



National Apostolate for
Inclusion Ministry

*Promoting the Full Inclusion of People with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities in the
Life of the Catholic Church*

What is Confirmation

By Marilyn E. Bishop



INTRODUCTION

Confirmation is conferred after Baptism to strengthen the work of the Holy Spirit begun in Baptism. Confirmation assists the person to conform more closely to Christ. It calls the person to accept a sense of mission to be sent out to the world to be a living vital witness to the teaching of Jesus, the Lord.

All baptized, unconfirmed Catholics are to be confirmed as long as they want to receive this sacrament, are instructed, and are able to renew their baptismal promises. According to the U.S. Catholic Bishops' *Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, published in 1995 by the United States Catholic Conference, "Persons who because of developmental or mental disabilities may never attain the use of reason are to be encouraged either directly or, if necessary, through their parents or guardian, to receive the sacrament of Confirmation at the appropriate time.

Special attention is to be given to the selection of the sponsor for this person. The sponsor participated in the ritual of Confirmation and is a role model for the person who has intellectual/developmental disabilities. As a person with intellectual/developmental disabilities grows in their understanding of their role in the church, the sponsor offers guidance for the journey. The sponsor assumes a special role – that of both confidant and teacher. Therefore, it is wise to select a person who has a long-time knowledge of this person and who knows some of the unique situations and challenges that confront him or her.

The sacrament of Confirmation is a spiritually significant ritual and it confers a seal. A seal is an ancient symbol of ownership used symbolically in sacred rituals in other religions. This seal marks the person as a special friend of Jesus.

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WHAT IS CONFIRMATION

Confirmation is a spiritual, sacred and permanent sign or seal that marks the Christian as a witness of Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. It is conferred by the bishop or his designated person.

Through this sacrament, the faithful share more fully in the gifts of the Holy Spirit which bring renewed vibrancy to the spiritual life of the person. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are knowledge, understanding, wisdom, fortitude, right judgment, piety and fear of the Lord. The gift of *knowledge* helps to instruct us about God and to appreciate God's work in the world; the gift of *understanding* helps one penetrate into the truths of faith; the gift of *wisdom* helps one make judgments that will help to attain the goal of holiness; the gift of *courage or fortitude* helps each person boldly to proclaim the gospel; the gift of *right judgment or counsel* helps the confirmand make right decisions; the gift of *reverence or piety* inspires gratitude to God for all that was given; and the gift of *wonder and awe or fear of the Lord* inspires appreciation for the presence of the Lord.

The gifts enhance the spiritual life of the confirmand and prepare him or her to be a witness to the world. To be a "witness" means to behave and speak like Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit the Christian now attends to both the physical and spiritual needs of others.

Just as all who are confirmed, so too, the person with mental limitations is called to be a witness to the Lord. People with intellectual/developmental disabilities can be invited to fully give of their own unique virtues. These may be demonstrated through specific acts such as caring for elderly or disabled people in a very loving way. Or, this virtue may be shown in their special style of presence and prayer. The person with intellectual/developmental disabilities is often capable of giving a special uninhibited welcome to the stranger. Or, their gift may be that of prayer offered in a simple, heartfelt manner.

People with disabilities are most often seen as objects of service rather than as people who have their own gifts to share. It is through the sacrament of confirmation that the Holy Spirit is let loose in the hearts of people with intellectual/developmental disabilities. Through this giver of holiness they witness both within the church and to secular society.

PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT

The preparation and instruction to receive this sacrament is an important aspect of the whole sacrament. For instance, the confirmands are asked to choose a Confirmation name that has spiritual meaning to them or to use their baptismal name to show the connection between Baptism and Confirmation. This requires reflection. Similarly, the selection of a sponsor is to be given careful thought before the ritual. This person is to be known for his or her faithfulness to the church, to the person and to the process of continued support. And finally, the sacrament of Confirmation demands commitment to both Jesus and to his church. This commitment is to be understood as completely as possible before the sacrament is conferred.

THE SYMBOLS AND RITUALS OF CONFIRMATION

The sacrament of Confirmation like the other sacraments of the Catholic Church is rich in both actions and symbols.

Symbols

Specific symbols of the sacrament of Confirmation have come down through the ages to us, carrying with them ancient traditions that seem foreign to us but are still meaningful for our sacraments.

Chrism: Scripture frequently references the use of oil and anointing with the Holy Spirit. The sacred chrism is a mixture of oil and perfume that has been blessed by the bishop. In ancient times, oil was used to heal wounds and soothe the limbs of athletes. That, along with the scent that is added, creates a symbol that is now associated with health, healing, strength and beauty.

Dove: The Holy Spirit is represented by a bird that is gentle, graceful and peaceful.

Seal: Military generals used seals in ancient times to show that soldiers belonged to them. Such seals designated ownership.

New Name: In the early Church, choosing a new name meant to reject the former pagan life and to accept rebirth into the life of Jesus.

Wind: God's Spirit is described as wind because the wind blows wherever it wants to go; it is free, similar to the Spirit who moves among us and comes to us at God's pace, not ours. Wind is both gentle and it is powerful – just as God's Spirit can both refresh people and galvanize people into action.

Red: This color is used as a symbol on feasts that are dedicated to the Holy Spirit.

Crosier: The staff of a shepherd is used symbolically by the bishop who is the chief shepherd of souls in the diocese. Shepherds used the staff to chase predators from the sheep and used the hook to rescue animals that fell into crevices or to hold barriers in place so that his sheep could continue on their way.

Mitre: The hat worn by the bishop at the Confirmation ceremony is called a mitre; this headband or turban represented leadership in ancient times.

Rituals

The rituals of the sacrament of Confirmation come from ancient traditions to signify the grace conferred on the confirmed person by the Holy Spirit under the auspices of the bishop and the Holy Catholic Church.

Presentation of the Candidates: Students stand when their name is called to signify their readiness.

Renewal of Baptismal Promises: The baptismal promises reconnect to the first sacrament of initiation into the church.

Laying of Hands: This indicates that the Spirit is bestowed on the person and therefore, the power of the Spirit is bestowed. The gesture means dedication to do a task for God.

Anointing with Chrism: Using the sacred oil, the bishop forms the cross on the forehead to show that the seal is bestowed. The anointing is done in the shape of a cross to show that the person is redeemed by Christ. At the same time of the anointing on the forehead, the bishop says the words of Confirmation: "(Name) be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

WHAT DOES THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION DO?

Effects of the sacrament for the individual

The sacrament of confirmation helps the individual to be more firmly united with Christ and it gives the gifts of the Holy Spirit which give special strength to be a more committed Christian. Since being a witness is essential to the professed Christian, the sacrament enhances one's ability to boldly confess the name of Jesus and to never be ashamed of the Cross



National Apostolate for
Inclusion Ministry

The person with intellectual/developmental disabilities, in the face of rejection and ridicule, can be helped to realize their special need to remain faithful to the expected behavior of a Christian. Reliance on the Holy Spirit can therefore be of special value.

And finally, but not lastly, the person is sealed in the Holy Spirit as one of God's own.

Effects of the sacrament on the community

The sacrament of Confirmation brings to the community a person recommitted to his or her church, a person who is willing to step forward in Christ's name to benefit either the church community or the civic community. The Church must invite the newly confirmed to share these gifts that have often gone repressed but now can be proclaimed with fervor and renewed commitment.

The sacrament renews the faithful person's calling to the common priesthood of all believers which is received in Baptism and is now officially proclaimed in Confirmation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Confirmation is an important sacrament. The preparation time, the ritual, and the experience of community serve to remind all that this person is indeed a full-fledged member of the Church with all of the rights and responsibilities. These responsibilities will be eagerly assumed if the Church is prepared to allow the awakened sense of giving witness to flourish in the heart of the confirmed.

Confirmation of the person with intellectual/developmental disabilities is the same as Confirmation for anyone else. It is the sacrament of the committed adult Christian who desires a deeper alliance with the Church in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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