

The History and Development of the Sacrament of Confirmation

The Spirit is present in the Church, moving and breathing where He wills, but allowing historical events and cultures to shape our practices, our rites and our understanding of the sacraments. Through the centuries, the way we have celebrated the Sacrament of Confirmation and understood its meaning has undergone many changes. It is accepted as a celebration of the Holy Spirit within us and a time for affirming our baptism, and yet throughout the world in time and place, there are differences in meaning, purpose, and the age at which it is to be celebrated.

Confirmation in the Early Church

In the early Church, during the times of the Apostles, the three Sacraments of Initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist- were celebrated together, in the same ceremony by adult catechumens at the Easter Vigil. The “elect” would descend into a pool where they were baptized “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”, and then ascending from the pool they were clothed in a white robe. The Apostles and first bishops would then lay their hands on them and anoint them with oil, “sealing” their baptism. The newly baptized then proceeded to a place of honor among the community where they participated in the Eucharist for the first time. Initiation was actually a single event with several “special moments.” The grand climax was their joining the faithful around the “table of the Lord” for the celebration of Eucharist.

Confirmation, which consisted of laying on of the Bishop’s hands and the anointing to “seal” the baptism, was first seen as inseparable from baptism. But then a historical situation occurred which changed the common practice. The Emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion early in the fourth century. With so many more people being baptized, the Bishops could not preside at every baptism. The Bishops in the East solved the problem by delegating the Sacraments of Initiation to their priests, reserving for themselves only the blessing of the oil used in the rites. Still to this day, The Eastern Churches baptize, confirm, and give first Holy Communion to all new Catholics, including infants. The Bishops of the West also delegated baptism to priests, but reserved for themselves the anointing and laying on of hands. They would perform the rite of Confirmation to seal the baptisms whenever they visited a particular area.

The Theology of Confirmation

In the Sacrament of Baptism, the initial gift of the Holy Spirit is given; in Confirmation the gift is strengthened in its fullness with the Seven Gifts of the Spirit. Like Baptism, Confirmation imprints a permanent spiritual mark, or character, on the soul, so a person can receive this sacrament only once.

Preparation for Confirmation should aim at leading the Christian toward a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit – his actions, his gifts, and responsibilities of Christian life. For youth who have already been baptized and whose families present them for Confirmation, catechesis is age-appropriate and focuses mainly on aspects of the Rite of Confirmation itself. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1309) reminds us that the necessary catechesis for Confirmation, especially when it is seen properly as a sacrament of Initiation, consists in helping the candidate draw closer to Jesus Christ, become more familiar with the working of the Holy Spirit, and remain open to his or her call to live the baptismal commitment, appropriate for their age level. Catechesis (or Instruction) for Confirmation should strive to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, the universal Church as well as the parish community.

The Age of Confirmation

Every baptized person not yet confirmed can and should receive the sacrament of Confirmation. Since Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist form a unity (as “Sacraments of Initiation”), it follows that “the faithful are obliged to receive this sacrament at the appropriate time,” for without Confirmation and Eucharist, Baptism is certainly valid and efficacious, but Christian initiation remains incomplete. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1306) In the Eastern tradition, infants receive baptism, confirmation, and their first holy communion, which gives greater emphasis to the unity of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation. In the Western or Latin tradition, however, the practice of the bishop administering the anointing with chrism at Confirmation has given greater emphasis to becoming more deeply bound to the Universal Catholic Church of which he, the Bishop, is the local representative.

In the Middle Ages, it became the practice to confirm in adolescence rather than infancy. Twelve year olds were considered “adult” in their responsibilities, and so those that prepared them for the sacrament of Confirmation taught that the Sacrament would help them live their lives as responsible Christian adults. They were taught that Confirmation made them “soldiers for Christ” and that they had to be willing to fight, suffer, even die for the faith. The sign of peace in the rite was replaced by a gentle slap on the face to remind the newly confirmed to be prepared for battle in life.

Confirmation is still looked on today by many as a sacrament of “maturity,” but we know that the adolescents of today are not ready to share all the responsibilities of an adult life, especially while they are still living at home. Being confirmed at age 14 or even 16 does not mean that the candidate is considered mature in his or her faith. It is expected for the candidates to understand that it takes a life-time of learning to grow in their faith. Conversion to Christ is a gradual process to which Confirmation gives added strength in their journey of faith. And so preparation for Confirmation is not to be viewed as some kind of “final exam” in the faith and its reception is not a celebration of having “graduated.” In the Western tradition, the Church deems a child ready for Confirmation if he or she has reached the “age of reason” (or “age of discretion”, considered to be about 7 years of age.) (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1307) Many children now receive confirmation before their first communion. In the diocese of Boise, children in the RCIA process receive Confirmation before first Holy Communion. Youth who have already received Reconciliation and Eucharist at 7-8 years of age, wait in our diocese to receive Confirmation when they are in 9th grade or older. Canon law says that the faithful should be confirmed by age 16, although a number of people now wait to make that decision when they are adults. It is **expected**, however, that the youth should complete their initiation as baptized Catholics in their teen years.