

Confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church

I. WHAT IS CONFIRMATION?

On the first Pentecost the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples from a disoriented circle of mourners to a focused team of evangelizers. Huddled in the upper room after the resurrection of Jesus, the fearful disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and they could no longer be still. Suddenly determined to share the good news of salvation, they burst onto the streets of Jerusalem, preached with conviction, gained believers to their number, and baptized them into an ever-growing throng (Acts 2:1-11). On Pentecost the disciples received the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost they began to proclaim Christ to the world.

Confirmation is Pentecost for Catholics. Confirmation is the conferral of the gift of the Holy Spirit upon the baptized for the purpose of proclaiming Christ to the world. Those who are confirmed “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” (Lumen Gentium 11, cited by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 1285).

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are enumerated in the prayer that accompanies this sacrament: “the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence, the spirit of wonder and awe in [God’s] presence” (*Rite of Confirmation* [RC] 25). The Holy Spirit comes to Catholics in different ways throughout their lives, but confirmation specially confers these marvelous gifts—not just for one’s own sake, but for the sake of others.

The newly-confirmed receive a spiritual seal. A seal may symbolize a person, a sign of authority, or an indication of ownership. It authenticates a juridical act or document. It may make something secret (CCC 1295). In confirmation the seal is the Holy Spirit, who claims Christians, authenticates them, and conceals lifelong divine aid within them. Because of the permanence of

this seal, confirmation is celebrated only once in a lifetime.

Confirmation perfects baptismal grace (CCC 1285, 1316). The Church expects that those who are baptized will also be confirmed. Their initiation in the Catholic Church is incomplete without it (cf. CCC 1304).

Together with baptism and first communion, confirmation is one of the sacraments of initiation. This is especially clear when someone receives all three in the same celebration. This commonly occurs in the Eastern Churches, where even newly-baptized infants are confirmed and given a taste of communion.

The meaning of confirmation is enriched when it is celebrated at baptism: “The conjunction of the two celebrations signifies the unity of the paschal mystery, the close link between the mission of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the connection between the two sacraments through which the Son and the Holy Spirit come with the Father to those who are baptized” (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults [RCIA] 215). When Roman Catholic adults are baptized at the Easter Vigil, for example, they receive confirmation immediately. On a single occasion they are baptized into the body of Christ and confirmed with the Holy Spirit. The Church thus proclaims the links between the Son and the Spirit, and between baptism and confirmation.

The confirmation of Roman Catholic infants is deferred some years after their baptism, and it may precede or follow first communion. When confirmation comes before first communion, it draws the sacraments of initiation closer together. It also prepares children for first communion with the gifts of the Spirit.

When confirmation follows first communion, it still confers gifts of the Spirit. “Holy Communion augments our union with Christ” (CCC 1391). Confirmation gives “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.” For those already receiving communion, confirmation enhances their fulfillment of the Christian life.