

Confirmation

In 1982 I boarded a plane in Kansas City, bound for Rome. I was to begin my studies at the University of Sant' Anselmo in the field of sacramental theology. I was 29 years old and had been ordained for three years. Bishop John Sullivan wanted me to get a doctorate in sacred theology, and then return home to teach in our lay ministry formation program. As the plane taxied down the runway in Kansas City, preparing for liftoff, I tried to guess into the future which of the seven sacraments I would choose as the subject for my doctoral dissertation. I remember saying this very clearly to myself: "One thing I know: I do not want to write about confirmation." And with that, I left the tarmac.

The following year I shared that story with Ghislain Lafont, the faculty member and humble but learned monk whom I had asked to direct my dissertation. He asked why I wanted to avoid confirmation. I said, "Because I know enough about the history and practice of that sacrament to understand why its meaning is debated. There's no clear solution to confirmation. I don't want anything to do with that controversy." He said, "Then that's what you will write." He had me study Robert Bellarmine's treatment of confirmation, as well as the works by the Reformers he railed against: John Calvin and Martin Chemnitz. By the time I finished, I could answer any question you had about confirmation, as long as it pertained to something that took place before the sixteenth century. Since then, I've been like a dog with a bone, and confirmation has been my tar baby, my albatross. But really, it's a beautiful sacrament, and its lasting effects go under-appreciated.

The introduction to the *Order of Confirmation* says this about pastors in paragraph 6: "Pastors of souls will see that the sponsor, chosen by the one to be confirmed or by his or her family, is spiritually fit to take on this responsibility and is endowed with these qualities:

"a) he or she should be of sufficient maturity to fulfill this function;

"b) he or she should be a member of the Catholic Church and should have received initiation in the three Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist;

"c) he or she should not be impeded by law from fulfilling the responsibility of a sponsor."

The ideal sponsor, according to paragraph 5, is the same person who served earlier as the candidate's baptismal godparent. The logic is immediately apparent - the duties of the godparent endure. When the same godparent returns for confirmation, it demonstrates commitment and establishes another link between the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. This is often ignored. When kids are asked to think of someone whom they'd like to have as their confirmation sponsor, very few catechists ever ask them first to supply the names of their baptismal godparents and to see if one of them would please step in. Sometimes the original godparent has fallen out of touch, and sometimes the candidate or the family wants to involve a different person to establish a new bond. But the ideal is that when you become a godparent, you stick with the task

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for confirmation as well. (This would not find much favor in the hispanic community, for example, where life is better the more godparents you have.)

This is the only paragraph that deals explicitly with the role of pastors in confirmation, and it focuses on something in which I admit I don't get overly involved: the choice of a sponsor. Perhaps the introduction envisions smaller parish communities, where the pool of potential sponsors is well known. If so, it simply underscores the basic responsibility we priests share: pastoral care. We should be helping people live a life of grace in such a way that they become not only models for others but coaches - people actively engaged in recruiting others in Christian acts.

The requirements for confirmation sponsors are based on those in canon 874 §1, listing the requirements for the baptismal godparent. Surprising to some people is that having been confirmed is one of the requirements to serve as a sponsor for someone else's confirmation and even as a godparent for baptism. The same canon does not explicitly rule out from the pool of godparents someone who is married outside the church, but it does rule out someone who has never been confirmed. At St. Anthony's we ask potential baptismal godparents for some proof of confirmation. We get a lot of resistance on this. Sometimes the documentation has been lost or is hard to produce. One of our members told me she had been baptized and confirmed at the shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, where the sacramental records are handwritten on 3x5 cards, not in a computerized file. The secretary there had to sort through the cards to search for her record. There are other people, though, whom, we suspect, were never confirmed. We had one family who decided to have the baptism of their child at a neighboring parish where the pastor was not demanding a confirmation record. I said, "But they belong to the same Catholic Church. They may not be checking the records, but if you have not been confirmed, you are ineligible to be a godparent." They didn't care. The other guy was more welcoming. I know that priests are supposed to be nice, but I believe we should also encourage people to get confirmed. The primary benefit is not eligibility for godparenting, but the gifts of the Holy Spirit. That should be a sufficient draw.

The next paragraph of the introduction focuses on the ministry of the bishop: "The ordinary minister of Confirmation is the Bishop. Normally a Bishop administers the Sacrament so that there will be a clearer reference to the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. For after the Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, they themselves transmitted the Spirit to the faithful through the laying on of hands. Thus the reception of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the Bishop shows the close bond that joins the confirmed to the Church and the mandate received from Christ to bear witness to him before all."

There's no such thing as a free lunch. Yes, when you are confirmed, you get gifts, but these gifts come with a hitch. You are to bear witness to Christ before all. The presence of the bishop is popularly regarded as a photo op with a miter. But he is much more than just a big hat. He connects this sacrament to the biblical event of Pentecost. Just as the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles to help

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them bear witness, so the same is happening here. As successor to the apostles, the bishop continues this ministry. The star power of any bishop often overshadows this. A bishop is not there to draw attention to himself, but to the pentecostal testimony that the candidates are expected to give.

Ask the candidates in a typical catechetical group about confirmation as gift, and they'll tell you it doesn't feel like much of a gift. It's often a reward for class attendance, mass attendance and service projects. Our misunderstanding of the meaning of confirmation is revealed when we put service projects before the sacrament, when that is the kind of behavior that the liturgy hopes will happen afterwards.

Paragraph 7 continues, "Besides the Bishop, the following possess the faculty to confirm by the law itself:

"a) territorial prelate and territorial abbot, vicar and prefect apostolic, apostolic administrator and diocesan administrator, within the limits of their territory and while they hold office;

"b) in consideration of the person to be confirmed, a Priest who, in virtue of his office or the mandate of the Diocesan Bishop, baptizes a person who is no longer an infant or admits one already baptized into the full communion of the Catholic Church;

"c) as regards those who are in danger of death, the pastor or indeed any Priest."

For the sake of our gathering, I'd like to focus on letters b and c. With regard to letter b, you probably know these two excerpts from the code of canon law: 883/2 The priest confirms a person he baptizes "who is no longer an infant or one already baptized whom he admits into the full communion of the Catholic Church." And 885/2: "A presbyter who has this faculty must use it for those in whose favor the faculty was granted."

In other words, you are to confirm any adult and any child of catechetical age whom you baptize. You have this faculty from the law, not from the bishop. Once he appoints you to ministry, you do not need his permission to confirm a seven-year old whom you baptize. In fact, you must confirm that seven-year old in order to comply with canon 885. In a recent survey of parishes, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate asked if unbaptized children of catechetical age receive all three sacraments of initiation in the same mass. Do you want to guess what percentage of parishes nationwide are following the law? 47%. Less than half.

Sometimes we pastors feel that we are above the law, that our experience in dealing with real people makes us the best arbiters for what is pastorally sound, even if it means depriving children of the grace of the Holy Spirit. (You can tell I feel strongly about this.)

This faculty is not tied to any particular day of the year, such as the Easter Vigil. I receive validly baptized Christians into the full communion of the Church throughout the year, as they are ready, at a typical Sunday mass. Any priest may

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do this. Such a reception animates the congregation as they see the community grow, and it inspires them to invite others to join the Church. It also shows ecumenical respect by separating this activity from the baptisms, which are theologically worlds apart. Priests sometimes ask, if they do this, if they receive someone into the church on the Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time, for example, do they confirm? They do and they must. They do not ask permission of the bishop; the authority comes from the law.

Letter c is also often overlooked. I carry complete oil stocks in my car, not just the oil of the sick. When I am called to the hospital or someone's home when a person is in danger of dying, I have chrism with me. I ask the family, "Was this person confirmed?" Normally, they were. But sometimes the tragedy unfolding before me is the danger of the death of an infant. Letter c gives no restrictions on age. In case of an emergency, even an infant may be confirmed. Canon 889 § 2 says, "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." When there is a danger of death, other restrictions do not apply. An infant may be confirmed. If I am performing an emergency baptism for a child who will not survive, I confirm that child as well.

Paragraph 8 says more about the bishop: "The Diocesan Bishop is to administer Confirmation personally or is to take care that another Bishop administers it; if necessity requires, he can grant the faculty to one or more specific Priests, who are to administer this Sacrament."

Since 1949 priests have received increased permissions to confirm in special circumstances. This shows the church's rethinking of confirmation, the ministry of priests, and the concern that many Catholics do not present themselves for this sacrament.

Paragraph 8 continues: "For a grave cause, as sometimes is present because of the large number of those to be confirmed, the Bishop and even the Priest endowed with the faculty of confirming in virtue of the law or the special grant of the competent authority can in single cases also associate Priests to themselves to administer the Sacrament."

A bishop facing a large crowd of candidates for a single confirmation ceremony may invite priests to assist him, thus cutting in half or more the time it will take. This rarely happens, though, because families typically want a bishop to confirm the candidate. There are good reasons for this, beyond the impending Snapchat.

If priests are invited, paragraph 8 continues, "It is preferable, moreover, that the Priests who are so invited:

"a) either exercise a particular role or office in the diocese, being, namely, either vicars general, episcopal vicars, or vicars forane;

"b) or are the pastors of the places where Confirmation is conferred, or pastors of the places where the candidates belong, or Priests who have had a special part in the catechetical preparation of those to be confirmed."

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Here you can see the Vatican's hesitancy to let just any priest confirm. We may do it under certain circumstances, especially when it pertains to a ministry we hold at the diocesan or parochial level. But normally, this sacrament is reserved to bishops. Look at the RCIA's paragraphs on confirming at the Easter Vigil sometime. Even though it is properly expected that the priest who baptizes will also confirm, the RCIA thinks it's very likely that the bishop has come to your parish church for the Vigil this year. Paragraph 232 says, "If the bishop has conferred baptism, he should now also confer confirmation. If the bishop is not present, the priest who conferred baptism is authorized to confirm." Note that if you plan to confirm, you must be the one who baptizes. You cannot have one priest baptize and another confirm, or a deacon baptize and a priest confirm. The priest who confirms must be the priest who baptizes. If the bishop is confirming at the Easter Vigil, it's recommended that he baptize. This demonstrates his function as the father of the diocese and the unity of the sacraments of initiation.

All this implies the special connection between baptism and confirmation, but also the special connection that we priests have with our bishops. Not every priest feels this. If you haven't gone through a time when you didn't much feel like serving your bishop, hang on. Your day may come. But as professionals in the field of ministry, we collaborate with our shepherd for the good of the people of God.

Paragraph 9 eventually mentions priests again. It opens this way: "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 Domini Spiritus Sancti* (Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit)."

As you may know, this is a complete change of formula from the one in force before the council. Formerly, the bishop said in Latin, "I sign you with the sign of the cross, and I confirm you with the chrism of salvation. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." After the council, the very words for administering the sacrament shifted their focus from the action of the bishop to the action of the Holy Spirit. Every confirmation should remind us of this, that our ministry is not about what we do, but about what God does.

The introduction continues, "The laying of hands on those to be confirmed, which is accompanied by the prayer *Almighty God*, although it does not pertain to the validity of the Sacrament, should still be considered to be of great importance with regard to the integrity of the rite and a fuller understanding of the Sacrament.

"The Priests who are at times associated with the principal minister in conferring the Sacrament join him in the laying of hands on all the candidates, but say nothing."

This laying of hands has grown in importance, so much so that in the rare instances when the bishop asks us to help him confirm due to a large number of candidates, we make the gesture with him, while he alone recites the prayer. This illustrates one way that we priests assist the bishop in his ministry, using our

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hands to put his words into action. (But when the bishop is the only one confirming, he is the only one extending his hands.)

This section of the introduction concludes with these words: “The whole rite presents a twofold symbolism. Through the laying of hands on the candidates by the Bishop and the concelebrating Priests, the biblical gesture, by which the gift of the Holy Spirit is invoked, is expressed in a manner well suited to the understanding of the Christian people. In the anointing with Chrism and the accompanying words, the effect of the giving of the Holy Spirit is clearly signified. Signed with the perfumed oil by the hand of the Bishop, the baptized receive the indelible character, the seal of the Lord, together with the gift of the Spirit that conforms them more fully to Christ and gives them the grace of spreading among men and women ‘the pleasing fragrance of Christ.’”

The laying of hands on the candidates helps people understand the invocation of the Holy Spirit. At any confirmation, though, we would profitably recall the gifts that were given to us on the day that we were confirmed. In our ministry we rightly reflect on what it is to be ordained, but perhaps not enough on what it means to be confirmed. We received the gifts of the Holy Spirit too: wisdom and understanding, counsel and fortitude, knowledge and piety; the fear of the Lord. Those gifts have helped us in our ministry to make good judgments and to give good advice, to grow in understanding and devotion, and to have a healthy respect for the God who made us and has so amazingly called us into ministry. We too are the pleasing fragrance of Christ at work in the world.