

# The Reforms of Confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church

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*Confirmation has undergone a series of reforms throughout its history, even after the Second Vatican Council. The revised English translation of the post-conciliar Rite of Confirmation is the latest effort. This paper will examine the reasons behind the reforms.*

**The Catholic Rite of Confirmation has undergone many reforms in its history, and the latest version is due to be released soon. This paper will explain why this latest reform is happening, offer a brief survey of the history of the rite, and note a few of the expected details from the upcoming revision.**

**There is but one reason why we are receiving a replacement for the current Rite of Confirmation in English: the new rules for translation from Latin into the vernacular languages. These rules, established by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (CDWDS) in its 2001 instruction *Liturgiam authenticam*, have been highly controversial. The first result, the third edition of the Roman Missal, continues to meet objections. Defenders of the missal say that the vernacular prayers, rubrics, antiphons and instructions now better represent their intended content. Objectors maintain that the spoken texts are now too stilted and sound more like translations than real prayers. The process through which the project passed has also been denounced. Many people reviewed the work, but the final product caused disappointment and anger over collegiality, ecumenism, and literary style.**

**The Catholic Church has learned a lot from this experience, and perhaps the most surprising development after the release of the English-language missal was Pope Benedict's appointment of Arthur Roche as Secretary to the CDWDS. As Bishop Roche of Leeds, he chaired the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) throughout the development of the revised translation of the Roman Missal, and he saw much of the laboriously finished work undergo ample changes by the Vatican. As Archbishop Roche, he has moved to the other side of the table. So the Church has at the CDWDS a bishop familiar with the complete process of translation and the frustrations experienced by various constituents along the way. This does not mean that everyone will now rejoice at future translations, but it does suggest that the process and the quality of the work should improve.**

**All of the liturgical books in the Roman Rite are up for revision, and ICEL has begun work on several of them. The next ones expected to be released in English are the Orders of Confirmation and of Celebrating Marriage. The *Ordo celebrandi Matrimonium* was revised in Latin 22 years ago; ICEL began a new English translation twice and aborted it twice - once because of the appearance of *Liturgiam authenticam*, and once because the third edition of the Roman Missal took precedence. English-speaking Catholics need a translation of the**

revised marriage ceremony, so this project understandably moved to the front of the line. The retranslation of the Rite of Confirmation probably advanced because so many of the people reviewing and approving translations are bishops. They use the Rite of Confirmation extensively, though not exclusively. They will be relieved to have a book that fits hand in glove with the Missal. At this moment, both these Orders are at the gray book stage. Hence, ICEL has completed its work on them, and Conferences of Bishops are submitting their comments to the CDWDS, which will review their remarks and issue the final translation. At that point the work will go to the publishers and then join the liturgical library of the Roman Catholic Church.

This presentation concerns the Order of Confirmation. The most important thing to remember is that there is no new Latin edition of this Order, as there was for the Order of Celebrating Marriage and more famously of the Roman Missal. Advancing through the halls of authority is a retranslation into English of the same post-Vatican II *Ordo confirmationis* released in 1971. That work introduced some notable reforms to the overall structure of the ceremony, as well as to the words and gestures used for its administration, so let me explain what needed fixing after the Second Vatican Council. I will offer this in historical contexts.

First, until the fifth century, it is anachronistic to speak of confirmation as a ceremony independent from initiation, even though it had antecedents. I'm speaking here of a ceremony administered by a bishop in those cases where a presbyter had baptized and offered communion. From the fifth through the thirteenth centuries, when a bishop baptized, he anointed and offered communion as well. The number of those cases was probably few each year, but the persistence of legislation throughout this time suggests that bishops did offer the three initiation rites in one ceremony. In most cases, however, the bishop confirmed people who had already been baptized and received communion. Infants were always eligible for confirmation from the fifth through the thirteenth centuries. Preparation for confirmation was nonexistent or minimal.

We have no detailed description of a confirmation ceremony throughout most of this period. We know that bishops confirmed, but not exactly how. Cyril of Jerusalem told the newly baptized of the fourth century that they had received in their postbaptismal anointing the seal of the Holy Spirit; but he never claimed that he said those words during the ceremony. The earliest records of a formula from the eighth to the tenth centuries Gelasian Sacramentaries used these words: *Signum Christi in vitam aeternam*, whereas *Ordo Romanus XI* simply used *In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*. After that were seen the formulas *Confirmo te in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, and *Confirmo et consigno te in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*. Among the Pontificals leading up to the tenth-century Roman-Germanic Pontifical was that of Egbert, which has the bishop pray for the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit and then offer this formula in Latin: "Receive the sign of the holy cross with the chrism of salvation in Christ Jesus for eternal life. Amen." The Roman Pontifical of the twelfth century was the first to use the formula *Signo te signo crucis et confirmo te chrismate salutis in*

*nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*. The Pontifical of Durandus added the words, *ut replearis eodem Spiritu Sancto et habeas vitam aeternam*.

As to the rubrics, indications to sign the forehead with chrism date to the Gelasian Sacramentary. The Roman-Germanic Pontifical further clarifies that this was done in the form of a cross. By the thirteenth century Durandus said the bishop used the tip of his right thumb, dipped in chrism. Twelfth-century texts had the bishop impose hands on individuals, but this instruction did not endure.

From the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the age for confirmation rose, and the age for first communion rose higher. The sequence of these rites, by this time recognized as sacraments in the Catholic tradition, was extremely fluid. Baptism always came first, and when bishops baptized, they continued to confirm and give communion during the same ceremony. When priests baptized, the sequence of confirmation and the first reception of communion depended entirely upon the availability of the bishop and the age of the first communicant.

Leaders of the Protestant Reformation disputed the value of confirmation, largely because of the absence of adequate foundations in scripture. Philip Melancthon, for example, wrote in his *Theological Points*, “Now the rite of confirmation is an utterly empty ceremony. It would be useful however that an investigation and profession of doctrine be made and a public prayer for the sake of religious people, nor would that prayer be futile.”<sup>1</sup> Many of the Reformers pointed out that there is no anointing in sacred scripture, whereas there is plenty of handlaying; however, this did not dissuade the Catholic Church from following the later tradition.

The laying on of hands was accomplished more by an extension of hands over the group while the bishop offered the traditional prayer for the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, its inspiration coming from Isaiah 11, which enumerates the gifts of an ideal king. There were some variations on this - another prayer appearing and then disappearing before it settled into the post-Tridentine practice. The rubric called for the bishop to “impose hands,” though he did so over the group of all the candidates by extending his hands.

The Roman Ritual after the Council of Trent used this formula in Latin: “[John or Mary], I sign you with the sign of the cross and confirm you with the chrism of salvation. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The text indicated exactly which word accompanied the movement of the bishop’s thumb - at first the word *signo*, but in later documents, *crucis*. The rite appeared in the Roman Pontifical as the first among the blessings given by a bishop. Its connection to Christian Initiation was largely unacknowledged and nearly completely undefended until the twentieth century.

By the twentieth century, the age for first communion in the Catholic Church dropped from about 12 to about 7, and gradually the age of confirmation

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<sup>1</sup>*Loci theologic*, Ee. Carolus Gottlieb Bretschneider and Henricus Ernestus Bindseil. Corpus reformatorum. Philippi Melanthonis, opera quae supersunt omnia. Halis Saxonum: C. A. Schwetschke et filium, 1834–60; reprint ed. New York and London: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1963. 21:853.

rose to fill the void that communion had left behind - so it became a kind of maturity rite for adolescents.

The revised initiation rites certainly influenced confirmation practice. Paragraph 71 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy passed by the Second Vatican Council fifty years ago, said this: “The rite of confirmation is to be revised and the intimate connection which this sacrament has with the whole of Christian initiation is to be more clearly set forth; for this reason it is fitting for candidates to renew their baptismal promises just before they are confirmed.” By asking for a clear showing of the connection that confirmation has with the whole of Christian initiation, the Council did not explicitly call confirmation a sacrament of Christian initiation. Rather, it was something separate that ought to have a connection to it. The renewal of baptismal promises, an innovation from the conciliar reforms, referred people back to the initiation that happened some time ago.

After *Sacrosanctum concilium* was promulgated, Pope Paul VI established the Consilium for Carrying out the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which in turn appointed a variety of groups of liturgical experts to work on the various parts of the reform. Confirmation was entrusted to Study Group 20: Relators Balthasar Fischer and Pierre-Marie Gy; members Cardinal Giulio Bevilacqua, Mario Righetti, Bernard Botte, Cipriano Vagaggini, Josef Jungmann, and Georges Delcuve.<sup>2</sup> The study group knew the history of the liturgical texts and practices.<sup>3</sup>

The first draft of the revised rite of Confirmation from 13 September 1967 introduced the renewal of baptismal promises requested by the Council. It also created a liturgy of the word, which confirmation ceremonies never had before the Council. A section entitled “Imposition of Hands” indicated that this action could be done either over individuals before the prayer or over all of them during it. The liturgy of the eucharist followed, or if taking place outside of mass, the prayer of the faithful, the Lord’s Prayer and the final solemn blessing of the bishop concluded the ceremony. The Lord’s Prayer was another post-Vatican II innovation to the rite of Confirmation. Most of these elements from the first draft of 1967 made it all the way to the 1971 publication of the *Ordo confirmationis*.

A revised draft was prepared on 4 April 1968.<sup>4</sup> This included specific recommendations for the scripture readings. The renewal of baptismal promises was also scripted out for the first time. The making of baptismal promises traditionally includes three renunciations and three confessions of faith, and the verbs are in the singular. This draft, creating the first postconciliar renewal of baptismal promises for confirmation, combined the three renunciations into one, and changed the verbs in the questions to the plural. (In English, this is indistinguishable because “Do you renounce?” can be singular or plural, but the questions are different in Latin.) Furthermore, the study group changed one of

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<sup>2</sup> Bugnini, p. 613.

<sup>3</sup> S. 240, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> S. 285.

the Latin words: *pompis* became *seductionibus* - so, not “Do you renounce his pomps / empty promises / empty show?” but “Do you renounce his seductions?” In the Easter Vigil, the other place where a renewal of baptismal promises occurs in the Roman Rite, contains two versions of the three renunciations; one remained the traditional formula, but the other was reworked into an alternative form that still holds today. The second of the questions from this alternative formula at the Vigil includes the Latin word *seductionibus*, translated now this way: “Do you renounce the lure of evil?” The change in vocabulary for the Order of Confirmation held through the 1971 revision and remains today.

This April 1968 draft had the people kneel before the imposition of hands in keeping with the preconciliar custom. The bishop imposed hands on the confirmands as they knelt. If the number was large, he extended his hands over the whole group. They stood for the anointing with chrism. Here is where the first revision of the confirmation formula occurred: *N., accipe signaculum donationis Spiritus Sancti*. This was the boldest move of the study group. In no other sacrament was the form (the words) being changed so dramatically. In this case, the revised form was closer to the ones used in the Eastern Rites and more expressive of the meaning of the sacrament. Ever since the middle ages, the bishop famously gave a slap to the one being confirmed; this was abolished, as this 1968 draft explains, “because no one understands the meaning of this rite.” This draft also includes proposed texts for the Prayer of the Faithful and the solemn blessing, as well as an insertion into the *Hanc igitur* of the Roman Canon. Those being confirmed were allowed to receive communion under both forms.

By 15 September 1968, the formula had changed slightly from *N., accipe signaculum donationis Spiritus Sancti* to this: *N., accipe signaculum Spiritus Sancti, qui tibi datur*. Instead of receiving the seal of the gift, people received the seal of the Spirit. The revised formula also eliminated a double genitive, which was intended to help translators.<sup>5</sup> Study Group 20’s final draft was prepared on 21 April 1970, but it primarily concerned the front matter of the book.

In 1971, the *editio tipica* was released. The renewal of baptismal promises now included a special one pertaining to the Holy Spirit: “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, / the Lord, the giver of life, / who today through the Sacrament of Confirmation / is given to you in a special way / just as he was given to the Apostles on the day of Pentecost?”<sup>6</sup> This marks the first such variation ever in the confession of baptismal faith.

The heading “Imposition of Hands” remained, along with the rubric that the bishop imposed hands over “all those to be confirmed.” Priests could join the bishop in this gesture, but the bishop alone recited the prayer for the coming of the Spirit. The rubric did not explain how the bishop was to do this, but the first English translation had him extend his hands, not impose them. The posture to kneel had been removed from the rite, and the formula had changed once again.

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<sup>5</sup> Bugnini, p. 625.

<sup>6</sup> ICEL’s proposed translation from gray book.

**“*N., accipe signaculum Doni Spiritus Sancti.*”** This went back to the first proposal, changing only the word *donationis* to *Doni*.

When ICEL began work on its translation, it actually proposed changing the formula in English to “Be sealed with the Holy Spirit, the gift of the Father.”<sup>7</sup> Some on ICEL’s episcopal committee objected that this denied the *Filioque*, but it was pointed out that other prayers in the Rite of Confirmation affirm that the giving of the Spirit comes from the Father alone. This proposal, changing the form of the sacrament that the Vatican had just changed, seems to have given rise to the clarification that only the Holy See could change sacramental formulas and that it would henceforth maintain jurisdiction over their translations. On October 25, 1973 the Congregation for Divine Worship signed a letter that said, “Pope Paul VI reserves to himself the power to approve personally all translations of the sacramental forms into the vernacular.”<sup>8</sup> So, ICEL lost its proposed translation and received one from Pope Paul VI. What the Latin literally means is “*N., receive the little sign of the Gift of the Holy Spirit.*” However, the formula comes from the Byzantine Rite, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which translates the Eastern formula as “the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> The present formula in English is “*N., be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.*” This is not exactly what it says in Latin, but perhaps that is what those who composed the Latin meant for it say. In any event, Pope Paul apparently thought it was pretty good. What Pope Francis thinks remains to be seen.

Regarding the renewal of baptismal promises, ICEL proposes keeping the present translation for the word *seductionibus* in the renunciation. ICEL recommends here not the words “lure of evil,” as the expanded Easter Vigil question has it, but the present English translation: “empty promises.” Sadly, even young children receiving the sacrament understand empty promises all too well.<sup>10</sup>

As to the prayer for the sevenfold gift of the Spirit, the revised translation mimics the classic structure of the lengthy sentence in the Latin oration, a style that still receives criticism in the revised English translation of the missal, but one that shows the original structure of the prayer. The first English translation goes like this: “All-powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, / by water and the Holy Spirit / you freed your sons and daughters from sin / and gave them new life. / Send your Holy Spirit upon them / to be their Helper and Guide. / 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. / We ask this through Christ our Lord.” The commission is recommending this:

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<sup>7</sup> Minutes of the Episcopal Committee, March 1-2, 1972, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> DOL 130/905.

<sup>9</sup> CCC 1300.

<sup>10</sup> OC 23.



**“Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
 who brought these your servants to new birth  
 by water and the Holy Spirit,  
 freeing them from sin:  
 send upon them, O Lord, the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete;  
 give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
 the spirit of counsel and fortitude,  
 the spirit of knowledge and piety;  
 fill them with the spirit of the fear of the Lord.  
 Through Christ our Lord.**

**The vocabulary for the gifts of the Spirit matches the translation currently in force in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1831). As to the rubric that accompanies this prayer, the proposed revised translation adheres closely to the Latin: “Then the Bishop lays hands upon all those to be confirmed.” The first English translation says he and the priests “lay hands upon all the candidates (by extending their hands over them).” The Latin only says that they impose hands; nothing further is explained. This avoids a direct reference to the extension of hands, which in practice will probably still be broadly observed, but does give the bishop and priests the option of placing hands on everyone’s head.**

**However, even though most people - bishops and priests included - may think that that extension of hands or imposition of hands is the imposition of hands that can be traced back to the biblical foundations for confirmation in passages such as Acts 8 and 19, Pope Paul VI differed. He wrote these words in small caps near the conclusion of his Apostolic Constitution on Confirmation: “The Sacrament of Confirmation is conferred through the anointing with chrism on the forehead, which is done by the laying on of the hand, and through the words: *Accipe signaculum Doni Spiritus Sancti.*” So, while the bishop anoints the forehead with his thumb, he places the rest of his hand on the top of the head of the one being confirmed. That is the imposition of the hand. Paul even quoted the thirteenth-century Pope Innocent III: “The anointing of the forehead with Chrism signifies the laying on of the hand, the other name for which is Confirmation, since through it the Holy Spirit is given for growth and strength.”**

**As to a possible revised English translation of the formula of confirmation, ICEL is not offering a suggestion because this is reserved to the Holy See. It simply submits the present translation.**

**The Roman Catholic Order of Confirmation has been reformed many times throughout its history. Many would like to see it reformed further with regard to the age of the candidate, the minister who presides, the occasion for the celebration, and the meaning of the rite, as well as the ritual implications of the first imposition of hands. Pope Paul VI also said in his Apostolic Constitution, “it has been Our wish also to include in this revision what concerns the very essence of the rite of Confirmation, through which the Christian faithful receive**

**the Holy Spirit as Gift.” It is hard to argue with this goal. Perhaps no other Catholic sacrament has endured so much reform as Confirmation has. Its future will surely see more.**

This talk was presented at the meeting of Societas Liturgica in Würzburg Germany on 7 August 2013.