

## THE SACRAMENTS: II—CONFIRMATION

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**B**APTISM joins us to Christ and allows us to share his divine life. It is the Holy Spirit who brings this new life to a Christian—‘if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his’ (Rom. 8, 9). This close relationship between baptism and the gift of the Spirit was indicated by our Lord, who coming up out of the Jordan waters ‘saw the heavens opened and the Spirit as a dove descending and remaining on him’ (Mark 1, 10). The Spirit which filled Christ fills us too when we are baptized, and unites us as members of Christ to our head: ‘as the body is one and has many members . . . so also is Christ. For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether bond or free’ (I Cor. 12, 12-13). From these and similar passages it is clear that baptism is the source of Christian life, which is the life of the Spirit.

At the same time it is also the case that the other sacraments produce fresh outpourings of the Spirit throughout our lives. This association is especially close in the sacrament of Confirmation, which we must now consider. The scriptures in fact always link confirmation with baptism, calling it a baptism of the Spirit. Our Lord had said at his Ascension, ‘You shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence’ (Acts 1, 5), echoing the words of the Baptist, ‘He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire’ (Luke 3, 16). The same idea lies behind the prophecy of Joel, ‘I will pour out of my spirit upon all flesh’ (quoted Acts 2, 17) which was fulfilled when the Spirit came upon the apostles with a ‘sound—as of a mighty wind’ and a vision of ‘parted tongues, as it were of fire’ (Acts 2, 2-3). This renewal of the Spirit at Pentecost to the apostles who had already received it—‘He breathed upon them and he said to them: Receive the Holy Ghost’ (John 21, 22)—is the key to understanding the sacrament of Confirmation which it typifies.

Our Lord had given the explanation of what was to come about at Pentecost when he said, ‘You shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you, and you shall be witnesses unto

me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the uttermost part of the earth' (Acts I, 8). The Church was about to begin its world-wide expansion, but this could only come about through the power of the Spirit. St Luke's history of the early Church is precisely an account of the activity of the Holy Spirit among men. It is noticeable how, from the day of Pentecost onwards, all the decisive steps in the expansion are attributed to the work of the Spirit, explicit reference being made as the missionaries pass successively into Samaria (Acts 6, 5 leading to 8, 1—cf. 8, 29), Antioch and the Gentiles (11, 15-20), Asia Minor (13, 21), Greece (16, 6-9), and finally Rome itself (19, 21). At Pentecost the Spirit had turned the apostles into witnesses of Christ to every nation; by their words, speaking in every tongue 'the wonderful works of God' (Acts 2, 11), by their sufferings, and even by their death as in the case of Stephen. The external signs, the wind and fire, the speaking with tongues and prophesying, were indications of the new part that the Spirit was playing in the lives of these men. At baptism he had been given to free them personally from sin by uniting them to Christ; now he had a new function, making them Christ's witnesses to the world.

The apostles in their turn had the power to bring about this renewal of the Spirit by laying their hands upon the baptized. There are two occasions where St Luke explicitly makes reference to this rite of confirmation. After the Samaritans had been baptized by the deacon Philip, they were sent two apostles 'who, when they were come, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Ghost. For he was not as yet come upon any of them: but they were only baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands upon them and they received the Holy Ghost' (Acts 8, 15-17). Undoubtedly the Holy Spirit had sanctified them at baptism, but he had not yet come upon them with external signs for the public work they had to do. This is also clear at Ephesus, where 'having heard these things, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had imposed his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied' (Acts 19, 5-6); just as the apostles themselves had done on the day of Pentecost.

Confirmation today is no longer accompanied by outward signs of the workings of the Spirit such as these; even in the

first days of the Church, St Paul was concerned to stress their comparative unimportance (1 Cor., chs. 12-14). They represented only one aspect of the Spirit's power to make men witnesses to Christ; he brings interior gifts above all. These gifts of the Spirit which we now share with Christ are described by Isaias: 'The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and of godliness. And he shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord' (Is. 11, 2-3) The Spirit with his gifts comes to us at baptism, as we have seen, but confirmation strengthens us to use them. Normally speaking, baptism is received in infancy. As the growing child comes to full consciousness, he has to profess his faith, and confirmation completes the work of the sacrament with which it is so closely associated. From all this we can understand its purpose. A Christian is confirmed as the apostles were in order to profess his baptismal faith before the world, not necessarily as they did by preaching and working miracles, but by using the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In other words, he must show forth an adult faith. The rarity of such faith among Catholics today is perhaps attributable to the slight attention now paid to the sacrament of Confirmation, merely a matter of course to children and often neglected altogether by adult converts. Unless we make use of the intellectual gifts of wisdom and understanding, counsel and knowledge, we inevitably 'become such as have need of milk and not of strong meat' (Heb. 5, 12). We can only avoid this reproach if we develop the powers received in confirmation, and grow up in the faith 'that henceforth we be no more children, tossed about by every wind of doctrine' (Eph. 4, 14). Faith is a hard intellectual discipline, fed by the word of God given in scripture but made our own through meditation. The assent we give to doctrine must remain merely notional unless we constantly think about it, discuss it and question it within the context of the Church's interpretation. And without such faith there is little chance of our engaging in the adult Christian activity which St Paul refers to in the continuation of the passage just quoted, that 'doing the truth in charity, we may in all things grow up in him who is the head, even Christ' (Eph. 4, 15). Activity of this kind need not necessarily take place within the various action groups so amply provided by the modern Church; but undoubtedly it must involve

prayer, reception of the other sacraments, and charitable love of God and our neighbour. All too often these are thought of in an infantile, merely superficial way, and to a large extent replaced by optional 'devotions', which make no demands likely to require supernatural aid. Those on the other hand who understand them in the light of an adult faith are certainly going to meet difficulties which call into play the gifts of fortitude, of godliness, and of fear of the Lord. They will be drawing on the grace of confirmation.

As with the other sacraments, this renewal of divine life in us is brought about through an outward sign which causes what it signifies. This is the anointing of the forehead with chrism by the hand of the bishop, successor of those apostles who laid their hands upon the first Christians; at the same time he says the words: 'I sign you with the sign of the cross, and I confirm you with the chrism of salvation in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.' As we saw in the case of the baptismal water, the meaning of this sign can only be gathered from an examination of the scriptures.<sup>1</sup> In the early history of Israel, kings and priests were anointed with chrism in order to call the spirit of God upon them. Thus when Samuel had discovered David, 'the Lord said, Arise and anoint him, for this is he. And Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren. And the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward' (1 Kings 16, 12-13). Similarly there is an account of the anointing of Aaron the priest by Moses (Lev. 8). Now it is Christ who completes and fulfils both the kingship and priesthood of the Old Testament: the name *Christos* is closely connected with *chrisma* in Greek. St Peter refers to this when he says that 'God anointed him with the Holy Ghost and with power' (Acts 10, 38). Chrism then is used in confirmation to show that we have fully become 'other Christs', filled with his Holy Spirit. St John says explicitly, 'You have the unction from the Holy One and know all things . . . and you have no need that any man teach you: but as his unction teacheth you of all things and is truth and is no lie' (1 John 2, 20 and 27). The anointing has filled us with that Spirit of truth 'who will teach you all truth'. The effective sign of anointing completes our incorporation in Christ, making us sacramentally kings and priests before the world ('a kingly priesthood, a holy

<sup>1</sup> cf. Augustine, *Enn. II in Ps. xxiv*, for all that follows.

nation, a purchased people': 1 Peter 2, 9). Nor does its effect end here. For as the whole imagery of the Apocalypse shows forth, it is a sign too of that future glory where Christ has in reality 'made us to our God a kingdom of priests' (Apoc. 5, 10).

One further point may be touched on here. The Church has always taught that confirmation, like baptism, is a sacrament that cannot be repeated. Each must have a permanent effect on the recipient, even where it has been received in heresy, yet reception may or may not lead to personal sanctity. The theological difficulties to which this gave rise in the early Church were finally resolved by St Augustine, though the solution is best expressed in a terminology developed some centuries later, and which it may be useful to explain here. A sacrament is a sign having a real effect, but the effect must, from this evidence, be twofold. Now the outward rite, the pure sign, is known as the *sacramentum tantum*, and is said effectively to signify both a *res et sacramentum* and a *res tantum*, a significant reality which in its turn points further to a pure reality. In the case of confirmation the *sacramentum tantum* is the signing with chrism and the words spoken by the bishop or his representative; the *res et sacramentum* is the permanent effect known as the 'sacramental character'; a reality, yet itself pointing to an ultimate reality, *res tantum*, the grace which may or may not be present, depending on the subjective dispositions of the recipient: with confirmation this is the grace to witness to Christ in the Spirit. The personal dispositions of the giver or receiver of the sacrament cannot affect the sacramental character, which must be given if the rite is correctly performed with at least the intention to do what the Church does: but sacraments do not work by magic, so that personal faith and state of soul must modify, even perhaps exclude, that grace which is normally the ultimate effect of the sacrament.

The doctrine of sacramental character (now *de fide*, Trent, sess. vii, canon 9, Denz. no. 852) which solves the problem of why certain sacraments cannot, in the mind of the Church, be repeated, is not something arbitrarily introduced. According to patristic writers, it has its roots in the scriptural references to a seal put by the Holy Spirit on our souls. St Paul says, for instance, 'now he that confirmeth us with you in Christ and that hath anointed us, is God: who also hath sealed us and given the pledge of the Spirit in our hearts' (2 Cor. 1, 21-22). It is not clear from

these passages alone whether baptism or confirmation is being thought of, though in patristic times a distinction began to be made between the sealing in baptism and the perfecting of the seal in confirmation.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the sacrament of Confirmation produces an effect which is meant to last throughout the whole course of a Christian's life. He can draw upon the grace it gives for every activity of a public nature where his faith has to be professed. In this way confirmation leads naturally on to the sacraments we have yet to consider, since in receiving them we do precisely profess our Christianity before the whole Church. Though it cannot be called the gate to the other sacraments in the same strict sense that baptism can, it ought normally speaking to precede them. Without question a wider understanding of its meaning and appreciation of its grace would have a tremendous effect on the practice of Catholics throughout the Church.



## GROWING UP IN CHRIST

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**A**LTHOUGH religious instruction occupies a separate place in the curriculum of a Catholic school, and although we pay special attention to this class no one believes that religious instruction, and still less training, is finished when the religious knowledge period is over. Every practising Catholic in England must have heard, perhaps oftener than he cares to remember, the argument for staffing Catholic schools with Catholic teachers, that religion must penetrate all departments.

<sup>1</sup> The patristic evidence is given in ch. 6 of Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology* (London, 1956).