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What is the Sacrament of Confirmation?

Confirmation is one of the sacraments of the Catholic Church, but what exactly does it do in the Christian's soul, and who can receive it? We answer the most common questions about the sacrament of Confirmation.

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Confirmation is one of the sacraments of the Church. Together

with Baptism and the Eucharist, it constitutes the set of "the sacraments of Christian initiation," that is, sacraments whose reception is necessary for the fullness of the grace we receive in Baptism.

The sacrament of Confirmation unites the Church more intimately and enriches her with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Thus those who receive it are obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed, as true witnesses of Christ.

Summary

1. Is the sacrament of Confirmation present in the Bible and the history of the Church?
2. What is the rite of Confirmation?
3. What effects does the sacrament of Confirmation have?
4. Who can receive this sacrament?

1. Is the sacrament of Confirmation present in the Bible and the history of the Church?

In the Old Testament, the prophets announced that the Spirit of the Lord would rest upon the awaited Messiah. In the book of the Prophet Isaiah, the following words are placed on the lips of the Messiah: "The Spirit of the Lord Yahweh is upon me, because Yahweh has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor" (Isaiah 61 1-2).

Something similar is also announced to the entire people of God; to its members God says: "I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (Ezekiel 36:27).

The descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at his Baptism by John was the sign that he was the one who was to come, the Messiah, the Son of God. Having been conceived by the work of the Holy Spirit, his whole life and his whole mission are realized in total communion with the Holy Spirit which the Father gives him "without measure."

On repeated occasions, Christ promised this outpouring of the Spirit, a promise he made first on Easter Day and then, more manifestly, on the day of Pentecost. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the Apostles begin to proclaim the wonders of God and Peter declares that this outpouring of the Spirit is the sign of the messianic times. The Acts of the Apostles recounts that those who believed in the apostolic preaching and were baptized received in turn the gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands

and prayer. It is this laying on of hands that has been rightly considered by Catholic tradition as the origin of the sacrament of Confirmation, which perpetuates in the Church the grace of Pentecost.

This biblical picture is completed by the Pauline and Johannine tradition that links the concepts of "anointing" and "seal" with the Spirit infused in Christians. The latter found liturgical expression in the most ancient documents, with the anointing of the candidate with perfumed oil. This anointing illustrates the name "Christian", which means "anointed", and which has its origin in the name of Christ, whom "God anointed with the Holy Spirit". And this rite of anointing exists to this day both in the East and in the West. Therefore, in the East this sacrament is called chrismation, anointing with chrism, or *myron*, which means "chrism". In the West the name Confirmation

suggests that this sacrament both confirms Baptism and strengthens baptismal grace.

As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, this sacrament was already lived in the early Church: "When the Apostles who were in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the Word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. These went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for He had not yet descended upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and received the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:14-17). (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1286-1289; Paul VI, Apostolic constitution *Divinae consortium naturae*)

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- In the Church there is a diversity of ministries, but there

is only one aim: the sanctification of men. And in this task all Christians participate in some way, through the character imprinted by the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. We must all feel responsible for the mission of the Church, which is the mission of Christ. He who does not have zeal for the salvation of souls, he who does not strive with all his strength to make the name and doctrine of Christ known and loved, will not understand the apostolicity of the Church. (*In Love with the Church*, 15)

- Today too, blind men, who had lost the ability to look up to heaven and contemplate the wonderful works of God, recover their sight. Lame and crippled men, who were bound by their passions and whose hearts had forgotten love,

recover their freedom. Deaf men, who did not want to know God are given back their hearing. Dumb men, whose tongues were bound because they did not want to acknowledge their defeats, begin to talk. And dead men, in whom sin had destroyed life, come to life again. We see once more that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword." And just as the first Christians did, we rejoice when we contemplate the power of the Holy Spirit and see the results of his action on the mind and will of his creatures. (*Christ is Passing By*, 131)

- An apostle — that is what a Christian is, when he knows that he has been grafted onto Christ, made one with Christ, in baptism. He has been given the capacity to carry on the battle

in Christ's name, through confirmation. He has been called to serve God by his activity in the world, because of the common priesthood of the faithful, which makes him share in some way in the priesthood of Christ. This priesthood — though essentially distinct from the ministerial priesthood — gives him the capacity to take part in the worship of the Church and to help other men in their journey to God, with the witness of his word and his example, through his prayer and work of atonement. (*Christ is Passing By*, 120)

- The disciples, who were already witnesses of the glory of the Risen One, experienced in themselves the power of the Holy Spirit: their minds and hearts were opened to a new light. They had followed Christ

and accepted his teachings with faith, but they were not always able to fully grasp their meaning: they needed the Spirit of truth to come and make them understand all things. They knew that only in Jesus could they find words of eternal life, and they were ready to follow him and to give their lives for him, but they were weak and, when the hour of trial came, they fled and left him alone. On the day of Pentecost all that has passed: the Holy Spirit, who is the spirit of strength, has made them firm, sure, bold. The word of the Apostles resounds loud and vibrant through the streets and squares of Jerusalem.
(Christ is Passing By, 127)

2. What is the rite of Confirmation?

Through the anointing with oil, the person confirmed receives "the mark", the seal of the Holy Spirit. The anointing with holy chrism after Baptism, in Confirmation and in Ordination, is the sign of a consecration. Through Confirmation, Christians, that is, those who are anointed, participate more fully in the mission of Jesus Christ and in the fullness of the Holy Spirit that he possesses, so that their whole life may give off "the good odor of Christ".

An important moment that precedes the celebration of Confirmation, but which, in a certain way, is part of it, is the consecration of the Holy Chrism. It is the bishop who, on Holy Thursday, during the Chrism Mass, consecrates the holy chrism for his entire diocese.

The liturgy of the sacrament begins with the renewal of the Baptismal promises and the profession of faith of those being confirmed. Thus it is clear that Confirmation is an extension of Baptism.

In the Roman rite, the bishop extends his hands over all the persons being confirmed, a gesture which, since the time of the Apostles, is the sign of the gift of the Spirit. And the bishop thus invokes the outpouring of the Spirit:

"Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who didst regenerate, by water and the Holy Spirit, these thy servants and didst deliver them from sin: hear our prayer and send upon them the Holy Spirit Paraclete; fill them with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, with the spirit of counsel and fortitude, with the spirit of knowledge and piety; and fill them with the spirit of thy holy fear.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord"
(Ritual of Confirmation, 25).

The essential rite of the sacrament follows. In the Latin rite, "the sacrament of Confirmation is conferred by the anointing of the holy chrism on the forehead, made by imposing the hand, and with these words: 'Receive by this sign the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Paul VI, Const. ap. *Divinae consortium naturae*).

The kiss of peace with which the rite of the sacrament concludes signifies and manifests ecclesial communion with the bishop and with all the faithful.

The original minister of Confirmation is the bishop. Although the bishop may, in case of necessity, grant to other priests the faculty to administer the sacrament of Confirmation, it is appropriate that he himself confer it. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1293-1301;

1312-1314; Paul VI, Apostolic const.
Divinae consortium naturae

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- The holy Mass brings us face to face with one of the central mysteries of our faith, because it is the gift of the Blessed Trinity to the Church. It is because of this that we can consider the Mass as the centre and the source of a Christian's spiritual life. It is the aim of all the sacraments. The life of grace, into which we are brought by baptism, and which is increased and strengthened by confirmation, grows to its fullness in the Mass. Christ is Passing By, 87.
- Don't just talk to the Paraclete. Listen to him! When you pray, consider how the life of childhood, which enabled you to realise deeply that you are a

son of God, filled you with a filial love for the Father. Think how, before that, you have gone through Mary to Jesus, whom you adore as his friend, as his brother, as his lover, for that is what you are...

- After receiving this advice you realised that until now you had known that the Holy Spirit was dwelling in your soul, to sanctify it... But you hadn't really grasped this truth about his presence. You needed that advice. Now you feel his Love within you, and you want to talk to him, to be his friend, to confide in him... You want to facilitate his work of polishing, uprooting, and enkindling...
- I wouldn't know how to set about it!, you thought. Listen to him, I insist. He will give you strength. He will do everything, if you so want... And you do want!

- —Pray to him: Divine Guest, Master, Light, Guide, Love, may I make you truly welcome inside me and listen to the lessons you teach me. Make me burn with eagerness for you, make me follow you and love you. (*The Forge*, 430)
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3. What effects does the sacrament of Confirmation have?

The effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as was once granted to the Apostles on the day of Pentecost.

From this fact, Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace:

- 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 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.

Confirmation, like Baptism, imprints on the Christian's soul a spiritual sign or indelible character; this is why this sacrament can only be received

once in a lifetime. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1302-1305)

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- By giving more supernatural strength to the soul, through a quiet and fruitful outpouring of the Holy Spirit, confirmation enables the Christian to fight as *milites Christi*, as a soldier of Christ, in his intimate battle against selfishness and lust of all sorts. (*Christ is Passing By*, 78)
- This pouring out of the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and makes us acknowledge that we are children of God. The Paraclete, who is Love, teaches us to saturate our life with the virtue of charity. Thus *consummati in unum*: "made one with Christ," we can be among men what the Eucharist is for us, in the words of St

Augustine: "a sign of unity, a bond of love." (*Christ is Passing By*, 87)

- Get to know the holy Spirit, the great Stranger, on whom depends your sanctification. Don't forget that you are God's temple. The Advocate is in the centre of your soul: listen to him and be docile to his inspirations. (*The Way*, 57)
- Among the gifts of the Holy Spirit, I would say that there is one of which all Christians have a special need: the gift of wisdom which, by making us know God and taste of God, puts us in a position to be able to judge with truth about the situations and things of this life. (*Christ is Passing By*, 133)
- Professional work is also an apostolate, an opportunity to give ourselves to others, to reveal Christ to them and lead them to God the Father — all of

which is the overflow of the charity which the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts. When St Paul explained to the Ephesians how their conversion to Christianity should affect their lives, one of the things he said was: "Anyone who was a thief must stop stealing; he should try to find some useful manual work instead and be able to do some good by helping others that are in need." Men need earthly bread to sustain them in their lives on earth; they also need bread from heaven to enlighten their minds and inflame their hearts. With your work, taking advantage of the opportunities it offers, in your conversations and your dealings with others, you can and should carry out this apostolic precept. (*Christ is Passing By*, 49)

4. Who can receive this sacrament?

Every baptized person, not yet confirmed, can and should receive the sacrament of Confirmation. With Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist form a unity, it follows that "the faithful are obliged to receive this sacrament in due time" because without Confirmation and Eucharist, the sacrament of Baptism is certainly valid and efficacious, but Christian initiation remains incomplete.

In the East, this sacrament is administered immediately after Baptism and is followed by participation in the Eucharist, a tradition that emphasizes the unity of the three sacraments of Christian initiation.

In the Latin Church, this sacrament is administered when one has reached "the age of reason". However, in

danger of death, children should be confirmed even if they have not yet reached the age of reason.

There is a preparation for the sacrament that helps to feel part of the Church of Jesus Christ. Each parish is responsible for the preparation of the confirmands.

To receive Confirmation, it is necessary to be in a state of grace. It is convenient to have recourse to the sacrament of Penance in order to be purified for the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is necessary to prepare oneself with a more intense prayer in order to receive with docility and availability the power and graces of the Holy Spirit.

For Confirmation, as for Baptism, candidates should seek the spiritual help of a sponsor. This should be the same as for Baptism in order to emphasize the unity between the two

sacraments. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1306-1311)

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- “Don’t help the Holy Spirit so much!”, a friend of mine said, jokingly, but sounding very scared. I answered: I think we “help him” very little. (*Furrow*, 120)
- —God is my Father! If you meditate on it, you will never let go of this consoling consideration. —Jesus is my intimate Friend (another re-discovery) who loves me with all the divine madness of his Heart. —The Holy Spirit is my Consoler, who guides my every step along the road. Consider this often: you are God’s... and God is yours. (*The Forge*, 2)
- Even in moments when we see our limitations clearly, we can and should look at God the

Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and realize that we share in God's own life.

There is never reason to look back. The Lord is at our side.

We have to be faithful and loyal; we have to face up to our obligations and we will find in Jesus the love and the stimulus we need to understand other people's faults and overcome our own. In this way even depression — yours, mine, anyone's — can also be a pillar for the kingdom of Christ.

- Let us recognize our infirmity but confess the power of God. The Christian life has to be shot through with optimism, joy and the strong conviction that our Lord wishes to make use of us. If we feel part of the Church, if we see ourselves sustained by the rock of Peter and by the action of the Holy Spirit, we will decide to fulfil the little duty of

every moment. We will sow a little each day, and the granaries will overflow. (*Christ is Passing By*, 160)

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