

THE THREE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION - *the Seal of the Holy Spirit*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1285-1321)

Introduction

Baptism and Confirmation are two of the sacraments of initiation into the Church, the universal sacrament of salvation. In receiving these two sacraments, the candidate is drawn into visible unity with the Church (Baptism), and then that unity is deepened as we grow in maturity & responsibility (Confirmation). This, however, is simply the visible effect of the sacraments - this visible effect is important because it expresses the even more important invisible change that comes over us through the reception of Baptism & Confirmation. The Church is inseparably bound into Christ: this we are told by Christ himself. It follows that whoever is bound into visible unity with the Church, is also bound into the person of Christ himself. Thus, in receiving the sacraments of initiation into the Church (of which Baptism & Confirmation are two), we receive, as pure gift from God, the very person and life of Jesus Christ. Each of the seven sacraments achieves this in a different way and for a distinct function. Baptism & Confirmation were designed by God as the specific means of visibly incorporating the disciples of Christ into the new creation.

1. Confirmation - the seal of the Holy Spirit for adult witness to Christ

- *“By the sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptised] 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.” C.C.C. 1285, quoting the Introduction to the Rite of Confirmation in the Roman Ritual.*

Baptism makes us children of God: we are incorporated into Christ, who is God's Divine Son from all eternity. Adopted into Christ, we now share the divine nature and are truly called “*sons of God*” because we have been given a share in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of divine Sonship. This is achieved by the gift of the Holy Spirit, poured out

on Christ, and now shared with us, putting us “*into Christ.*” Christ lived at every moment of His life in the fullness of the Holy Spirit:

- “*He was conceived of the Holy Spirit; his whole life and his whole mission are carried out in total communion with the Holy Spirit whom the Father gives him “without measure”.* C.C.C. 1286, quoting John 3:34.

Baptism, then, makes us members of Christ in his body, the Church:

- “*For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ.*” (Gal. 3:27)

Confirmation is the sacrament that is necessary for the *completion* of Baptismal grace because it transforms us, God's adopted children, into **adult witnesses** of God (C.C.C. 1285). It is the sacrament that marks a stage of spiritual maturity: our way of life changes as our understanding deepens. Just as children do not take responsibility for their own lives, for their feeding, security, education etc. but rely on adults to arrange this for them, so too, while we are spiritual children, our spiritual lives are more passive than active. We are trained in the mysteries of the faith, we are helped to develop and deepen our experience of Christian prayer through parents, friends, priests and others. In this stage, we are *being fed*, and it is others who take responsibility for feeding us. However, the time comes when we grow up sufficiently to take responsibility for our lives. As teenagers, we begin to decide for ourselves what we will eat, how we will work, whether we will apply ourselves, what we will read and learn. We take responsibility for the decisions we take: if we don't do the work we are expected to do, we are answerable for it - and may end up working through the night in order to meet a deadline. This marks a wholly different attitude within us: no more are we children with all things arranged for us - now we are more responsible for ourselves and are able to identify what we need to do. Most importantly, we have the maturity to organise this for ourselves. Confirmation marks this change and gives us the grace to make the same change in our lives of faith.

NOTE, though, that Confirmation is not just a ceremony of passage, a liturgical way of saying “Spiritually, I have come of age” - it is the moment when God gives us the necessary gift which enables us to come of age. The gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation turns a child-like witness of the death and resurrection of the Lord into an adult and fully-activated witness: now we will be able to fulfil the commission of our Baptism which is to bear steadfast and convinced witness to Christ throughout the world. In Confirmation, God provides the strength and divine life that is necessary for us to be able to fulfil our baptismal calling - thus it is truly sacramental (an outward sign which conveys an inward grace to the soul through which the Father gives us his Son).

2. The Old Testament

The coming of the Son of God, the One filled with the Holy Spirit, is not in itself the completion of God's plan. The prophets, especially Joel, tell of a day to come when the promised spirit, which gave the Prophets their unique power and strength, would be poured out not simply on individuals, but on the whole people. The growth and

spread of sin in the human family in the Old Testament occurs at the same time as the shrinking of the number of those inspired by the Spirit. This should come as no surprise: the effect of sin is drawing away from union with the Father, which is achieved by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit - in effect, the more we sin, the weaker the influence of the Spirit on man and the further we drift from him. This is detectable in many ways in the Old Testament, but most clearly at the start of the first book of Samuel:

- *“Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.” (1 Sam. 3:1)*

This occurs at a time when Israel is losing its way - after the conquest of the Promised Land, the people sway this way and that, obedient to the Law of Moses only when their lives were in peril at the hands of pagan nations. The further they wander from God, the more infrequent and rare the communication between Israel and God. By the time of Samuel, the people have become deaf to the Word of God, insensitive to the call to personal holiness, ignorant of the Law of Moses, unwilling to suffer the demands of personal self-sacrifice, which is unavoidable for the humble and contrite. Israel wants to be just like the other nations, who have not had the benefit of the revelations of God's love through Abraham, Moses and the Law. It is no wonder that in an environment that is so opposed to everything that God is working for, there should be almost no experience of the presence of God in the whole land.

However, God is not willing to leave the people in this state. The people are not ready for the gift of the Spirit, so until that time, and to help them prepare themselves, God sends those whom he has anointed with the Holy Spirit to lead and teach the people: these are the Prophets and Kings of Israel. These men and women were given a share of the gift of the Spirit - through the Holy Spirit God guided the people (as we recite in the Creed each Sunday *“We believe in the Holy Spirit ... He has spoken through the prophets”*). Yet this is only a temporary state: God is preparing Israel for the fullness of the gift of the Holy Spirit, which he will give when they are ready. The prophet Isaiah records God's promise of a time when the Spirit of God will be given not to the few but to all who believe in him - Jew and Gentile. He writes of the time when *“the Spirit is poured upon us from on high” (Is. 32:15) – “I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.” (Is. 44:3)*.

These prophecies come to a climax in the prophet Joel, who is more explicit than the others in the matter of God's plan to give his Holy Spirit to all the nations. He records God's promise that the last age, when God will bring to completion the work of salvation and will vindicate his chosen people by leading them out of their slavery to sin, will be characterised by the unprecedented outpouring of the Spirit on each and every member of the nation of Israel and on all who put their trust in God:

- *“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and the maidservants in those days I will pour out my spirit.” (Joel 2:28-29)*

By this sign, the culmination of history will be known and the last days will have begun. All peoples will prophesy as Moses and Isaiah did, will proclaim God's Word

as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah and Amos did. In the last age, all peoples will be prophets, not just the chosen few, because the Holy Spirit, who leads human beings to prophesy, will not just be given but poured out (the meaning is that of a massive wave, of superabundance) on those who wait on God's mercy. For the Early Church, St. Paul and in the unbroken teaching of the Catholic Church, this prophecy has been fulfilled by Christ, and is being fulfilled in our own days. St. Paul shows us this in his own letters when he refers to the gift of the Spirit:

- *“We can boast about our sufferings. These sufferings bring patience, as we know, and patience brings perseverance, and perseverance brings hope, and this hope is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.” (Romans 5:4-5)*

For St. Paul, the prophesy of Joel is complete since the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit is being witnessed by him in the showering of the Spirit through the laying on of hands in what we have come to call Confirmation. The Spirit is being given by God not solely to the faithful of Israel but to all the nations - to all who turn to God in faith by calling on the name of Christ. This is the meaning of the very word “Catholic” – it refers to the *universal* call of God to all peoples, not just to the people of Israel. Thus the Church is not bound by country, ethnicity, language, race or region: Christ did not establish a Church of Germany, or a Church of Ukraine but a *Catholic* or *universal* Church. Thus even the Gentiles are being granted this gift, and the presence of the same Holy Spirit in Jew and Gentile, in slave and in free, in woman and in man, creates out of the division and chaos of our human world a new unity, based not on nationalism, hatred of foreigners, greed or empire-building but on a common faith:

- *“Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together. There is one body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all, and within all.” (Ephesians 4:3-6)*

The letter to the Ephesians is really one long meditation on the mystery of the effect of Baptism and Confirmation: St. Paul keeps referring in the letter to the “mystery” which has been revealed - the mystery he means is the gift of the Holy Spirit to Israel and to all the nations:

- *“It means that pagans now share the same inheritance, that they are parts of the same body, and that the same promise has been made to them, in Christ Jesus, through the Gospel.” (Ephesians 3:1-11)*

In Ephesians, St. Paul is addressing a *Gentile* group of disciples of Christ. These are not Jews (like the apostles and the Church in Jerusalem) but Greeks, Romans, natives of Asia Minor etc. He writes to tell them that they have been brought into the arena of God's Holy Spirit, which until now the Jews had thought was reserved exclusively for them. BUT notice St. Paul's emphasis – he doesn't say that they have now been included simply because the Jews had their chance and missed it and someone has to take their place (salvation by default!) but that it had *always* been God's goal to open salvation to all nations of the earth. He has planned from the very beginning what was

happening at that time – the spread of true faith in Christ beyond the ethnic boundaries of Israel to the pagan nations of the earth:

- *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, **even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world**, that we should be holy and blameless before him. **He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ**, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” (Eph. 1:3-6)*

SO – what’s all this got to do with Baptism or Confirmation? Well – how was it that these pagan Gentiles were given to be included in the Covenant promises of God to Israel? Did they just say “I believe” and that was enough? What did they have to do to be saved? This is exactly what the converts of the day of Pentecost asked St. Peter after they had heard him preach. His reply still stands today:

- *“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”.**” (Acts 2:37-39)*

It is through the gift of Baptism that we become sharers in the promises made by God to Israel, and as we saw last time, this is exactly how we become *“his sons through Jesus Christ”* as St. Paul wrote above to the Ephesians. But what of Confirmation? This is what St. Peter means when he speaks of *“and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* It is not just there in the Acts of the Apostles – St. Paul assumes you are aware of all this in the letter to the Ephesians. He writes, immediately after the passage I quoted above in which he speaks of baptism:

- *“For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. **In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.**” (Eph. 1:9-14)*

Having become God’s sons through Baptism, St. Paul writes that these gentile Christians were also *“sealed with the promised Spirit”* and it is precisely this that we receive in the sacrament of Confirmation.

The great watershed moment, when the Spirit was poured out on all who professed their faith, was the day of Pentecost as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (*ch. 2*). The significance of the event was not lost on St. Peter who, in his recorded homily,

quotes from the prophesy of Joel and in effect proclaims definitively that the day Joel was speaking of had come to pass:

- *“But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “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”.” (Acts 2:14-18).*

His message could not be misunderstood: the last age has begun because the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit has occurred. All those who are converted and are baptised on that day (about 3000 we are told) receive the same Spirit (*Acts 2:41*).

3. The New Testament

The people of Israel were waiting for the outpouring of the Spirit of God. Christ is presented to us in the Scriptures *par excellence* as the one who is filled with the Holy Spirit. The accounts of his Baptism in the Jordan at the hands of St. John the Baptist make this quite clear: after his Baptism, the heavens are torn open and the Spirit is seen in the form of a dove, descending on Christ. His conception itself was the work of the Holy Spirit, whose power brings the Virgin Mary to the conception of Christ without the involvement of a human father

- *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God.” (Lk. 1:35)*

The Holy Spirit rests on Christ as it has rested on no other and fills him entirely. His miracles are performed through the Holy Spirit and his teaching derives its power in the hearers, the force of its conviction, the power to convert and to move the hearts of his disciples, the power to convict from their own mouths those who resist and oppose him out of malice – all this from the Spirit whom Christ communicates by his very presence, his teaching and his actions during his lifetime.

If Christ is the Spirit-filled One, it was also his explicit desire to share his Spirit with his disciples: on several occasions he teaches clearly and without ambiguity that he would send the Spirit to his disciples. NOTE that these disciples, the Apostles, already have faith and are already in communion with Christ. This giving of the Holy Spirit is one which Christ offers *after* he has brought the Apostles to a living and active faith in him. Thus, there is nothing improper in separating these two experiences for modern day disciples (first, the drawing to communion with Christ and the gift of faith, which we celebrate in Baptism; later, as that faith matures and as Christ himself chose to do with the Apostles, to offer and confer the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who already to a degree are living lives of faith in him). Indeed, in the Acts of the Apostles we find an occasion when Baptism and Confirmation were separated – a

group of disciples received Baptism but had never been sealed with the additional gift of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit:

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

At the Last Supper, Christ reveals that he is soon to leave the Apostles - in response to their sadness, Christ proclaims, *“it is for your own good that I am going because unless I go, the Advocate will not come to you.” (Jn. 16:7)*. The Advocate is a title of the Holy Spirit in the role he plays as the one who pleads for us to the Father, as a lawyer pleads a case in court. In the words of St. Paul:

- *“The Spirit too comes to help in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words, and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what he means, and that the pleas of the saints expressed by the Spirit are according to the mind of God.” (Romans 8:26-27)*

Christ continues at the Last Supper, confirming the promise to send the Holy Spirit and clarifying what the gift of the Spirit is for - it is to preserve within the Church the whole truth of Christ's teaching, to be the living memory of the Church and the one who leads the Church from within to the holiness of the Father:

- *“I still have many things to say to you but they would be too much for you now. But when the Spirit of Truth comes he will lead you to the complete Truth, since he will not be speaking as from himself but will say only what he has learnt; and he will tell you of the things to come. He will glorify me, since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine. Everything the Father has is mine; that is why I said, “all he tells you will be taken from what is mine”.” (Jn. 16:12-15)*

The gift of the Holy Spirit is about Truth. Christ offers and gives the Holy Spirit because it is the abiding presence of the Spirit within the Church that keeps it true to the teaching of Christ and bound unbreakably to Christ who is *“the Truth” (Jn. 14:6)*. Without the guarantee that what the Church teaches is truly the teaching of Christ, there is no point in preaching and proclaiming the faith. Unless we are sure it is the revealed word of God, we would not dare to preach it. SO - if preaching the faith is the purpose of the Church, Christ knew that he would need to guarantee the truthfulness of the Church's teaching for all generations. This is needed not because we are so holy or wise but precisely because we are utterly incapable of holding to Christ's teaching without the guarantee of the abiding presence of the Spirit of Truth.

The gift of the Spirit in Confirmation is about our fidelity to the Truth, which is Jesus Christ. The Spirit is given to us to bind us more closely to Christ in his mystical body, the Church, by keeping us faithful to the Truth that Christ has spoken. The Spirit, given in Confirmation, is the Spirit who enlightens the mind and reveals to us in the

soul and through the Church to which he unites us, the surpassing mystery of God himself. It is the Spirit who gives us the supernatural strength to hold fast to that teaching, especially when we may be pressured by circumstances of culture to abandon it for being out-moded, illogical or too demanding:

- *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Mt. 5:10-12)*

4. Infant Baptism: the Sacrament of Confirmation emerges

Initially, Baptism and the Seal of the Holy Spirit (Confirmation) were administered together. In the earliest days of the Church, the majority of converts were adults (although there is little doubt that infants were received along with their parents when a household converted). Since these adults were of an age when they were able to give adult, considered and effective witness to their faith in Christ, it was appropriate that the sacrament of confirming/strengthening their faith through the gift of the Holy Spirit should be administered to them at the same time, in the same ceremony.

It took several hundred years for these two sacraments to become distinguished and celebrated separately. However, as time went on, the number of adult converts seems to have dropped: the majority of those seeking entry into the Church were the children of the already baptised. At this time, in the Western part of the Church, the practise became the separation of Baptism from the sealing with the Holy Spirit - Baptism was administered soon after birth and Confirmation was delayed until they had reached a more mature age. In the East of the Church, the practise remained with the two rites happening in the same ceremony: infants were baptised and then sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Catholic Church accepts both of these practises, but the practise of confirming infants has remained only in the Orthodox Churches (in Russia and Greece especially).

In the Latin Church (that is, in the West) the practice of the early Church to reserve Confirmation in ordinary circumstances to the Bishop has been retained. This is so for an important reason. Confirmation, as we shall see in the next section, is a sacrament of entry into the Church - for most of us, our experience of “the Church” is restricted to the parish, our local clergy and the people who come to that church each Sunday. Although this is understandable, it can cause us to have a very parochial view of Christ's body: we can find that we see no further than the needs and interests of our own community. Whereas the nature of the Church is wholly different: we are members of the universal Church (remember the meaning of “Catholic”), which is an organic whole, a single body. It is spread throughout the geographical regions of the world and sub-divided into small group-areas called local churches, or dioceses. Each one of these is the Catholic Church, present in that area. By reserving the rite of Confirmation ordinarily to the Bishop, we are reminded that the Church is more than our parish, and its outlook encompasses more than the needs of my local area. We go

to the head of the local Church, the Bishop, and he welcomes us into deeper communion with the universal Church through the rite of Confirmation.

5. Confirmation: Sacrament of Initiation into the Church

Confirmation is one of the three sacraments of entering the Church. This needs a little explanation. It is not about whether or not we were inside the Church through Baptism (as though Baptism had failed to enter us in the Church), as some often say. It is about how deeply you and I are living in the Church. Baptism undoubtedly enters us in the mystical Body of Christ, the Church. However my membership of the Church has still to be completed and fulfilled after Baptism.

This is so because of the nature of the Church. Christ founded the Church for a purpose and a mission. *"Go, therefore,"* he commands the Eleven Apostles after the Resurrection, *"make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you."* (Mt. 28:19-20). The Church's character is missionary, her function and commission is to proclaim the faith, the revelation which the Father has given us in Christ and to administer to all who believe in the Gospel the grace of entry into Christ's body through the sacrament of Baptism. To be a disciple of Christ at its deepest level is to be one who calls the nations to repentance, who bears witness to Christ by way of life. As this is so, it follows that a child Christian (duly baptised, entered into the body of Christ, the Church) while truly being a member of the Church, is not able to live out that membership by active involvement in the Church's mission of proclamation of the faith. Children are able to bear a child's witness to faith, but there is a maturity to their capacity to proclaim the faith that is still wanting. This is not to discriminate against the child but to recognise that they are still growing and are yet to reach adulthood.

Thus Confirmation is the sacrament that initiates us into the fuller and more complete sharing in the Church's mission. As confirmed adults we are now called to take our place in the number of Christ's disciples i.e., to give *conscious, understanding, deliberate, considered and consistent witness* to the faith that lies within us. Children pray as they are instructed and when they are reminded to pray. They come to Mass because their parents arrange to bring them. As adults, we pray not solely when we are called to pray but because we choose to do so. We come to Mass not just because someone else is taking us but because it is the act of faith we want to make. This is a level of witness to our faith that is beyond a child by virtue of the greater maturity of years and independence. We can only enter fully into the mystery of the Church's life when we are able to witness fully and by the choice of our own will to the faith in Christ within us. In this way, Confirmation draws us, by the action of God the Father and God the Son through the gift of the Holy Spirit, to be able to complete the Christian mission at its heart, which is the teaching of the faith to the world.

As Confirmation is about entering the Church's mission more fully, it is a sacrament that identifies us more profoundly with the community of the Church. In a way we become more fully Christian because we receive the strength through the spirit to be

able to do our part in the proclaiming of the Gospel. This has an obvious ecclesial dimension - by this I mean that we are not talking about some vague idea of church but of a concrete reality, a flesh and blood community of fellow believers: the Church you are choosing to enter, the Catholic Church. For this reason, the Church calls you to receive Confirmation when you enter the Catholic Church - as adults, you are old enough to begin immediately in the adult witness to the faith (there is no need to wait, as there is with children who are welcomed into the Catholic Church through Baptism).

A word about Confirmation in the Church of England

It may seem unnecessary to you to be confirmed as you may remember your Confirmation in the Anglican Communion.

The formal teaching of Anglicanism, as defined in the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion of Queen Elizabeth I (which are still authoritative in the Anglican Communion and to which all Anglican clergy have to give their assent upon ordination and upon accepting ecclesiastical preferment) states that it is the firm belief and teaching of Anglicans that Confirmation is not a sacrament:

“There are two sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord. Those five commonly called sacraments, that is to say, Confirmation, Penance, Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction, are not to be counted for sacraments of the Gospel, being such as have grown partly of the corrupt following of the Apostles, partly are states of life allowed in the Scriptures, but yet have not like nature of sacraments with Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, for that they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God.” (from article 25)

Does this matter? Actually, it is critical. It means that Anglican teaching, and indeed the teaching of all the communities that were founded at the Reformation and afterwards (Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Evangelicals etc.) states that *the ceremony of Confirmation does not of itself convey the gift of the Holy Spirit to the candidate*. In the years since the Reformation, many Protestant communities, including the Anglican Communion, have revived the practice of Confirmation - but the formal teaching remains the same: they do not hold that such a liturgy confers the gift of the Holy Spirit but simply acts as a symbolic affirmation of the strength which the Spirit brings to the believing disciple. It performs a useful function and becomes, in a sense, a rite of passage to maturity and gives adolescents the opportunity to stand up themselves to proclaim their personal faith in God. BUT, good as all these things are, they do not add up to the gift of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Confirmation.

The problem is more complicated today since there are some, perhaps even many, Anglican clergy who believe that in Confirmation they are truly conferring the gift of the Holy Spirit – and teach their people that this is the case. Unfortunately, they are not holding true to the faith of their own ecclesial community and while we may rejoice that there are some within these communities who look on Confirmation as the Catholic Church does, nevertheless we must acknowledge that they are not representing Anglican dogma.

Since this is the teaching of these communities, those who come to the Catholic Church and seek reception into it have not received the gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation even though they may previously have taken part in a confirmation liturgy.

6. The Gift of the Holy Spirit: what does it bring us?

The prophet Isaiah describes the effect of the gift of the Spirit on the recipient. He calls the Holy Spirit:

- *“The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.” (Is. 11:2)*

For Isaiah, for St. Peter at the first Pentecost and in the theology of the Catholic Church (which is drawn directly from these sources) the gift of the Spirit in Confirmation is offered *for the adult proclamation of the Good News*. The ‘Gifts of the Holy Spirit’, which are drawn from this prophesy of Isaiah, are all gifts which presuppose the living-out of our baptismal faith as adult witnesses. Confirmation, then, is the unique gift of grace that the new Christian adult needs in order to live according to the faith into which he or she was baptised (be that at birth or as an adult).

Baptism makes us God's en-graced believers, but this gift of fellowship with Christ does not totally fulfil what is asked of us as disciples of Christ. Christ instructed the Apostles to “*go, and make disciples of all nations*” (Mt. 28:19). That requires more than just faith: it takes courage, conviction and a level of witness to the truth of the Gospel, which the youthful in faith are not capable of. Everyone is called to witness to his or her faith, and a child does so in child-like ways (kneeling down to say a prayer after receiving Holy Communion can be a dramatically powerful thing to see a child do). But that is not a full and complete witness to faith - this comes with years, maturity and growth in understanding. We are called to defend the faith in terms of the Church's teaching on issues of social justice, morality, spiritual holiness etc., all of which are beyond a child's ability but which must be done – not just by a few but by all adult members of the Church.

The unity of the Apostles with Christ was only complete when they adopted the mission of Christ in its fullness. For the Twelve, it was not enough that they live according to the teaching of Christ - they were the *Apostoloi* - the 'sent-out ones'. They were only in complete unity with Christ when they had the courage and knowledge to take to the nations the fullness of Christ's teaching concerning the Father and the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ himself confirmed at the Last Supper that the gift of the Holy Spirit was essential for the group of the Twelve to complete the work he had given them to carry out. The Spirit is to be given to strengthen them to follow the commandments of Christ:

- *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of Truth.” (Jn. 14:15-17)*

The Spirit is entrusted to the Church so that in the community of faith there should be the means of returning to the Father through forgiveness and reconciliation:

- *"Jesus said to them 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any they are retained.'" (Jn. 20:21-23)*

The seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit need to be seen in this light. As the prophet Isaiah lists them, they state very powerfully the point and purpose of Confirmation. Each is specifically designed to equip the soldier for Christ and witness to the Gospel for the work they are undertaking:

1. **WISDOM:** the gift of supernatural wisdom, that is wisdom that is not based on the assumptions of the society or world but on heavenly realities as revealed by Christ. For instance, Holy Wisdom will lead us to perceive the glory of the cross as well as its tragedy, or to glimpse the appropriateness of Christ's choice of the twelve Apostles despite their weakness at the arrest and trial of Christ. This gift is essential if we are to present GOD'S holiness to the world (see St. Paul's great distinction between heavenly wisdom and earthly so-called wisdom, which is incapable of perceiving God's intention - 1 Cor, 1:17-31).
2. **UNDERSTANDING:** the gift of grasping and holding to the truths that the Church teaches. These are revealed to us by the Holy Spirit in the teaching of Christ so that we may hold to Christ who is the Truth. Once again, this gift is critical for any public witness to the world. Not only must we perceive the truth of what we hold (the gift of Wisdom) but also HOLD to it with heart and soul.
3. **COUNSEL:** the gift of applied wisdom - the good sense to live our lives by avoiding the temptations we find hard to resist and the occasions which we know that could cause us to compromise the living proclamation of the Gospel. This gift is given to help us preserve the health of our spiritual lives. The soldier must be healthy internally if he is to defend his country from attack from outside.
4. **FORTITUDE:** this needs little explanation, especially today. In order to complete our mission as disciples of Christ we will need fortitude since the message we proclaim will often be rejected by the world (*"Because the world refused to acknowledge him, therefore it does not acknowledge us."* 1 John 3:1). On many fronts, the teaching of Christ is rejected by the 'wisdom' of our society - see his attack on divorce, the defence of the sanctity of marriage (*Matt 19:3-12*). The Church's constant teaching on abortion, contraception, social justice and many other issues are rejected by our society: it will take supernatural fortitude to hold to them in the face of denial or ridicule.
5. **KNOWLEDGE:** the gift of seeing the hand of God at work in our world and his image present in all people, but at the same time to recognise that no created thing is loved for its own goodness but insofar as it reflects the

absolute and infinite goodness of the Creator. This is a supernatural knowledge that interprets the physical world as pointing to a greater reality - the God to whom we are testifying in the way we live.

6. **PIETY:** the gift of holiness in our lives which we encourage through heartfelt prayer, a humble disposition, the proper reception of the Sacraments, the loving service of our neighbour and the willing participation in the work of the Church.
7. **FEAR OF THE LORD:** the gift of genuine filial love of God - to love God as a true son loves his father, respecting his authority and accepting the commands of his love. Fear of the Lord is not about servile terror but honest acknowledgement of the holiness of God and acceptance of our own need for him.

Please note that the *spiritual gift of Wisdom* is not quite the same as wisdom in the usual sense of the word: we are not saying that anybody who has been confirmed will suddenly become a genius. We are speaking more in terms of a capacity or a potential - in Confirmation, the Holy Spirit is given, through the Bishop, to the candidate, bringing to him or to her the ability to witness to God more fully. Thus, we will need courage to witness to the faith: the Holy Spirit brings the gift of Fortitude, which we must accept, employ and co-operate with. In this way the *gift* of Fortitude becomes the reality of Fortitude itself (we become courageous in defending the Faith even in the face of ridicule or hostility) but not by magic or just because we have received the Spirit in Confirmation, but because we have co-operated with the Spirit present within us and brought this gift to fruition. The confirmed have the capacity to surpass in true wisdom all the geniuses of the world if they co-operate fully with the Spirit of Divine Wisdom that has been poured into them.

A Brief Conclusion

Confirmation is the sacrament in which the Holy Spirit is given to enable the baptised adult to offer this deeper personal act of discipleship.

At the heart of each specific celebration of Confirmation lies the great mystery of the day of Pentecost, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (*chapter 2*). The Apostles were told by Christ to wait and to pray for the gift of the Spirit: they certainly had faith, & believed in Christ, since they had seen him resurrected in triumph. They knew he was what he claimed to be, they trusted his promises - and yet were incapable of carrying out the command to teach all nations. They had real faith, but also real fear: fear of rejection at the hands of the Jews, fear of arrest, trial and martyrdom because of the message they had to tell drove the Eleven to hide and to carry on believing, but in secret. Despite the reality of their faith they were paralysed and unable to fulfil the commission they had received to preach the Gospel to the whole world.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured on them anew: not to give them *faith* - they have that already - but to give the *strength necessary to put that faith into committed practice*. St. Peter leads the Twelve in the first public proclamation of the Good News in spite of the danger of persecution and reprisal from the Jewish authorities

(persecution which subsequent chapters of the Acts demonstrate to be determined and worthy of real fear).

The courage they receive, the wisdom of their preaching, their understanding of heavenly realities, which flow from this outpouring of the Spirit, is quite astonishing.

1. In *Acts Chapter 2* St. Peter demonstrates his authority over Jerusalem and his courage in the face of the staunchest bastion of Jewish orthodoxy (the Temple priesthood, who had Christ executed).
2. In *Acts Chapter 3* St. Peter goes further and takes the preaching of Christ right into the camp of those who plotted Christ's death - he preaches in the Temple itself, showing his authority over all the rites and forms of worship laid down in the Old Testament.
3. In *Acts Chapter 4* St. Peter goes even further: he is arrested with St. John in the Temple and brought before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Priests, Levites and Pharisees.

These were the very same men who plotted Christ's death and achieved it, through the complicity of the Roman authorities. They were the legitimate ruling body in Israel, given authority to administer the Law by permission of Rome and through collaboration with the occupying Imperial forces. If St. Peter had not felt fear preaching in Jerusalem or on the Temple mount, he should have felt it before the Sanhedrin, standing where Christ had stood only weeks before. Yet, when he is interrogated and effectively put on trial in front of Annas, Caiaphas the High Priest *"and all the members of the High Priestly families"*, it is St. Peter who is unafraid and instead turns round and accuses them, in their own courtroom, of the crime of murdering the Messiah:

- *"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, addressed them, "Rulers of the people, and elders! If you are questioning us today about an act of kindness to a cripple, and asking us how he was healed, then I am glad to tell you all, and would indeed be glad to tell the whole people of Israel, that it was by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, **the one you crucified** ... by this name and by no other that this man is able to stand up perfectly healthy, here in your presence, today ... For of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved".*" (Acts 4:8-10, 12)

As time goes by, the dangers they face on behalf of the Gospel become apparent and not merely empty threats. The Apostles are arrested (*Acts 5:18*) and flogged (*Acts 5:40*). Other disciples, not even leading teachers or apostles, are martyred (such as Stephen, the first martyr, *Acts 7:55 - 8:1*). A general persecution begins against any and every disciple of Christ -

- *"That day a bitter persecution started against the Church in Jerusalem, and everyone except the Apostles fled to the country districts of Judaea & Samaria ... Saul then worked for the total destruction of the Church; he went from house to house arresting both men and women and sending them to prison."* (Acts 8:1,3)

Giving public witness to the faith was not about enduring ridicule or even just boredom or lack of interest: in these years, it could cost you your life. Yet, knowing the dangers and the proximate reality of gruesome death at the hands of the Roman or Jewish authorities, these previously terrified men, paralysed by fear into staying behind locked doors, suddenly take the world by storm. Pentecost gives the Twelve the courage in their faith to overcome not merely the *illusion* of danger or simply the fear of the unknown, but actual situations of danger - the real possibility, in extreme cases, of martyrdom. (The Twelve Apostles were all to suffer the privilege of martyrdom except St. John, who by tradition, died of old age in internal exile on the island of Patmos). Such conviction and courage is a supernatural gift and depends on a giver greater than any in this world. This is the gift of the person of the Holy Spirit.

- *“Recall then that you have received the spiritual seal, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgement and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence, the spirit of holy fear in God's presence. Guard what you have received. God the Father has marked you with his sign; Christ the Lord has confirmed you and has placed his pledge, the Spirit, in your hearts.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1303, quoting St. Ambrose, writing about 360 A.D. in Milan)*

Confirmation is the gift of the Holy Spirit to the adult disciple that forms him or her into a courageous witness to the Gospel. In a sense, it is the moment when Pentecost falls on each member of the Church, enabling them to fulfil the commission of their Baptism at its deepest level. For this reason, the sacrament of Confirmation is said to “perpetuate the grace of Pentecost in the Church” (C.C.C. 1288, quoting Pope Paul VI, *Divinae Consortium Naturae*, (1971), 659)

- *See C.C.C. 1286-1289, 1302-1305*

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