

Confirmation: A Sacrament in Search of a Theology?

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Abstract

In response to accusations leveled against the integrity of confirmation as a distinct sacrament, the author searches magisterial documents for a theology of confirmation. Two main theological explanations of the sacrament are explored: the ecclesial significance of the bishop's office as the original minister of confirmation; and the grace of the sacrament – that is, the gifts and Gift of the Holy Spirit. This grace is characterized as both defensive and offensive, from the perspective of defending the faith of the individual and the Church, and sharing in Christ's mission to evangelize the world. In a final section, the author addresses several popular but mistaken or one-sided approaches to explaining confirmation that have had negative pastoral consequences in recent decades.

Keywords

confirmation, sacrament, chrismation, ordinary minister, grace, holy spirit, bishop

For many years, scholars and liturgists found it fashionable to call confirmation “the sacrament in search of a theology,”¹ and to discuss the “problem” of confirmation at length.² From the perspective of the Council of Trent, there is some justification for this label. At its seventh session in 1547, the council produced a mere three canons on the sacrament of confirmation, which content themselves

¹ William J. Bausch, *A New Look at the Sacraments* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third, 1983), p. 92: “Among the scholars, confirmation is often called the sacrament in search of a theology.”

² For an extended treatment of the “problems” regarding confirmation in twentieth-century scholarship, see Achille M. Triacca, ‘Per una trattazione organica sulla “confermazione”: verso una teologia liturgica’, *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 86 (1972), pp. 128–81; see also Karl Rahner, *A New Baptism in the Spirit: Confirmation Today* (Denville NJ: Dimension, 1974), p. 10; Joseph M. Powers, ‘Confirmation: The Problem of Meaning’, *Worship* 46.1 (1972), pp. 26–27.

with affirming that confirmation is a sacrament and that its ordinary minister is the bishop.³ Yet the fathers of the Council of Trent had no need to go deeper. The radical rejection of the Catholic sacramental system that began to spread with Martin Luther had entirely dismissed confirmation on the grounds of a lack of biblical evidence,⁴ and so there was no need to address the subtleties of its theology in response. A simple affirmation that confirmation was a sacrament of the new law sufficed. Twentieth-century scholars presented arguments more sophisticated and historically rooted than Luther's bald assertion that confirmation is not a sacrament, yet they tend toward the same conclusion. They suppose two 'problems' with confirmation: first, an alleged lack of clear ritual and theological distinction between confirmation and baptism in ancient Christianity⁵; second, the "instability" of the rite from a ritual perspective throughout history.⁶

The complexity of the historical vicissitudes of confirmation could intimidate those who wish to more fully understand and appreciate confirmation as a sacrament. The author of this article is an historical theologian and patristic scholar who holds that historical studies critically appropriated do not impede confirmation's sacramental integrity and intelligibility. Instead of getting bogged down in archaeological details,⁷ however, this study directly addresses the notion that confirmation lacks any coherent theological rationale by closely examining relevant teachings of the magisterium. It will demonstrate that confirmation is not bereft of "a theology," but rather boasts a rich one that few in recent decades have devoted serious effort to exploring.

³ Council of Trent, Sessio VII (3 mart. 1547), *Canones de sacramento confirmationis* 1–3, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. and trans. Norman P. Tanner (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), p. 686.

⁴ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, trans. Albert T. W. Steinhäuser, rev. Frederick C. Ahrens and Abdel Ross Wentz, Luther's Works 36 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959), pp. 91–92, here 92: "we seek sacraments that have been divinely instituted, and among these we see no reason for numbering confirmation," emphasis in original.

⁵ For a strident example, see Nathan Mitchell, 'Christian Initiation: Decline and Dismemberment', *Worship* 48.8 (1974), pp. 458–79.

⁶ See, e.g., Charles Davis, *Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism and Confirmation* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 107.

⁷ A critical assessment of confirmation's historiography is a distinct and hefty topic of investigation. On this topic, see Burkhard Neunheuser, *Baptism and Confirmation*, trans. John J. Hughes (New York: Herder, 1964); Gerard Austin, 'The Essential Rite of Confirmation and Liturgical Tradition', *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 86 (1972), pp. 214–24; Giuseppe Riggio, 'Liturgia e pastorale della confermazione nei secoli XI–XII–XIII', *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 87 (1973), pp. 445–72 and 88 (1974), pp. 3–31; J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Confirmation Then and Now* (Chicago IL: Hillenbrand, 2005). See also the collection of texts gathered by Paul Turner, *Sources of Confirmation: From the Fathers through the Reformers* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1993).

After briefly placing confirmation in its context as a sacrament of initiation, the ecclesial significance of the bishop's office as original minister of confirmation will be examined in some detail. The next topics to be analyzed are the gifts and Gift the Holy Spirit imparted in confirmation, and the effect of its grace for growth and strengthening of the already-baptized Christian. A final section critiques several unhelpful theories, presuppositions, or negative judgments that have been passed on the sacrament in recent decades. These mistaken or one-sided approaches to confirmation continue to have a direct impact on the pastoral level. Here they are considered primarily as springboards for highlighting a coherent theology of confirmation. In light of confirmation's theological rationale, current pastoral practice and popular opinions regarding confirmation stand in need of reform.

Without prejudice to the distinct practices of eastern rites, this study concentrates on confirmation in the Latin Rite.

A SACRAMENT OF INITIATION

The Second Vatican Council directly addresses confirmation only once in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium*:

The rite of confirmation is also to be revised. The point of this revision is that the very close connection of this sacrament with the whole process of Christian initiation may become more clearly visible. For this reason, it will be a good idea for people to make a renewal of baptismal promises prior to receiving this sacrament. If the occasion allows, confirmation can be administered during mass⁸

As the council directs, a renewal of baptismal promises precedes the reception of confirmation in the revised rite of confirmation, and the reception of confirmation within Mass is especially recommended.⁹ These are immediate means of stressing the unity of the sacraments of initiation.¹⁰

⁸ Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium*, §71 (4 December 1963), in Tanner, vol. 2, pp. 833–34.

⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, §71, in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 833; the renewal of baptismal promises is in Rite of Confirmation, 23, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. 1, prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), pp. 23–24; Introduction, Rite of Confirmation, in *The Rites*, vol. 1, §13, p. 483: "Confirmation takes place as a rule within Mass in order that the fundamental connection of this sacrament with all of Christian initiation may stand out in clearer light." *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997) [henceforth CCC] 1298: When celebrated apart from baptism, confirmation begins with the renewal of baptismal promises and the profession of faith.

¹⁰ Accordingly, Pope Paul VI made provision for integrating confirmation within the Mass one month after the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum concilium*: Pope Paul VI, Litterae Apostolicae Motu Proprio Datae, *Sacram liturgiam*, norm 4 (25 January 1964), in *Acta*

In the revised liturgical books as well as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, first printed in 1992, baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist are consistently termed the “sacraments of initiation.” When Paul VI promulgated the revised rite of confirmation in 1971 with the Apostolic Constitution *Divinae consortium naturae*, he used an analogy with the natural life to explain the relationships among the sacraments of initiation:

The sharing of divine nature, which men are given through the grace of Christ, bears a certain likeness to the birth of natural life, its growth, and nourishment. For by baptism the faithful are born again, by the sacrament of confirmation they are strengthened, and finally they are sustained by the food of eternal life in the eucharist. Thus by means of these sacraments of Christian initiation, they increasingly benefit from the treasures of divine life and progress toward the perfection of charity.¹¹

Paul VI draws in part from an analogy between the sacramental life and the natural life already developed by St Thomas Aquinas.¹² Just as God grants birth, growth, and nourishment in the bodily life, so the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist provide birth, growth, and nourishment in the spiritual life. Through the grace offered in these sacraments, Christians become partakers in the very life of God, participating in divine nature.

THE MINISTER OF CONFIRMATION AND PERFECTION OF ONE’S BOND WITH THE CHURCH

Pope Paul VI also highlights the continuity of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles at Pentecost, the apostles’ subsequent role in conferring the Holy Spirit, and the bishops’ role as successors of the apostles.¹³ Pope St Innocent I (401–417), writing to Decentius of Gubbio early in the fifth century, similarly connects the bishop’s prerogative as minister of the signing with chrism with his status as successor of the apostles:

Apostolicae Sedis 56, series 3, vol. 6 (1964), pp. 141–42: “Eam art. 71 partem vim suam statim obtinere statuimus, ex qua Sacramentum Confirmationis, pro opportunitate, intra Missam, post lectionem Evangelii et homiliam, conferri potest.”

¹¹ Pope Paul VI, *Divinae consortium naturae*, in *Enchiridion documentorum institutionis liturgicae*, vol. 1, (1963–1973), ed. Reiner Kaczynski (Rome: C.L.V.-Edizioni Liturgiche, 190), no. 148, §2591, p. 808; my translation.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* IV, 58, in *Summa contra gentiles*, vol. 4, *Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O’Neil (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1957), pp. 249–50.

¹³ Pope Paul VI, *Divinae consortium naturae*, in Kaczynski, vol. 1, no. 148, §2594, p. 809.

... though the presbyters are priests of the second order, yet they do not have the fullness of the pontificate. That this pontifical authority of confirming (*ut consignent*) or of conferring the Spirit the Paraclete is proper only to the bishop is clearly shown not only by the Church's custom but by that passage of the Acts of the Apostles which affirms that Peter and John were directed to confer the Holy Spirit to those who were already baptised.¹⁴

Innocent links the sacrament of confirmation with Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit effected when the apostles laid hands on the baptized, as related in Acts 8:14–17. Precisely because they are successors of the apostles – as Vatican II reaffirms¹⁵ – bishops should be the ministers of this sacrament. Innocent's letter proved influential; its very words can be discerned in the Council of Florence (1431–1445).¹⁶ The Council of Trent also insists upon the bishop's role as ordinary minister of confirmation, anathematizing anyone who claims “that the ordinary minister of holy confirmation is not a bishop only but any simple priest.”¹⁷ In light of the clear teachings of these ecumenical councils, the bishop's status as ordinary minister of the sacrament of confirmation is infallibly defined doctrine.¹⁸

¹⁴ Innocent I, Letter to Decentius, Bishop of Gubbio, in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, 7th ed. (New York: Alba House, 2001), §1406, p. 581.

¹⁵ Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus*, §2 (28 October 1965), in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 921: “Episcopi autem et ipsi, positi a Spiritu sancto, in apostolorum locum succedunt ut animarum pastores...”; see also *Christus Dominus*, §4 and §6, p. 922.

¹⁶ Council of Basel-Ferrara-Florence-Rome, Session 8 (22 November 1439), Bull of Union with the Armenians, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, *Nicaea I to Lateran V*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), p. 544: “Ordinarius minister est episcopus. Et cum ceteras unctiones simplex sacerdos valeat exhibere, hanc non nisi episcopus debet conferre, quia de solis apostolis legitur, quorum vicem tenent episcopi, quod per manus impositionem Spiritum sanctum dabant, quemadmodum actuum apostolorum lectio manifestat... Loco autem illius manus impositionis in ecclesia datur confirmatio. Legitur tamen aliquando per apostolice sedis dispensationem ex rationabili et urgenti admodum causa simplicem sacerdotem crismate per episcopum confecto hoc administrasse confirmationis sacramentum.”

¹⁷ Council of Trent, Sessio VII (3 mart. 1547), *Canones de sacramento confirmationis*, 3, in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 686: “Si quis dixerit, sanctae confirmationis ordinarium ministrum non esse solum episcopum, sed quemvis simplicem sacerdotem: a.s.” John Jerome Coleman, *The Minister of Confirmation: An Historical Synopsis and Commentary*, The Catholic University of America Canon Law Studies 125 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1941), p. 103: “Moreover, though a statement on the priest-minister seemed more or less called for at the Council of Trent, it might only have confirmed heretics in their errors if the Council had asserted that the priest could in any circumstances administer confirmation.”

¹⁸ Congregatio de Disciplina Sacramentorum, Decretum de confirmatione ministranda iis qui ex gravi morbo in mortis periculo sunt constitute *Spiritus Sancti munera* (14 September 1946), in *Documenta ad instaurationem liturgicam spectantia 1903–1963*, ed. Carlo Braga and Annibale Bugnini (Rome: CLV-Edizioni Liturgiche, 2000), no. 38, §1812, p. 542: “Definitae doctrinae est solum Episcoporum esse ordinarium confirmationis ministrum.”

Rather than using the term “ordinary,” the Second Vatican Council describes bishops as “original ministers of confirmation.”¹⁹ Cardinal Francis Arinze, while serving as secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship, explains this to newly nominated bishops as follows:

The ecclesiological and pastoral tradition of the Latin Rite is that the bishop is the ordinary minister of this sacrament. Vatican II calls him the originating (*originarius*) minister. (*Lumen Gentium* 26) The bishop should not easily cede his place, except in case of real need, since a celebration of this kind ensures a real contact with communities and individual faithful. For many of them it remains a memorable and once-for-all occasion all their lives. Here as ever we should build on these human factors to ensure the impact of a call to a serious Christian engagement.²⁰

The bishop’s role as minister of confirmation brings about a personal contact between the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the confirmand, and the confirmand’s parish and family. Such “human factors” immerse the confirmand and those close to him into the ecclesial reality of the universal Church.

These “human factors” point to deeper theological factors underlying the Church’s insistence that, being “the ordinary minister” of confirmation, “whenever possible,” the bishop “should seek to administer it in person.”²¹ The bishop serves as the principal of unity in the local church and, through it, in the universal Church. The Second Vatican Council teaches,

A diocese is a section of the people of God whose pastoral care is entrusted to a bishop in cooperation with his priests. Thus, in conjunction with their pastor and gathered by him into one flock in the holy Spirit through the gospel and the eucharist, they constitute a particular church. In this church, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Christ is truly present and at work.²²

The bishop’s office as the ordinary minister of confirmation must be understood in light of his function of ensuring ecclesial communion.²³

¹⁹ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, §26 (21 November 1964), in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 871: “Ipsi [episcopi] sunt ministri originarii confirmationis . . .”

²⁰ Francis Arinze, ‘Active Participation Reconsidered: The Liturgy and the Sanctifying Office of the Bishop. Reflections Proposed to Bishops of Recent Nomination, in Rome, September 17, 2004’, *Adoremus (Online Edition)* 10.7 (October 2004).

²¹ Congregation for Bishops, Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops *Apostolorum successores*, §144 (22 February 2004), (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), p. 159.

²² Second Vatican Council, *Christus Dominus*, §11, ed. and trans. Tanner, vol. 1, p. 924.

²³ Max Thurian, *Consecration of the Layman: New Approaches to the Sacrament of Confirmation*, trans. W. J. Kerrigan (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963), pp. 98: “The idea of having confirmation reserved to the bishop, chief ecclesiastic of a given region, results from a

Confirmation renders one's bond with the Church more perfect, as *Lumen gentium* teaches and Paul VI reaffirms when promulgating the revised rite of confirmation: "By the sacrament of confirmation they [the faithful] are bound more perfectly to the Church..."²⁴ Through sacramental communion with the bishop – which confirmation emphasizes in a dramatic and memorable way – the Christian is incorporated into the communion of the local church and, through it, the universal Church. Hence Pope John Paul II exhorts the bishop to ensure, inasmuch as is possible, that he himself is the first minister of confirmation:

Finally, with regard to Confirmation, the Bishop, as the ordinary [first, *primus*] minister of this sacrament, will ensure that he himself is its usual celebrant. His presence in the midst of the parish community which, by virtue of the baptismal font and the table of the Eucharist, is the natural and normal place for the process of Christian initiation, effectively evokes the mystery of Pentecost and proves most beneficial in consolidating the bonds of ecclesial communion between the pastor and the faithful.²⁵

This is the characteristic strength of the traditional western practice whereby the bishop is the usual minister of confirmation: it "more clearly expresses the communion of the new Christian with the bishop as guarantor and servant of the unity, catholicity, and apostolicity of his Church."²⁶

legitimate desire to manifest in the case of each of the faithful (in his integration into the ministry of the Church) the ecumenical unity of which the bishop is the representative par excellence... It is right that, when the faithful offer their disposability in confirmation, the 'ecumenical' authority in the Church, should manifest to them the unity of the Church organization which is enrolling them." For Thurian, this reflection follows upon biblical evidence regarding the connection between confirmation and the apostles. See also Austin P. Milner, *The Theology of Confirmation* (Notre Dame IN: Fides, 1972), pp. 90–99.

²⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, §11, in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 857: "Sacramento confirmationis perfectius ecclesiae vinculantur, speciali Spiritus sancti robore ditantur, sicque ad fidem tamquam veri testes Christi verbo et opera simul diffundendam et defendendam arctius obligantur."

²⁵ Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation On the Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World *Pastores gregis*, §38 (16 October 2003), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 96 (2004), p. 876: "Quod denique ad sacramentum spectat Confirmationis, videbit Episcopus, qui primus est eius minister, ut plerumque ipsemet illud conferat. Praesens enim ipse paroecialem apud communitatem, quae propter Baptismatis fontem ac Mensam Eucharisticam locus naturalis est ordinaries itineris initiationis christianae exstat, evocat vehementer Pentecostes mysterium ac maximam addit utilitatem ad vincula ecclesialis communionis inter pastorem ac fideles firmanda"; translation from Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortations* (Trivandrum, India: Carmel International Publishing House, 2005), pp. 57–58. Earlier in the same section (p. 875), John Paul II describes the bishop as the "first dispenser" of confirmation: "Baptismate enim renati fideles participesque effecti sacerdotii roborantur Confirmatione, cuius primarius est Episcopus dispensator, sicque unam recipiunt Spiritus donorum profusionem."

²⁶ CCC 1292, 1318. The strength of the eastern practice, by contrast, is greater emphasis on the unity of Christian initiation: see CCC 1318.

From ancient times in the West and East, however, priests have been granted the faculty to confirm the baptized faithful.²⁷ This remains the case in eastern churches even today, including those in communion with Rome,²⁸ which demonstrates the Holy See's long-standing willingness to allow exceptions despite repeated stress upon the bishop's role as minister of confirmation. In a prominent early example, Pope St Gregory the Great (d. 604) allowed priests to confirm. St Thomas cites Gregory, explaining that the pope, by virtue of his fullness of power in the Church, is able to entrust certain tasks to lower orders which belong properly to higher orders.²⁹ The theological underpinnings of the priest's ability to confirm are not entirely clear, and beyond the scope of this paper.³⁰ Moreover, the Council of Florence affirms that the bishop is the ordinary minister of confirmation while allowing that a simple priest may confer the sacrament with chrism prepared by the bishop in urgent cases.³¹ St Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787), citing papal initiatives of the eighteenth century, also affirms that a “simple priest can confirm, as an extraordinary minister.”³² By the nineteenth century, priests were regularly

²⁷ Coleman, *The Minister of Confirmation*, pp. 22–31, here p. 31, concludes that the priest is “but the extraordinary minister of confirmation, as indeed seems to be implied in a canon which the Council of Trent enacted on the minister of confirmation. The Church's lifelong practice also warrants the conclusion that a very grave cause is required in order that a simple priest may be delegated to administer confirmation.” Although Coleman is writing in 1941, his overview of ancient practice remains helpful.

²⁸ The Second Vatican Council restored the eastern churches' ancient practice, whereby priests confer the sacrament of confirmation, in the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches *De ecclesiis orientalibus* [*Orientalium ecclesiarum*], §§13–14 (21 November 1964), here §13, in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 904: “The practice concerning the minister of confirmation which has been in force from the earliest times in the eastern churches is to be fully restored. Thus priests can confer this sacrament (*presbyteri hoc sacramentum conferre valent*), using chrism blessed by a patriarch or a bishop.” See also Khaled Anatosios, ‘The Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, *Orientalium ecclesiarum*’, in *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 345–46. On the legislation of the Holy See regarding the minister of confirmation in eastern rites up to the early twentieth century, see E. Herman, ‘Confirmation dans l'église orientale’, in *Dictionnaire de droit canonique*, vol. 4 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1949), cols 124–26.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IIIa, q. 72, art. 11, in *S. Thomae Aquinatis doctoris angelici Summa theologiae*, ed. De Rubeis, Billuart, et al., vol. 5 (Turin: Marietti, 1933), pp. 96–98.

³⁰ On this question, see Coleman, *The Minister of Confirmation*, pp. 106–111; Eloy Tejero, Commentary on Can. 882, in *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, vol. 3.1, ed. Ángel Marzoa, Jorge Miras, and Rafael Rodríguez-Ocaña (Chicago IL: Midwest Theological Forum, 2004), pp. 516–17; and several studies by A. Mostaza Rodríguez, including most recently ‘En torno al ministro de la confirmación’, *Revista española de derecho canónico* 36 (1980), pp. 494–98.

³¹ Council of Basel-Ferrara-Florence-Rome, Session 8 (22 November 1439), Bull of Union with the Armenians, in Tanner, vol. 1, p. 544, quoted above.

³² S. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, *Theologia moralis* VI, tract. II, cap. II, dub. II, ed. P. Leonard Gaudé, vol. 3 (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1909), §170, p. 156:

granted the faculty to administer confirmation in mission territories, and the 1917 Code of Canon Law allowed those equivalent in law to a bishop to confirm within their territories – always in the absence of a bishop.³³ In 1963, Paul VI went a step further by allowing diocesan bishops to grant priests the faculty of confirming.³⁴ Finally, the revised Rite of Confirmation of 1971 expanded the faculty by law for priests to confirm, giving it to, among others, priests who baptize persons who are no longer infants.³⁵

Following the promulgation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in 1972, many Latin Rite communities have experienced a shift whereby they are increasingly witnessing simple priests ministering the sacrament of confirmation.³⁶ This is partially an attempt to act upon *Sacrosanctum concilium*'s mandate that “the rite of confirmation also ought to be revised so that the intimate connection of this sacrament with entirety of Christian initiation might shine forth.”³⁷ Many assume that the best means of emphasizing this intimate connection of the sacraments of initiation is the administration of baptism, confirmation, and first holy communion in one integral, continuous rite celebrated by one minister, even if it be a priest.³⁸ Yet there are other means of emphasizing this connection, many of which are written into the revised rite itself, as mentioned above. Moreover, the Rite of Confirmation demonstrates, despite any apparently contrary tendencies, a preference that the bishop minister confirmation as a general rule (*ex more*).³⁹

“Dubium autem fit: an ex concessione Pontificis possit simplex sacerdos confirmare, tamquam minister extraordinarius?... Idque hodie non amplius dubitandum ex bulla nostri Summi Pontificis Benedicti XIV, incipiente Eo quamvis tempore, edita 4 Maji 1745.”

³³ Kevin T. Hart, Commentary on Book IV Title II, in *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, ed. John P. Beal et al. (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), p. 1077.

³⁴ Pope Paul VI, Motu proprio *Pastorale munus*, §13 (30 November 1963), in *Enchiridion documentorum instaurationis liturgicae*, vol. 1, (1963–1973), ed. Reiner Kaczynski (Rome: C.L.V.-Edizioni Liturgiche, 190), no. 4, §151, p. 33.

³⁵ Praenotanda, *Ordo confirmationis*, editio typica (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1971), §7, pp. 17–18: “Praeter Episcopum facultate confirmandi ipso iure gaudet: a) Administrator Apostolicus, qui non sit Episcopus, Praelatus vel Abbas nullius, Vicarius et Praefectus Apostolicus, Vicarius Capitularis, intra limites sui territorii et durante munere; b) presbyter, qui ex officio sibi legitime tribute adultum aut puerum aetatis catecheticae baptizat, vel adultum iam valide baptizatum in plenam communionem Ecclesiae admittit; c) In mortis periculo...”; see Hart, *New Commentary on the Code*, p. 1077.

³⁶ *Ordo initiationis christianae adultorum*, editio typica (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1972).

³⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, §71, in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 833: “Ritus confirmationis recognoscatur etiam ut huius sacramenti intima connexio cum tota initiatione Christiana clarius eluceat...”; my translation.

³⁸ Introduction, Rite of Confirmation, §13, in *The Rites*, vol. 1, p. 484: “When confirmation is given during Mass, it is fitting that the minister of confirmation celebrate the Mass...”

³⁹ *Ordo confirmationis* (1971), §8, p. 17: “Confirmationis minister originarius est Episcopus. Sacramentum ex more ab ipso administratur, quo apertius referatur ad primam

The bishop's significance as the original minister of confirmation is even more strikingly highlighted in the revised Rite of Confirmation. The rite instructs the extraordinary minister who celebrates the sacrament to explain that the bishop is the sacrament's ordinary or original minister:

When confirmation is given by an extraordinary minister, whether by concession of the general law or by special indult of the Apostolic See, it is fitting for him to mention in the homily that the bishop is the original minister of the sacrament and to explain the reason why priests receive the faculty to confirm from the law or by an indult of the Apostolic See.⁴⁰

The sample homily exemplifies the language that might be used to express this point: "Bishops are successors of the apostles and have this power of giving the Holy Spirit to the baptized, either personally or through the priests they appoint (*et sive per se sive per presbyteros*)."⁴¹ The terms of the homily suggest that, when a simple priest serves as extraordinary minister of confirmation, the bishop is giving the Holy Spirit through the priest. In this way, the Rite of Confirmation of 1971 stresses the theological importance of the bishop as original and ordinary minister of the sacrament even while making provisions for priests to celebrate it.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church similarly emphasizes the bishop's office with regard to confirmation: "it is fitting that he confer it himself, mindful that the celebration of Confirmation has been temporally separated from Baptism for this reason."⁴² This emphasis demonstrates continuity with the ancient teaching of the Latin Church that the bishop is the ordinary minister of the sacrament, whose connection to it is not only theologically important, but also necessary for validity. The close connection is always preserved insofar as only

effusionem Spiritus Sancti in die Pentecostes." The rite approved for use in the USA specifies, in Introduction, Rite of Confirmation, §8, in *The Rites*, vol. 1, p. 481: "The diocesan bishop is to administer confirmation himself or to ensure that it is administered by another bishop. But if necessity requires, he may grant to one or several, determinate priests the faculty to administer this sacrament."

⁴⁰ Introduction, Rite of Confirmation, §18, in *The Rites*, vol. 1, pp. 485–86; I have changed "a minister who is not a bishop" to "an extraordinary minister," in accordance with the Latin text, *Ordo confirmationis* (1971), §18, p. 21: "Cum Confirmatio a ministro extraordinario, aut ex concessione iuris generalis aut ex peculiari indulto Sedis Apostolicae, confertur, convenit ut ipse in homilia mentionem habeat de Episcopo ministro originario sacramenti, ac rationem illustret cur etiam presbyteris facultas confirmandi a iure vel ab Apostolicae Sedis indulto tribuitur."

⁴¹ *Ordo confirmationis* (1971), §22, p. 21, trans. Rite of Confirmation, §22, in *The Rites*, vol. 1, p. 488.

⁴² CCC 1313.

chrism consecrated by the bishop constitutes valid matter for the sacrament, both in the Latin Rite⁴³ and in eastern Catholic Rites.⁴⁴

Priests remain extraordinary ministers of confirmation, to use the language with which, in 1946, certain categories of priests first were granted the faculty to act by law as ministers of confirmation in cases of the danger of death.⁴⁵ The faculty to validly act as the minister of confirmation is more broadly given to priests in the 1972 Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults⁴⁶ and, accordingly, the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*.⁴⁷ Yet no document of the magisterium refers to a simple priest or presbyter as the ordinary minister of confirmation; the bishop alone retains that title. This is especially evident in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, which plainly identifies the bishop as the “ordinary” minister of confirmation, rather than using the term “original.”⁴⁸ In this, the 1983 *Code* follows its predecessor, the *Code of Canon Law* of 1917, which explicitly referred to the priest given the faculty of confirming by common law or apostolic indult as an extraordinary minister.⁴⁹ In the period between the two codes, the magisterium used the same terminology.⁵⁰ Even the *Eastern Catholic Code* refrains from labeling presbyters as “ordinary” ministers of confirmation, despite the fact that presbyters routinely or habitually

⁴³ *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition*, trans. Canon Law Society of America (Washington DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1998) [henceforth 1983 *Code of Canon Law*], can. 880 §2. On the necessity of using oil consecrated by the bishop, see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IIIa, q. 72, art. 2, ed. De Rubeis, Billuart, et al., vol. 5, p. 87.

⁴⁴ CCC 1312–13; Second Vatican Council, *Orientalium ecclesiarum*, §13, in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 904.

⁴⁵ Congregatio de Disciplina Sacramentorum, Decree *Spiritus Sancti munera*, in Braga and Bugnini, no. 38, §1813, p. 542; §1818, p. 543; §§1823–24, p. 544; see Hart, *New Commentary on the Code*, p. 1077. See also CCC 1314.

⁴⁶ Praenotanda, *Ordo initiationis christianae adultorum* (1972), §46, p. 18, trans. Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, §14, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. 1, prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1990) [henceforth RCIA], pp. 40–41.

⁴⁷ 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, can. 882–88; see also CCC 1313–14.

⁴⁸ 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, can. 882: “Confirmationis minister ordinarius est Episcopus.” On the reasons why those who drafted the 1983 *Code* chose *ordinarius* rather than *originarius*, see Tejero, Commentary on Can. 882, pp. 513–15.

⁴⁹ 1917 *Code of Canon Law*, can. 782, in *Codex Iuris Canonici Pii X Pontificis Maximi*, ed. Pietro Gasparri (Westminster MD: Newman, 1963): “§1. Ordinarius confirmationis minister est solus Episcopus. §2. Extraordinarius minister est presbyter, cui vel iure communi vel peculiari Sedis Apostolicae indulto ea facultas concessa sit.” See Coleman, *The Minister of Confirmation*, pp. 104–5.

⁵⁰ Congregatio de Disciplina Sacramentorum, *Instructio de presbytero sacramentum confirmationis ministrante Sacramenti confirmationis disciplina* (20 May 1934), ed. Braga and Bugnini, vol. 1, no. 30, §1362, p. 379: “Quod ad ministrum prae primis attinet Sacramenti Confirmationis, dogmaticam definitionem Concilii Tridentini mutuatus Codex I.C., canone 782 ordinarium huius Sacramenti ministrum solum Episcopum edicit, extraordinarium vero ministrum presbyterum, cui vel iure communi vel peculiari Sedis Apostolicae indulto facultas huiusmodi concessa sit.”

administer confirmation in eastern communions.⁵¹ Returning to the Roman Rite, the bishop's prerogative in this regard is also preserved on the ritual level: a presbyter can confirm only in the bishop's absence, unless the numbers of confirmandi are so large that the bishop must avail himself of the aid of one or more priests in administering the sacrament.⁵²

In conclusion, ecclesial documents repeatedly insist that the bishop be the usual minister of confirmation, in keeping with his juridical and theological status as the sacrament's ordinary and original minister. For the sake of making theological sense out of confirmation's effect of strengthening one's communion with the Church and, through it, with Christ, the bishop's role as the ordinary minister of the sacrament must be stressed. The most obvious practical means of emphasizing the bishop's role is to ensure, whenever possible, that the bishop himself administers the sacrament.

THE GIFT AND GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

"Catholic doctrine proclaims that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are conferred through the sacrament of confirmation."⁵³ Immediately the question arises: is the Holy Spirit not imparted through the sacrament of baptism? Yes. In baptism, "when the unclean spirit has been expelled from the soul, the Holy Ghost enters in and makes it like to Himself."⁵⁴ Strictly speaking, then, the baptized already have the gift of the Holy Spirit. Yet the gift of the Holy Spirit, the grace of God, is infinite; each and every baptized Christian can benefit from the increase of this gift – even the apostles. As Rabanus Maurus pointed out when discussing confirmation in the ninth century, the Holy Spirit is imparted upon the apostles on two distinct occasions: in the post-resurrection appearance (John 20:22) and again at Pentecost (Acts 2:4).⁵⁵ Furthermore, the rite of each of the seven sacraments as revised since 1970 contains an explicit epiclesis invoking the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ Even in the Eucharist, the Church beseeches the

⁵¹ *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches: Latin-English Edition* (Washington DC: Canon Law Society of America, 2001), cans 694 and 696 §1: "All presbyters of the Eastern Churches can validly administer this sacrament either along with baptism or separately to all the Christian faithful of any Church *sui iuris*, including the Latin Church."

⁵² Praenotanda, *Ordo initiationis christianae adultorum* (1972), §46, p. 18; trans. RCIA, §14, in *The Rites*, vol. 1, p. 40.

⁵³ Congregatio de Disciplina Sacramentorum, Decree *Spiritus Sancti munera*, in Braga and Bugnini, no. 38, §1808, p. 541.

⁵⁴ Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical on the Holy Spirit *Divinum illud munus*, §9 (9 May 1897); where no printed source for a magisterial document is cited, the text was consulted on the web site of the Holy See, <www.vatican.va>.

⁵⁵ Rabanus Maurus, *De clericorum institutione*, l.30 (PL 107:344–46).

⁵⁶ One who argues that confirmation adds nothing to the effects baptism might logically deny also that any other sacraments add anything to baptism, or offer any peculiar

Father for the benefits of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, thereby illustrating that the fully initiated Christian cannot claim to possess this gift to such an extent that no further giving would be of benefit.⁵⁷ No one's capacity to be filled by the Holy Spirit is exhausted in this life. There is no contradiction, then, in asserting that the Christian who has received the Holy Spirit through baptism comes to "share more completely in the . . . fullness of the Holy Spirit" through confirmation.⁵⁸

Furthermore, the gift of grace imparted through confirmation can be called the grace of the Holy Spirit in a particular way (*modo speciali*).⁵⁹ This gift is twofold: it includes both the Holy Spirit Himself and the seven gifts properly attributed to the Holy Spirit. Pope Leo XIII elaborates:

The same Spirit gives Himself more abundantly in Confirmation, strengthening and confirming Christian life; from which proceeded the victory of the martyrs and the triumph of the virgins over temptations and corruptions. We have said that the Holy Ghost gives Himself: "the charity of God is poured out into our hearts by the Holy Ghost who is given to us" (Rom. v., 5). For He not only brings to us His divine gifts, but is the Author of them and is Himself the supreme Gift, who, proceeding from the mutual love of the Father and the Son, is justly believed to be and is called "Gift of God most High."⁶⁰

The Holy Spirit is the supreme Gift given at confirmation. Paul VI reaffirms that through confirmation the baptized receive, most importantly, the ineffable Gift of the Holy Spirit Himself.⁶¹ Leo XIII and Paul VI assume, along with St Thomas, that "Gift" is a proper name of the third Person of the Trinity.⁶²

In addition to the Holy Spirit Himself, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are conferred, augmented, or increased through

sacramental grace of their own. Then "the only real difference between the sacraments would be material, namely, a difference of rite or ceremony," as is pointed out by Lawrence P. Everett, *The Nature of Sacramental Grace*, Catholic University of America Studies in Sacred Theology, 2nd series 7 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948), p. 131.

⁵⁷ For example, *Prex Eucharistica III, Missale Romanum*, editio typica tertia (Vatican City: Typis Vaticanis, 2002), §113, pp. 587–88: "concede, ut qui Corpore et Sanguine Filii tui reficimur, Spiritu eius Sancto replete, unum corpus et unus spiritus inveniamur in Christo."

⁵⁸ CCC 1294.

⁵⁹ Francis J. Connell, *De sacramentis ecclesiae: tractatus dogmatici*, vol. 1 (New York: Pustet, 1933), p. 169.

⁶⁰ Leo XIII, *Divinum illud munus*, §9.

⁶¹ Pope Paul VI, *Divinae consortium naturae*, in Kaczynski, vol. 1, no. 148, §2595, p. 810.

⁶² See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 38, arts 1 and 2, ed. De Rubeis, Billuart, et al., vol. 5, pp. 252–54.

confirmation.⁶³ These are wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord. The oration that precedes the essential rite of anointing with oil beseeches God for both the Holy Spirit and these seven gifts:

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 [piety] reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe [fear of the Lord] in your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord.⁶⁴

The Christian needs these seven gifts in order to live heroically the life of divine grace, the life of virtue. Leo XIII expresses this beautifully:

By means of them the soul is furnished and strengthened so as to obey more easily and promptly His voice and impulse. Wherefore these gifts are of such efficacy that they lead the just man to the highest degree of sanctity; and of such excellence that they continue to exist even in heaven, though in a more perfect way. By means of these gifts the soul is excited and encouraged to seek after and attain the evangelical beatitudes, which, like flowers that come forth in the spring time, are the signs and harbingers of eternal beatitude.⁶⁵

The Gift of the Holy Spirit Himself, as well as the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, are the *sine qua non* of the life of virtue and holiness to which the Christian is called. They enable the faithful to reach the heights of moral perfection set forth in the beatitudes; to assume the very “countenance” of Christ.⁶⁶ Such conformity to Christ is indicated as an effect of confirmation in the introduction to the rite: “By signing us with the gift of the Spirit, confirmation makes us more completely the image of the Lord and fills us with the Holy Spirit, so that we may bear witness to him before all the world and work to bring the Body of Christ to its fullness as soon as possible.”⁶⁷ By renewing,

⁶³ CCC 1303, discussing the effects of confirmation, includes “increases (*auget*) the gifts of the Holy Spirit” as a way in which confirmation “brings an increase and deepening (*augmentum et altiore penetrationem affert*) of baptismal grace.” This assumes that the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are conferred previously, presumably at baptism.

⁶⁴ *Ordo confirmationis* (1971), §42, p. 17: “Deus omnipotens, Pater Domini nostri Iesu Christi, qui hos famulos tuos regenerasti ex aqua et Spiritu Sancto, liberans eos a peccato, tu, Domine, inmitte in eos Spiritum Sanctum Paraclitum; da eis spiritum sapientiae et intellectus, spiritum consilii et fortitudinis, spiritum scientiae et pietatis; adimple eos spiritu timoris tui. Per Christum Dominum nostrum”; trans. Rite of Confirmation, §42, in *The Rites*, vol. 1, p. 500.

⁶⁵ Leo XIII, *Divinum illud munus*, §9.

⁶⁶ CCC 1717.

⁶⁷ *Praenotanda generalia*, De initiatione christiana, in *Ordo baptismi parvulorum*, editio typica altera (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986), §2, p. 7: “Donatione

strengthening, or augmenting the gifts of the Holy Spirit already received in baptism, confirmation effects “a new outpouring of the Spirit having for its object to bring to perfection the spiritual energies called forth in the soul by Baptism.”⁶⁸ In this way confirmation is the perfection and consummation of baptismal grace.⁶⁹

How, exactly, do the gifts of the Holy Spirit perfect one’s spiritual energies and enable the perfect life of virtue and holiness, the life of the beatitudes? The virtues are infused at baptism: the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity, along with the natural virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.⁷⁰ Human reason and will require the divine assistance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to realize, live, and perfect both the natural virtues and the theological virtues, as Jesuit Fr John Hardon explains:

Even the infused virtues are not enough. They do not, by themselves, so perfect a man on the road to heaven that he has no further need of being moved by the yet higher promptings of the Holy Spirit. For whether we consider human reason and will in their natural powers alone, or as elevated by the theological virtues, they are still very fallible and require help. Wisdom is against folly, understanding against dullness, counsel against rashness, fortitude against fears, knowledge against ignorance, piety against hardness of heart, and fear of God against pride. The gifts of the Holy Spirit supply this help by giving us remedies against these defects and making us amenable to the promptings of His grace.⁷¹

autem eiusdem Spiritus in Confirmatione signati, ita perfectius Domino configurantur et Spiritu Sancto implentur, ut, testimonium eius coram mundo perferentes, corpus Christi quamprimum ad plenitudinem adducant”; trans. Christian Initiation, General Introduction, §2, in *The Rites*, vol. 1, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), p. 119; see also Michael Kevin O’Doherty, *The Scholastic Teaching on the Sacrament of Confirmation*, Catholic University of America Studies in Sacred Theology (Second Series) 23 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1949), pp. 61–62.

⁶⁹ Connell, *De sacramentis ecclesiae*, vol. 1, p. 169.

⁷⁰ Council of Vienne, Decrees, 1, in Tanner, vol. 1, p. 361: “sanctifying grace and the virtues are conferred in baptism on both infants and adults.” On this point, the Council of Vienne is cited by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Infant Baptism *Pastoralis actio* (20 October 1980), §7, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 72 (1980), p. 1141. Considering the grace of baptism, CCC 1266 discusses sanctifying grace, the ability to believe in God, to hope in God, and to love God, along with an ability to grow in the moral virtues. See also Ludwig Ott on the effects of baptism in *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch (Rockford IL: TAN, 1974), p. 354: “inner sanctification by the infusion of sanctifying grace, with which the infused theological and moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost are always joined.”

⁷¹ John A. Hardon, *History and Theology of Grace: The Catholic Teaching on Divine Grace* (Ann Arbor MI: Sapientia, 2005), pp. 374–75; the *Epitome theologiae Christianae*, 8 (PL 178:1740), sometimes attributed to Peter Abelard, also portrays the grace of confirmation as counteracting the seven deadly vices.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit, then, enable the Christian to respond to God's grace, and therefore to overcome temptation and to live the life of holiness – the life of sanctity to which Christ calls all of his faithful.

The seven gifts, along with the supernatural Gift of the Holy Spirit Himself, together constitute the indispensable gift of the Holy Spirit that the Christian needs not only for salvation,⁷² but also to advance in the spiritual life. Such spiritual growth corresponds to the Lord's call that, as the Second Vatican Council insists, extends to all the faithful, whatever their condition or state: "be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48).⁷³ Living up to this call is possible through the gift given in confirmation, as is signified in the form: receive the seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴

As a final consideration, the Gift and gifts of the Holy Spirit imparted at confirmation build upon the foundation of sanctifying grace received at baptism. Just as the gift of the Holy Spirit already received at baptism is augmented or increased at confirmation, so too is sanctifying grace.⁷⁵ In addition, actual graces are infallibly offered through the virtue of confirmation. Such actual graces, along with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, constitute the Christian spiritual armor; they strengthen the faithful, enabling them to meet the challenges of defending and spreading the gospel.⁷⁶

SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND STRENGTHENING: A GRACE BOTH DEFENSIVE AND OFFENSIVE

In the succinct words of the Code of Canon Law, "The sacrament of confirmation strengthens the baptized and obliges them more firmly to be witnesses of Christ by word and deed and to spread and defend the faith."⁷⁷ The confirmed are obliged and enabled to spread and to defend faith in Christ. *Lumen gentium*, which the Code cites here,

⁷² See Hardon, *History and Theology of Grace*, p. 375, who follows St Thomas in considering the gifts of the Holy Spirit to be necessary for salvation.

⁷³ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, §11, in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 858: "Tot ac tantis salutaribus mediis muniti, christifideles omnes, cuiusvis conditionis ac status, ad perfectionem sanctitatis qua Pater ipse perfectus est, sua quisque via, a Domino vocantur."

⁷⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Divinae consortium naturae*, in Kaczynski, vol. 1, no. 148, §2600, p. 812: "ACCIPE SIGNACULUM DONI SPIRITUS SANCTI."

⁷⁵ Since sanctifying grace is already received at baptism, confirmation increases or augments sanctifying grace. See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IIIa, q. 72, art. 7, ed. De Rubeis, Billuart, et al., vol. 5, pp. 92–93; H. Lennerz, *De sacramento confirmationis*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Gregorian University, 1949), p. 47; O'Doherty, *Scholastic Teaching on Confirmation*, pp. 65–66; Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 365–66.

⁷⁶ Joh. B. Umberg, 'Confirmatione baptismus "perficitur",' *Ephemerides Theologiae Lovanienses* 1 (1924), pp. 514–15.

⁷⁷ 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, can. 879.

insists that the special grace of the Holy Spirit conferred at confirmation entails the strength both to promote and to defend the faith. “By the sacrament of confirmation,” the faithful “are endowed with a special strength of the Holy Spirit, and thus are more strictly obliged at once to spread and to defend the faith by word and by deed as true witnesses of Christ.”⁷⁸ According to the fifteenth-century Council of Florence, the anointing of the forehead with the sign of the cross symbolizes such strengthening and emboldening:

The effect of this sacrament is that a Christian should boldly confess the name of Christ, since the holy Spirit is given in this sacrament for strengthening just as he was given to the apostles on the day of Pentecost. Therefore the candidate is enjoined on the forehead, which is the seat of shame, not to shrink from confessing the name of Christ and especially his cross, which *is a stumbling block for Jews and a folly for gentiles* [1 Cor 1:23], according to the Apostle, and for this reason he is signed with the sign of the cross.⁷⁹

Note the twofold strength and obligation emphasized at both Florence and Vatican II. On the one hand, confirmation enables one to spread the faith by word and deed. On the other hand, it enables one to defend and protect the faith by word and deed, even in the face of radical opposition. To use a military or – perhaps more aptly today – sporting analogy, the grace of confirmation is both offensive and defensive.

The grace for defense strengthens one to overcome opposition to the faith in all its forms, including the temptations of the devil, the world, and the flesh.⁸⁰ In his encyclical on the Mystical Body of Christ, Pope Pius XII teaches: “By the chrism of Confirmation, the faithful are given added strength to protect and defend the Church,

⁷⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, §11, in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 857: “Sacramento confirmationis perfectius ecclesiae vinculantur, speciali Spiritus sancti robore dantur, sicque ad fidem tamquam veri testes Christi verbo et opere simul diffundendam et defendendam arctius obligantur”; my translation. Pope Paul VI cites this passage in *Divinae consortium naturae*, in Kaczynski, vol. 1, no. 148, §2595, p. 810; it is also cited in CCC 1285.

⁷⁹ Council of Basel-Ferrara-Florence-Rome, Session 8 (22 November 1439), Bull of Union with the Armenians, in Tanner, vol. 1, p. 544. O’Doherty, *Scholastic Teaching on Confirmation*, p. 72, observes that the council’s description of the effects of confirmation represents “an official recognition of the scholastic teaching” that he outlines in the preceding pages.

⁸⁰ Congregatio de Disciplina Sacramentorum, Decree *Spiritus Sancti munera*, in Braga and Bugnini, no. 38, §1809, p. 541: “quum admirabili sit adiumento ad acriter decertandum contra diaboli nequitiam, mundi et carnis illecebras; ad gratiae virtutumque omnium in terris, gloriaeque maius incrementum assequendum in coelis.” Davis, *Sacraments of Initiation*, p. 157, dismisses out of hand the notion that confirmation is “the sacrament of our personal struggle with sin,” arguing instead that the Eucharist and penance “provide the help to overcome sin after baptism.” This argument, however, is spurious; all of the sacraments are oriented towards overcoming sin, either by imparting sanctifying grace, preserving it, or restoring it.

their Mother, and the faith she has given them.”⁸¹ This teaching reflects Aquinas’ contention that in baptism one receives spiritual power to attain one’s own salvation, whereas in confirmation one receives power to engage in “the spiritual battle against the enemies of the faith.”⁸² The internal and external enemies of the faith might be summarized with the trilogy of world, flesh, and devil. According to the *Roman Catechism* of 1566, “by means of the Sacrament of chrism,” baptized Christians become “stronger to resist all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and the devil, while their minds are fully confirmed in faith to confess and glorify the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸³ The *Roman Catechism* goes on to explain, with an image drawn from the Council of Florence:

by this Sacrament the Holy Spirit infuses Himself into the souls of the faithful, and increases in them strength and fortitude to enable them, in the spiritual contest, to fight manfully and to resist their most wicked foes. Wherefore it is indicated that they are to be deterred by no fear or shame, the signs of which appear chiefly on the forehead, from the open confession of the name of Christ.⁸⁴

Similarly, the more recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the anointing of confirmation strengthens us “for the combat of this life.”⁸⁵ In the words of Alphonsus Liguori, the grace that confirmation imparts is “a special strength for fighting the battle of the Lord.”⁸⁶

This combat or life-long battle is not only defensive; it is also offensive or missionary. The offensive facet of the grace of confirmation may be considered under the rubric of the apostolate of the laity. The Second Vatican Council teaches that confirmation, along with the other sacraments of initiation, is the source of this apostolate.

Laypeople have their office and right to the apostolate from their union with Christ their head. They are brought into the mystical body of Christ by baptism, strengthened by the power of the Spirit in confirmation, and assigned to apostleship by the Lord himself. They are consecrated as a royal priesthood and a holy people (see 1 Pt 2, 4–10),

⁸¹ Pope Pius XII, Encyclical on the Mystical Body of Christ *Mystici Corporis Christi* (29 June 1943), §18, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 35, ser. 2, vol. 10 (1943), p. 201: “Confirmationis vero chrismate credentibus novum robur inditur, et Ecclesiam Matrem et quam ab ea acceperint fidem, strenue tueantur ac defendant.”

⁸² Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IIIa, q. 72, art. 5, ed. De Rubeis, Billuart, et al., vol. 5, p. 91.

⁸³ *The Roman Catechism: The Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*, trans. John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan (Rockford IL: TAN, 1982), p. 209.

⁸⁴ *Roman Catechism*, p. 211.

⁸⁵ CCC 1523: “illa Confirmationis nos ad huius vitae proelium roboraverat.”

⁸⁶ S. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, *Theologia moralis*, VI, tract. II, cap. II, dub. I, ed. Gaudé, vol. 3, §169, p. 155: “*Gratia*, id est robur speciale at praelianda praelia Domini”; see also O’Doherty, *Scholastic Teaching on Confirmation*, pp. 62–63.

so as to offer spiritual sacrifices in all their works and to bear witness to Christ throughout the world.⁸⁷

Thus the council associates confirmation with apostleship and with a consecration that is both royal and priestly, disposing the Christian to worship and bear witness to Christ. Writing before the council, Bernard Leeming also highlights the priestly nature of the character received in confirmation:

Christ's priesthood consists, not exclusively in offering the sacrifice of mankind to God, but includes also the bringing of the truth of God to mankind. Confirmation, giving a commission to share in Christ's work of bringing God's truth to men, is obviously a share in his priesthood.⁸⁸

Anointing signifies and effects the consecration whereby Christians are made to share more completely in the royal priesthood and mission of Jesus Christ and the fullness of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁹

Before proceeding to discuss this consecration more fully, the offensive and defensive grace of confirmation may be summarized with the words of the *Catechism*. Confirmation "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."⁹⁰

CONSECRATION FOR MISSION: CONFIRMATION AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE FAITHFUL

The Second Vatican Council insists that the lay faithful share in the Church's mission, and therefore in Christ's, insofar as they are commissioned "by the Lord himself through baptism and confirmation."⁹¹ Drawing from this passage, John Paul II links the sacraments of initiation with the Christian's share in Christ's threefold mission as priest, prophet, and king:

The participation of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King finds its source in the anointing of Baptism, its further development in Confirmation and its realization and dynamic sustenance in the Holy Eucharist. It is a participation given to each member of the lay faithful individually, in as much as each is one of

⁸⁷ Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam actuositatem* (18 November 1965), §3, in Tanner, vol. 2, pp. 982–83.

⁸⁸ Bernard Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology*, 2nd ed. (Westminster MD: Newman, 1960), p. 237.

⁸⁹ CCC 1294. Max Thurian, also writing before the council, expounds confirmation as a "new kind of consecration to the service of Christ and the Church," in *Consecration of the Layman*, pp. 83–94, here p. 83.

⁹⁰ CCC 1303, referencing *Lumen gentium*, §11.

⁹¹ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, §33, in Tanner, vol. 1, p. 876.

the many who form the one Body of the Lord: in fact, Jesus showers his gifts upon the Church which is his Body and his Spouse.⁹²

Assumed here is the Old Testament practice of consecrating priests, prophets, and kings with some sort of anointing.⁹³ Christ, in whom all priestly, prophetic, and kingly offices are fulfilled, is anointed by the Holy Spirit Himself. This Gift of the Holy Spirit, imparted through the chrism of confirmation, in turn “configures us to Christ anointed by the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁴

From this derives the significance of anointing with chrism, which constitutes part of the essential rite of confirmation. With supreme apostolic authority, Paul VI defines the essential rite in these terms: “The sacrament of confirmation is conferred through anointing with chrism on the forehead, which is done by the imposition of hand, and through the words: ‘Be sealed with [or receive] the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”⁹⁵ As the *Catechism* specifies, confirmation imparts an indelible spiritual mark (*signum spirituale indelebile*) or character (*character*) that perfects the common priesthood of the faithful received in baptism.⁹⁶ Confirmation more profoundly configures to Christ those who were raised to the royal priesthood through baptism.⁹⁷ This grace includes the “the power to profess faith in Christ publicly and as it were officially.”⁹⁸ Public profession of the faith, by the witness of a life in conformity with charity, or by the spoken word, is an essential part of the threefold mission of Christ to which the Christian is conformed in confirmation.

⁹² Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation On the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World *Christifidelis laici*, §14 (30 December 1988). Cf. *Christifidelis laici*, §22: “These ministries express and realize a participation in the priesthood of Jesus Christ that is different, not simply in degree but in essence, from the participation given to all the lay faithful through Baptism and Confirmation.” See also John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, §66 (22 January 1999).

⁹³ On the use of olive oil for the sacrament of confirmation in light of its natural qualities and biblical precedents, see David P. Lang, *Why Matter Matters: Philosophical and Scriptural Reflections on the Sacraments* (Huntington IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2002), pp. 95–123.

⁹⁴ Daniélou, *Bible and Liturgy*, p. 118.

⁹⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Divinae consortium naturae*, in Kaczynski, vol. 1, no. 148, §2600, p. 812: “SACRAMENTUM CONFIRMATIONIS CONFERTUR PER UNCTIONEM CHRISMATIS IN FRONTE, QUAE FIT MANUS IMPOSITIONE, ATQUE PER VERBA: ‘ACCIPERE SIGNACULUM DONI SPIRITUS SANCTI’”, my translation. See also CCC 1300.

⁹⁶ CCC 1304–5.

⁹⁷ CCC 1322: “Qui ad dignitatem sacerdotii regalis sunt per Baptismum elevati et profundius Christo per Confirmationem configurati, ipsum sacrificium Domini cum tota communitate per Eucharistiam participant.”

⁹⁸ CCC 1305, citing Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 72, art. 5, ad 2.

WHAT CONFIRMATION IS NOT

The task of articulating the theology of confirmation is pressing because, in its absence, the sacrament is at the mercy of anthropological sciences or personal opinions.⁹⁹ This is not to say that psychological, pedagogical, or social human sciences cannot make a positive contribution to the practice of confirmation; they can and do.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, a fitting appreciation of the divine reality of confirmation is the proper task of theology. Such appreciation demands a reconsideration of common methods of preparing baptized children and adolescents for the reception of the sacrament. To this end, a brief treatment of what confirmation is not will prove helpful for highlighting what it is.

A Mere Appendage of the Baptismal Rite

Aidan Kavanagh, in an essay first published in the journal *Worship* in 1984, suggested that confirmation in the early Church was originally a mere dismissal rite following the ceremonies of baptism.¹⁰¹ Despite the fact that Kavanagh's argument is unconvincing when read critically, it exerted a major influence upon the discussion and practice of confirmation in subsequent decades. Kavanagh's study lent credibility to a working presupposition of Protestant historiography: confirmation was not originally a sacrament distinct from baptism, and its shaky historical grounds engender theological and pastoral problems.¹⁰² Kavanagh was not the only or the first Catholic author to embrace this fundamentally Protestant historical theory in the post-Vatican II decades,¹⁰³ although his reputation as a professor at Yale lent the theory considerable credibility. On the basis of such

⁹⁹ See Triacca, 'Per una trattazione organica', p. 147.

¹⁰⁰ More often than not, however, theologians who appeal to the anthropological sciences do not demonstrate direct contact with those sciences, but rather presuppositions regarding them. Consider, for example, Gerard Fourez, *Sacraments and Passages: Celebrating the Tensions of Modern Life* (Notre Dame IN: Ave Maria Press, 1983). Despite Fourez's professed use of "social sciences as well as theology" (p. 10), one is hard-pressed to find a single reference to an actual study from the field of social sciences; certainly the chapter on confirmation (pp. 87–96) is bereft of any such citation.

¹⁰¹ Aidan Kavanagh, 'Confirmation: A Suggestion from Structure', in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 148–58; the article originally appeared in *Worship* 58 (1984), pp. 386–95.

¹⁰² Perhaps most influentially, Fisher, *Confirmation Then and Now*, pp. 126–36; for a more recent statement of the Protestant consensus, see James A. Whyte, 'Confirmation/ Admission to the Lord's Supper', in *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. 40: "Once the rite of confirmation had been separated from Baptism, the problem was to find a meaning for it." By contrast, consider the markedly Catholic history of confirmation in Coleman, *The Minister of Confirmation*, pp. 9–35, and the patristic witnesses gathered in Lennerz, *De sacramento confirmationis*, pp. 9–16.

¹⁰³ See, e.g., Bausch, *A New Look*, p. 104.

arguments, many came to regard confirmation as an illegitimate offspring of baptism that has no unique claim to existence as a distinct rite, much less as a sacrament. One occasionally can discern such views even among bishops.¹⁰⁴

As intimated above, the Church had encountered this theory before. In 1907, along with other errors of the Modernists, Pope St Pius X condemned the following assertions: “There is nothing to prove that the rite of the Sacrament of Confirmation was employed by the Apostles. The formal distinction of the two Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation does not pertain to the history of primitive Christianity.”¹⁰⁵ If the sacrament of confirmation is indeed a sacrament of the New Law instituted by Christ, then it necessarily existed during the time of the apostles. Paul VI affirms that God inaugurated confirmation on the day of Pentecost:

Peter regarded the Spirit who had thus come down upon the apostles as the gift of the Messianic age (see Acts 2:17–18). Then those who believed the apostles’ preaching were baptized and they too received “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). From that time on the apostles, in fulfillment of Christ’s wish, imparted to the newly baptized by the laying on of hands the gift of the Spirit that completes the grace of baptism. This is why the Letter to the Hebrews listed among the first elements of Christian instruction the teaching about baptisms and the laying on of hands (Heb 6:2). This laying on of hands is rightly recognized by reason of Catholic tradition as the beginning of the sacrament of confirmation, which in a certain way perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church.¹⁰⁶

The historical theory advanced by Kavanagh and others after Paul VI wrote these words is no mere argument regarding the structure of an ancient rite. Rather, the theory dynamites the scriptural basis of confirmation as well as the doctrine clearly articulated by the Council of Trent that there are seven sacraments of the New Law. One who insists upon the fundamental identity of baptism and confirmation, and not merely their primitive historical unity, must either deny the teaching authority of the Church or equivocate in some nominalist fashion.¹⁰⁷ The faithful must beware lest the assumption that

¹⁰⁴ Geoffrey Robinson (Bishop of Sydney), ‘Confirmation: A Bishop’s Dilemma’, *Worship* 78 (2004), pp. 50–60.

¹⁰⁵ Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernists *Lamentabili sane* (3 July 1907), §44, in *The Popes Against Modern Errors*, ed. Anthony J. Mioni, Jr. (Rockford IL: TAN, 1999), pp. 177–78.

¹⁰⁶ *Divinae consortium naturae*, in Kaczynski, vol. 1, no. 148, §2594, p. 809; trans. International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. 1 (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), pp. 473–74.

¹⁰⁷ Karl Rahner is more perspicacious in *A New Baptism in the Spirit: Confirmation Today*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (Denville NJ: Dimension, 1975), p. 11: “. . . the Spirit-conferring imposition of hands cannot be related to any express mandate of Jesus. This of

confirmation is not a sacrament in its own right drive any pastoral initiative that insists upon the celebration of baptism and confirmation in one integral ceremony.

Confirmation as Human Effort: The Activist Interpretation

Many programs preparing youth for confirmation demand service projects and catechetical classes. Although these may be legitimate means of preparing, they should not be considered necessary criteria for reception of the sacrament. The impression must be avoided that confirmation is earned through community service or that it is a graduation program for completing a course in catechesis.¹⁰⁸ Bishop Alvaro Corrada of Tyler, Texas, aptly warns:

If one is not careful, service projects before Confirmation can seem to be demonstrating an ability to do things, and Confirmation becomes a type of graduation into an adult faith. This abuse of pragmatism can result in failing to recognize that the desire “to do” or to praise God is itself a grace, as is the capacity to do good.¹⁰⁹

Both the desire and the capacity to do good are gifts of God’s grace, a grace which precedes good actions and which is especially poured out in confirmation. Moreover, the claim that confirmation was or is “nothing but a form of religious instruction in which those approaching adolescence presented an account of their faith publicly to the church” is specifically condemned by the Council of Trent.¹¹⁰

Also rooted in an activist anthropological and psychological starting point is the claim that confirmation is a moment of personal choice for or reaffirmation of one’s baptismal faith. On the basis of this theory, confirmation should be delayed until the teenager or young adult is able to make a free and mature commitment to his or her baptismal faith. Monika Hellwig, for example, is sympathetic with this theory:

course is bound to be of lesser moment today than it was in the age of the Reformation, because from the viewpoint of the history of dogma and in the light of the decisions made by the Council of Trent, we cannot today deny the institution of the Sacrament of Confirmation by Jesus in the Catholic understanding of things.” In the final analysis, however, Rahner like Kavanagh appears to consider confirmation superfluous, since the grace of confirmation – the promise and the Word – is already received in baptism (p. 27).

¹⁰⁸ This point is not lost, for example, in the ‘Pastoral Guidelines for Celebrating the Sacrament of Confirmation’ of the Archdiocese of St Louis (1998), 6: “An integral part of preparation for this sacrament is the candidate’s engaging in Christian service To offset the impression that Confirmation marks a ‘graduation’ or end point rather than a beginning of fuller Christian life, service should be continued during the eighth grade,” following confirmation in the seventh grade.

¹⁰⁹ Bishop Alvaro Corrada, Pastoral Reflection on the Sacrament of Confirmation (7 October 2005), 21, on <dioceseoftyler.org>.

¹¹⁰ Council of Trent, *Canones de sacramento confirmationis*, 1, ed. and trans. Tanner, vol. 2, p. 686.

Those who have been concerned with pastoral theology and practice in the context of education, action, or psychology have been pleading for a much later age for confirmation. They have suggested that since baptism has not been a personal choice for most Christians today and since personal choice is quite essential to the task of being a Christian, we really need a moment of personal choice that can be publicly celebrated. Confirmation seems to offer just this. If it is the sacrament of maturity as a Christian, the sacrament of active assumption of Church membership and apostolic responsibilities, then there is much to be said for waiting until the candidate is both ready and truly willing to make a fully adult commitment. That would be in his late teens or early twenties and sometimes much later.¹¹¹

Such a theory implies, as Hellwig explicitly claims, that a “child is indeed a passive Christian.”¹¹² This is tantamount to denying that one has free will before reaching a point of physical or emotional maturity. Such a theory also denies that children who have reached the age of reason are immediately called upon to assume Church membership and apostolic responsibilities, or are capable of “a full personal participation in this sacrament.”¹¹³ Correctly assuming that people become capable of making life-changing commitments at various ages, this theory fails to recognize the necessity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit for making and keeping noble, chaste, and holy commitments.

Corrada also addresses this trend of treating confirmation as chiefly a personal choice to commit to one’s baptismal faith:

Confirmation is not about an individual deciding to embrace the faith of Baptism. It is not a human act similar to that of non-Catholic Christians who, perhaps in their early teens, choose to publicly profess that they have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Sacraments are primarily about God choosing and embracing us not the other way around. In baptism, God marks us unconditionally as a member of His family and coheir with Christ, children by adoption. (see Galatians 4:5–7) Once baptized, at whatever age, we can no more choose to cease being a child of God than we can choose to cease being the child of our natural mother. Confirmation is not our “confirming” Baptism or our faith in Christ; it is Christ confirming us in the Christian life we are already living.¹¹⁴

Such an interpretation reflects the Church’s conviction that confirmation is a divinely established reality rather than a mere human act. Corrada strikingly insists that every moment is apt for embracing the

¹¹¹ Monika Hellwig, *The Meaning of the Sacraments* (Dayton OH: Pflaum, 1972), pp. 27–28.

¹¹² Hellwig, *Meaning of Sacraments*, p. 28.

¹¹³ See Davis, *Sacraments of Initiation*, p. 140.

¹¹⁴ Corrada, *Pastoral Reflection*, 22.

faith, while the preeminent sacramental expression of this embracing takes place in the Eucharist: “Each instant calls us to embrace Christ as He has embraced us. Above all, the celebration of the Eucharist is an appropriate sacramental moment for the individual to renew the commitment to service in the Church and in the community for the common good.”¹¹⁵ One baptized as an infant should confirm and renew the faith continuously, and from the earliest moment possible, which more or less coincides with attainment of the age of reason. The Mass is a privileged place for doing so, but a living faith should characterize the entire life of the Christian – child, teenager, and adult.

A Catholic Bar Mitzvah or Coming of Age Ceremony

In the Latin Rite, to receive confirmation licitly outside the danger of death, the recipient must meet five basic criteria: have the use of reason, be baptized and not confirmed, suitably instructed, properly disposed, and capable of renewing the baptismal promises.¹¹⁶ Being properly disposed includes being in a state of grace, so the sacrament of penance ought to be received before confirmation when it is separated in time from baptism.¹¹⁷ Although the Roman Church does not oppose the practices of eastern Churches that confirm infants immediately after baptism, at the same time it “generally requires that candidates for Confirmation be old enough to be able to distinguish between good and evil.”¹¹⁸ The magisterium has consistently encouraged the faithful to be strengthened by confirmation near the age of discretion or reason, that is, around the age of seven.¹¹⁹ While affirming this practice, the revised Rite of Confirmation allowed conferences of bishops to determine another age.¹²⁰ The National Conference of Catholic Bishops approved a norm allowing for

¹¹⁵ Corrada, Pastoral Reflection, 22.

¹¹⁶ 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, can. 889.

¹¹⁷ CCC 1310, 1319.

¹¹⁸ Pope Benedict XIV, Encyclical on the Observance of Oriental Rites *Allatae sunt*, §22 (26 July 1755), in *The Papal Encyclicals 1740–1878*, ed. Claudia Carlen Ihm (Wilmington NC: McGrath, 1981), p. 59.

¹¹⁹ 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, can. 891; Congregatio de Disciplina Sacramentorum, Decree *Spiritus Sancti munera*, in Braga and Bugnini, no. 38, §1810, p. 541: “Quamquam nihil intentatum relinquunt vigiles animarum rectores ut, quantum fieri potest, baptizati omnes hoc sacramento rite muniantur et quidem vix cum ad aetatem rationis participem pervenerint, scilicet circa septennium: quod profecto septennium antevertere licet, prout expresse cavetur canone 788...”; see also CCC 1307. For a fuller listing of relevant magisterial texts, see Richard P. Moudry, ‘A Parish Resource for Confirmation: What Does Vatican II Say?’ in *Confirmed as Children, Affirmed as Teens*, ed. James A. Wilde (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990), pp. 27–33.

¹²⁰ Introduction, Rite of Confirmation, §11, in *The Rites*, vol. 1, p. 483; 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, can. 891.

wide latitude: “between the age of discretion and only about sixteen years of age.”¹²¹ Such allowances can be made for good pastoral reasons.¹²² Yet even where local national, diocesan, or parish guidelines stipulate a later age for the sacrament, sacred ministers cannot deny confirmation to anyone who meets the canonical criteria listed above.¹²³

Therefore the candidate for confirmation need not be well beyond the age of discretion. Spiritual growth or maturity is not necessarily reflected in physiological growth or maturity.¹²⁴

Thus it is not accurate to connect Confirmation to maturity in the psychological sense so that it would best [be] given at an age of social maturity. The Sacrament of Confirmation strengthens the person to bear witness, rather than expresses the person’s determination to bear witness, to his faith. This strengthening is something that can be fittingly given at any age.¹²⁵

Reception of confirmation during the teen years has become common and even encouraged only since the 1970s. Yet arguments for teenage confirmation spring from theories of catechesis ostensibly drawn from the human sciences that remain to be proven, not from any teachings of the Church or sound theological arguments.¹²⁶

The human sciences with their various theories of psychosocial development provide no clear answers to the question of the age of confirmation, but only helpful observations. Here is a basic description of psychosocial development during “middle childhood” (7 to 11 years of age):

Children during these years begin to employ a complex and sophisticated self-evaluation that results in a more balanced assessment of personal strengths and weakness. They recognize that they have both desirable and undesirable qualities

These changes occur in the context of a growing social self as children more and more perceive themselves as a part of their social context¹²⁷

¹²¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Canon 891 - Age for Confirmation, US Bishops’ Complementary Norm, signed by Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza (21 August 2001).

¹²² J. D. Crichton, *Christian Celebration: The Sacraments* (London: Chapman, 1979), p. 111.

¹²³ See the letter of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Prot. N. 2607/98/L (18 December 1999), signed by Cardinal Jorge A. Medina Estévez and printed in *Notitiae* 35 (November – December 1999); in addition to the canons on confirmation, the decision references 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, can. 843 §1.

¹²⁴ CCC 1308.

¹²⁵ Corrada, Pastoral Reflection, 17.

¹²⁶ See Paul Turner, *Confirmation: The Baby in Solomon’s Court*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2006), pp. 97–102.

¹²⁷ John S. Dacey and John F. Travers, *Human Development across the Lifespan*, 5th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p. 246.

Furthermore, middle childhood is a key period of moral development, during which “children search for friends and want to become accepted members of a group,” and the habits of peers exert strong influence upon the actions of the child.¹²⁸ The influence of peers, however, peaks during adolescence (12 to 18 years). Around grades eight and nine, “conformity to peers – especially to their antisocial standards – peaks.”¹²⁹ Furthermore, adolescence is marked by a flurry of “fast-paced change” in all areas of development, most significantly marked today in many instances by sexual activity.¹³⁰ Hence this fifth developmental stage is characterized as a period of “identity confusion,” during which adolescents “experiment with the numerous roles and identities they draw from the surrounding culture.”¹³¹

Added to these psychosocial theories, one might consider a common experience of parents.¹³² Children in middle childhood are more open to instruction and the guidance of authority figures at home, Church, or state. Adolescents, by contrast, exhibit marked tendencies towards rebellion and skepticism with regard to authority figures, including the parents who wish to share their faith with them. The words often attributed to Mark Twain about his father’s wisdom are apt in this regard: “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learnt in 7 years.”¹³³ Studies confirm this observation: “Conflict with parents often escalates during early adolescence, remains somewhat stable during the high school years, and then lessens as the adolescent reaches 17 to 20 years of age.”¹³⁴

Although such considerations drawn from experience and the human sciences cannot prescribe or determine any best age for confirmation, they point more in the direction of middle childhood than adolescence. Middle childhood is marked by social and psychological growth, and by intense development of one’s personality and self-awareness. It is also a time when children, on the whole, are more open to the positive influence of parents, peers, and educators, including clergy and catechists. The supernatural grace of confirmation granted in early middle childhood could lend to the formation of an authentically Christian identity and spirit in the child during this time of fervent psychosocial development. This same supernatural

¹²⁸ Dacey and Travers, *Human Development*, pp. 249, 253–55.

¹²⁹ John W. Santrock, *Children*, 7th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), pp. 42, 540.

¹³⁰ Dacey and Travers, *Human Development*, p. 330.

¹³¹ Santrock, *Children*, pp. 42, 540.

¹³² The author of this article is the father of six children, and so claims personal experience in this regard.

¹³³ I have been unable to determine the original source of this quotation.

¹³⁴ Santrock, *Children*, p. 549.

grace could then perfect the virtues of the young Catholic even before the onset of the trials and temptations that accompany adolescence – including identity confusion, experimentation (often sexual), and conflict with authority – that are not conducive to the proper disposition for benefitting from the sacrament. These observations from social sciences correlate with the Latin Rite’s discipline that the recipient of confirmation need only have reached catechetical age or the age of reason, which occurs early in middle childhood, around the age of seven.

Some sort of Christian celebration of the passage from childhood to adolescence may be pastorally desirable and spiritually fruitful. Furthermore, ongoing catechesis and Christian formation of young Catholics as they go through these times of psychosocial change is imperative. Along these lines, the Hispanic American custom of the *Quinceañera* might be adapted to various local communities, and the liturgical year provides excellent material for ongoing faith formation.¹³⁵ The sacrament of confirmation, however, must not be reduced to a rite of passage or an incentive to keep teenagers in catechism classes.¹³⁶

A One-Shot Deal

Notions that confirmation is merely a rite of passage or an occasion to affirm one’s baptismal faith betray a view of the sacrament as the work of a moment, which has value or force only during the time of its celebration. One holding such a view with any logical consistency will criticize the analogy that describes confirmation in terms of spiritual “growth” – the analogy that Paul VI employs when he promulgates the revised rite of confirmation.¹³⁷ Wilhelm Breuning provides an example; he criticizes that notion that confirmation leads to the growth of baptismal grace. “Such an interpretation,” writes Breuning, “suffers from the difficulty of explaining the meaning and significance of an eventful, once-and-for-all growth of this type, for

¹³⁵ See, for e.g., David M. Beaudoin, ‘Celebration of Passage: Childhood to Adolescence’, in *Confirmed as Children, Affirmed as Teens*, ed. James A. Wilde (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990), pp. 35–42.

¹³⁶ The question of the order of the sacraments of initiation arises, although it is beyond the scope of this paper. My research supports efforts to lower the age of reception of confirmation for those baptized as infants – a pastoral move that naturally might be accompanied by the administration of confirmation before the reception of first holy communion. A number of dioceses have initiated this process: see James A. Wilde (ed.), *When Should We Confirm? The Order of Initiation* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989), and Stella Maria Jeffrey, ‘Christian Initiation: A Pastoral Perspective on Restored Order’, *Antiphon* 9.3 (2005), pp. 245–52.

¹³⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Divinae consortium naturae*, in Kaczynski, vol. 1, no. 148, §2591, p. 808.

growth is a continuous development through the living power of a beginning.”¹³⁸

Breuning’s insight is correct, although he overlooks the significance of the character imparted in confirmation. According to the teaching articulated, among other places, by the ecumenical Council of Florence in 1439, confirmation imparts an indelible seal or character on the soul.¹³⁹ The seal (*sigillum*) imprinted by confirmation “marks our total belonging to Christ, our enrollment in his service for ever, as well as the promise of divine protection in the great eschatological trial.”¹⁴⁰ Although this seal or indelible character is indeed imparted in a moment, the grace it pledges abides. This grace enables and accompanies the growth and perfection of the spiritual and moral life of the Christian that began at baptism.

In addition to the everlasting character imparted in confirmation, a new and ongoing relationship with one particular member of the faithful is contracted – the spiritual kinship (*cognatio spiritualis*) effected between the confirmand and his or her sponsor.¹⁴¹ Sponsors, according to the Rite of Confirmation, will help the confirmed “to fulfill their baptismal promises faithfully under the influence of the Holy Spirit whom they have received.”¹⁴² The sponsor has an ongoing responsibility “to see that the confirmed person acts as a true witness to Christ and faithfully fulfills the obligations connected with this sacrament.”¹⁴³

In light of the *sigillum* and, to a lesser extent but nonetheless worthy of note, the *cognatio spiritualis*, confirmation effects an ongoing spiritual reality. As Colman O’Neill comments, “too much should not be made of the passing ceremony as a unique occasion of grace, though nothing prevents its being such.”¹⁴⁴ Confirmation is no mere passing event for which the momentary social and psychological situation of the recipient is all-important. Especially from the perspective of the character that endures as a pledge of perennially offered grace

¹³⁸ Wilhelm Breuning, ‘Baptism and Confirmation: The Two Sacraments of Initiation’, in *Adult Baptism and the Catechumenate*, ed. Johannes Wagner et al., *Concilium: Theology in the Age of Renewal* 22 (New York: Paulist Press, 1967), p. 99.

¹³⁹ Council of Basel-Ferrara-Florence-Rome, Session 8 (22 November 1439), Bull of Union with the Armenians, in Tanner, vol. 1, p. 542: “Inter haec sacramenta tria sunt, baptismus, confirmatio et ordo, que characterem, id est spirituale quoddam signum a ceteris distinctivum imprimunt in anima indelebile. Unde in eadem persona non reiterantur.”

¹⁴⁰ CCC 1296, see also 1295 and 1317.

¹⁴¹ Alphonsus Liguori lists this as the third effect of confirmation, after the character and grace, in *Theologia moralis*, VI, tract. II, cap. II, dub. I, ed. Gaudé, vol. 3, §169, p. 155: “Effectus est Cognatio spiritualis, eodem modo quo dictum est de Bapt.”

¹⁴² Introduction, Rite of Confirmation, §5, in *The Rites*, vol. 1, p. 480.

¹⁴³ 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, can. 892.

¹⁴⁴ Colman E. O’Neill, *Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments* (Wilmington DE: Glazier, 1983), p. 201. O’Neill continues: “The abiding sacrament possesses that dynamic quality that the person who bears it gives it; in this way it is related to the constantly recurring sacrament of the Eucharist . . .”

from which the Christian should constantly draw, confirmation is an ongoing, living reality that enables continuous, life-long growth in Christian virtue.

CONCLUDING APPLICATIONS¹⁴⁵

Far from being a sacrament without a theology, confirmation enjoys a rich development in the teachings of the Church. This study has gleaned the essentials of those teachings, particularly on the question of the effects of confirmation, with special attention paid in this regard to the minister of the sacrament. It concludes with two practical pastoral applications.

The first application regards the minister of the sacrament. On biblical, historical, and theological grounds, the bishop's prerogative as ordinary minister of confirmation must be emphasized. The apostles received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and in turn passed it on by the laying of hands. Christ entrusts the task of continuing to impart the Holy Spirit to the bishops precisely as successors of the apostles. Moreover, the bishop preserves the unity of the local church and its communion with the universal Church, and from this derive the ecclesial ramifications of confirmation. Through sacramental contact with the bishop, the confirmand's bond with the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church is perfected. On the experiential level, this contact should also be encouraged if only because it is the sole occasion on which many Catholics encounter a bishop face-to-face. This is not to deny that a priest can validly administer confirmation. Nonetheless, the administration of confirmation by a priest is canonically extraordinary and ought to be the exception rather than the rule in thought, practice, and experience.

The second concluding observation regards the effect of confirmation on the level of grace offered in an ongoing manner through the indelible character imparted by the sacrament. In light of this effect, deficiencies stemming from errors or one-sided theoretical emphases become evident in common catechesis and pastoral practice. Such deficiencies can be avoided by appropriating correctives to a series of prominent opinions. Confirmation is not a mere appendage of the baptismal rite, which should be joined and amalgamated with it at all costs, including marginalization of the bishop's role. Confirmation is not properly understood as the fruit of human effort or as

¹⁴⁵ I express my thanks to colleagues who have reviewed drafts of this essay: Dr Robert Fastiggi, Dr John Gresham, Msgr James Ramaccotti, Fr Samuel Weber O.S.B., and Dr Lawrence J. Welch. Helpful comments were received from the audiences to whom earlier versions of this essay were presented, first at the Gateway Liturgical Conference of September 2008 in St Louis, and subsequently to the members of the St Louis Society of Catholic Theologians in November of the same year.

a coming of age ceremony marking teenage life transitions. Confirmation's significance cannot be limited to a moment in which one reaffirms baptismal faith, and it must not detract from the continuous affirmation of faith that should characterize the Christian's entire life.

What, then, is confirmation? A fruitful theology of confirmation begins with the twofold Gift of the Holy Spirit imparted in the sacrament – that is, the Holy Spirit Himself and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. The perfection of virtue and holiness in the Christian life depends upon this Gift. The defensive and offensive grace of confirmation also empowers the Christian to protect and defend the faith as well as to promote it and bear witness to Christ. Conformed through the Gift and gifts of the Holy Spirit to Christ as priest, prophet, and king, the baptized and confirmed believer is given a new and greater disposition for divine worship, and a deeper share in and ability to carry out the mission that Christ entrusted to the Church.

Careful consideration of the theology of confirmation, drawing from the teachings of the magisterium, strongly suggests that the baptized Christian should receive confirmation upon reaching the age of reason (or earlier, as among eastern Churches), not later.¹⁴⁶ Upon reaching the age of reason, the Christian experiences temptations and attacks on virtue and on faith. Therefore upon reaching the age of reason the Christian needs the grace to defend and preserve personal faith and morality, to defend the Church and, more closely united to the Church, to undertake Christ's mission to evangelize or witness to the truth – even if only in the classroom and on the playground. The infallible extension of grace and the divine initiative of the sacrament of confirmation come from Christ through the Church, and must not be despised or put off in favor of any ill-proven historical, sociological, or psychological theories. Delaying or omitting confirmation may prove disastrous for the faith of the individual baptized Christian and the life of the Church as a whole, and undermines the Church's divinely instituted “mission of announcing the kingdom of Christ and of God and of inaugurating it among all peoples.”¹⁴⁷

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¹⁴⁶ Connell, *De sacramentis ecclesiae*, vol. 1, p. 166: “susceptio Confirmationis in aetate infantile est valde utilis, ut per gratiam roborantem Spiritus Sancti praevenerentur etiam primi incursus mundi et diaboli.”

¹⁴⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, §5, in Tanner, vol. 2, p. 851.