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Talk #5

Confirmation and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit



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5. Confirmation and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

What Does Confirmation Add to Baptism?

Why did Christ institute the sacrament of Confirmation?¹ The question is disputed among contemporary theologians.² The liturgy ties Confirmation very closely with Baptism, as sacraments of Christian initiation. The gifts bestowed by the two sacraments seem to be the same: sanctifying grace, the supernatural virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and His indwelling. The chief theological problem therefore is to show how Confirmation differs from Baptism.

St. Thomas holds that the specific purpose of Confirmation is the giving of *spiritual maturity*, as Baptism gives spiritual birth. Its purpose is to complete, strengthen, and perfect what was begun at Baptism, as maturity completes, strengthens, and perfects what was begun at birth.³ The name “Confirmation” signifies spiritual strengthening: making firm. Since what was begun at Baptism was a beginning of the infusion of sanctifying grace, by which we receive the indwelling of the Spirit and His seven gifts, Confirmation gives a greater fullness of these gifts to help the recipient blossom into spiritual maturity.⁴ This way of characterizing what is proper to the mission of Confirmation comes from a profound reading of the episode of Pentecost, which is viewed by the Tradition as the exemplar of Confirmation.

Lumen gentium 11 speaks of the purpose of Confirmation as completing what was begun in Baptism by a fuller gift of the Spirit by which the faithful are enriched with a special strength to be true and active witnesses of Christ: “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.”⁵ Spiritual maturity is required to be a true and active witness of Christ in the world and to share in the Church’s mission to spread the Gospel by example, words, and prayer.

These effects are expressed by the prayer of the celebrant before Confirmation in the ordinary form of the Latin Rite:

1 The Eastern tradition refers to Confirmation by another name: Chrismation. In the early Church, this sacrament was also spoken of as a “perfecting.”

2 See Daniel G. Van Slyke, “Confirmation: A Sacrament in Search of a Theology?” *New Blackfriars* 92/1041 (Sept. 2011): 521-551.

3 See Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Divinae consortium naturae*: “From that time on the apostles, in fulfillment of Christ’s will, imparted to the newly baptized by the laying on of hands the gift of the Spirit that completes the grace of Baptism.” Cited in CCC 1288.

4 St. Thomas explains the specific purpose of the sacrament of Confirmation in *ST III*, q. 72, a. 1.

5 Translation from the CCC 1285.

My dear newly baptized, born again in Christ by baptism, you have become members of Christ and of his priestly people. Now you are to share in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit among us, the Spirit sent by the Lord upon his apostles at Pentecost and given by them and their successors to the baptized. The promised strength of the Holy Spirit, which you are to receive, will make you more like Christ and help you to be witnesses to his suffering, death, and resurrection. It will strengthen you to be active members of the Church and to build up the Body of Christ in faith and love.⁶

The Institution of Confirmation by Christ

We have seen above that Christ Himself instituted the sacraments; Christ, therefore, must have personally instituted Confirmation. When did He do so? Traditionally, Confirmation is seen as having been received by the Apostles and other disciples at Pentecost. Yet at this point Christ had already ascended into heaven. Christ’s institution of the sacraments, however, should have taken place during the time of His bodily presence on earth. St. Thomas Aquinas answers the question very simply: Christ instituted the sacrament of Confirmation when He promised the Apostles the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁷

Jesus made this promise three times during His discourse after the Last Supper. It is first found in John 14:16–17, 26:

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. . . . 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.

It appears a second time in John 15:26–27: “But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.”

A third and fuller explanation of the promise is given in John 16:7–15: “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. . . . He will glorify

6 *The Rites of the Catholic Church as Revised by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 1:162–63.

7 St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 72, a. 1, ad 1: “And therefore we must say that Christ instituted this sacrament not by bestowing, but by promising it, according to John 16:7.”

me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son, the gift of the Holy Spirit endows the recipient with the Spirit and mind of Christ.

Forty days after the Resurrection and just before His Ascension, Christ reiterated for the fourth time the promise of the gift of the Spirit from the Father and from Himself. He presents it as a kind of second Baptism in the Spirit that has the specific effect of giving spiritual power and transforming the disciples into witnesses of Christ in the whole world and until the end of time:

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. . . . 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.” (Acts 1:4–8)

It is clear from these four texts that Christ personally instituted a sacrament, distinct from Baptism, in which the Holy Spirit is given more fully. This fuller gift is meant to complete the transformation or conversion of the disciples, giving them the Spirit of the Son, and making them His witnesses before the world. By receiving the Spirit of the Son the confirmed faithful gain a spiritual insight into “sin and righteousness and judgment” (Jn 16:8) and the power to “teach all things” and to know in greater fullness the words and teachings of Christ. Because Confirmation bestows this infused knowledge, it can be likened to an interior illumination that completes the effects of Baptism.

Figures and Prophecies of Confirmation in the Old and New Testament

The Anointing of Priests, Prophets, and Kings in the Old Testament

Various figures of the sacrament of Confirmation are given by the anointing of priests, prophets, and kings in the Old Testament. Interestingly, the word “Messiah” (Meshiach) in Hebrew, and “Christ” in Greek means literally “anointed one.” The Old Testament rite of anointing priests, kings, and prophets with oil represented the spiritual anointing of the Holy Spirit. The Messiah was to be the supremely anointed one. Being fully inserted into Christ means receiving a participation in His anointing by the Holy Spirit. This anointing gives to the recipients a share in Christ’s prophetic, priestly, and kingly office.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, in his catechesis to the newly baptized and confirmed, explains the typology of the Old Testament anointings that foreshadowed Confirmation:

It is important for you to know that this anointing is foreshadowed in the Old Testament. When Moses en-

trusted to his brother the command of God and made him High Priest, after washing him with water he anointed him [Ex 40:12–13]. . . . Likewise when the High Priest raised Solomon to the kingship, he anointed him after washing him in the waters of Gihon [1 Kings 1:33–39]. This happened to Aaron and Solomon by way of figure, but to you not in figure but in truth, for you were truly anointed by the Holy Spirit. Christ is the beginning of your salvation, for he is truly the first-fruit while you are the whole lump. If the first-fruit is holy, clearly the holiness will pass to the whole lump.⁸

The anointing of Aaron and his sons, the priests of Israel, is a figure of Confirmation. Their anointing is commanded in Exodus 29:1–7: “Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests. . . . You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the door of the tent of meeting, and wash them with water. . . . And you shall take the anointing oil, and pour it on his head and anoint him.” The anointing of Aaron is also mentioned in Psalm 133:1–2 as a figure of the unity of the brethren: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious ointment on the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!”

The kings of Israel were anointed with oil.⁹ The anointing of David by Samuel as related in 1 Samuel 16:12–13 is particularly illustrative of the effects of that ritual: “And the Lord said, “Arise, anoint him; for this is he.” Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.” The anointing of David is also spoken of in Psalm 89:20. Here the principal agent of the anointing is not said to be Samuel, but the Lord Himself: “I have found David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him; so that my hand shall ever abide with him, my arm also shall strengthen him.”

Prophets also received a ritual anointing with oil that signified the interior anointing of the Holy Spirit. We see this in 1 Kings 19:16, in which God commanded Elijah to anoint Elisha to be a prophet after him.

Prophecies of Confirmation in the Old Testament

This gift of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit had been foretold by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, speaking of a new Covenant and new Law which was to be written not on tablets of stone, but in the hearts of men by the gift of the Spirit.

In Ezekiel 36:24–27 there is a magnificent messianic prophecy:

⁸ St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogic Catecheses*, Sermon 3.6, in Edward Yarnold, ed., *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, pp. 82–83.

⁹ Saul was anointed by Samuel (1 Sam 10:1), and Solomon was anointed by Zadok the High Priest and by Nathan the prophet (1 Kings 1:34, 39, 45).

For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle *clean water* upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And *I will put my spirit within you*, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

Two spiritual gifts are promised: the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit. The first part of the prophecy concerns the forgiveness of sins to be accomplished through Baptism, for God says “I will pour upon you clean water,” by which they are cleansed from sin. The second part concerns the gift of the Spirit. The effect is to take away hardness of heart, symbolized in the heart of stone, and to give a heart of flesh, a heart made new, which has the power to enable the recipients “to walk in the law of the Lord.” The messianic gift of the Spirit does not replace the Torah, but rather *plants it within*. This is the purpose of the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost and in Confirmation.

In the light of the reference to Baptism and Confirmation (Pentecost), the opening line of the prophecy concerning the ingathering “into your own land” should be taken in an ecclesiological sense. The messianic ingathering will be an ingathering into the Church through the portals of Baptism and Confirmation!

A similar prophecy is given in Jeremiah 31:31–33, introducing the crucial notion of a *new covenant*. The New Covenant centers on the giving of the Holy Spirit, to renew the heart and write the Torah upon it. The new Law of the New Covenant is thus described as the interiorization of the Torah through the Spirit.

St. Paul speaks of the faithful in Corinth using this image of the Spirit written on their hearts: “You show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor 3:3). Another prophecy of the gift of the Spirit is Joel 2:28–29, as will be seen below.

Baptism of Christ

In the New Testament, the Baptism of Christ is a figure of Confirmation. After Christ emerges from the waters of the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descends on Him and *remained* on Him, as John the Baptist mentions in John 1:32. The Fathers see this as a type of the giving of the Holy Spirit that was given right after Baptism in Christian initiation.

Pentecost and the Sending of the Holy Spirit

Jewish Pentecost

The principal exemplar for Confirmation is the Jewish Pentecost. The symbolism is extremely rich. This feast is more commonly known by Jews as the Feast of Weeks, which in Hebrew is *Shavuot*, referring to the seven weeks after the Passover. It is referred to in this way in Ex 34:22–23: “You shall observe the feast of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest. . . . Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God, the God of Israel.” Pentecost (*Shavuot*) was one of the three feasts of pilgrimage—together with Passover and the autumn Feast of Booths (*Sukkot*)—in which all adult males Israelites had to present themselves before the Lord in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Shavuot, like the feast of Booths, had a dual significance: agricultural and historical. On the one hand, it commemorated and gave thanks for the grain harvest reaped between Passover and Pentecost. In this regard the purpose of the feast was to offer the first fruits of the harvest before the Lord in the Temple. As a celebration of the harvest, the Israelites were to “rejoice before the Lord” (Dt 16:11), share the fruits of the harvest with the poor and needy, and offer sacrifice.

However, the Israelites were not just to give thanks for material sustenance, but more principally for their spiritual sustenance. Thus Pentecost is also a memorial of the great historical event of the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, fifty days after the Passover. Hence this feast is also called the *Festival of the Giving of the Law*, and the feast of the “Revelation” of the Torah.

The agricultural aspect is no longer observed, because it was tied to the Temple in Jerusalem in which the first fruits were to be offered and sacrifice performed. Today the feast focuses solely on commemorating the gift of the Torah.

Christian Pentecost

Let us now look at the first Christian Pentecost, fifty days after the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. The same marvelous parallel that connects the old and the new Passover (Easter) is no less present between the old and the new Pentecost. The giving of the Holy Spirit on the first Pentecost to all the disciples, ten days after the Ascension, is related in Acts 2:1–4: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” Why was the communication of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost accompanied by the sound of wind? First of all, the word “spirit” also means “wind”

in Hebrew. Jesus Himself made this connection when speaking with Nicodemus about the communication of the Spirit in Baptism: “The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:8).

The tongues of fire at Pentecost were also associated with the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit gives light and the fire of love. The rabbinical tradition frequently makes this connection.¹⁰ The connection of flames and the fire of the Holy Spirit was also very prominent on Mt. Sinai in the giving of the Law, in the first Jewish Pentecost, described in Exodus 19 and 24:16–17: “The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days; and on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.” The cloud covering the mountain represents the mystical communication of the Holy Spirit, and the flames represent the fire of charity commanded in the holiness of the Law, which is summed up in the double commandment of charity.

The same elements are present over the Apostles in the form of rushing wind and tongues of fire. The fact that the flames appeared as “*tongues of fire*” is also significant. The Apostles were given the gift of tongues of fire to communicate the Gospel through preaching, so as to excite the fire of charity in the hearts of their listeners. As we shall see, the first fruits of this preaching were three thousand souls.

The Speaking in Tongues

Acts 2:5–11 tells us:

There were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

The Apostles’ speaking in tongues on Pentecost was a prophetic allusion to the universality of the Church, which is the ark of salvation for the whole human race and thus speaks all tongues and is understood by all. The event of Pentecost was thus the antitype of Babel with its confusion and “pluralism” of tongues that created divisions

among men. The speaking in tongues on Pentecost was understood by all and created unity, and was itself a sign of the catholic unity that the Church is called to be. The confusion of tongues at Babel was caused by the attempt to create a social edifice to rival God, to make a “name for themselves” without God (see Gen 11:4). The catholic unity first revealed on Pentecost pointed to a social edifice founded by God: the Messianic Kingdom of God, whose coming Jesus had preached from the beginning of His ministry.

Although the plurality of tongues that began at Babel continues, and will doubtless continue until the end of time, in the Church the original harmony is recomposed in the unity of faith. Although materially there continue to be many languages, they are united in proclaiming the same Creed. Thus St. Paul exhorts all to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.” The variety of the gifts and charisms of the Holy Spirit is ordered to strengthening the unity of the Body, composed of complementary members.

The speaking in tongues at Pentecost thus perfectly represents the catholic unity which marks the Church. It is a unity that is not monolithic, but composed of a great variety of complementary members, each of which serve the others. It is to be made up of Jews and Gentiles, and of all the nations on earth, speaking all its tongues, but united in faith, hope, and charity which create the unity of the Church.

St. Augustine has a beautiful commentary on the significance of the miracle of tongues at Pentecost:

At the beginning the Church was not yet spread throughout the entire world, making it possible for Christ’s members to speak among all nations, and therefore the miracle happened in each person as a presage of what would later be true of all. Today the whole body of Christ does speak in the languages of all peoples, or, rather, if there are any tongues in which it does not yet speak, it will. The church will grow until it claims all languages as its own.... I dare to say to you, “I speak in the tongues of all men and women. I am in Christ’s body, I am in Christ’s Church. If Christ’s body today speaks in the languages of all, I too speak in all languages. Greek is mine, Syriac is mine, Hebrew is mine. Mine is the tongue of every nation, because I am within the unity that embraces all nations.”¹¹

If St. Augustine could say around the year 400 that the Church already speaks nearly all languages, how much

¹⁰ See the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, “Holy Spirit,” vol. 6 (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1964), 448.

¹¹ St. Augustine, *Exposition of Psalm 147*, n. 19, in *Expositions of the Psalms 121–150*, trans. Maria Boulding, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, part 3, vol. 20 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004), 464.

more that is true today! I wonder if there is a language on earth in which the Bible is not translated and catechesis given.

An ancient liturgical text of the Church says: “The diversity of tongues is no longer an obstacle to the building of the Church, but rather reinforces its unity.”¹² This is the miracle of Catholic universality, in which the plethora of tongues builds up the unity of the Church.

Prophecy of Joel

After the miracle of the speaking in tongues, some of the passersby mocked them, saying that they were drunk with new wine. They were indeed drunk, but with a spiritual rather than a physical inebriation. Spiritual inebriation or ecstatic spiritual joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

At this point St. Peter stood to make his first apostolic discourse to the people in Jerusalem. He began by citing a prophecy of Joel 2:28–29 concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Messianic times:

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. . . . And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Acts 2:13–21)

In conformity with the prophetic text, the rabbinic tradition affirms that the Holy Spirit will be “poured out equally upon Jews and pagans, men and women, freemen and slaves.”¹³

God had never withheld the gifts of the Holy Spirit from mankind. The Old Testament frequently speaks of the Holy Spirit and His gifts of prophecy, given to the recognized prophets from Elijah to John the Baptist, and also to kings such as Saul and David. In the New Testament, we see the Spirit given to Elizabeth and Zachariah, Simeon, and the prophetess Anna.

What is new about the messianic outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost? There are three principal novelties. First, the Spirit is given for the building up of the Church as the anti-Babel, the new Ark of Noah, which is intended to be a “sign and instrument . . . of communion with God and of unity among all men.”¹⁴ Thus it is to be universal, extending beyond the borders of Israel and into the whole world. This first occurred when the centurion Cornelius and his household received the gift of the Holy Spirit at

the hands of St. Peter in Acts 10, and then on a broader scale in Antioch as narrated in Acts 11.

Secondly, the outpouring of the Spirit, according to this text, is no longer to be considered an extraordinary event given to a few privileged souls—prophets, priests, and kings—but is to be given to all “your sons and daughters,” young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, slaves and free. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon *all* the disciples who were praying together in the cenacle, and not only upon the Apostles. In fact, the disciples praying in the cenacle on Pentecost (about 120)¹⁵ comprised the universal Church at that moment of its birth. St. Luke clearly states that “all” received the gift of the Spirit.

Third, the means established for this universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit is *sacramental*: realized throughout the life of the Church through an efficacious sensible sign capable of transmitting grace: Confirmation. This sacramental means of giving the Holy Spirit is intimately tied to the universality of the gift. All can receive the Holy Spirit because there is an ordinary channel established for giving it. And the only precondition for receiving the sacramental gift of grace through the Spirit is faith and contrition for sin.

Transformation of the Apostles

The spiritual effects given by the sacrament of Confirmation are beautifully illustrated by the transformation of the Apostles on Pentecost, especially with regard to their newfound courage and ability to speak. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1302, the “effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the Apostles on the day of Pentecost.”

Pentecost completed the conversion of the Apostles and brought them to the highest stage of the spiritual life. Like our physical and intellectual life, the spiritual life is subject to growth and development, and is said to have three stages: it begins with the purgative state of beginners, advances to the illuminative state of those who are progressing, and culminates in the unitive state of those who are advanced. The state of beginners is referred to as purgative because the major emphasis in this state lies in actively combating vices and disordered tendencies. It is a stage of uprooting sin and combat against it. The illuminative stage is marked by the progress in supernatural virtue under the guidance of faith and the beginning of infused prayer. The unitive stage is that of sanctity, lying in the blossoming of charity, infused contemplation, the fullness of the action of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the beatitudes and fruits of the Holy Spirit.

However, even at the day of the Ascension, the Apostles were still insufficiently clear about their mission, think-

12 *Sacramentarium Veronense*, ed. L.C. Mohlberg (Rome, 1956), n. 217. These texts date from the sixth century.

13 *Jewish Encyclopedia*, “Holy Spirit,” vol. 6, p. 449, citing Tanna debe Eliyahu, ed. Friedmann.

14 Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* 1.

15 See Acts 1:15.

ing still in terms of a temporal kingdom in Israel, for they asked: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

The third conversion came on the day of Pentecost, when they were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and all of His gifts, and could then take their place as pillars of the Church. Through the experience of Pentecost, they gained a supernatural fortitude or boldness, a supernatural wisdom to understand the mysteries of God, and a supernatural docility to God’s inspirations. Their contemplation was translated immediately into fearless preaching and conversion.

Peter, who fifty days before had trembled at the word of a maidservant, now, with breathtaking boldness, preaches repentance for the crucifixion of Christ to the very men who were partially responsible:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.... Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:22–24, 38).

Some days later, he preaches again after the miracle of the cure of the lame man:

The God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.... And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord (Acts 3:13–19).

Their supernatural fortitude is shown in the fact that after Pentecost they rejoice in suffering for the sake of Jesus Christ (Acts 5:41). Above all, however, their supernatural transformation is evident from the ardor of love for Christ which the Apostles communicated to the early Christian community. Acts 2: 44–47 gives eloquent witness:

And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread

in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

This glorious spiritual transformation that we witness in the Apostles and disciples after Pentecost is the exemplar of the spiritual effects that are given by the sacrament of Confirmation throughout the life of the Church. Some may ask: Why are not all sanctified by Confirmation as the disciples were on Pentecost? The sacraments open the door to the outpouring of God’s graces, but the faithful need to *continually cooperate* with the work of God through *progressive conversion*. The graces given in germ in Baptism and Confirmation need to be *progressively unfolded* and unleashed in our lives as we seek to advance through the three stages of the spiritual life towards holiness. The character of Confirmation provides the basis for this progressive unfolding of sanctity.

Like the other sacraments, the grace of Confirmation is received according to the dispositions of the recipient. The Apostles were perfectly disposed to receive the full effects of Confirmation by their experience of Christ’s public ministry, Passion, and Resurrection. As the pillars of the Church, Christ had given them a suitable disposition so that they could be brought immediately by the gift of the Holy Spirit to the heights of the Christian life. Most Christians, however, have to acquire a better disposition to receive the grace of Confirmation, through their gradual cooperation with the graces received day by day.

Pentecost and the First Fruits

The Christian Pentecost also corresponded mystically to the other original aspect of the Jewish Pentecost: the feast of the first fruits of the wheat harvest of the land of Israel, offered on that same day. The material first fruits of the harvest celebrated in the Jewish Pentecost correspond to the spiritual first fruits of the Apostolic preaching: a harvest of three thousand adult converts. Acts 2:37–41 recounts the event:

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.” . . . So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”

These three thousand baptized souls were the first fruits of the preaching of the Apostles. The flock of the Church thus increased from 120 to 3,120—a twenty-five-fold increase. Still more important were the spiritual first fruits:

the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit in the souls of the disciples. Thus the first fruits of the Church offered to God on her first Pentecost were fruits of grace and apostolate.

At Pentecost the Church is fully born, and present with all her elements. We have sanctity, fortitude, charity, and joy in the Holy Spirit, the super-abundant engendering of new members, and the universal promise of a Church that speaks all languages. What was begun in the Annunciation and nativity of Jesus is brought to completion on Pentecost, just as what was begun through Abraham was brought to its first fullness in the Jewish Pentecost on Mt. Sinai through the giving of the Law. And Pentecost continues in the Church through the sacrament of Confirmation, through which the Church is kept ever young as on that first day of Pentecost when she received her birth.

References to Confirmation after Pentecost in the New Testament

Acts 8 and 19

After Pentecost, we see the miracle repeated through the laying on of the hands of the Apostles.¹⁶ In Acts 8, the people of Samaria have received the Word through the deacon Philip (not the Apostle) and were baptized. When the Apostles “heard that Samaria had received the word of God,” they sent Peter and John to them “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 8:15–17). The miracle of Pentecost was thus reproduced in Samaria.

The deacon Philip baptized, but was not able to give the Holy Spirit in Confirmation because he was only a deacon, and the ordinary minister of Confirmation is a bishop, endowed with the fullness of Holy Orders. For this reason two of the Apostles (of whom the bishops are successors) went to Samaria to confirm them and thus confer the fuller gift of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

One of the Samaritans, Simon Magus (the magician), was so impressed with this sacramental and infallible means of giving grace, that he offered money to the Apostles to be given the power to confer the Spirit. From this incident we get the word “simony,” which refers to

16 See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1288: “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.”

17 See Innocent I, Epistle 25 *Ad Decentium*, 3.6 (PL 20.554–5): “Concerning the signing of children, it is clear that this may not be performed by anyone except the bishop. . . . This is evident not only from the Church’s practice but from the passage in the Acts of the Apostles which states that Peter and John were sent to confer the Holy Spirit on those who were already baptized.”

the attempt to *buy* sacramental power: buying a share in the episcopal power of the Apostles.

We see the sacrament of Confirmation again in Acts 19:2–7. When St. Paul arrived in Ephesus, he found some disciples there and asked them if they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit when they were initiated into the faith. They replied that they did not even know of the existence of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul then asked them: “‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They said, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ . . . On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve of them in all.”

First St. Paul baptized the disciples and then afterwards he laid his hands upon them. Although the sacrament is not named, the Christian Tradition identifies this with the sacrament of Confirmation, as in Acts 8. The effect is the same as on Pentecost: the Holy Spirit came upon them, they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Here we see the distinction between three rites: (a) the Baptism of John, (b) Baptism in the name of Jesus, and (c) the laying of hands by an Apostle, with the result that the Holy Spirit came upon the recipients.

In Acts 10:44–48 in the house of the Gentile centurion Cornelius, we see a similar phenomenon, but in reverse order by an extraordinary intervention of God like that of Pentecost. While Peter is preaching to Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, which convinced Peter that Gentiles were also to be baptized.

In these four cases of the giving of the Spirit described in Acts, the gift of the Holy Spirit is connected with the catholicity and missionary nature of the Church. Those who receive the Holy Spirit speak various tongues (foreign languages), foretelling the catholic nature of the Church. This gift of tongues is connected with seminal moments in the Church’s fulfilling of Christ’s command to be His witnesses in Acts 1:8: “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.” The four instances of the outpouring of the Spirit trace that trajectory. It was first received in Jerusalem, then in Samaria, then in the house of the Gentile centurion, and then in the Gentile city of Ephesus.

Confirmation in Other New Testament Texts

St. Paul seems to allude to the sacrament of Confirmation in 2 Corinthians 1:21–22: “Now he that confirmeth us with you in Christ, and that hath anointed us, is God; Who also hath sealed us, and given the pledge of the Spirit in our hearts.”¹⁸ The terms used in this passage are all terms later associated in the liturgy with the sacrament of Confirmation: to confirm, to anoint, seal, and pledge of

18 Douay-Rheims translation.

the Spirit. The context of this text concerns God's fidelity to His promises in Christ. As we have seen, Confirmation is the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament prophecies of the giving of the Spirit in the Messianic age.

In his first letter, John speaking of the spiritual power of Christians as an "anointing" or "seal" (*sphragis*). He writes:

But the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him. (1 Jn 2:27).

This text has a clear reference to the promise of the prophets, such as Joel and Jeremiah (31:31) that in the Messianic age God Himself would teach the faithful interiorly. John sees this prophecy as fulfilled in Christian "anointing," which seems to correspond to what we call Confirmation.¹⁹ The anointing is said to be abiding in the faithful, and teaching them interiorly.

There is a probable reference to the sacrament of Confirmation in 1 Jn 5:6–8:

This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth. There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree.

It is clear that the reference to water and blood indicates both the water and blood that came from Christ's side when pierced by the centurion's lance, as recorded in John 19:34. But what about the reference to the Spirit? The most plausible interpretation, it seems to me, is to the sacrament of Confirmation. Thus the reference to "the Spirit, the water, and the blood" indicates the three sacraments of Christian initiation. These are spoken of as "witnesses" of Christ, on account of the progressive interior illumination they impart.²⁰

The Essential Elements and Effects of Confirmation

The Sacramental Sign of Confirmation

The sacramental sign of Confirmation is being signed by Holy Chrism on the forehead by the imposition of the hand of the minister (the bishop or a priest delegated by him).

Scripture does not explicitly give us the sacramental sign of Confirmation. In Acts 8 and 19 we hear mention only of a laying on of hands by the Apostles. Pope Paul VI, in

his Apostolic Constitution *Divinae consortium naturae*, explains:

From that time on the apostles, in fulfillment of Christ's will, imparted to the newly baptized by the laying on of hands the gift of the Spirit that completes the grace of Baptism. For this reason in the Letter to the Hebrews the doctrine concerning Baptism and the laying on of hands is listed among the first elements of Christian instruction. 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.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1289 then speaks of how the anointing with chrism was part of the sacramental sign from very early times:

Very early, the better to signify the gift of the Holy Spirit, an anointing with perfumed oil (chrism) was added to the laying on of hands. This anointing highlights the name "Christian," which means "anointed" and derives from that of Christ himself whom God "anointed with the Holy Spirit." This rite of anointing has continued ever since, in both East and West. For this reason the Eastern Churches call this sacrament Chrismation, anointing with chrism, or myron which means "chrism."

The Minister of Confirmation

The ordinary and original minister of Confirmation is the bishop. The Council of Trent defined this as follows: "If any one says that the ordinary minister of holy confirmation is not the bishop alone, but any simple priest whatsoever; let him be anathema."²¹ The fact that the ordinary minister is the bishop manifests the fact that Confirmation binds the recipient "more closely to the Church, to her apostolic origins, and to her mission of bearing witness to Christ."²²

The universal law of the Church also grants this power to a priest who, in virtue of his office as pastor, "baptizes one who is no longer an infant or admits one already baptized into the full communion of the Catholic Church,"²³ as part of the rite of Christian initiation of adults or reception into the Church. Since the bishop cannot be present in all the parishes of the diocese on the Easter vigil, the pastor who baptizes or receives the candidates into full communion with the Church has the power by universal law to confirm them. In addition, any pastor or priest can administer Confirmation in danger of death.²⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1314 says that "the Church desires that none of her children, even the youngest, should depart this world without having been perfected by the Holy Spirit with the gift of Christ's fullness."

19 We see from St. Cyril of Jerusalem's catechetical lecture on Confirmation (sermon 3) that this text was read in the liturgy of Confirmation.

20 See also Hebrews 6:1–2, which seems to refer to Baptism by the word "ablutions" and Confirmation by the "laying on of hands."

21 Council of Trent, session 7, canon 3 on Confirmation, Denz 873.

22 CCC 1313.

23 CIC, canon 883, § 2.

24 CIC, canon 883, § 3.

For children confirmed in the ordinary course of things (outside of the extraordinary context of reception into the Church), Confirmation should be conferred by the bishop. If necessity requires it, the bishop can grant the faculty to administer Confirmation to one or more designated priests. A different practice developed in the Eastern rite with regard to the usual minister of Confirmation with regard to children. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1312 explains,

In the East, ordinarily the priest who baptizes also immediately confers Confirmation in one and the same celebration. But he does so with sacred chrism consecrated by the patriarch or the bishop, thus expressing the apostolic unity of the Church whose bonds are strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation.

Both the Eastern and the Latin practice have advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of the Eastern practice is that it emphasizes the unity of Christian initiation, whether for babies or adults. The disadvantage is that the association of Confirmation with the bishop and the apostolic succession, as maintained in the Latin practice, is less clearly manifested in the Eastern rite. It is maintained, however, through the fact that the oil of chrismation is blessed by the bishop on Holy Thursday.

Subject of Confirmation. When Should Confirmation Be Received?

The subject of Confirmation is a baptized Christian. Canon 889 §1 of the CIC states: “Every baptized person not yet confirmed and only such a person is capable of receiving confirmation.” Confirmation is validly received by any baptized Christian (who intends to receive it, or at least does not have a contrary intention).

However, the eastern and western practice differs on the proper age for receiving the sacrament. The traditional age for Confirmation in the Latin rite is the “age of discretion,” although in danger of death, infants and children below the age of reason should be confirmed.²⁵ The age of discretion is generally estimated to begin about the age of seven. Canon 891 states:

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.

The USCCB has decreed the age for the reception of Confirmation at between “the age of discretion and about sixteen years of age.”²⁶ Except in cases of danger

²⁵ See CCC 1307: “For centuries, Latin custom has indicated ‘the age of discretion’ as the reference point for receiving Confirmation. But in danger of death children should be confirmed even if they have not yet attained the age of discretion.”

²⁶ Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston, President of the USCCB, issued the “decree of promulgation” on August 21, 2001,

of death, the recipient of confirmation should be suitably instructed and properly disposed, which means being in a state of grace. Canon 889 §2 makes this clear: “To receive confirmation licitly outside the danger of death requires that a person who has the use of reason be suitably instructed, properly disposed, and able to renew the baptismal promises.”

Although the Code of Canon Law indicates the age of reason as the proper age for reception of Confirmation, in the United States it is generally received considerably after the age of reason. As a result, Confirmation has lost its proper place in the rites of Christian initiation, which should normally be received in the following order: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist (as in the RCIA). Since the Eucharist is the source and summit of the sacramental system, it would seem more fitting that first reception of the Eucharist be preceded ordinarily by reception of Confirmation. Pope Benedict XVI has recently drawn attention to this question in *Sacramentum caritatis* 17–18:

If the Eucharist is truly the source and summit of the Church’s life and mission, it follows that the process of Christian initiation must constantly be directed to the reception of this sacrament. . . . Concretely, it needs to be seen which practice better enables the faithful to put the sacrament of the Eucharist at the centre, as the goal of the whole process of initiation.

One of the reasons why Confirmation is often administered several years after the age of discretion comes from the idea that the sacrament involves a personal ratification of their Baptism on the part of the recipient. However, it is not necessary that one must await spiritual maturity before receiving the sacrament, for it is the power of the sacrament that causes spiritual maturity.²⁷ One does not receive confirmation as a mere sign that one is already spiritually mature, but rather one receives Confirmation to be the sacramental cause of the unfolding of spiritual maturity. Thus one should be confirmed at a time when one first begins to approach physical maturity and the need to give witness to the faith in the world.

The Effects of Confirmation: Character and Grace

The Character of Confirmation

The character of Confirmation is an indelible spiritual mark or power through which the recipient is given “a certain spiritual growth bringing man to perfect spiritual age.”²⁸ Through the character of Confirmation, the recipient “receives power to do those things which pertain to

which became effective on July 1, 2002.

²⁷ See CCC 1308; Bishop Alvaro Corrada “Pastoral Reflection on the Sacrament of Confirmation,” Oct. 7, 2005, nos. 17, 22.

²⁸ *ST* III, q. 72, a. 5.

the spiritual combat with the enemies of the Faith.”²⁹ “He who is confirmed receives the power of publicly confessing his faith by words, as it were by virtue of office.”³⁰ Through this character, the one who is confirmed is entitled to the graces to participate in Christ’s priestly, prophetic, and kingly offices as a mature member of the Body of Christ. “Those who receive Confirmation, which is the sacrament of the fulness of grace, are conformed to Christ,”³¹ confirmed with His strength, and are called to build up the Church.³² It is a mark of spiritual maturity, making it possible for those who are “newborn babes” through Baptism to achieve spiritual maturity.

Lumen gentium describes the mission of the laity as a supernatural participation in Christ’s priestly, prophetic, and kingly offices. Because of their participation in Christ’s priestly mission, they are called to consecrate the world to God.³³ The character of Confirmation is beautifully explained in the fourth century liturgical document, *Apostolic Constitutions*:

But the bishop shall only anoint their head during the laying-on of hands, as was formerly done for kings and priests; not because those who are now baptized are ordained priests, but because, as anointed ones in the following of the anointed one, they are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the Church of God, the pillar and ground of the marriage chamber, those who formerly were not a people, but now are beloved and chosen.

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The grace of Confirmation consists in the fuller outpouring of the Holy Spirit and His gifts, as occurred on the apostles at Pentecost. This involves the giving of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Isaiah 11:1–2³⁴ that rest upon the Messiah and fill Him:

And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the spirit of counsel, and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of godliness. And

29 ST III, q. 72, a. 5.

30 ST III, q. 72, a. 5, ad 2.

31 ST III, q. 72, a. 1, ad 4

32 See the prayer before Confirmation in in the ordinary form of the Latin Rite: “Let us pray to our Father that he will pour out the Holy Spirit to strengthen his sons and daughters with his gifts and anoint them to be more like Christ the Son of God.”

33 LG 34

34 The Hebrew Masoretic text mentions only six distinct gifts, repeating the last gift of fear of the Lord twice and omitting godliness (piety). The Greek Septuagint translation from the third century BC, instead of repeating fear of the Lord twice, renders the first as piety (*eusebeia*). Why did the translators of the Septuagint do this? It is not certain, but perhaps it was done to fill out the symbolic number seven representing fullness, and harmonize with other texts of the prophets which speak of seven “eyes” of the Lord (see Zech 4:10).

he shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord.³⁵

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are messianic gifts. Since they filled the soul of Jesus Christ, they also are meant to fill the souls of all the members of His Mystical Body, by their assimilation with the Head of the Body. This assimilation is indeed the deepest reason for being of the Church. The messianic kingdom, which is the Catholic Church, was prophesied to be the place where the faithful would be able to be filled with the Holy Spirit and His sevenfold gifts (Jer 31; Ezek 36). This gift is realized through the power of the sacrament of Confirmation.

The giving of the seven gifts of the Spirit is mentioned in the prayer of Confirmation as the celebrant holds his hands outstretched over the recipients in the gesture of overshadowing:

Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence.³⁶

The Nature of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

What is the principal purpose of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit? They enable us to be led by the secret inspirations of the Holy Spirit. How do we know God’s secret plans for us and the hidden desires of His Spirit? We can only know them by being led by Him. This is the sublime function of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1830 defines the gifts of the Holy Spirit as “permanent dispositions which make man docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit.” These dispositions are like the sails of a ship given to us by the Holy Spirit that catch the movements of actual grace breathed forth by the Holy Spirit. The gifts are necessary for salvation because even the help of the theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity) and the supernatural infused virtues (direct gifts from God of supernatural prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude) are not enough to lead man safely and with ease to his supernatural end. The faithful need the docility to be led by God Himself through His inspirations.

The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord, as revealed in Isaiah 11:2–3. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are present in all who are in a state of grace, and they grow in the soul with the increase of sanctifying grace and the supernatural virtues. Their activity becomes more marked as sanctifying grace increases.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit aid the theological and the supernatural moral virtues to operate with docility to the direction of God given through His subtle inspirations in the soul in a state of grace. Thus they make us *habitually*

35 Douay-Rheims translation.

36 *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, 1:163.

docile to the movements of actual grace in our soul. St. Thomas Aquinas has given a classical explanation of the necessity and general function of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and their distinction from the supernatural virtues which they aid and perfect³⁷:

Human virtues perfect man according as it is natural for him to be moved by his reason in his interior and exterior actions. Consequently man needs yet higher perfections, whereby to be disposed to be moved by God. These perfections are called gifts, not only because they are infused by God, but also because by them man is disposed to become amenable to the Divine inspiration, according to Isaiah 50:5: “*The Lord . . . hath opened my ear, and I do not resist; I have not gone back.*”³⁸

The gifts are necessary for salvation because even the help of the theological virtues and the supernatural infused moral virtues (supernatural prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude) are not enough to lead man safely and with ease to his supernatural end. Reason illuminated by faith is not always sufficient to show us God’s particular will for us. The faithful need special insights and strengths that lead them directly and securely to do God’s will, and to be docile to His supernatural movements.³⁹

How often it happens that we are perplexed as to what course of action is God’s will for us, or what would be the best way to exercise charity in a given situation. In cases like this we need the gift of counsel to make us docile to God’s promptings, showing the way to the fulfillment of God’s plan, which He knows perfectly, and we are ignorant of.

In matters of faith, when a subtle new heresy is introduced, the saints are immediately aware of its heretical nature by the gift of understanding, which gives them greater penetration into the mysteries of faith, by way of “connaturality.” The saints (and those more advanced in the spiritual life) gain a “Catholic nose” to sniff out what departs from Catholic truth.

Likewise when we pray, we need to be moved by God directly (with the gifts of piety and wisdom) so as to praise God in a more worthy manner, and to request what is truly good for us. For this reason, St. Paul (Rom 8:26-27) says that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And He who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

37 For St. Thomas’s doctrine on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, see Luis Martinez, *The Sanctifier*.

38 *Summa of Theology*, I-II, q. 68, a. 1.

39 *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 2.