212-1419.

³⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1314.

³¹ Congregation for Divine Worship, *General Introduction to the Rite of Confirmation* (August 22, 1971), 11.

order and unity of the sacraments of initiation.³² His 2007 post-synodal Apostolic exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, noted earlier, is most significant in the call to recapture the primacy of the Eucharist in the sacraments of initiation. His concern is to maintain the centrality and importance of the Eucharist which in many parish catechetical programs is given less attention than confirmation.

Observations and Questions on Confirmation Celebrated after Eucharist

Some of the motivations for a later age for confirmation – a way for engaging teenagers, an opportunity for personal ownership of one’s faith, a sacrament that requires sufficient biological maturity – are found wanting as one takes a close look at them in light of the history, the theology, and the recent Magisterium on the sacraments of initiation.

A motivation for putting confirmation later in adolescence is that it provides a way to keep young people involved in the faith and active with ongoing catechesis. Even though the experience of many is that confirmation at a later age keeps children involved, it is not the only thing that will keep young people interested. “A distinction needs to be drawn between what more properly concerns Confirmation on one hand and, on the other hand, what forms part of the wider pastoral care of pre-adolescence or adolescence, which goes well beyond the preparation for the sacrament and its follow-up.”³³ Parents are the ones with the

³² Benedict XVI, “Message for 2008 World Youth Day”, (Lorenzago, July 20, 2007)

³³ Elberti, S.J., “Witness of Christ in the Spirit”, 75.

responsibility to ensure the faith formation of their children. It is their duty as the first teachers of their children in the faith to make certain that they and their children continue to learn the faith, deepening their knowledge and understanding of our Catholic faith.

We can ask the following of those who advocate a later age for confirmation. Should a free, unmerited gift of God, the sacrament of confirmation, be treated as a reward, or worse, as something earned or deserved for attendance and work in a parish catechetical program? Should the fear of not receiving a sacrament ever be used as a means to keep a young person involved in the life of the Church? Should the gift and strengthening of the Holy Spirit be denied young persons in their most formative years? And, finally, is confirmation, because of the special attention given to it and the length in preparation for its reception, perceived by many to be a more important sacrament than baptism and Eucharist?

Confirmation at times is spoken of by some, who advocate a later age, as a way for the young person to make a personal commitment to their faith. This view distorts the sacrament of confirmation. Confirmation is not marked by a choice to believe or not believe in the Catholic faith. Rather as disciples we are **chosen by God** to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit, to be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit generously bestowed by God, and we are called to cooperate with that grace. Every Sunday we affirm our personal response of this election as we proclaim our

faith through the Creed and say “Amen” to Jesus in the Eucharist. Taking personal responsibility for one’s Catholic faith is something that is a habitual choice made by grace. Faith is a theological virtue, bestowed by a loving God, which grows over time, not something that is chosen once and for all at confirmation.

Another reason used in determining the age of confirmation is the discussion around maturity. “When the discussion of maturity arises, the nature of the maturity must be specified before the discussion begins. Is it a biological, psychological, intellectual or spiritual maturity that we are speaking about?”³⁴ The Catechism reminds us, “Although Confirmation is sometimes called the ‘sacrament of Christian maturity,’ we must not confuse adult faith with the adult age of natural growth, nor forget that the baptismal grace is a grace of free, unmerited election and does not need ‘ratification’ to become effective.”³⁵ The Catechism then cites Thomas Aquinas, “Age of body does not determine age of soul.”³⁶ Children can be mature spiritually. I have found the 3rd graders to be most receptive to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and their childlike trust and wonder is beautiful to behold. Many times their ability to see the truth and have complete trust in God is strikingly better than our own. It allows for a deeper receptivity of the graces of the sacrament. We experience too many young adults, and older ones, who are not spiritually mature, but spiritually have regressed into a state of indifference or

³⁴ Elberti, S.J., “Witness of Christ in the Spirit” 68.

³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1308.

³⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1308. c.f. *Summa Theologica* III.72.7.ad2.

despondence toward God. This can be because of various reasons both within and outside of the scope of their own choices, but a fact nonetheless. Spiritual maturity cannot be identified with biological maturity and children do have the spiritual maturity necessary to receive confirmation, just as they have the spiritual maturity to receive the Eucharist at the age of reason. If they are mature enough to receive the Eucharist, the crown of the sacraments, are they not mature enough to receive a sacrament that is ordered to it?³⁷

Conclusion

This evening we have discussed some of the themes surrounding the sacrament of confirmation. Any one of these themes could be an area of study for you to pursue as graduate students in the area of liturgy. Confirmation is a sacrament of initiation which gives the fullness of the Holy Spirit. This gift of the Spirit completes baptism and bestows a special strength that enables one to be a witness to Jesus Christ, more perfectly binding one to the Church, and allows one to worship the Father in spirit and truth. Topics of study could be the special strength of the Spirit given as shown in the prayer over those to be confirmed; the history of the formula of the prayer over those to be confirmed; the history of the ritual action of the laying on of hands and its diversity of forms; how confirmation

³⁷ It is good to note here a 1999 response from the Congregation for Divine Worship in which parents of an 11-year-old child requested confirmation from their bishop for their child. The norm in the diocese was sophomore year of high school. The Dicastery asked the bishop to move forward as quickly as possible with the confirmation and not wait until the sophomore year. cf Notitiae 35 (Nov.-Dec. 1999), Prot. N. 2607/98/L.

binds one more to the Church; and how confirmation allows one to worship the Father in spirit and in truth, harkening back to the insights of Thomas.

Confirmation is ordered to the reception of the sacrament of the source and summit of our lives, the holy Eucharist. The order of initiation that marked the early Church is baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist; and in only recent history has another order been tried. The teaching of the Church since Vatican II has supported the restoration of the order of the sacraments of initiation. The question raised by Pope Benedict XVI concerning the difference in practices of the east and the west and which practice truly helps to put the Eucharist at the center and goal of initiation is an important area of study and reflection for you in your graduate studies.

In parish life, restoration of the order of the sacraments of initiation aids the local community in forming effective and engaging catechesis which acknowledges growth in faith as a life-long process. Parents are called to exercise their role as the primary evangelizers and catechists of their children. Liturgical studies can be done on the intimate connection between the celebration of the sacraments of initiation and the ongoing faith formation of children, adolescents and adults.

Children, who face different challenges today than we did when growing up, receive the strength and gifts of the Holy Spirit in confirmation that will aid them

as they grow up in the contemporary world. Another area of study is looking at the role of the Holy Spirit in strengthening the child in the gifts of the Spirit and leading them to spiritual maturity.

Thank you for your attention this evening on this important discussion. I pray that the Holy Spirit who came down upon Mary and the apostles at Pentecost, the same Holy Spirit that has been called down upon Christians of every generation and the same Spirit we received in our confirmation will stir up the grace of God deep within our lives so that the Church may be effective in her mission to participate in and bring the saving message of Jesus Christ to our world. This mission, entrusted to us in baptism and confirmation, is most fully nourished by our faithful life-long participation in the one sacrifice of Christ in the Most Holy Eucharist.