

Confirmation
Session #2 year II
Why Catholic?

The odds seem to be against Confirmation,
especially if we consider it, in a sense, to be the completion of Baptism.
At the least we must acknowledge that

1. Jesus did not receive any sort of Confirmation—unlike Baptism.
2. It seems unnecessary for Salvation—unlike Baptism.

It is indeed hard to situate.
And how easily we pass it by, and how quickly it is forgotten.

Did Jesus really intend it?
Is it really necessary?
What exactly is it?
What does Jesus do in it?
What does it add to Baptism?
Why is Baptism incomplete?
Is Baptism incomplete?

We can look at these Sacraments
from a perspective of *justice* and a perspective of *love*.
Take a guess which perspective is deeper, and more complete...

There is perhaps an analogy that can help.
Recall the words of Jesus in John 6:53.
Jesus says that unless we eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood
we have no life in us.
Well, there are plenty of Christians who do not receive the Eucharist,
because they do not believe it.
Are they thoroughly lifeless? Of course not.
So what is Jesus saying?
Jesus is speaking from a perspective of love.
He is speaking

- in the light of
 - our end
 - our purpose with Him
- in the light of the *fullness* to which we are called

and He is saying that, in that light, we are *as though* lifeless, when we do not receive this unique gift of intimacy. There is a certain fullness of intimacy that is lacking. Do not forget what we said at our first session, however. Although the Sacraments are “guaranteed places of encounter”, the repercussions, the fruit, the intimacy experienced as a result of receiving the Sacrament depend on us.

Now, as Thomas Aquinas says,

- “Confirmation is the Sacrament of the *fullness* of grace” (Q. 72 art. 1, reply 2, 4...)
- “In this Sacrament the *fullness* of the Holy Spirit is bestowed” (Q. 72 art. 1, reply 1)

Like the Eucharist, Confirmation is a Sacrament of fullness.

Which makes calling it a Sacrament of *initiation* sound initially odd to the ear.

When we think “initiation”, we think “basic entry”.

It is in the light of the end or purpose, i.e. intimacy with Christ that “initiation” is to be understood.

Jesus does not call us to “basic intimacy”.

Jesus calls us to *fullness* of intimacy.

We are initiated into relationship, into intimacy with Jesus that cannot be partial.

Partial love really makes no sense.

It is in this light that we can understand repeatedly receiving the Eucharist.

Otherwise, it would be somewhat odd to re-receive.

It would be like pledging a fraternity an indefinite number of times.

No.

The intimacy is ever-deepening...

This view of fullness allows us better

to look at Confirmation in its relation to Baptism,

and to articulate the particular “necessity” of Confirmation.

We need Baptism

(or the grace communicated through Baptism) in order to be saved.

The grace can, of course, be communicated outside the Sacrament.

But the normal channel for such grace is the Sacrament of Baptism.

This is all we *need* to be saved.

But we are called to being *more* than being saved.
 We are called to unbelievable intimacy.
 Beyond salvation there is *love*, the cause of salvation.
 And so—by the way—the question, “Are you saved”? does not cut it.
 The real question is “Are you *loved*?”
 Well, we *are* loved.
 Aah: but do we welcome the love, and let it draw us into intimacy?
 And do we let ourselves, in that intimacy, be transformed?
 It is all about divinization,
 i.e. becoming God-like, i.e. full of divine love and light.
 Just getting saved, i.e. squeezing through the pearly gates is not enough.

[For those interested, Thomas Aquinas poses the question
 of the necessity of the Sacraments: Summa Theologica, III, Q. 65 art. 4]

And so, Confirmation is necessary
 in terms of the fullness of intimacy with Christ to which we are called.
 If I may quote Thomas Aquinas—again!
**It is evident that in the life of the body
 a certain special perfection consists in man's attaining to the perfect age,
 and being able to perform the perfect actions of a man.
 Similarly, man receives spiritual life in Baptism,
 which is a spiritual regeneration: while in Confirmation
 man arrives at the perfect age, as it were, of the spiritual life.
 Hence Pope Melchiades says: "The Holy Ghost, Who descends
 on the waters of Baptism bearing salvation in His flight,
 bestows at the font, the fullness of innocence;
 but in Confirmation He confers an increase of grace.
 In Baptism we are born again unto life;
 after Baptism we are strengthened."**

An aspect of this fullness, an expression of this fullness,
 which the Sacrament bestows is the strength to persevere
 and the strength to publicly profess Christ.
 In other words, there is a taking of ownership of the faith,
 of ownership of relationship with Christ.
 There is perhaps something analogously true in human relationships.
 When two people marry, they publicly profess their love,
 and, in so doing, take greater ownership of their relationship.
 In Confirmation, we are drawn more deeply into relationship,

and we are empowered to profess our love, and take ownership of it. Confirmation leads to amazing participation in the mystery of Redemption. The big difference in our relationship with Christ, of course, is that *He* makes all of this possible.

We are insufficiently equipped by ourselves to be in relationship with and to persevere in relationship with, and to be bold instruments of God.

We are given *the Holy Spirit*.

We are given the Holy Spirit

from Him in whom is the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

“Filled with the Holy Spirit”, as we read in Luke, Jesus goes to the desert.

It only makes sense that Christ bestow,

and it only make sense that we be given the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

As Lumen Gentium (“Light of the Peoples”),

a document from the Second Vatican Council, says:

“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.”

Time permitting,

we shall return to and explore more this gift that is the Holy Spirit.

Let us explore a few other aspects of the Sacrament *per se*.

1. its institution
2. its matter
3. its celebration
4. its effects

1. Institution

When did Jesus institute the Sacrament of Confirmation?

When did Jesus say “Do this”, and then show what He meant?

It is a thorny question,

a “gotcha” question from some of our Protestant brethren.

Recall that some Sacraments were not bestowed by Christ,

but *promised* by Christ.

And that is fine!

Recall that we are not about explicit instructions,

i.e. being written in detail in black and white.

We are about the Church, in whom arises and flowers what Jesus deposits.

Certain Sacraments Jesus did not give on the spot,
but foretold He would have emerge in/from the heart of the Church.
Confirmation is one of them.

What is tricky with Confirmation is that Jesus did not explicitly say
—as He did with Reconciliation—

“What you receive, you will be empowered to give.”

Jesus simply promised the gift of the Holy Spirit.

**“If I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you,
but if I go, I will send Him to you.”** (John 16:7)

That it be a foretelling, a future promise is fitting
because the Holy Spirit was to be communicated
only *after* the Resurrection
and (more fully even) after the Ascension (cf. John 20:22).

John notes interestingly in his gospel,

Jesus stood and exclaimed,

"Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink.

Whoever believes in me, as scripture says:

'Rivers of living water will flow from within him.'"

He said this in reference to the Spirit

that those who came to believe in him were to receive.

There was, of course, no Spirit yet,

because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

John 7: 37-39

And so, as Saint Thomas Aquinas says,

The Sacrament (of Confirmation) was instituted by Christ
when he promised His disciples the Holy Spirit.

Its *practice emerged* in the Church very quickly.

Its practice *emerged* in the Church *very quickly*.

Instituted by Christ when He promised His disciples the Holy Spirit,

Confirmation was first celebrated by the Church

when the Apostles laid hands on those who had been Baptized.

We reads about it in the Acts of the Apostles (8:13-15):

Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria

had accepted the word of God, they sent them Peter and John,

who went and prayed for them, that they might receive the holy Spirit,

for it had not yet fallen upon any of them;

they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

Notice, from the outset in the Church, a distinction between the two. Some Protestants have understood this to mean that Baptism is just an outward sign to the community that one has accepted Christ, but that no real communication of the Holy Spirit occurs, and such communication occurs elsewhere. These verses taken alone could lead to such conclusion. We believe that this passage serves simply to underscore that we have *two distinct Sacraments*, Baptism and Confirmation. We believe that the Holy Spirit *is* communicated at Baptism, and more fully at Confirmation.

And so, the *celebration* of Confirmation began with the imposition of hands by the Apostles. As Pope Paul VI says (apostolic constitution, *Divinae consortium naturae*, 663): “The imposition of hands is rightly recognized by the Catholic tradition as the origin of the Sacrament of Confirmation, which, in a certain way, perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church.”

2. Matter

What do we bring to the table in order to celebrate this Sacrament?

What is the “matter” of Confirmation?

(not “What is the matter *with* Confirmation?”!)

We believe that the use of a special oil, called “chrism”, is needed.

How can this be?

How can this be since there was no use of oil
when the Apostles received the Holy Spirit?

To explain this, Saint Thomas Aquinas does something very interesting—which may seem like a stretch to some.

[What he articulates, of course, presupposes/implies trust in the Holy Spirit’s guidance of the Church in things important like the Sacraments.]

He acknowledges that the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles did not entail the use of any oil.

He then states that the Apostles discerned that oil would be used as the sign in line with/in place of the sign seen at Pentecost.

I quote (you *really* need to fasten your brain belt):

Christ, by the power which He exercises in the Sacraments, bestowed on the apostles the reality of this Sacrament,

**i.e. the fullness of the Holy Spirit, without the Sacrament itself...
Nevertheless, something of keeping with the matter of this Sacrament
was displayed to the apostles in a sensible manner
when they received the Holy Spirit.**

**The Spirit descended upon them in a sensible manner
— in the form of fire, refers to the same meaning as oil.**

**And this was quite fitting: for it was through the apostles that the grace
of the Holy Ghost was to flow forth to others.**

**Also, the Holy Ghost descended on the apostles in the form of a tongue,
which refers to the same meaning as balm: except in so far as the tongue
communicates with others by speech, but balm, by its odor:
the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, as teachers of the Faith;
the rest of the believers, as doing that which gives edification to the
faithful.**

The Apostles discerned, led by the Holy Spirit,
that a sign analogous to fire ought to be used for this Sacrament: oil.
Both fire and oil suggest *communicating*.

Thanks to Confirmation, we are equipped to *spread* the Good News.
Recall the words of Isaiah,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.

He has *anointed* me to bring glad tidings to the poor.”

It is prophetically said of Christ Himself, in Psalm 45 (v.8):

“God has anointed you with the oil of gladness.”

And Paul goes on to say, regarding followers of Christ,
(in particular appealing to the *balsam* mixed with olive oil to makes chrim):

**Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ
and manifests through us the odor of the knowledge of him
in every place.**

For we are the *aroma* of Christ for God

among those who are being saved . (II Corinthians 2:14-15)

Now, some may be wondering about this special oil: chrim.

Chrim is made with the oil of olives to which is added balsam.

Balsam is an aromatic, resinous substance that is extracted
from the wood of certain trees or plants,

especially those belonging to the terebinthine family.

Why oil of olives?

Is it simply because it is what was at hand?

Circumstance is not absent from the equation.

Saint Thomas Aquinas very interestingly says, however, that there is more. He says that the oil of olives uniquely has the properties that symbolize the Holy Spirit.

In fact, I found listed a very interesting article:

Oleo-Signs and Quali-Signs: The Qualities of Olive Oil

by Anne Meneley from Trent University in Canada.

The abstract of the article reads:

This article considers the way that a single substance, olive oil, uniquely bundles together a set of quali-signs including luminosity, liquidity, spreadability, durability, capacity to cleanse, capacity to seal or preserve, capacity to insulate, and notably, a lack of miscibility in water.

Saint Thomas Aquinas also notes that the olive tree itself is an evergreen, and thus “**signifies the refreshing, merciful operation of the Holy Spirit.**”

(Q. 72 art. 2, reply 3)

He also notes that:

Baptism is bestowed that spiritual life may be received simply; wherefore simple matter is fitting to it (water!).

But Confirmation is given that we may receive the fulness of the Holy Ghost, Whose operations are manifold.

Consequently a compound matter is appropriate to this Sacrament

(Q. 72 art. 2, reply 2)

Last comment regarding the “matter”: interestingly,

It is interesting to note that the matter used for this Sacrament

Christ did not directly use, i.e. Christ did not use oil when He anointed.

The Sacraments which he established where He did use the matter, the Church does not bless the matter.

The Sacraments which He established where He did *not* use the matter, the Church *does* bless the matter before its use.

This would require some pondering....

If anyone later has any insight, please do share!

Chrism, by the way, is used in the administration of the Sacraments of:

Baptism

Confirmation

Holy Orders

The *crown of the head* of the newly-baptized is anointed with chrism,

the *hands* of a priest at his ordination

the *head and hands* of a bishop at his consecration

and, as we shall see in considering the celebration of Confirmation,

the *forehead* of the person confirmed.

3. Celebration

What is the exact celebration of Confirmation?

To quote simply the Catechism:

The essential rite of Confirmation is anointing the forehead of the baptized with sacred chrism (in the East other sense-organs as well), together with the laying on of the minister's hand and the words: "*Accipe signaculum doni Spiritus Sancti*" (Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.) in the Roman rite, or: *Signaculum doni Spiritus Sancti* [the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit] in the Byzantine rite. (CCC 1320)

There are three aspects:

1. the anointing on the forehead
2. imposition of hands
3. the words

We have already considered the use of oil.

We can perhaps ask the question, "Why the forehead?"

Why not the left inner thigh?

Why not the wrist?

Saint Thomas Aquinas (again!) articulates the fittingness.

He says:

In this Sacrament man receives the Holy Spirit for strength in the spiritual combat, that he may bravely confess the Faith of Christ even in face of the enemies of that Faith.

Wherefore he is fittingly signed with the sign of the cross on the forehead, with chrism, for two reasons.

***Firstly*, because he is signed with the sign of the cross, as a soldier with the sign of his leader, which should be evident and manifest.**

Now, the forehead, which is hardly ever covered, is the most conspicuous part of the human body.

Wherefore the confirmed is anointed with chrism on the forehead, that he may show publicly that he is a Christian.

***Secondly*, because man is hindered from freely confessing Christ's name, by two things: fear and by shame.**

Now both these things betray themselves principally on the forehead on account of the proximity of the imagination, and because the (vital) spirits mount directly from the heart to the forehead:

hence "those who are ashamed, blush, and those who are afraid, pale"

(Ethic. iv). **And therefore man is signed with chrism, that neither fear nor shame may hinder him from confessing the name of Christ.**

I would add that the symbolism of the forehead makes it a most fitting place for anointing. Does it not symbolize the place of deliberation? Confirmation is the Sacrament of spiritual adulthood. It is sometimes called the Sacrament of Christian maturity.

There is another consideration regarding the celebration. The celebration has a *celebrant*. It is the Bishop or his delegate who celebrates this Sacrament. Why?!?? It is a Sacrament of completion, of perfection. It is fitting therefore that the minister in whom resides a greater fullness confer it.

The conferring of this Sacrament is reserved to bishops, who possess supreme authority in the Church: just as in the primitive Church, the fullness of the Holy Ghost was given by the apostles, in whose place the bishops stand (Acts 8). Hence Pope Urban I says: "All the faithful should, after Baptism, receive the Spirit by the imposition of the bishop's hand, that they may become perfect Christians."

He then goes on to say, very interestingly, **The Sacrament of Baptism is more efficacious than this Sacrament as to the removal of evil, since it is a spiritual birth, that consists in change from non-being to being. But this Sacrament is more efficacious for progress in good; since it is a spiritual growth from imperfect being to perfect being. And hence this Sacrament is committed to a more worthy minister.**

Of course, the Holy Spirit can be bestowed outside the Sacraments. Otherwise, our Protestant brethren would be up the creek!

Saint Thomas Aquinas states:

The Divine power is not confined to the sacraments. Hence man can receive spiritual strength to confess the Faith of Christ publicly, without receiving the sacrament of Confirmation: just as he can also receive remission of sins without Baptism. Yet, just as none receive the effect of Baptism

**without the *desire* of Baptism;
so none receive the effect of Confirmation,
without the *desire* of Confirmation.**

4. Effects

What are the effects of Confirmation?

We trust that when Jesus promises, He performs.

We trust that Jesus surely does something.

The Catechism puts it well and succinctly:

The sacrament of Confirmation is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost. (CCC 1302)

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**

Recall then that you have received the spiritual seal, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence, the spirit of holy fear in God's presence.

Guard what you have received.

God the Father has marked you with his sign;

Christ the Lord has confirmed you

and has placed his pledge, the Spirit, in your hearts.

(Saint Ambrose +397)

Henceforth, we are called to live in the Holy Spirit, who lives in us.

Living in the Holy Spirit, who lives in us, if He is greater, means surrender upon surrender.

Saint Paul says, in Romans chapter 8 (v.14):

“Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”

How are we led the Holy Spirit?

How do we live the grace of Confirmation, and grow in the Spirit?

What is “life in the Spirit”?

We all ask ourselves (on a good day!):

- “How is my spiritual life?”
- “Am I growing spiritually?”
- “Holiness: *are we there yet?*”
- “Where do I stand with Christ?”
- “What exactly *is* the Holy Spirit doing?”

These are questions regarding the spiritual life, which,

because lived particularly in prayer, lead us to evaluate our prayer life.

“How is my life in the Spirit” is answered first in looking at our prayer life.

From what I have observed (and experienced!),

we very often tend to evaluate our experience of prayer like we do our other experiences.

We tend to evaluate our daily lives, our daily experiences, by looking for and trying to measure with the emotional impact of these experiences.

Am I right?!?

“That was a terrific party, i.e. I *felt* great.”

“What a great person, i.e.

I *felt* encouraged by and comfortable in his presence.”

“I love my job, i.e. I *feel* productive and needed and free to be myself.”

“This is a good parish, i.e. something about it makes me *feel* good.”

“My prayer time this morning was particularly wonderful, because I *felt* connected and *felt* very peaceful.”

We *all* think in these terms and along these lines.

We all evaluate, day in and day out, our lives

in great reference to what is happening emotionally.

Such evaluation is legitimate, but, dare I say, limited.

It is limited, quite simply, as regards

- the humanity of our experiences
- the deeper reality of human experience

Why? Because there are things in human interaction that escape

- the realm of feeling
- emotional “verification”

Such evaluation is *all the more* limited when it comes to the Holy Spirit in us.

Thus, when we say,

“My prayer time this morning was particularly wonderful, because I *felt* connected and *felt* very peaceful. Thank you Holy Spirit.”

- we only see a *portion* of the picture
- we only capture *some* of what is truly happening

The point of connection between God and my soul is humanly imperceptible.

Where the Holy Spirit is primarily at work in me is touched in faith alone.

“We do not know how to pray as we ought...

but the Spirit itself intercedes for us in expressible groanings.”

(Romans 8:26)

The work of the Holy Spirit is mysterious.

Thus, if we cannot directly perceive “Its” work

and thus evaluate our spiritual growth,

then our preoccupation should not be ourselves, but *the Holy Spirit*.

Spiritual navel-gazing

- is not terribly fruitful
- in the end, is not terribly spiritual

“Come, Holy Spirit” should be our “mantra” or leitmotif of our day.

A big question does arise, nonetheless:

- if our spiritual life is primarily the Holy Spirit’s responsibility
- if we cannot readily discern what the Holy Spirit is doing deep inside of us

how do we know we are spiritually on track?

The answer is so very simple, too simple for us sometimes to believe: *desire*.

If our growth as children of God depends on the Holy Spirit,

then we are to

- *desire*
- *want*
- *thirst for*
the Holy Spirit.

Saint Augustine says the following
(in his commentary on the Epistle of John):

**The entire Christian life is in fact an exercise of holy desire.
You do not yet see that for which you long,
but the very act of desiring prepares you,
so that, when God comes, you may see and be utterly satisfied.**

Indeed, we read in Ephesians 6:18:

“With all supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit.”

I propose that we can restate this, with all due respect:

“With all *desire*, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit.”

Jesus, in Matthew’s Gospel (7:7-9), reveals that the key is desire:

**Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it
will be opened to you. For the one who asks, receives. The one
who seeks, finds. The one who knocks, enters.**

All of this is so simply restated by Therese of Lisieux,
when she “defines” prayer as a “surge of the heart”
(Mansuscrits Autobiographiques, C 25r).

It is all about desire.

Notice, also, how much Therese expresses herself in terms of desire
in these excerpts from her “Act of Offering”,
the great prayer which, in a sense, reveals, through the lens of holy
desire

- how she sees God
- what she most deeply wants
- the relationship between her “well-beloved Spouse” and her heart

**O my God, Most Blessed Trinity, I *desire* to love Thee and to
make Thee loved, to labor for the glory of holy Church by saving
souls still on earth and by delivering those who suffer in
Purgatory. I *desire* to accomplish Thy Will perfectly, and to attain
to the degree of glory which Thou hast prepared for me in Thy
Kingdom; in one word, I *desire* to be a saint, but I know that I am
powerless, and I implore Thee, O my God, to be Thyself my
sanctity.**

Her Divine Son, my well-beloved Spouse, during His life on earth, told us: "If you ask the Father anything in my name he will give it to you." (John 16:23). I am then certain that Thou wilt hearken to my *desires*...My God, I know it, the more Thou wilt to give, the more dost Thou make us *desire*. Immense are the *desires* that I feel within my heart, and it is with confidence that I call upon Thee to come and take possession of my soul.

I desire, O Well-Beloved, at every heartbeat to renew this Oblation an infinite number of times, till the shadows retire (Cant. 4:6) and I can tell Thee my love eternally face to face!

And so Augustine and Therese and a host of others reveal to us That, as we grow in the Spirit, our desire intensifies.

If so, then *our prayer simplifies and is increasingly interior*, for desire deepens the heart.

The Holy Spirit leads us through vocal praise and intercession and thanksgiving to silent, interior prayer.

We normally progress in this, in this way.

Growth in the Holy Spirit entails this.

Saint John of the Cross says,

What we need most in order to make progress is to be silent before this great God with our appetite and with our tongue, for the language he best hears is silent love.