

St Mary & St John Fisher Parish, Denton

The Sacrament of Confirmation 2013: Updating Our Understanding

I. Our Experiences and Memories

Most Catholic members of families of children to be confirmed this year will remember the day of their own Confirmation, perhaps in the 1970s/1980s. This would have been associated with the Bishop's Visitation to the parish which took place once every six to eight years. Those being confirmed would have been mostly aged between 8 and 14 years old, and it was seen as a single moment of adult commitment which came AFTER First Holy Communion. Preparation in school often involved choosing and studying the life of a Saint. The Ceremony was often portrayed as becoming a "Soldier of Christ", signified by a gentle liturgical "slap" from the Bishop.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) asked for a refreshed practice and understanding of the Sacrament of Confirmation and this was implemented in Salford Diocese in 1984. This marked a return to a much earlier, more authentic theology of the Sacrament.

Our children have already received their Work Sheet at their meeting with their Faith-Friends. On this website is also a second resource for them: A Confirmation Activity Sheet, which helps them think back to the New Testament and deepen their understanding of the Holy Spirit. This third resource is designed for parents, to help them pass on to our candidates the correct modern understanding of the Sacrament of Confirmation. Please use it as you see fit.

II. Our Loving God's Plan for Us

During his time on earth revealing God's love to us, Jesus often promised the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This promise was fulfilled privately on Easter Sunday and then more strikingly and more publicly at the Festival of Pentecost. Empowered by this gift of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles began to proclaim God's plan of salvation. Whoever believed this message received the gift of the Holy Spirit in their turn, by Baptism and by the imposition of hands (early Confirmation). We hear of the Apostles busy with this mission, recorded by St Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (8:14-17):

"When the Apostles heard that Samaria had welcomed the Word of God, they sent 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 baptized in the Lord's name. So they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit."

By this special strength from the gift of the Spirit, the followers of Christ were more perfectly bound to the Church and the mission entrusted to her by Jesus himself. They became true witnesses of Christ, empowered to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.

So this is our first key point: the Holy Spirit is a FREE GIFT to us to help us deepen our faith, to become more like Jesus himself and to use the gift to work for the mission of the Church.

III. Three Sacraments of Christian Initiation: Unity, Order and Age

As we noted at the start of the Sacramental Programme, we remember that three Sacraments together constitute the "Sacraments of Christian Initiation": Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. It is very important to always maintain the unity of these three sacraments. Every baptized person not yet confirmed can and should receive the sacrament of Confirmation, for Baptism on its own remains incomplete. Confirmation is necessary to complete baptismal grace, and Baptism and Confirmation together prepare us to receive in faith the gift of Jesus himself in the Eucharist.

The age for administering these three united Sacraments has varied through the centuries, with noticeable differences between the Church in the West and East. Indeed, in the early centuries, Baptism and Confirmation were in fact celebrated together. For many centuries, Confirmation has been celebrated after Baptism and received at "the age of discretion" or the "age of reason". In today's world, we know that our young people grow up in their various aspects at different speeds.

Teenagers are often physically “grown up” yet lack emotional maturity; children of a very young age sometimes have greater intellectual ability than many of their elders; some adults even display some child-like attitudes, etc.

So we need to be careful not to confuse faith and spiritual maturity with physical or natural age. St Thomas Aquinas put it simply: “Age of body does not determine age of soul.” Age 7 or 8 is the right time to mark our continuing maturing in the faith at a key stage in growing up. It is not a teenage sacrament, in which we somehow confirm or ratify faith in some quasi-adult commitment.

This is the second key point: the ORDER of the three Sacraments Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist is more important than all questions of age, which have often become quite confused.

IV. Confirmation: Sacramental Signs and Symbols

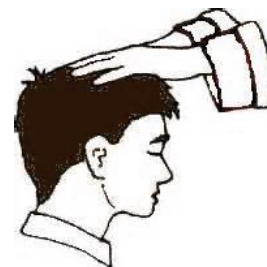
As with all the Sacraments, Confirmation is rich with signs and symbols, which together form a traditional ceremony showing to all that there is a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as once gifted to the Apostles at Pentecost. In addition to the hymns, prayers and Scripture readings, there are four key symbols or symbolic actions which we need to help our children reflect upon...

A. Renewal of Baptismal Promises

The Rite of Confirmation begins with the renewal of baptismal promises and the profession of faith by the candidates. These were the promises first made at Baptism on our children’s behalf by parents and Godparents. This faith has matured enough for the children to make it their own. This profession clearly shows that Confirmation follows Baptism.

B. Laying on of Hands

The priest extends his hands over the whole group of candidates – a gesture signifying the gift of the Holy Spirit since the very earliest times. This is called the “epiclesis”, the same gesture used in Ordination, and during Mass to call down the Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine.



C. Oil of Chrism and Anointing: "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit"

This is the essential part of the sacrament, which is conferred through the Anointing with Chrism on the forehead in the sign of the cross, and through the words: “Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.” This anointing with Chrism was added in the early centuries to the laying on of hands.



Sacred Chrism for the whole diocese is consecrated by the Bishop during Holy Thursday Chrism Mass. This is an important action that precedes the celebration of Confirmation and so in a certain way is really part of it. This is especially important in Salford Diocese, as the original and ordinary minister of Confirmation is the Bishop; but as in many other Dioceses, the Bishop grants the faculty of administering Confirmation to parish priests.

Oil is rich in meaning. Throughout the centuries, it has been a sign of abundance, joy, cleansing, limbering, healing and strengthening. In the Church’s sacramental life, three oils are used and these signify cleansing, strengthening and healing. Sacred Chrism is a fragrant oil, made from olive oil and balsam, and it is also a sign of Consecration. It is the primary symbol in Confirmation.

The anointing highlights the name “Christian”, as the name “Christ” is Greek for “anointed”. So it derives from that of Christ himself whom God “anointed with the Holy Spirit.” So, whenever we use Chrism, we immediately think of the associated word, Christ.

The word “sealed” reminds us that a seal is a symbol of a person, a sign of personal authority, or even ownership. So, soldiers used to be marked with their leader’s seal and slaves with their master’s. A seal also gives authority to a juridical act or document.



Christ himself declared that he was marked with his Father's seal, and Christians are also marked with an indelible spiritual seal: God establishes us in Christ and commissions us; he has put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts. This "sealing" with the Holy Spirit marks our total belonging to Christ, our public enrolment in his service for ever.

D. Sign of Peace

The sign of peace concludes the rite. This signifies and demonstrates a new, closer communion with Christ and his Church family. This closer belonging is welcomed: the response "And with your spirit" follows the words "Peace be with you".

This is our third key point: for us to truly understand our faith tradition and the Sacraments, we all need to consider more deeply the many rich SYMBOLS we use.

V. The Effects of Confirmation

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost changed the Apostles' lives for ever: the door was broken open, their fears and sadness were overcome; they witnessed even to the point of death.

Similarly - as it is the same Spirit - we need to think of the lasting spiritual effects of Confirmation:-

- We are united more closely to Jesus Christ our brother, sharing one heavenly Father;
- Our bond with the Church conferred at Baptism is made more perfect, in readiness for the fullness of Communion in the Eucharist we will soon receive;
- We are strengthened in our Mission of spreading and defending our faith in word and deed;
- The "Gifts of the Spirit" are increased in us, given with a view to building up Christ's Body.

(The Catholic Church Catechism defines these seven "gifts" as follows:-

WISDOM	to recognise the things of God
UNDERSTANDING	to understand the mysteries of faith
COUNSEL	to choose whatever is God's will
FORTITUDE	to stand firm in the cause of virtue and truth
KNOWLEDGE	to discern the difference between good and evil
PIETY	to faithfully practise our religion
RESPECT for the LORD	to be inspired with a respect for God)

This is our fourth and final key point: as we are already blessed as God's children through our Baptism, we see Confirmation as both INCREASING AND DEEPENING God's gifts to us.

VI. Last Details

The emphasis on belonging to Christ and his Church, and the consequent living out of our faith in word and deed, reminds us of our need for others to help us on our faith journey. Two traditions help us in this regard, both of which identify a particular role model for living the faith and growing in God's family membership.

First, candidates for Confirmation, as for Baptism, fittingly seek the spiritual help of a Sponsor. Our Sponsor is the closest and more immediate role model for us. Given his/her crucial importance, the Church's rules for choosing a Sponsor are very clear. The Sponsor must be Roman Catholic, over 16, who has celebrated Confirmation and Holy Communion and who is regularly PRACTISING (attending Sunday Mass). The first choice should be a Godparent from the day of Baptism who fulfils this requirement (assuming that Godparents were well chosen at that time). Sponsors show their important role by presenting candidates for Confirmation and by placing their right hand on the candidate's right shoulder during the anointing with the Oil of Chrism.

Secondly, candidates MAY choose a Christian Saint from the Church family who will be a suitable role model. This Saint will clearly be more historical, but still relevant, chosen for their life and importance and not just the name. Children enjoy learning from those who have gone before them.