

THE GIFT OF CONFIRMATION

For Parents of Children
Being Confirmed

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By the sacrament of confirmation, [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.

Second Vatican Council
Constitution on the Church



CELEBRATING THE HOLY SPIRIT

DEAR PARENTS,

Through his or her baptism, your son or daughter was first initiated into the Church, becoming a member of God’s family and an heir to heaven. The Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—came to dwell within him or her.

Baptism, however, is only the first of what the Church calls the three “sacraments of initiation”: baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. Now it is time to prepare your child for confirmation, for the Church teaches that without confirmation the grace of baptism and Eucharist is not complete.

You may be aware that the celebration of confirmation has changed many times over the centuries and even over the past few decades. For example, the age for being confirmed has varied from century to century and even from diocese to diocese or parish to parish. The way the sacrament is viewed and conferred has shifted depending on culture, practical and pastoral needs, and the insights of theologians and religious educators.

What has remained constant, however, is the essence of confirmation. This special, “once-in-a-lifetime” sacrament is designed to deepen our relationship with Christ and his Church and to celebrate the presence and action of the Holy Spirit within us and within the Church.

Confirmation harkens back to the original experience of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down on the infant Church and empowered it to carry on the life and mission of Jesus. Confirmation is our personal Pentecost.

Whether your child is seven, thirteen, or sixteen, this book will

help you carry out your role as the first and most important teacher of the faith in your child's life. It will provide you with an understanding and appreciation of the sacrament that can be conveyed to your child, even if you are not Catholic yourself. It will assist you in helping your child fulfill the requirements of your parish confirmation program, such as selecting a name, choosing a sponsor, and writing a letter of request. This book also offers ideas for making confirmation more meaningful by involving your entire family.

Like baptism, confirmation is a sacrament that is celebrated only once. Whereas your child probably has no memories of being baptized, through your efforts he or she can experience confirmation as important and inspiring and perhaps remember it as one of his or her life's high-points.

Using this book may also lead to a bonus. It may awaken you to the gift of initiation into the Catholic faith that you received at your own confirmation, or if you were not confirmed for some reason, it may encourage you to pursue the sacrament as an adult through your parish's RCIA program.

As you undertake to prepare your child for this next step of his or her spiritual journey, be confident. The same Spirit who will come to your son or daughter in a special way at confirmation is with you as guide and helper. With the Spirit's grace and power at work in you, you will be able to help form your child into a committed, active and enthusiastic disciple of Jesus— someone who lives by Gospel values and promotes God's kingdom in the world.

Throughout these sacred days of preparation, let your frequent prayer be "Come, Holy Spirit!"

INITIATION BY FIRE

People become members of many organizations or groups through a period of formation followed by a ritual of acceptance. This is the case for fraternities and sororities, groups such as the Knights of Columbus, religious communities, the military, and even social clubs. The Church is no different.

Initiation into the Church is accomplished by three sacraments: baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. A sacrament is an encounter with Christ in a ritual during which God actually acts *through* symbols to bring about what the symbols stand for. Human beings like rituals and symbols. We mark significant events and express our thoughts and feelings through actions, words and concrete signs. Think, for example, of how we celebrate the birthdays of loved ones. We have parties, give presents, light candles, sing “Happy Birthday to You,” make wishes, blow out the candles, and then eat cake and ice cream.

In sacraments, ordinary things like water, wine, oil, bread, gestures and words express spiritual realities that are invisible. And not only do these symbols point to these realities, they actually bring them into being when they are used in one of our sacramental rituals. This is exactly what happens in baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist.

THREE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

Baptism, the first sacrament of initiation, uses water and the words “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” as its symbols. Think of the many ways you use water. Water is associated with cleansing and life. At baptism your child was united with Jesus’ saving death and resurrection. Sin was “washed away,” and your

child was flooded with new divine life. He or she became a child of God and a temple of the Trinity, with a right to the other sacraments.

In confirmation, God again acts to save. This time the symbols are the laying on of hands and the anointing with chrism (holy oil). At confirmation the gifts the Spirit brings are intensified in your child. He or she receives more grace to live as Jesus did. As the name of the sacrament suggests, your child's baptism and membership in the Church are "confirmed" in a real and permanent way. Depending on your child's age and maturity, confirmation is also an opportunity for him or her to profess the faith personally and publicly and to accept an increased responsibility to live it faithfully.

The third sacrament of initiation is the Eucharist, which uses bread and wine as its symbols. Sharing in this sacrificial meal as Jesus commanded at the Last Supper is the culmination of Christian initiation. Only full members of the Church are invited to it. (In fact, in the early Church those at Mass who were preparing for initiation left after the Word was proclaimed and before the liturgy of the Eucharist.) Through partaking of the Body and Blood of Jesus, your child is united with him and with the other members of the Church.

BAPTISM BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

The sacrament of confirmation is foreshadowed in Scripture.

Jesus told Nicodemus that we enter the kingdom of God by being "born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5). Sacramentally, we are born of water through our baptism and we are born of Spirit through our confirmation.

Water and the Spirit played a part when Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan and assumed his mission as Messiah. As Jesus came up from the water, the Spirit came down on him in the form of a dove (see Mark 1:9–11). Returning to Nazareth, his hometown, Jesus went to

the synagogue and read from the book of the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.*

(Luke 4:18-19)

After the reading Jesus said, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

The Spirit helped Jesus carry out his mission. At the Last Supper Jesus promised his followers that he would ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit to be their helper too. Later, on Easter night, Jesus appeared to his apostles and said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). He breathed on them and said, “Receive the holy Spirit” (John 20:22). And just before he ascended to the Father, Jesus promised his followers that they would be baptized with the holy Spirit and be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (see Acts 1:1-8).

THE PENTECOST EVENT

Jesus was true to his word. On Pentecost, which was originally a Jewish harvest feast, the apostles, Mary and other followers were gathered in prayer in an upper room in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit came down on them: “And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on

each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim” (Acts 2:2-4).

Pentecost is sometimes called “the birthday of the Church.” It is the first time that Jesus’ followers were recognized as a group. Filled with the Spirit, St. Peter, no longer in fear for his life, went out from the house and boldly witnessed to Jesus. He said, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). As a result, three thousand people were baptized that day, and the coming of the Spirit has continued up to the present time—even to the upcoming confirmation of your child!

CONFIRMATION AS A NEW PENTECOST

When your son or daughter is confirmed, the Holy Spirit most likely won’t appear as tongues of flame. Your child probably won’t begin speaking in tongues either. You might not even notice a big difference in your child’s behavior.

Still, faith teaches us that there is a real change that is brought about by the reception of this sacrament. In your child’s heart a quiet fire will begin to glow. He or she will experience an increase in the grace needed to continue formation as a good Christian, to witness to Jesus, and to cope with life’s challenges.

Years from now, perhaps as a single adult or as a parent, your son or daughter will realize that he or she is “suddenly” on fire with love for God and neighbor and become both willing and able to spread the Good News that the kingdom of God has already begun in his or her heart. This is the promise of confirmation as a “new” Pentecost.