

The relationship of the Sacrament of Confirmation to the other Sacraments of Initiation

A source of reflection on Christian witness and mission under the action of the Holy Spirit

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The Spirit which came down on the Apostles at Pentecost and which is given to every one of Christ's disciples with the sacraments of Christian initiation, especially with Confirmation, is the Spirit of sanctification and mission. In this study Fr. Scerri explains the missionary commitment for all those who receive the sacraments of Christian initiation. It is an invitation for everyone to reflect on and intensify their own participation in missionary activity as the Magisterium of the Church affirmed in the Second Vatican Council and John Paul II never tires of confirming in his teaching.

An «intimate connection» (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 71)

In the introductory paragraphs of the Apostolic Constitution *Divinae Consortium Naturae*, the relationship between the three sacraments of initiation is clearly asserted. In this Constitution on the sacrament of Confirmation, Pope Paul VI states:

«The faithful are born anew by Baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation, and finally are sustained by the food of eternal life in the Eucharist... The link between Confirmation and the other sacraments of

initiation is shown forth more clearly not only by closer association of these sacraments but also by the rite and words by which Confirmation is conferred» (1).

This «*unitatis initiationis christianae*» – as described in *Divinae Consortium Naturae* – offers a re-reading and a re-explication of the «*intima connexio cum tota initiatione christiana*» (2) mentioned eight years earlier in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council. The Council Fathers had asked for a revision of the rite of Confirmation «so that the *intimate connection* of this sacrament with the whole of Christian initiation» (3) would be more evident and the

organic unity between the three sacraments of initiation restored. Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist together constitute the very foundation of the Christian life (4) – a life of witness and mission in the world. The centrality and importance of sacramental life to missionary activity is attested in the conciliar decree *Ad Gentes*:

«Missionary activity is nothing else, and nothing less, than the manifestation of God's plan, its epiphany and realization in the world and in history... Through preaching and the celebration of the sacraments, of which the Holy Eucharist is the centre and summit, missionary activity makes Christ present, he who is the author of salvation» (5).

This close relationship is not an occasional or external factor only but is especially evident in the earliest days of the Church when Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist «formed a single homogenous rite begun at the baptismal font and completed in first Communion at the Eucharistic sacrifice» (6). This close relationship must be safeguarded. A beautiful prayer from a Greek ritual is a clear pointer to this deep bond:

«O Lord, you have deigned to give new life to your servant who has been illuminated by means of water and the Spirit... bestow upon him even *the seal of the gift of your Holy Spirit*, and the communion of the holy body and the precious blood of your Christ» (7).

The three sacraments of initiation constitute the Christian person and fill him with a new life in the Spirit. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian is therefore imbued with the responsibility and the mission to be a witness to all his fellow brothers and sisters. In fact, these three sacraments «are closely united and form the three stages of a unique evolution» (8) which results in the formation of mature Christians, whose vocation is to be men and women for others, in service and love, under the action of the Holy Spirit.

Confirmation as the seal and fullness of Baptism

Cipriano Vagaggini sees Confirmation as «the seal and fullness of Baptism» (9) because, through

the action of the Holy Spirit, the Christian is strengthened, so that he may wrestle against the evil attitudes within him and around him. Hence, this is why we can say that confirmation «perfects» the individual's baptismal consecration (10), reinforcing his Christian witness in the Church and in the world. Wilhelm Breuning explicates this relation between Baptism and Confirmation by showing that

«the relationship to the Spirit that Confirmation brings about presupposes the earlier establishment of the fundamental baptismal relationship with the same Spirit» (11).

Phrases such as *augmentum gratiae, ad robur, perfectio* (12) and *consummatio* – all featuring in Scholastic and later texts – refer to this feature of Confirmation with respect to Baptism. An interesting reference to the Oriental practice of Confirmation supports these notions. Nicholas Cabasilas (c. 1320-1391), a Byzantine theologian, liturgist and spiritual writer, uses the verb *teleitai* (made perfect) when talking of the confirmed person. Moreover, he calls the minister of the sacrament *telestes* (he who perfects and achieves) (13).

Confirmation entails that the baptised person is sent on a mission (14) in the world where he lives. Every mission asks for a real and authentic witness (15). Because it binds the individual more strongly – under the action of the Spirit – to Christ and the Church (16), Confirmation disposes the individual for the ecclesial communion which is achieved by full participation at the Eucharistic table.

Several liturgical texts – both ancient and modern – reveal the intimate connection between the sacraments of initiation and Christian witness. An example helps to illustrate the point. In one of the prayers of the Euchologion of Serapion, we find beautiful references to the gift of the Holy Spirit, and its effects in the life of the Christian. This prayer is that reserved for the blessing of the chrism which is used for the sacrament of Confirmation:

«God of hosts, protector of everyone who turns to you... You give this chrism a divine and heavenly power. May the baptised who will be anointed with it, with the salutary sign of the Cross of the only-begotten Son... be regenerated... *May they become sharers more and*

more in the gift of the Spirit. Fortified by this seal, may they remain stable and immovable, unhurt and inviolable, protected from threats and surprises, living in the faith and knowledge of the truth to the very end...» (17).

This text leads us to recall the words of the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, where Pope John Paul II – with reference to the sacrament of Baptism – states:

«Baptism is not simply a seal of conversion, a kind of external sign indicating conversion and attesting to it. Rather, it is the sacrament which signifies and effects rebirth from the Spirit... At the same time, I invite the Christian faithful, both individually and as communities, to bear authentic witness to Christ through the new life they have received» (18).

As a result of this, ecclesial communion is strengthened by making Christians active and responsible members of the Church. This mission asks for an ever faithful bond with the Church, in love and service of one's brethren. In fact, under the ever-present action of the Holy Spirit, Baptism consecrates the very deepest foundations of the being of a Christian, Confirmation gives him the strength to carry out good actions in his daily life, while he is nourished and strengthened by the Eucharist. It is in this light that the Christian life is seen as a life of intimacy with each of the persons of the Trinity. According to Georges Delcuve, Baptism corresponds to God's sending of the Spirit of his Son into our hearts; Confirmation corresponds to the giving of the Spirit by the Father to us and the Spirit bearing witness to the Son; in the Eucharist, we have the Spirit of the Father and the Son who bring the Christian community together as a single body (19).

The deep unity between the sacraments of initiation, and the action of the Holy Spirit, is described by Dom Pelagio Visentin by these beautiful words. He sees the celebration of the Eucharist by the ecclesial community as the apex of sacramental initiation. In this celebration,

«the baptised person who has been grafted in the dead and risen Christ, and "confirmed" by the "seal of the Holy Spirit"... reaches the highest degree of assimilation with the New

Man who revealed himself on Easter morning...» (20).

A deep bond with the Paschal mystery of our Lord

The Paschal mystery of Jesus led to the effusion of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. This led to the diffusion of the kerygma by means of the strong and convincing witness of the first members of the Church. J.D. Crichton asserts that

«if Confirmation is understood as the establishing of the Holy Spirit in the baptised individual, we can see that it "confirms" his relationship to Christ and enables him to bear witness to Christ in his passion and resurrection» (21).

This is a fundamental characteristic of the life of the Christian who has the duty to proclaim the Good News of our Lord, namely the firm conviction that Jesus died for all mankind, and rose from the dead (22), hence bringing liberation from sin and death. This is a message of love and hope which brings courage, especially to the weak and the suffering. Confirmation, therefore, embarks the Christian on an apostolic mission. The confirmed Christian is responsible «to work... for the wholesome public opinion, a more mature and balanced culture, economy and political life» (23). Through co-responsibility and participation, he is therefore a witness to Christ in the world. This is evident also in the prayers which form part of the rite of Confirmation: they are full of references to Pentecost, so that in this sacrament, the Christian is seen more clearly as a participant in the mission of the apostles.

Confirmation is ordered towards the Eucharist, the apex of Christian initiation. The Eucharist is the spiritual food necessary to accomplish the work of the apostolate, as well as the bond of charity which binds all those who partake of the same Body and the same Cup of our Lord. Our active and authentic participation in the Eucharist can also be seen as an aspect of our commitment to mission in the community. This is expressed in a deep way by St Augustine:

«If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the

table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are, you respond "Amen" ("yes, it is true!") and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words, "the Body of Christ" and respond "Amen". Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your *Amen* may be true» (24).

The deep bond which binds together the Eucharist to Baptism and Confirmation can be further appreciated by noting the significance of the *consignatio* during Confirmation. In Baptism, we are buried with Christ, «so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life» (Rom 6: 4). The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the marking present and the sacramental offering of his death on the Cross. Now, in Confirmation, we encounter the making of the sign of the cross on the forehead (*consignatio*), which was accompanied by the laying on of hands (the epicletic invocation of the Holy Spirit) in the ancient rites. The revised rite of Confirmation retains the significance of the relationship between the Cross and the effusion of the Holy Spirit:

«The bishop dips his right thumb in the chrism and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the one to be confirmed, as he says: "N., be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit"» (25).

Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist: a life of commitment and mission

Many authors see Confirmation as the sacrament of the apostolate of the Christian within the universal Church. Karl Rahner calls Confirmation «the sacrament of mission and witness» (26) and a means of «collaborating in the mission of the Church» (27) and participating fully in it. The theme of Christian witness and *parthesia* under the powerful and life-giving action of the Holy Spirit can be demonstrated from the actual rite of Confirmation.

In this rite, we encounter phrases like «*witness to Christ*», «*bearing witness to the world*», «*proclaim to all the world*» and «*active members of the Church*». They are a very clear indication of the significance of the sacrament of Confirmation in the life and mission of all the *christifideles*, as messengers of the Good News of Jesus, by opening their hearts and

their lives to the action of the Holy Spirit, so that all mankind may know of the love of the Father. Becoming sons and daughters of the Father in Baptism, strengthened and called to give witness in Confirmation, and nourished by the Eucharist, the Christian has an apostolate and a mission to accomplish in the Church (28) and within society (29). This is stated by the decree *Ad Gentes*:

«All Christians by the example of their lives and the witness of the word, wherever they live, have an obligation to manifest the new man which they put on in Baptism, and to reveal the power of the Holy Spirit by whom they were strengthened at Confirmation, so that others, seeing their good works, might glorify the Father (cf. Mt 5:16) and more perfectly perceive the true meaning of human life and the universal solidarity of mankind» (30).

This is iterated in another section of *Ad Gentes*. The Council Fathers stress the relationship between being reborn in Christ through Baptism and an authentic Christian witness in all spheres of life. The conciliar decree states that all the baptized are called «to bear witness to Christ... by their life and their words, in the family, in their social group, and in the sphere of their profession» (31). These words have been lived out by countless men and women throughout the ages, in all the continents and in varying circumstances and situations. Within the context of this article and this review, it may be suitable to refer to the witness given by Blessed Peter To Rot (1912-1945), a catechist and a martyr of our days, beatified by Pope John Paul II during his recent visit to Papua New Guinea:

«Inspired by his faith in Christ, [Blessed Peter] was a devoted husband, a loving father and a dedicated catechist known for his kindness, gentleness and compassion. Daily Mass and Holy Communion, and frequent visits to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, sustained him, gave him wisdom to counsel the disheartened, and courage to persevere until death» (32).

Blessed Peter's witness in the face of oppression and persecution led him to defend family life, the unity of marriage and marital fidelity. When the priests of his village were imprisoned, he bravely and responsibly continued to teach the faithful,

visited the sick, baptized and led the people in prayer. The Pope praised the spiritual maturity of the new *beatus*, and presented him as a shining witness to all, especially to the lay apostolate:

«His spiritual maturity showed in his apostolic maturity. He paid particular attention to those who had become lukewarm in the practice of the faith or who had abandoned it...

«Do not be discouraged about the future of evangelization! Do not hesitate to preach the Good News clearly and boldly, for there is only one true hope for humanity: Jesus Christ...» (33).

This is a concrete example of a life of mission of service towards one's neighbour in all the environments and sectors of life. This can be linked to what Pope John Paul states in his Encyclical on the value and inviolability of human life, *Evangelium Vitae*. In the promotion of a culture in the service of human life, the Pope asserts:

«Evangelization is an all-embracing, progressive activity through which the Church participates in the prophetic, priestly and royal mission of the Lord Jesus. It is therefore inextricably linked to *preaching, celebration and the service of charity*. Evangelization is a *profoundly ecclesial act*, which calls all the various workers of the Gospel to action, according to their individual charisms and ministry.

«This is also the case with regard to the proclamation of the *Gospel of life*, an integral part of that Gospel which is Jesus Christ himself. We are at the service of this Gospel, sustained by the awareness that we have received it as a gift and are sent to preach it to all humanity, "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). With humility and gratitude we know that we are the *people of life and for life*, and this is how we present ourselves to everyone» (34).

Redemptoris Missio talks of the role of the laity and the wide extension of their missionary activity, as well as their involvement in the rapidly growing «ecclesial movements» [which are] filled with

missionary dynamism» (35). The call to a mission *ad gentes* can be seen to possess yet another dimension, namely, the responsibility of each Christian to carry the reconciling love of the Father to others. It is a call to overcome barriers and open our hearts to the incessant action of the Holy Spirit, and so proclaim the eternal freshness of Christ's message (36). It is what Pope John Paul II asserts with renewed vigour, in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*:

«The primary tasks of the preparation for the Jubilee thus include a *renewed appreciation of the presence and activity of the Spirit*, who acts within the Church both in the sacraments, especially in *Confirmation*, and in the variety of charisms, roles and ministries which he inspires for the good of the Church...

...The Spirit is *the principal agent of the new evangelization*. Hence, it will be important to gain a renewed appreciation of the Spirit as the One who builds the Kingdom of God within the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ, stirring people's hearts and quickening in our world the seeds of the full salvation which will come at the end of time» (37).

This is an invitation which the Pope repeated in Manila, during the celebration of the 10th World Youth Day, at the conclusion of his heartfelt homily to an enormous multitude:

«Dear People of God in the Philippines, *go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit to renew the face of the earth* – your own world first, your families, your communities and the nation to which you belong and which you love; and the wider world of Asia, towards which the Church in the Philippines has a special responsibility before the Lord... And all of you, not only the Filipino people, have the same responsibility before the Lord and the world beyond, working through faith for the renewal of God's whole creation. That is your responsibility, your calling, everywhere, in Europe, in Africa, in both Americas, in Australia, everywhere!» (38).

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NOTES

(1) PAUL VI, Apostolic Constitution *Divinae Consortium Naturae* (15 August 1971), in *The Rites of the Catholic Church* (Pueblo Publishing Company; New York 1976) 290.

(2) Cf. GY Pierre-Marie, «Le problème de la confirmation dans l'Eglise catholique», *La Maison-Dieu* 168 (1986) 8.

(3) SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 71.

(4) Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Geoffrey Chapman; London 1994) §§ 1210, 1285.

(5) SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, § 9.

(6) VAGAGGINI Cyprian, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy* (Liturgical Press; Collegeville, Minnesota 1976) 174.

(7) «O Signore che ti sei degnato di dare nuova vita al tuo servo che è stato illuminato per mezzo dell'acqua e dello Spirito... concedigli anche il sigillo del dono del tuo santo Spirito, e la comunione del santo corpo e del prezioso sangue del tuo Cristo». GOAR J., *Euchologium, sive Rituale Graecorum. Officium sancti Baptismatis* (Parigi 1647) 355, as quoted by JOUNEL Pierre, «La confermazione», in GELINEAU Joseph (ed.), *Nelle Vostre Assemblee* (Queriniana; Brescia 1970) 494.

(8) RANWEZ Pierre, «The Sacrament of Confirmation, builder of the Personality of Service in the Mystical Body of Christ», *Lumen Vitae* 9 (1954) 19.

(9) VAGAGGINI, *Theological Dimensions*, 411.

(10) Cf. CONGAR Yves, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, III (Geoffrey Chapman; London 1983) 217-218.

(11) BREUNING Wilhelm, «When to Confirm in the case of Adult Baptism», *Concilium* 3:2 (1967) 53.

(12) Cf. MAGRASSI Mariano, «"Confirmatione Baptismus perficitur". Dalla "perfectio" dei Padri alla "aetas perfecta" di San Tommaso», *Rivista Liturgica* 54 (1967) 430ff.

(13) Cf. NORET Jacques, «La confirmation selon Nicolas Cabasilas», *La Maison-Dieu* 168 (1986) 35.

(14) Cf. COFFY Robert, «La confirmation aujourd'hui», *La Maison-Dieu* 142 (1980) 30, 37.

(15) Cf. FRENO Gorg, «Il-Konfirmazzjoni: Ghandna Bzonnha? Riflessjonijiet Duttrinali u Pastoral», *Knisja 2000* 15 (1990) 18.

(16) «...più perfettamente vincolati alla Chiesa». GERARDI Renzo, «Il sacramento della confermazione e il dono dello Spirito Santo», *Lateranum* 47 (1981) 495.

(17) *Euchologium Serapionis*, 25 (16), as quoted by VAGAGGINI, *Theological Dimensions*, 411-412.

(18) JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990) § 47.

(19) Cf. DELCUVE Georges, «Becoming Christians in

Christ», *Lumen Vitae* 28 (1973) 88-94.

(20) «Qui il battezzato innestato nel Cristo morto e risorto, e "confermato" dal "sigillo dello Spirito Santo" (...) raggiunge la più alta assimilazione all'uomo nuovo che si è rivelato la mattina di pasqua...». VISENTIN Pelagio, *Culmen et Fons*, I (Edizioni Messaggero; Padova 1987) 125.

(21) CRICHTON J.D., «Theology of Worship», in JONES Cheslyn - WAINWRIGHT Geoffrey - YARNOLD Edward (ed.), *The Study of Liturgy* (SPCK; London 1978) 26.

(22) Cf. GIOVANNI PAOLO II, *Lettera ai Sacerdoti per il Giovedì Santo 1995* (25 marzo 1995) § 6, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (8 aprile 1995) 5.

(23) HÄRING Bernard, *Healing and Revealing* (St Paul Publications; Slough 1984) 58.

(24) ST AUGUSTINE, *Sermo* 272: PL 38, 1247; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 1396.

(25) *Rite of Confirmation*, § 27, in *The Rites*, 309-310.

(26) RAHNER Karl, *A New Baptism in the Holy Spirit - Confirmation Today* (Dimension Books; New Jersey 1975) 9.

(27) RAHNER Karl, *The Church and the Sacraments* (Burns & Oates; London 1974) 93. This is also affirmed by Yves Congar: cf. CONGAR Yves, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 220.

(28) Cf. MAGRASSI Mariano, *Vivere la Liturgia* (Edizioni La Scala; Noci 1978) 250.

(29) Cf. DOYLE Eric, «Confirmation for Commitment to Mission», *The Clergy Review* 67 (1982) 164.

(30) SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, § 11.

(31) *Ibid.*, § 21.

(32) JOHN PAUL II, Homily for the Beatification of Peter To Rot, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (17 January 1995) § 3, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Supplemento (25 gennaio 1995) iv.

(33) JOHN PAUL II, Meeting with the Clergy, Religious and Laity, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (16 January 1995) §§ 5-6, in *ibid.*, iii.

(34) JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* (25 March 1995) § 78.

(35) JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990) § 72.

(36) Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (Jonathan Cape; London 1994) 113.

(37) JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (10 November 1994) § 45.

(38) JOHN PAUL II, Homily during Mass at Manila, 10th World Youth Day (15 January 1995) § 8, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Supplemento (21 gennaio 1995) xiv.

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