

The History of the Sacrament of Confirmation

The Holy Spirit is present in the Church, moving and breathing where the Spirit wills, but allowing historical events and cultures to shape our practices and understanding of the Christian faith. A striking example of this movement is the history and theology of the Sacrament of Confirmation.

Confirmation in the Early Church

In the early church, the three Sacraments of Initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, and Communion – were celebrated by adult catechumens in the same ritual at the Easter Vigil. The catechumens were baptized in God through the pouring of water, confirmed in the Spirit through the anointing of oil, and bound to Christ through the sharing of Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion.

In the fourth century, Roman Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity as the state religion, calling all people and all of their households to be initiated in the Christian faith. As more and more people were baptized and Christianity spread from the cities into the countryside, it became increasingly difficult for bishops, who were by now involved in governing, to preside at every Baptism.

The bishops of the East delegated the Sacraments of Initiation to the priests, reserving for themselves only the blessing of the oil used in the rites. The bishops of the West delegated Baptism and Communion to the priests, but retained the function of performing the anointing and laying on of hands of Confirmation. They would do this when they visited a particular locality. Thus, in the West, the Sacrament of Confirmation began to be celebrated at a later time than at the celebration of Baptism.

The Changing Theology of Confirmation

Baptism was considered the Sacrament of the initial gift of the Holy Spirit, while Confirmation was considered the Sacrament of the reception of the fullness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit: knowledge, wisdom, fortitude, fear of the Lord, counsel, piety and understanding. During the Middle Ages, it became the practice to confirm close to adolescence. Theologians began to teach that Confirmation was a Sacrament of maturity; those who received it were regarded as old enough and ready to live active, responsible Christian lives. The notion that Confirmation made one a soldier of Christ prevailed, indicating that the Confirmed were fortified by an increase in the Holy Spirit's gifts to fight, suffer, and die for the faith.

The Theology of Confirmation Today

Conversion to Christ is a gradual, lifelong process. Therefore, the Sacrament of Confirmation does not imply that a candidate is completely mature in the Christian faith. Through the Sacrament, the confirmed person is strengthened for his/her lifelong journey in faith.

Confirmation is integrally connected to Baptism and Holy Communion. Together, these sacraments constitute the process by which the Holy Spirit brings the believer into full union with the Christian community. Confirmation does not complete Baptism in the sense that Baptism left something incomplete; rather the two sacraments are two of three actions of the initiation process; the third action being the reception of Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion.

Confirmation celebrates the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the person and the Church. According to the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, through Confirmation, Catholics are "more perfectly bound to the Church" and are "as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread the faith by word and deed." Confirmation seals believers in the Holy Spirit, anointing them and empowering them to carry on the mission of Jesus Christ.