

LESSON 5

CONFIRMATION

BACKGROUND READING



The Sacrament of Confirmation is often misunderstood, despite the rich history of the Sacrament that reaches back to Jesus and the Apostles and its deep roots in the Old Testament. Contrary to popular belief, it is not a graduation ceremony or the Catholic equivalent of a Jewish bar mitzvah. Rather, the Sacrament of Confirmation is an important step on the path of Christian initiation that completes, or confirms, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit received at Baptism and sends the person out to proclaim boldly the Good News. “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” (CCC 1285).

Confirmation in Salvation History

The roots of the Sacrament can be found throughout the Old Testament. From early on, God made known to His people what He desired for them: “You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). God sought to make of His people a

royal priesthood who would proclaim and glorify His name to all the nations and serve Him in love.

By the time Israel became a royal kingdom, it was already well established that priests and kings were anointed with holy oil as a symbol of consecration – that is, of being set apart as belonging to God – and as a symbol of the outpouring of God’s Spirit upon them to commission them for God’s service and to strengthen them for the work ahead according to their position. All of the kings in the line of David were anointed at their inauguration as king and became “messiahs” in Hebrew or “christs” in Greek, both of which mean “anointed one.” Later, the prophets foretold of a day on which God would “pour out [His] spirit upon all flesh” (Joel 2:28).

Jesus, while completing His work of salvation, announced, “For on [the Son of Man] the Father, God, has set His seal” (John 6:27), proclaiming that He was the awaited Christ. Further, He promised to send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, after Him to teach and to confirm all that has been revealed to us and to empower us to proclaim the Good News of salvation: “But you will receive power when the Holy

Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And on Pentecost, when the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Apostles had gathered in the Upper Room, with a rush of wind, the Holy Spirit descended upon them as tongues of fire and emboldened them to preach to the gathered crowd and soon to all the nations.

“Be Sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit”

The tradition of anointing with holy oil, or chrism, as a seal of the Holy Spirit continues in the Sacrament of Confirmation. The bishop, the ordinary minister of the Sacrament, speaks the words “Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit” while laying his hands on the confirmand, signifying the outpouring of the Spirit in a succession of imposition of hands that stretches back to the Apostles. These words and actions bring to fruition God’s desire for His people to be a royal priesthood. Indeed, Confirmation increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit within the person, and “gives [him] 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” (CCC 1303).

The Sacrament of Confirmation uniquely gives us the fullness of the Christian mission as well as the ability and strength to complete it. In Confirmation we, as St. Paul proclaims, “put on the armor of God” and “hold faith as a shield, to quench all [the] flaming arrows of the evil one” (Ephesians 6:11, 16).

Who Can Receive Confirmation?

The Church teaches clearly that “Every baptized person not yet confirmed can and should receive the sacrament of Confirmation” (CCC 1306). In the early Church, Baptism and Confirmation were received together. Increasing numbers of infant Baptisms made it impossible for the bishop to be present for all of them, and for this and other reasons, the two began to be offered separately. In the Latin rite today, Confirmation is most commonly received after the recipient has attained the age of reason, with the age being set by the bishop. The Eastern Church, on the other hand, retained the tradition of offering Confirmation at the same time as Baptism. In this way the Eastern Church emphasizes the unity of Baptism and Confirmation.

To receive Confirmation, a baptized person “must profess the faith, be in the state of grace, have the intention of receiving the Sacrament, and be prepared to assume the role of disciple and witness to Christ,” both in the Church and in the world (CCC 1319). A candidate for Confirmation should seek a practicing Catholic to serve as a sponsor, to be a model of faith and encouragement. Because of Confirmation’s close connection to Baptism, it is desirable, if possible, that one of the baptismal godparents serve as the sponsor. It is also customary that the one to be confirmed chooses the name of a saint – someone who exemplifies to them a life of holiness – as a Confirmation name.