

The Graces of Confirmation

Issue: What is the biblical basis of the Sacrament of Confirmation? What graces does it confer? At what age should it be administered? When can the faithful receive this sacrament?

Response: Confirmation is a sacrament of Christian initiation with a strong biblical basis; it completes baptismal grace and strengthens the individual with the power of the Holy Spirit. For children in the Latin Rite dioceses of the United States, Confirmation is administered between the ages of seven and sixteen and should not be denied to those who are suitably disposed.

A Biblical, Apostolic Sacrament

Almighty God, speaking through the Old Testament prophets, foretold the outpouring of the Holy Spirit:

“For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring” (Is. 44:3). “I will leave none of them remaining among the nations any more; and I will not hide my face any more from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord GOD” (Ezek. 39:28–29).

“And it will come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit

on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit” (Joel 2:28–29).

Centuries later, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ spoke of the reception of the Holy Spirit by those who would believe in Him:

“On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, ‘If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, “Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’ Now

this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (Jn. 7:37–39).

On the night He was betrayed and again on the day He ascended into heaven, Our Lord spoke with the apostles in particular about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit:

“And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. . . . These



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things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (Jn. 14:16–17, 25–26).

“And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.’ And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit. . . . But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Lk. 24:49; Acts 1:4–5, 8).

The promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit took place on the day of Pentecost, when “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4).

Having received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the apostles conferred the Holy Spirit upon the baptized through prayer and the laying on of hands:

“Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14–17).

St. Paul the Apostle also administered the sacrament: “And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied” (Acts. 19:6). The Letter to the Hebrews lists the sacrament among “the elementary

doctrines of Christ” and again associates “the laying on of hands” with becoming “partakers of the Holy Spirit” (Heb. 6:1–4).¹

As the successors of the apostles, the bishops of the Church have continued to administer the sacrament down through the centuries. The early Christian writers Tertullian, St. Hippolytus, Pope St. Cornelius, and St. Cyprian all refer to the sacrament, as do St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, Pope St. Innocent I, and Pope St. Leo I, who wrote in the fourth and fifth centuries.²

The New Testament associates prayer and the imposition of hands with the Sacrament of Confirmation. By the third century, “the better to signify the gift of the Holy Spirit, an anointing with perfumed oil (chrism) was added to the laying on of hands” (Catechism, no. 1289). Thus, this sacrament is also called Chrismation.

The Graces of Confirmation

Drawing upon the scriptural foundation laid in Acts 8:14–17, the Church’s Magisterium teaches that Confirmation completes baptismal grace and thus (along with the Sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist) is one of the three sacraments of Christian initiation. In the early Church, bishops customarily administered all three sacraments to catechumens at the Easter Vigil.³ The Church continues to teach that “Baptism, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Confirmation together constitute ‘the sacraments of Christian initiation,’ whose unity must be safeguarded” (Catechism, no. 1285).

In allowing the baptized to partake of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Sacrament of Confirmation confers manifold graces, which the Catechism summarizes:

“It is evident from its celebration that the effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit

as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost.

“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.

“Like Baptism which it completes, Confirmation is given only once, for it too imprints on the soul an *indelible spiritual mark*, the ‘character,’ which is the sign that Jesus Christ has marked a Christian with the seal of His Spirit by clothing him with power from on high so that he may be His witness.

“This ‘character’ perfects the common priesthood of the faithful, received in Baptism, and the confirmed person receives the power to profess faith in Christ publicly and, as it were, officially (*quasi ex officio*).”⁴

Two Traditions of Administering Confirmation

At different times in the Church’s history and in different liturgical rites, the Sacrament of Confirmation has been administered at different ages. As dioceses began to grow and it became impossible for the bishop to preside personally at all baptisms, two major traditions of administering the Sacrament of Confirmation developed and endure to this day.

In the East, priests administer Confirmation and Holy Communion to infants immediately after they are baptized. The

Eastern practice highlights the unity of the three sacraments of Christian initiation. While Confirmation is fittingly called the sacrament of Christian maturity, the Church reminds us that “we must not confuse adult faith with the adult age of natural growth, nor forget that the baptismal grace is a grace of free, unmerited election and does not need ‘ratification’ to become effective” (Catechism, no. 1308).

In the West, on the other hand, the administration of the Sacrament of Confirmation continued to be reserved ordinarily to the bishop.⁵ The Western practice highlights the link between this sacrament and the apostles. In doing so, it also manifests the communion between Christians and their bishops and reminds Christians that they, too, must bear witness to Christ as lay apostles.⁶

The Age of Confirmation in the West

In the Western tradition, the practice of confirming infants remained widespread until the 13th Century and continued in Spain into the 20th Century.⁷ In time, however, the age of reason (about seven years old) became (and remains) “the reference point for receiving Confirmation;” the *Roman Catechism* (1566), for example, counseled that the sacrament be administered between the ages of seven and twelve.⁸ Likewise, the 1917 Code of Canon Law decreed that the age of reason was the proper time to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation.⁹ According to the current (1983) Code of Canon Law, “The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops has determined another age, or there is danger of death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause suggests otherwise.”¹⁰

In August 2001, the United States Conference of Catholic

Bishops, with the approval of the Holy See, decreed that “the age for conferring the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Latin Rite dioceses of the United States will be between the age of discretion and about sixteen years of age.”¹¹ This decree became effective on July 1, 2002. It falls to the diocesan bishop to determine the age of reception of the sacrament in his diocese, since he is “the first steward of the mysteries of God in the particular Church entrusted to him” and “the moderator, promoter and guardian of her whole liturgical life.”¹²

The Right to Receive the Sacrament

The bishop has the authority to regulate the administration of the Sacrament of Confirmation in his diocese. At the same time, “sacred ministers cannot refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from receiving them” (canon 843, §1).

In 1999, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments ruled that the right of the faithful to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation can take precedence over the bishop’s authority to regulate the sacrament’s administration. An American bishop had decreed that recipients of the Sacrament of Confirmation in his diocese had to have reached the sophomore year of high school. An 11-year-old girl wished to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation, and the bishop refused to grant her a dispensation. In ordering the bishop to administer the sacrament to the girl, the congregation outlined important principles associated with the rights of the faithful to receive this sacrament:

“[I]t is no doubt true that there is a pastoral judgment to be made in such cases, provided that by ‘pastoral judgment’ one is speaking of the obligation of the Sacred Pastors to determine whether those

elements required by the revised Code of Canon Law are indeed present, namely, that the person be baptized, have the use of reason, be suitably instructed, and be properly disposed and able to renew the baptismal promises (cf. can. 843, §1; 889, §2). This Dicastery notes from the testimony submitted by the family, as well as that provided by Your Excellency, that it is clear this young girl has satisfied each of the canonical requisites for reception of the Sacrament. . . .

“[T]he Code of Canon Law legislates that Sacred Ministers may not deny the Sacraments to those who opportunely ask for them, are properly disposed and are not prohibited by law from receiving them (cf. can. 843 §1). Since it has been demonstrated that the girl possesses these requisite qualities, any other considerations, even those contained in the Diocesan Policy, need to be understood in subordination to the general norms governing the reception of the Sacraments.

“The Congregation considers it useful to point out that it is the role of the parents as the primary educators of their children and then of the Sacred Pastors to see that candidates for the reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation are properly instructed to receive the sacrament and come to it at the opportune time (cf. can. 890). Consequently, when a member of the faithful wishes to receive this sacrament, even though not satisfying one or more elements of the local legislation (e.g., being younger than the designated age for administration of the sacrament), those elements must give way to the fundamental right of the faithful to receive the sacraments. Indeed, the longer the conferral of the sacrament is delayed after the age of reason, the greater will be the number of candidates who are prepared for its reception but are deprived of its grace for a considerable period of time.”¹³

So long as a child meets the canonical requirements to receive

the sacrament in the Latin Rite—“namely, that the person be baptized, have the use of reason, be suitably instructed, and be properly disposed and able to renew the baptismal promises”—it is illicit to deny the sacrament.

For the reasons discussed in the FAITH FACT “Following Our Bishops” (to obtain a copy, call (800) MY-FAITH or visit www.cuf.org), Catholics should generally heed diocesan policies that regulate the Sacrament of Confirmation.

On occasion, however, the implementation of diocesan policies at the parish level may present a grave danger to the faith of young people or a proximate occasion of sin. A parish, for example, may require participation in a deeply flawed catechetical program or a co-ed sleepover retreat as a prerequisite for receiving the sacrament.

Parents who are faced with such situations should obviously not allow their children’s faith or morality to be endangered. At the same time, the extraordinary graces associated with the Sacrament of Confirmation make it imprudent to delay its reception.

Parents who are faced with such situations, then, ought to enter into charitable discussion with their pastor about the right of their child to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. In doing so, parents should use the principles outlined by the congregation and by CUF’s FAITH FACT “Effective Lay Witness Protocol” (call (800) MY-FAITH or visit www.cuf.org).

If the pastor persists in refusing to allow the child to receive the sacrament, parents can try to dialogue with the pastor and provide information presented in this FAITH FACT or appeal to diocesan authorities or even, if necessary, to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the

Sacraments, as outlined in “Effective Lay Witness Protocol.”

The Sacrament of Confirmation is a sacrament of great graces associated with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—an outpouring prophesied in the Old Testament, promised by Our Lord, and conferred at Pentecost. For more than two millennia, Catholics in the East and West have received this important sacrament, even as it has been conferred at different ages. In the Latin Rite dioceses of the United States, the sacrament is conferred between the ages of seven and sixteen. The teaching Church safeguards the right of Catholics to receive this sacrament.

¹ These passages are cited in Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, 1974), pp. 361–62. Other passages could be cited, particularly those associated with the Masses of Pentecost and the Ritual Mass of Confirmation.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 362–63.

³ See, for example, the *Catecheses* of St. Cyril

(315–86), bishop of Jerusalem and doctor of the Church, available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3101.htm>.

⁴ Catechism, nos. 1302–5.

⁵ In the West, priests, and not bishops, typically confirm converts and those in danger of death.

⁶ Catechism, nos. 1292, 1313.

⁷ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, 1974), p. 369; “Confirmation,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (Robert Appleton Co., 1908), available online at <http://www.newadvent.org>.

⁸ Catechism, no. 1307, which also teaches that “in danger of death children should be confirmed even if they have not yet attained the age of discretion”; *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN Books and Publishers, 1982), p. 208.

⁹ Canon 788, cited in Ott, p. 370.

¹⁰ Canon 891, available online at <http://www.vatican.va/archive/cdc/index.htm>.

¹¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Age of Confirmation Decreed” (August 31, 2001), available online at <http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/2001/01-150.shtml>.

¹² Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Instruction on Certain Matters to be Observed or to be Avoided regarding the Most Holy Eucharist *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (March 25, 2004), no. 19, available online at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html.

¹³ *Notitiae* (Nov.-Dec. 1999), available online at http://www.adoremus.org/CDW_Confirmation_age.html.

RECOMMENDED READING

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Catechism of the Catholic Church

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