

What difference does Confirmation make?

by Joseph Martos

It's been a long time, but I can remember it well. The 40 of us were lined up in the schoolyard on a cold day, our red "graduation" robes blowing in the wind. We were only in the fifth grade, but we were allowed to wear the robes for Confirmation—red being the color the Church uses to represent the Holy Spirit. We felt very grown-up, and very proud.

An hour later, as far as I could tell, it was over. We had been anointed (blessed with oil) on the forehead and slapped lightly on the cheek. In those days, that "slap" told us that we had to be "soldiers of Christ," ready to suffer for our faith. We had sung "Come, Holy Ghost," and the bishop had prayed over us and put his hand on our head. I felt like I had been ordained or surely something as important and official as that.

I look back on that day of years ago and ask myself, what difference did it make? It was a nice ceremony—almost like a parade or a welcome-home celebration. And of course there was the party afterwards and the Confirmation presents. But really, I didn't understand how much of a welcome it was and to what!

My wife tells me that, for her, the sacrament did make a big difference right away. I was glad to hear that on her Confirmation day she felt the love and power of God in a special way. She began to pray more, and attended Mass on weekdays. She made a constant effort to be more helpful at home, to be more polite to her parents, and to be less quarrelsome with her sisters—and she felt the grace within her to succeed.

Connecting the present to the past

To help me know why we do what we do now in the Church, I like to recall our Church history and tradition. In the early days of the Church, many Christians felt the Holy Spirit come into their life through the "laying-on of hands," as it was called then. A leader of the Christian community would lay his hands on those who had been baptized and pray for the Holy Spirit to come down into them. This practice seems to have been a forerunner of the official sacrament which we now call Confirmation. Afterwards, these new Christians would spontaneously be inspired to praise God aloud and pray in languages they hadn't known before.

Today, some Christians called charismatics or Pentecostals (including Catholics) testify that they have had this same experience—being "baptized in the Spirit," as they call it. It is not the same as the Sacrament of Confirmation, but it is a practice which seems to make them more receptive to the presence of the Holy Spirit. They feel changed inside, and charged with a spiritual energy that they never had before.

The way that Confirmation is celebrated in the Church today is a reminder of that early Christian practice, although the bishop no longer lays his hands directly on the heads of those who are being confirmed. During the ceremony, the bishop extends his hands over

the candidates and prays: "All-powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life. Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide. Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence."

Earlier in the ceremony, to prepare them for this moment, the bishop asked the candidates to renew the promises which their parents made for them at Baptism. He went over each of the major points of the Creed we say every Sunday at Mass and asked the candidates whether they believe in the Fatherhood of God, the Lordship of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, and other teachings of the Church.

When the candidates respond to these statements of faith, they do so in a group, as part of the Confirmation ceremony. They all give the same outward response, but inwardly their responses can differ in emotional intensity. Some may reaffirm their faith with all their heart, and they may open themselves up to a deeper and more mature awareness of the Holy Spirit's presence in their life. Others may feel absolutely no change of heart as they go through the Confirmation ceremony. Most people's experience probably falls somewhere in between these two extremes.

Different experiences of Confirmation are matched by different responses to the sacrament and its graces. In talking about my wife, I said that she not only felt something different at her Confirmation, but she also behaved differently afterwards. On the other hand, I don't remember behaving any differently right after I was confirmed, although I can honestly say that if I weren't a confirmed Christian I might have lived my life very differently over the years. And I'm sure that there are people whose Confirmation has never, ever made any difference whatsoever in their life. But there again, most people fall somewhere between the two extremes.

It used to be different

With these widely differing responses to Confirmation, why do we have it at all? *What* can we expect? *Where* did it come from?

In the earliest days of Christianity (we learn about them from the New Testament, especially from the Epistles of St. Paul and the Acts of the Apostles), adults became members of the Church through both a water baptism and a laying-on of hands. For many converts, becoming a Christian meant giving up sinful habits and beginning a new life. They felt a great spiritual energy to live differently from the majority of people around them.

Centuries after the apostles, when almost everyone in the Roman Empire was Christian, most people no longer experienced such dramatic change in their life at Confirmation. In the fourth century, for example, St. Augustine wrote, "Who in the present day expects that those on whom hands are laid for the bestowal [gift] of the Spirit will suddenly begin speaking in tongues?" In other words, only a few hundred years away from the apostles,

those charismatic gifts I mentioned earlier had all but disappeared. Becoming a Christian by that time meant living like everybody else and seldom suffering or even feeling uncomfortable.

As years passed, the laying-on of hands by the bishop was changed to an anointing with oil, since in the Scriptures anointing is often associated with the reception of God's Spirit. And, some years after that, the full ceremony of Christian initiation into the Church was divided into two parts: baptism with water by a priest, and anointing with oil by a bishop. This happened because the bishop could not always be present at everyone's baptism, and yet he wanted to personally receive every new Christian into full membership in the Church. After a while, this second part of Christian initiation became a completely separate ritual called Confirmation.

Eventually it turned out that, while all Christians were baptized, few were confirmed. One reason for this was that every parish had a priest but bishops were few and far between, just as today.

What difference *can* it make?

Seeing how the practice of Confirmation has differed widely down through the centuries, even falling into long periods of disuse, a more radical question can creep into our mind: Why keep up the practice of Confirmation at all?

One obvious answer is that Confirmation is a part of our tradition. It is a part of the Catholic heritage. By continuing the practice of Confirmation we show that we accept and continue that heritage.

Still, is this enough? Of course not. Just because we have always confirmed in some way is not a good enough reason for continuing to do it today. There must be more reasons than that.

One important reason is that Confirmation can make a real difference in the lives of young people. It can give you a chance to think about your baptism and about what it means to be a Christian. When you were baptized as an infant, you didn't know what was happening. Now, when you are older, you have a chance to reaffirm your membership in the Church and to say your own "I do" to your baptismal promises.

So Confirmation can indeed make a difference in your life. It can have the effect of a special spiritual awakening, as it had for my wife. Or it can have the effect of being a special reminder of your commitment to Christ and to the Church, as it was for me. A lot depends on you, and on the circumstances surrounding your own Confirmation.

What difference do you *want* it to make?

Many of us were confirmed before we were ready to make this serious commitment. We said we were willing to be confirmed Christians, and the bishop anointed us with the sign of Christ's cross.

In some ways, it's a question of maturity. If you've already been confirmed, you're older now than you were then. You've recited the Creed, a statement of your beliefs, Sunday after Sunday at Mass. You've learned more about the meaning of your faith. But have you taken the time to make your Christian living more mature as well? Does the meaning your head already knows take shape in actions from your heart?

God always offers you the grace to live up to your baptismal promises and to the commitment that your parents made for you at Baptism. So the important question is, what difference do you allow the sacrament of Confirmation to make in your life? If Confirmation does not seem to have the expected or desired effect, it is not that God has in any way failed you.

When you were confirmed, you renewed the promises that your parents made for you at your Baptism: to believe in God, to be a member of the Church, to avoid sin and lead a moral life. As you are probably aware, there's a lot packed into those simple phrases. There's also a lot of commitment that is demanded of you if you take them seriously.

And how seriously do you take these promises? I believe that being a Christian, especially a confirmed Christian, should make a noticeable difference in a person's life. Jesus once said, "Not everyone who calls me Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father" (Matthew 7:21). He meant that saying the words was not enough; choosing to know and do God's will was necessary. Being a confirmed Christian, like being a confirmed soccer player or a confirmed music lover, is a matter of deeds, not words.

How to *let* it make a difference

You may honestly believe that being a confirmed Christian ought to make a difference in your life, but you don't know how. Or you may realize that your growing Christian maturity ought to have a greater impact on your life, but you're not sure what it should be. Here are a few practical suggestions about living up to your Confirmation.

1. Learn more about what it means to be a Christian. Read the Gospels (Matthew 5—7 is a good place to begin) to see what Jesus asks of his followers. Find a book on how to live the Christian life (there are lots of them) and find one area where you might make an improvement. Ask someone whose faith you respect (age doesn't matter) how he or she tries to live a Christian life.
2. Think about yourself, your own hopes and ambitions, your own values and ideals. Take the time to write them down. Then ask yourself how these stack up against what you find in the Gospels and what you learn about living up to the teachings of Christ. Compare your own goals in life and your own personal behavior in the light of what it means to be a confirmed Christian.
3. If you find differences between the way you are and the way you think a Christian should be, make some honest judgments about which way you want to go. This kind of

self-examination is not easy, but the results are very rewarding. You may find yourself faced with some difficult choices, but no one can make them for you.

4. If you want to change your goals or behavior as a result of what you find out about yourself, be practical about it. Don't try to change everything at once. Pray about it, and ask for guidance from someone you respect. And don't try to do it alone. When you feel discouraged, remember it's a lifelong task. Get in touch with other young people in your parish or school who seem to be taking their Christian commitment seriously. Confirmation can and does make a difference—if you allow, even welcome, such change.

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