



RESTORED ORDER: Sacraments of Initiation

By Father Daren J. Zehnle

It is not about us, but him

For several decades now, well-meaning catechists, priests and deacons have told candidates for the sacrament of confirmation something along the lines of this: “Confirmation is when you decide to accept the Catholic faith for yourself.” If this were true, it would mean that my own reception of the sacrament of confirmation means nothing because I was confirmed the same day I was born; at such a young age, I could not possibly make such a momentous decision. The sacrament of confirmation, then, cannot be about an individual’s choice. Indeed, such an understanding was never present in any official document or prayer of the church.

The often-overlooked fact of the matter is that a Catholic accepts the faith each time he or she says, “Amen,” to “The Body of Christ” and to “The Blood of Christ.” A Catholic accepts the faith each time the *Creed* is recited. A Catholic also accepts the faith each Easter season during the renewal of baptismal promises.

When candidates were told they were soon to make such a decision for themselves in the presence of the bishop, too strong of an emphasis was placed on the person receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As we saw in my last article, every sacrament

Father Daren J. Zehnle, JCL, KCHS, is director of the Office for Divine Worship and the Catechumenate, pastor of St. Augustine Parish in Ashland and a judge in the diocesan Tribunal.

is always first and foremost about Jesus Christ and his merciful love so generously given to us. A sacrament is about the one receiving it to the extent that it is through the sacrament that the Lord Jesus bestows a share in his own life and mission to the person receiving the sacrament. What share, then, what mission, do we receive through the laying on of hands and the anointing with sacred chrism?

In his Apostolic Constitution *Divinae consortium naturae* (“the sharing in the divine nature”) in which he revised the liturgical rites of the sacrament of confirmation, St. Pope Paul VI said that ever since the Twelve received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the upper room on Pentecost, 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*” (emphasis mine). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses this even more strongly when it teaches that “the reception of the

sacrament of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace” (art. 1285). Using a helpful analogy, Paul Haffner has said, “Confirmation puts the seal on Baptism as Pentecost completes Easter” (*The Sacramental Mystery*, 72).

Because the seal of confirmation “roots us more deeply in divine filiation,” this second sacrament of initiation “gives us 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” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, art. 1303). Through this sacrament, we are united more closely to Jesus Christ and receive a share in his mission to proclaim the Gospel of salvation. The sacrament of confirmation gives us a special strengthening of grace to enable us to speak about the mission of Christ Jesus. This is what the sacrament of confirmation has always been about; it has always been about him. ✠

Frequently asked questions

Q. What is confirmation?

A. Confirmation is the second of the three sacraments of Christian Initiation. Confirmation is the completion of baptism and the sacrament by which the baptized faithful are anointed with chrism by the laying on of hands. The grace received is the fullness of the Holy Spirit and his gifts. We also describe this fullness as the completion, strengthening or perfection of the Holy Spirit received in baptism.