

Frequently Asked Questions about the Sacrament of Confirmation

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What is a Sacrament? An efficacious sign of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. (CCC Glossary) Since Sacraments are signs of grace instituted by Christ, they cannot be changed or eliminated as such. The administration of the sacraments is regulated by the Church and cannot be altered by bishop, priest, deacons or lay people.

How is grace given through sacramental signs? Jesus Christ continues his priestly ministry in a special way through the sacraments. “From the moment that the sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and His Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them.” (CCC 1128) “Sacramental grace” is the grace of the Holy Spirit, given by Christ and proper to each sacrament. The Spirit heals and transforms those who receive Him by conforming them to the Son of God. The fruit of the sacramental life is that the Spirit of adoption makes the faithful partakers in the divine nature by uniting them in a living union with the only Son, the Savior. (CCC 1128)

What is grace? The free and undeserved gift that God gives us to respond to our vocation to become his adopted children. (CCC Glossary) Grace is a sharing in the life and love which is God. (CCC 1997) “Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adopted sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.” (CCC 1996, Cf Jn 1:12ff; 17:3 Rom 8:14ff; 2 Peter 1:3-4)

What is Confirmation? One of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation, together with Baptism and Eucharist. Confirmation completes the grace of Baptism by a special out pouring of the Holy Spirit, which seals or “confirms” the baptized in union with Christ and equip them for active participation in the worship and apostolic life of the Church. (CCC Glossary)

What is the effect of Confirmation? Or

What is the “special out pouring of the Holy Spirit”? This can be looked at as two fold: the Holy Spirit confirms us (brings us more fully) into the apostolic mission of the Church, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit help the baptized person overcome the tendency to sin which remains in each of us, even after sin is removed in Baptism.

I had heard that in Confirmation a person makes a personal commitment to the promises made for them in Baptism and takes on an adult responsibility to be of service to the mission of Christ. Is this what the Church really believes? No, in fact the Eucharist is really the sacrament in which we personally affirm our commitment to Christ and the call of our Baptism. It is also in the Eucharist that we are sent out into the world to give witness. The end of Mass is a commissioning or a sending forth, “go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

What is the “apostolic life of the Church”? The living of the Christian faith as handed on to us from the Apostles whom Christ selected, trained, and commissioned. This includes worship of God (the Mass and the sacraments) and the service of others for the love of God. Bishops are successors of the apostolic college founded by Christ – continuing in our day the “apostolic life” of the Church he founded.

Why is the Bishop the ordinary minister of Confirmation? The Bishop, as successor to the Apostles, is a visible link to the Apostolic faith and to the visible communion of the Church. Hence, the Bishop is the ordinary minister of Confirmation. Presbyters who collaborate with the Bishop in the apostolic ministry entrusted to him, can at times be called upon to confer the sacrament of Confirmation by delegation from the Bishop.

Has Confirmation been celebrated the same way for 2,000 years? While Confirmation has been celebrated since the time of the Apostles, in part the external format for the way of celebrating has changed over the years. In establishing the sacraments Christ entrusts the particulars of their administration to the Church.

Is it best to celebrate Confirmation sometime after First Communion? For baptized Catholics it is legitimate to celebrate Confirmation after First Communion, but it is not the “best” practice. Until 100 years ago, Confirmation and First Communion would have been celebrated at the same time. In *Quam Singulari* (1906) Pope Pius X approved that First Communion should be given to children at about seven years of age. At this time it became common practice for Confirmation to come several years after First Eucharist. But this practice fails to connect Confirmation appropriately to the Eucharist, which is the sign of full Communion. In RCIA, for example, the Church insists that Confirmation should ordinarily precede reception of First Communion for those over the age of reason (about seven years of age).

It is good to celebrate Confirmation at an older age so that people will continue to come to Religious Education, right? No. Sacraments are not a prize to be used to motivate Catholics to receive catechesis. All those who are confirmed should be continuing to grow in their faith. Sadly, many adults learned that they didn’t have to study their faith once they had “gotten” Confirmation. Looking at the sacraments as a type of graduation is counter-productive. Preparation for a sacrament should lead people to a deeper conversion, a deeper response to the Call to Holiness in their life. Preparation should not be a set of hoops one has to go through to get a sacrament. After Confirmation opportunities need to be provided for both young and old to continue their journey as a Christian disciple.

Was it “wrong” for a Catholic to be Confirmed after they celebrated First Communion? No, provided the sacrament was celebrated in accord with the rituals and directives of the Church. The Sacrament of Confirmation may be validly received after the Eucharist. The proposed pastoral practice will be made to more fittingly initiate a Catholic into the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Throughout the years the Church has welcomed authentic developments in the practice of celebrating the sacraments.