

Confirmation Perfects Baptismal Grace

Author: John Paul II

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Description: Confirmation as the completion of Baptism was the subject of the Holy Father's talk at the General Audience of September 30, 1998, a continuation of catechesis on the Holy Spirit.

Confirmation Perfects Baptismal Grace

1. In this second year of preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, a renewed appreciation of the Holy Spirit's presence focuses our attention especially on the sacrament of Confirmation (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 45). As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, "it perfects baptismal grace; it ... gives the Holy Spirit in order to root us more deeply in the divine filiation, incorporate us more firmly into Christ, strengthen our bond with the Church, associate us more closely with her mission, and help us bear witness to the Christian faith in words accompanied by deeds" (n. 1316).

In fact, the sacrament of Confirmation closely associates the Christian with the anointing of Christ, whom "God anointed with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 10: 38). This anointing is recalled in the very name "Christian", which derives from that of "Christ", the Greek translation of the Hebrew term "messiah", whose precise meaning is "anointed". Christ is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.

Through the seal of the Spirit conferred by Confirmation, the Christian attains his full identity and becomes aware of his mission in the Church and the world. "Before this grace had been conferred on you", St Cyril of Jerusalem writes, "you were not sufficiently worthy of this name, but were on the way to becoming Christians" (Cat. Myst., III, 4: PG 33, 1092).

Sacrament of Confirmation perpetuates Pentecost

2. To understand all the riches of grace contained in the sacrament of Confirmation, which forms an organic whole with Baptism and the Eucharist as the "sacraments of Christian initiation", it is necessary to grasp its meaning in the light of salvation history.

In the Old Testament, the prophets proclaimed that the Spirit of God would rest upon the promised Messiah (cf. Is 11: 2) and, at the same time, would be communicated to all the messianic people (cf. Ez 36: 25-27; Jl 3: 1-2). In the "fullness of time" Jesus was conceived in the Virgin Mary's womb through the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1: 35). With the Spirit's descent upon him at the time of his baptism in the River Jordan, he is revealed as the promised Messiah, the Son of God (cf. Mt 3: 13-17; Jn 1: 33-34). All his life was spent in total communion

with the Holy Spirit, whom he gives "not by measure" (Jn 3: 34) as the eschatological fulfillment of his mission, as he had promised (cf. Lk 12: 12; Jn 3: 5-8; 7: 37-39; 16: 7-15; Acts 1: 8). Jesus communicates the Spirit by "breathing" on the Apostles the day of the Resurrection (cf. Jn 20: 22) and later by the solemn, amazing outpouring on the day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2: 1-4).

Thus the Apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, begin to "proclaim the mighty works of God" (cf. Acts 2: 11). Those who believe in their preaching and are baptized also receive "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2: 38).

The distinction between Confirmation and Baptism is clearly suggested in the Acts of the Apostles when Samaria is being evangelized. It is Philip, one of the seven deacons, who preaches the faith and baptizes. Then the Apostles Peter and John arrive and lay their hands on the newly baptized so that they will receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8: 5-17). Similarly in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul lays his hands on a group of newly baptized and "the Holy Spirit came on them" (Acts 19: 6).

3. The sacrament of Confirmation "in a certain way perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church" (CCC, n. 1288). Baptism, which the Christian tradition calls "the gateway to life in the Spirit" (ibid., n. 1213), gives us a rebirth "of water and the Spirit" (cf. Jn 3: 5), enabling us to share sacramentally in Christ's Death and Resurrection (cf. Rom 6: 1-11). Confirmation, in turn, makes us share fully in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit by the risen Lord.

The unbreakable bond between the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is expressed in the close connection between the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. This close bond can also be seen in the fact that in the early centuries Confirmation generally comprised "one single celebration with Baptism, forming with it a 'double sacrament', according to the expression of St Cyprian" (CCC, n. 1290). This practice has been preserved to the present day in the East, while in the West, for many reasons, Confirmation came to be celebrated later and there is normally an interval between the two sacraments.

Since apostolic times the full communication of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the baptized has been effectively signified by the laying on of hands. An anointing with perfumed oil, called "chrism", was added very early, the better to express the gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, through Confirmation Christians, consecrated by the anointing in Baptism, share in the fullness of the Spirit with whom Jesus is filled, so that their whole life will spread the "aroma of Christ" (2 Cor 2: 15).

Differences in Confirmation rite express its rich meaning

4. The differences in the rite of Confirmation which evolved down the centuries in the East and West, according to the different spiritual sensitivities of the two traditions and in response to various pastoral needs, express the richness of the sacrament and its full meaning in Christian life.

In the East, this sacrament is called "Chrismation", anointing with "chrism" or "myron". In the West, the term Confirmation suggests the ratification of Baptism as a strengthening of grace

through the seal of the Holy Spirit. In the East, since the two sacraments are joined, Chrismation is conferred by the same priest who administers Baptism, although he performs the anointing with chrism consecrated by the Bishop (cf. CCC, n. 1312). In the Latin rite, the ordinary minister of Confirmation is the Bishop, who, for grave reasons, may grant this faculty to priests delegated to administer it (cf. *ibid.*, n. 1313).

Thus, "the practice of the Eastern Churches gives greater emphasis to the unity of Christian initiation. That of the Latin Church more clearly expresses the communion of the new Christian with the Bishop as guarantor and servant of the unity, catholicity and apostolicity of his Church, and hence the connection with the apostolic origins of Christ's Church" (CCC, n. 1292).

5. From what we have said not only can we see the importance of Confirmation as an organic part of the sacraments of Christian initiation as a whole, but also its irreplaceable effectiveness for the full maturation of Christian life. A decisive task of pastoral ministry, to be intensified as part of the preparation for the Jubilee, consists in very carefully training the baptized who are preparing to receive Confirmation, and in introducing them to the fascinating depths of the mystery it signifies and brings about. At the same time, confirmands must be helped to rediscover with joyful wonder the saving power of this gift of the Holy Spirit.

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