

# Catholic

## UPDATE

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## CONFIRMATION A DEEPENING OF OUR CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Confirmation is  
a sacrament of  
commitment,  
one of faith in  
God's fidelity to us.

*by Carol Luebering*



CNS PHOTO GREGORY A. SHEMITZ, LONG ISLAND CATHOLIC

**O**lder Catholics remember Confirmation as the moment when their identity changed: they “received the Holy Spirit” and became “soldiers of Christ.” Today Confirmation is often defined as a sacrament of mature Christian commitment. It is the occasion when young people baptized as infants put their “personal signature” on their parents’ decision.

But the bishops have fixed the age for Confirmation in the United States at between 7 and 17. Can “commitment” mean the same thing to a second-grader and a high school senior? This *Update* will explore the rich meaning of the Sacrament of Confirmation by looking at it in terms of our Christian identity.

## ACQUIRING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Our earliest ancestors in faith did not distinguish Confirmation from Baptism. The apostle presiding over the little community baptized new members, anointed them with oil, and offered them the Eucharist for the first time in one rite of initiation.

As the Church grew and spread throughout the world, the apostles’ successors, the bishops, could no longer personally baptize every new Christian. They delegated the rite to priests. Still, the bishops made regular visits to local communities to confirm the priests’ Baptisms with a second anointing. Thus, a separate sacrament was born.

Confirmation is still, with Baptism and Eucharist, a sacrament of initiation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* insists that the unity of the three sacraments “must be safeguarded” (1285), even though children do not receive them at the same time.

The *Catechism* describes Confirmation as a deepening of baptismal gifts. It says that the sacrament roots us more deeply in our identity as God’s children, unites us more firmly with Christ, increases in us the gifts of the Holy Spirit, binds us more closely to the Church, and gives us special strength to bear witness to our faith (see 1303).

With Baptism and Eucharist, Confirmation shapes us as Catholic Christians. Each of these sacraments focuses on a different aspect of our life as believers: birth, breath, and nourishment.

Baptism is birth into the family of the Church. In the baptismal font we die and rise to new life in Christ. Parents bring an infant to the font because they want more for the child than physical life. They come to ask the *fullness* of life that only Christ can give. When infant baptismal symbolism is at its best, a baby is lowered beneath the water into the death of Jesus and rises again, gasping with eternal life.

Inhale, exhale: that’s the essential rhythm of life; it’s the first thing a newborn must do to survive. The breath of

Christian life is the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of God dwelling within us. First received at Baptism, the gift of the Spirit is celebrated more fully in Confirmation. It’s like taking a more grown-up breath.



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Besides breath, a newborn needs nourishment in order to survive. Living and breathing, once established, continue without conscious thought. But the need for food demands our attention frequently. The food we eat is the very stuff of which our bodies are made. Without it babies can’t grow and grown-ups can’t maintain healthy bodies. Just so, we need the nourishment of Eucharist frequently. We became members of Christ’s body when we were baptized, but the Eucharist nourishes our growth and keeps us healthy members of Christ.

## DISCOVERING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Adults adopt many names besides those given by their parents at Baptism. We define ourselves by citing the relationships, jobs, and interests that are important to us.

It takes time for a youngster to grasp the realities of larger identities. A sense of racial, ethnic, or national belonging comes slowly. It is absorbed over the years from celebrations and stories: Fourth of July fireworks and Thanksgiving pageants, ethnic foods and festivals, tales of immigrant struggles and the pain of discrimination.

A child born into the Church undergoes a similar learning process. Slowly the child discovers what it means to be Catholic from shared stories and customs. The Christmas crèche and the crucifix on the bedroom wall, family prayer and Sunday Mass,



Jesus' name on a parent's lips, and attending more formal religion classes: all these things and more teach children who they are in God's sight, as members of God's family.

Preparation for Confirmation includes learning to articulate what it means to be a Catholic Christian: the faith we express. Confirmation has long been delayed until a baptized infant could reach some understanding of these things—at least until the age of reason (about 7) and often until the approach of adolescence.

The Church to which parents brought an infant for Baptism is, of course, larger than anyone's personal experience. It is larger than a circle of believing friends, larger than the parish community in which a youngster has been growing up. It reaches not only to Rome, but also to the interior of Africa, the scattered Philippine Islands, the remote villages of Central America.

Modern communications have shrunk the world beyond the wildest imaginings of previous generations. All through a child's life come images of the Church from around the world: the Church's efforts to feed starving children in distant countries, papal travels, debates between bishops and government bodies.

Today's Confirmation candidates are ready to stand before a representative of the larger Church—the bishop or his delegate—and be anointed with the perfumed oil (chrism) blessed by the bishop at the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday. They can say with knowledge they lacked as newly baptized infants, "Yes, this is my Church. I accept the faith of this Church as my faith. This is who I am."

## AFFIRMING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Sooner or later, every youngster has to come to personal terms with his or her birthright identity. It's one thing to know the traditions of a family, a people, or a Church. It's another to *choose* them, to claim that identity.

"Owning" the identity conferred at birth doesn't always come easily. Adolescence begins the new and difficult task of establishing an identity as a separate and independent adult.

Sometimes the heritage gets dumped. Most often, the next generation follows in the footsteps of the generations before. At the same time, few people accept their heritage without reshaping it to fit their own personality and experience, to fit the reality of the world they know. And that world is changing, too. Today's kids learn to use a computer as early as they wield a pencil; they cruise the online  
(continued on back page)

## WHY SPONSORS?

No one comes to faith alone. We see the witness others give, and others see the beginnings of holiness in us. Confirmation, like Baptism, requires a sponsor, a person who will testify to the young person's growing faith and, at the same time, promise to serve as a model for continuing growth. Confirmation sponsors should already be such models.

A sponsor is often chosen from among the godparents who have been leading the way since infancy.

## THE RITE OF CONFIRMATION

Confirmation is usually celebrated in the context of Mass. After the readings, the candidates are presented to the bishop by their pastor or catechist. The bishop gives a brief homily on the meaning of the sacrament. He then asks candidates to renew their baptismal promises: to reject Satan, his works, and his empty promises, and to express their belief in the faith defined by the Apostles' Creed.



CNS PHOTO BY KAREN CALLAWAY, NORTHWEST INDIANA CATHOLIC

The bishops ask everyone present to join him in silent prayer for the candidates and then extends his hands over them, asking God to grant them the Spirit as Helper and Guide and to fill them with the Spirit's gifts.

One by one the candidates come forward with their sponsors. Calling each one by name, he traces a cross on their forehead with the chrism (oil) he blessed on Holy Thursday, saying, "Be sealed with the Gift of the Spirit," and offers a sign of peace.

The General Intercessions follow, and all celebrate the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

## DIG DEEPER

What did Confirmation mean to you when you were confirmed?

When and how have you sensed the Spirit at work in the world? In your life?

Whose witness has helped your faith?

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world with ease. What does it mean to affirm the baptismal commitment in a fast-changing world?

Like the rest of us, today's Confirmation candidate will continue to search for a better sense of divine reality until the day when eternal light explodes on newly opened eyes on the other side of the grave. Pledging faith to God is more a lifetime effort than a one-time action. It is therefore very difficult to speak of Confirmation as a sacrament of "mature" commitment. As the *Catechism* warns, maturity in faith cannot be measured by age (see 1308).

Life is strewn with broken promises, a fact every child learns early and every adult acknowledges sadly. But we keep on making and receiving promises because we believe that commitment is possible. And that belief rests on our faith that one promise, at least, will never be broken: God's commitment to us. Confirmation is the "seal" of God's promise. It marks us as God's property, a people set apart.

## LIVING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Believers have the Spirit, our God-breath, from Baptism. But the Spirit who was a soft, life-sustaining breath in an infant is, at Confirmation, the breath behind speech. The Spirit is the power to raise our voices in witness.

*Witness* was first (and still is) a legal term, a description of someone who testifies to what he or she knows from

personal experience. And that is the reality of Christian witness in every generation. Whether expressed by a martyr's death, in enthusiastic words or in quiet, everyday concern for others' needs, Christian witness is believers' testimony to what they *know*: Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is life and hope for all the world.

Children learn from infancy how people of faith take the stand in today's world. They hear quiet prayers and stories of Jesus; they see consolation offered for a child's skinned knee and a neighbor's loss. They watch adults give themselves in service to the community and to the needy.

Formal religious training acquaints them with the Church's heroes, the saints. This, in turn, demands from

older children some form of service as a sign of readiness for Confirmation.

Confirmation, like the other sacraments of initiation, marks the beginning of a journey toward deeper knowledge of God. Our Confirmation candidates join us in claiming our heritage. For years to come, they will bear witness to what loving and believing people have handed on to them—all in the Spirit of God.

*Carol Luebering was the author of many articles and books, including When You Are a Grandparent: Handing on the Faith (St. Anthony Messenger Press).*



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