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THE SACRAMENT OF
confirmation



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CONFIRMATION

The Forgotten Sacrament

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Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

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Deacidified

Not too long ago I talked to a young lad — 17 years old — who had not yet received the sacrament of Confirmation. Twice he had been prepared to receive it as a youngster. He had faithfully attended the catechism classes and was all ready to be confirmed. Both times, though, before the date scheduled for the Bishop's coming his father was transferred by the company that employed him to another town. The whole family moved with him, and so Jim was never confirmed. After that he had just forgotten about it, the way so many of us do, even after we have been confirmed.

You can't call Penance or Holy Communion forgotten sacraments. Most Catholics receive these sacraments fairly regularly, even frequently or daily. Baptism and Extreme Unction stand out in our minds because they're the first and last ones on the list. And very few persons have to be reminded that they have received either Holy Orders or the sacrament of Matrimony. Now Confirmation — that's another story. But why is it the forgotten sacrament?



Maybe it's because we have too little understanding of it, because we're not conscious of the practical implications of the sacrament of Confirmation in our day-to-day lives, because we're just vaguely aware of what we receive in this sacrament and what responsibilities it imposes on us.

We Have a Mandate

In any consideration of the sacraments, Confirmation follows immediately after Baptism because these two sacraments are very closely related. As a matter of fact, Confirmation is really the fulfillment — the completion — of the sacrament of Baptism.

Sometimes we hear Confirmation described as the sacrament of the Holy Ghost. That's true if you know just what this means. It doesn't imply that the Holy Ghost doesn't come to us in Baptism also, because that would not be true. The Holy Spirit comes to us in both sacraments, but for a different purpose.

In Baptism the Christian dies with Christ and rises with Him to a new life, the life of sanctifying grace. The effect

of this is to give him *personal holiness* right here and now. Confirmation is the logical complement of this sacrament because it gives the Christian *social holiness* and a corresponding social responsibility for the whole Mystical Body. By it the Christian becomes not only a beneficiary or fruit of Christ's mission to redeem all creation for His Father, but he also receives a share in this mission. More specifically, through Confirmation each Christian shares in the mandate Christ gave to His Apostles just before His Ascension into heaven: "Going, therefore, teach ye all nations. . . ."

Courage for the Fearful

As a confirmed follower of Christ, the Christian must now be concerned about spreading Christ's kingdom on earth. And each one of us is obligated to do this within the framework of our particular vocation in life, whether as priests or religious, as lay men or women. But this is a frightening responsibility. Most of us hang back a little, thinking that we will be happy if we can just save our own souls and hope

that others will be able to do so also. And that's not to be wondered at. Fear is natural in the face of such a gigantic and awesome responsibility; that's why Christ left us the sacrament of Confirmation, to give us the courage and wisdom we need in spreading His kingdom.

The difference between the graces of Baptism and Confirmation is seen dramatically in Scripture itself. After the death of Christ, the Apostles were shaken and frightened. They hid in the upper room, the Gospel tells us, afraid of the Jews. Surely they had been baptized before this; but they hadn't as yet received the special coming of the Holy Ghost, Whom Christ had promised He would send.

Then came the feast of Pentecost and with it the descent of the Holy Ghost upon them in the form of tongues of fire. What was the result? Filled with courage and zeal, they immediately went out to preach Christ's Gospel. The Acts of the Apostles tell us that when they were brought before the Jewish high court and given 40 lashes, they felt themselves lucky to be counted worthy to suffer for Christ.

The Martyr's Example

This wasn't true only of the Apostles. In the first 300 years of Christianity, everyone who became a Christian knew that he was courting death. Death caught up with thousands and thousands of them during the three centuries of persecution the early Church suffered under the Roman emperors. The courage and steadfastness of these martyrs astounded and infuriated their pagan persecutors. How could these Christians — even women and young children — find the obstinate courage to stand up to the emperor and defy him in the face of threats and torture?

To the pagans it was a mystery, but the Christians knew where such power came from. It was the Holy Spirit within them, strengthening and fortifying them. That's why the Church in the Mass for a virgin martyr cries out, "O God, one of the marvelous examples of your power was granting the victory of martyrdom even to delicate womanhood. . . ."

A few years ago a book appeared which stunned the country. It was entitled *In Every War But One*, and de-

tailed the many examples of American soldiers who collaborated with their Communist captors in the Korean War. It shocked us because we are accustomed to think of soldiers as courageous — American soldiers, especially. And here was documentary proof that many of our soldiers did not have the necessary courage to overcome Chinese wiles and tortures. We felt that they had failed us, our traditions and our ideals.

We're Marked Men

Every catechism or book on the sacraments says that Confirmation makes us soldiers of Christ. This is seen quite clearly in the ceremony of the sacrament. The Bishop traces the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person being confirmed. The symbolism of this action goes back to Roman days, when it was customary for every soldier to be tattooed with the name or sign of the general in whose army he was serving. The sign of the cross traced upon our foreheads is the symbol that we have become soldiers in the army of the crucified Christ. And this is not a mere ritualistic gesture.

Confirmation is one of the sacraments which print an indelible mark on the soul of the one receiving it, a mark that will remain as a badge of glory or shame throughout all eternity, depending on how faithfully we fulfill our new responsibility. St. Thomas' comment on this is: "A man receives the Holy Spirit in Confirmation for the courage necessary to the spiritual combat, that he may courageously confess the Faith of Christ, even against the adversaries of the Faith. Hence it is fitting that he be signed with the sign of the cross on his forehead. As a soldier is marked with the sign of his leader, so the Christian is marked with the sign of the cross. . . . He is anointed on the forehead, that he might openly show himself to be a Christian, just as the Apostles, after receiving the Holy Spirit, manifested themselves, whereas formerly they had hidden in the Cenacle."

Persecution Faces Us

But this is not the only indication that the confirmed Christian must be willing to suffer — even die — if neces-

sary. As the Bishop confers the sacrament, he gently strikes the cheek of the one confirmed to remind him that as the world hated and persecuted Christ, so will it hate and persecute His followers. Christ Himself warned us: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before you. . . . If they have persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. . . . Yes, the hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering worship to God. And these things they will do because they have not known the Father nor Me."

Persecution is no stranger to the 20th-century world. Thousands of Christians in the captive countries today — those behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains — know what it means to suffer for their Faith. Many have already tasted the blood of martyrdom, and the others have to be prepared for it daily. For them the graces of Confirmation are indeed real. But what about us in our daily lives? Very few of us are faced with the need to defend our Faith with our lives. How, then, can we give witness to it?

Today we must face the fact that we

live in a pagan world. The United States is not a Catholic country. Most of the people with whom we associate in our daily lives are not — by and large — living according to the ethics and the moral teachings of Jesus Christ. In fact, most of those who call themselves Christians guide their lives by the erroneous principles so much in vogue in the world today.

“Situational Morality”

I'll give an example of what I mean — a crude example, perhaps, yet one which accounts for so much payola, graft and all sorts of sinful chicanery today.

What it comes down to is this: If I enjoy something, want it and like it, then it is good for me and I'm going to go ahead and do it. Almighty God has created me. He loves me, knows my desires and wants me to be happy. I know that there are certain acts which He has forbidden to me; but, after all, sin is in the intention, and I have absolutely no intention of offending Almighty God. He can read my heart, and He knows I don't intend to

offend Him. I just want to do this because it seems to me enjoyable and for my benefit. Therefore, I'll go ahead and do it, and for me it is not a sin since I don't intend to sin. And so divorce, birth control, taking bribes or padding expense accounts, petty thievery and a host of other sins are rationalized away. But there's an error in all this.

Suppose I come up to you with a sharp razor in my hand and tell you to relax. I don't want to hurt you and in no way mean to offend you, but I have a little quirk in my personality. I truly enjoy seeing blood flow; therefore, I'm going to open a vein in your wrist. No offense intended!

I'm sure you would be offended and do everything in the world to prevent me from carrying out my intention. But that's the way we often act toward God. We say we have no intention to sin or offend Him, even though He has by His laws told us that certain actions *do* offend Him. But often the world adjusts the law of God to suit its own needs. This is done in the social world, in the business world, in almost every

field of activity. We rationalize away our faults. They are not sinful, so we claim.

Can We Remake God?

One of our great Catholic authors, François Mauriac, once said that God made man in His own image and likeness and that man has returned the favor — a very good description of the situational morality which guides so much of the modern world. We decide what God should be like and act accordingly, rather than try to find out what God really is like and adjust ourselves to Him.

Just look around you and see how many of your friends, both Catholic and non-Catholic — maybe even you yourself — guide their lives by the thinking described above. It's tough to rub elbows with them day in and day out and still maintain our Faith, practicing it the way Christ demands of us. We have to have supernatural help to do it, and we get that help in the sacrament of Confirmation.

But let's take a closer look at some of the ways in which this help comes

to us and how it should influence us in our daily lives. Let's look at the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. It's true that they come to us originally in Baptism, but in Confirmation they are tremendously increased in our souls.

Wisdom

The first gift we call *wisdom*. It can be defined as a sensitivity to God's revelations concerning Himself and our duties to Him. This deepens immensely our attitude and dependence upon God every time we adore Him in the Sacrifice of the Mass. Further, it should be the springboard for our zeal for the salvation of the souls of others. For when we fully realize how much God loves us, we want others to know how much He loves them, too. And we can't help realizing that God wants all men to love and worship Him without being eager to win them for Him.

It was because St. John Bosco was so filled with this gift of wisdom that he could say, "Give me souls, you can have everything else." He wanted to bring God to them and them to God.

Knowledge

Knowledge is the second gift of the Holy Ghost, and it is the perception of the essentially relative and perishable nature of earthly goods. Suppose you work in a factory which makes clothes. You see everyone else there making off with articles of clothing quite frequently. It would be easy for you to do likewise; but if you really have the gift of knowledge and follow its inspirations, you won't. After all, what's a new jacket, pair of trousers or sports coat compared to the love of God? These things will all pass away.

Or take the question of support for your church or the foreign missions. Naturally, you won't exactly want to part with your \$10 bill with its picture of Alexander Hamilton, even though the missionary's tale of need does touch you deeply. But if you have the realization that money is really quite insignificant in comparison with the work of winning souls for Christ you will be able to give generously. And if you are really generous you might want to give two or three years of your own life to this work as a lay missionary rather

than starting right in after college to build yourself some security and a place in society.

Counsel

The third gift is *counsel*, the facility to decide God's will in a particular instance or set of circumstances. Maybe it's a question of the vocation to which God is calling you. Or maybe you've fallen romantically in love with a non-Catholic, and then realize the dangers of the situation in your case. So you know through the gift of counsel that you have to fall back out of love again. There are 1,000 examples of how the gift of counsel is needed in the various works of Catholic action.

Understanding

Understanding — the fourth gift — is an ease in accepting all the truths revealed to men by God, despite the mysteries they involve. And I think that it's easy to give an example of this. Almost every Sunday I say Mass in a parish church. As I pass up and down the Communion rail, distributing the Lord's Body and Blood to hundreds of

people each Sunday, I can't help but be struck by their faith. There is no reasonable, logical explanation of the miracle of the Eucharist on strictly natural grounds. It demands faith to accept this teaching of Christ. It is truly a mystery, but one which every Catholic holds firmly, enlightened by the gift of understanding.

As St. Thomas Aquinas put it, speaking of faith in the Holy Eucharist, "Not to sight, or taste, or touch be credit, Hearing only do we trust secure; I believe, for God the Son has said it — Word of truth that ever shall endure."

Piety

And fifth in the list of the gifts of the Holy Spirit comes *piety*, an aptitude for prayer. In this instance we can recall St. Benedict's advice to his monks when they complained that their work was keeping them away from prayer. Don't forget, he told them, that *work is prayer* when you do everything for God's greater honor and glory. We can turn that around and truthfully say that *prayer is work*. Most of us don't

find it easy to be regular in our prayers, to kneel down and pray when we don't feel like it; but we realize that we should pray. Think of the millions and millions of families that daily pray the family rosary. Think of the millions who devote an hour a week or a month to nocturnal adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in their parish church. Surely, they do this only because they are hearkening to the inspirations the Holy Ghost sends them through the gift of piety.

Fortitude

The sixth gift is *fortitude*, a readiness to endure the privations and sacrifices which a life of virtue inevitably entails. I think all of us already know what this means. We find it mighty hard to stick close to God day after day, to ignore the example of the pagan world around us, to overcome the temptations that come to us on every side, and especially those that rise from the murky corners of our own personalities and temperaments. It takes courage to live as Christ wants us to, but the gift of fortitude will help us do it.

Fear of the Lord

Then, last of the seven comes the gift of *fear of the Lord*. And what do we mean by this? It is not fear in the sense that a student who hasn't studied is afraid he is going to fail his final exams. Or in the sense that a criminal is afraid the police are going to catch up with him. No, it's a deeper and better fear than that. It's the fear of the young man or woman who loves his or her parents so much, respects them so much, that he or she doesn't want to do anything that will hurt them, that will make them regret the confidence they have placed in their son or daughter.

It's a fear that comes from love and respect. It makes us stop and measure our actions against what we know a loving God expects of us. Because we love Him, we want very much to do what He wants us to do and are always wary lest we fail Him in some way or other.

Who's at Fault?

But if we are supposed to receive these gifts of the Holy Ghost in Con-

firmation—and we've already been confirmed—why don't we feel their influence more in our daily lives? Probably it's our own fault.

God doesn't force anyone, and His gifts are not going to change our lives unless we want them to and co-operate with them. There is a saying among theologians, handed down through the centuries, that grace doesn't destroy nature but builds upon it. And if we expect God's gifts to make themselves felt in our lives we have to do something to prepare ourselves for them so that they can work in us. To put it bluntly, we have to work a little more and pray a little more. At least, most of us should.

The Holy Spirit works in our souls through inspirations. And I'm afraid many Catholics wouldn't recognize an inspiration of the Holy Ghost if it walked in on them in red flannels.

Almost every prayer addressed to the Holy Spirit asks for His direct help in living our Faith as we should. One that comes to mind right now begins, "May my understanding be submissive to Your inspirations and to the teachings of the Holy Catholic Church." Now

it doesn't make sense to pray that our understanding blindly be submissive to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the Church unless we have a pretty good idea of what the Church teaches. And too many of us know only quite vaguely some of the most important doctrinal and moral teachings of the Catholic Church.

Oh, Those Long Sermons!

But isn't that what the Sunday sermons are for—to instruct us in the teachings of the Church and in our moral obligations? Don't they suffice?

No! If we really want to be honest with ourselves, we can't claim that we get all the instruction and exhortation necessary from the pulpits of our parish churches. Maybe if our pastors dared to preach long enough these lessons would suffice. But because we get restless in church, because they worry about parking problems and getting one group out of church and another in for the next Mass, our pastors seldom preach sermons longer than about seven or eight minutes. And that is not enough.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that St. Paul once kept his hearers from evening until the next morning while he preached to them. But not even St. Paul could get away with it without trouble. St. Luke tells us: "A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting at the window, was overcome with drowsiness, and, as Paul addressed them at great length, he went fast asleep and fell down from the third story to the ground and was picked up dead" (Acts 20:9).

There aren't many fellows around today with the name Eutychus; but pastors know that many a Tom, Dick and Harry would have nervous prostration if the sermon lasted more than 15 minutes at most. For St. Paul there was no problem; he raised the lad back to life again. But most priests today don't count on miracles to repair the physical damages their sermons might give rise to.

So our sermons, while necessary and helpful, are not of themselves sufficient. We need something more. And we can get it with a minimum of effort.

What? Read 30 Books?

In this country, in this day and age, the easiest way of becoming acquainted with the teachings of the Church and with the possible development of the supernatural life we lead is through spiritual reading. The average spiritual book is seven to 10 chapters long. The average reader can get through a chapter in about 15 minutes. That means that if every Catholic were to spend 15 minutes a day doing spiritual reading, he would read easily 30 books a year. And at the end of the year he would know much more about the teachings of the Church than when he began and would, I prophesy, be considerably holier.

Such a person would really be praying when he uttered the words, "Make my understanding submissive to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit." And unless you're willing to do a little bit of work to prepare yourself for the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, it might be better not to say such prayers. And if you're willing to do this extra work, it's pretty safe to say that you'll be doing a little more praying, too.

Are All Sacraments Equal?

Not all the sacraments are of equal importance. Certainly, the Holy Eucharist is the most important of all since in it we come into contact not only with grace, but with Christ Himself directly. The other sacraments vary in importance according to particular situations and circumstances.

Suppose you were in a terrible accident while in the state of mortal sin. If someone were to approach you as you lay dying alongside the highway and ask you which sacrament you were most interested in receiving right then, you would emphatically and rightly answer Penance. "Get me a priest, I want to go to confession!"

20th-Century Saints

As has been said so many times before, the world in which we live today is not a Christian world. It's hard, even for those who are sincerely trying, to lead a life which is pleasing to God. It's a world which cries out for saints—heroes in every walk of life who are willing to witness to their faith in Christ by their lives and to work for

the spread of His kingdom. As Pius XI said, "Let us thank God that He makes us live among the present problems. . . . It is no longer permitted to anyone to be mediocre." And it is because of the particular age in which we live that the sacrament of Confirmation assumes so much importance in the life of the Christian today.

By it he is given a *social holiness* in addition to the *personal holiness* he received in Baptism. He is given a mandate to share in the very work of Christ Himself, to bring God to men and men to God. "Going, therefore, teach ye all nations whatsoever I have commanded you. . . ." It gives him an official capacity in the social life of the Church. He has now the duty to participate in the external mission of the Church, to give of his time and talents in order that the society of which he is a member will become a place in which it is easier for its members to be brought to God.

While St. Pius X was Pope, he once asked his Cardinal-advisers what they thought was the greatest need of the Church in the 20th century. More

churches, more priests, more seminaries, more schools—these were the answers they gave him. To all of these suggestions St. Pius X said no. What the Church needs most of all in our day, he told them, is a group of apostolic laymen in every parish.

“Spread the Faith!”

“Keep the Faith” has been the watchword of the Church in America far too long. It should be “Spread the Faith.” A man cannot really be an apostle or a witness to Christ unless he has first achieved some depth of holiness in his personal life. But a Catholic cannot be content to strive only for personal sanctity when the society in which he lives is a pagan one. And what else can we call our society today?

We’re faced with a litany of problems both within our country and across the world. And the really critical problems of our day remain largely untouched by the influence of Catholics. Racial discrimination and segregation, civil rights, labor-management teamwork, migrant workers, secularized education, pornography, high health costs,

corrupt politics, the population problem—all of these areas are crying out for a Christian solution. But have we given it?

Pope Pius XII spoke to more people than any other Pope in history, and the constant theme of his message to Catholics was that they should make their lives more truly Catholic—that they should use the graces Confirmation had given them. He urged them to view their work-life, their professional careers, their political opportunities as providential areas in which they could bear witness to Christ and make His teachings effective.

“Yes, bearers of life,” he told them, “penetrate into every place, into factories, offices, fields, wherever Christ has the right to enter. . . . Make yourselves felt, use your rights and inner riches, in legislation and administration, in marriage and the family, in education and in schools, in the saving of the workers from the danger of falling into atheistic materialism.”

Christ once told His Apostles that the harvest was great but the laborers were few. If we are to Christianize the

world we live in, there is plenty of work to go around. There is a man-sized job for every adult Christian. And through the sacrament of Confirmation each of us has received both the commission to take up the work and the assurance of all the grace we need to do our share.

A Saint? Who, Me?

Confirmation might very aptly be called the call to action for the 20th-century Catholic, the sacrament of challenge — a challenge we too often forget.

Most Catholics very realistically do not view themselves as saints. And as they examine their consciences, they do not even believe that they have within themselves the raw material to become saints. Yes, they want to get inside the doors of heaven and hope to achieve this. But more? Somehow they just don't believe they're cut out for it. But let's face it, heaven is open only to saints; if we want to get in we have to want to become saints.

Every time we recite the Apostles' Creed we say: "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy Catholic Church, the

communion of saints, . . . and life everlasting. Amen.”

But what does this phrase mean, *the communion of saints*? As Catholics we believe in it, so we should learn what it means if we do not already know. *The communion of saints* refers to the unity the Church on earth shares with the Church in purgatory and in heaven. And we have that unity because we are all one in Christ and in the life of sanctifying grace He has won for us. We, as much as the souls in purgatory or in heaven, merit to be called *saints* not because of our own deeds but because as long as we are in the state of grace we really are holy with the holiness of Christ Himself.

Baptism: the Beginning

I don't know if Christians of all ages have been so afflicted, but I think that most of us Catholics today suffer from the disease of pessimism—from an inferiority complex. We rejoice fittingly, although sometimes gushingly, at the Baptism of an infant. But too often then a note of wistfulness creeps in.

We know that the infant's soul,

laved in the blood of Christ through Baptism, glows with the new life of sanctifying grace. But then we project into the future, thinking of the sins that quite possibly will one day corrupt the life of grace in this soul. And we are sad. But there's another point of view, too.

Baptism isn't the perfection of the Christian life; it's only the beginning. Rather than thinking of the future in terms of the corrosion and degradation that sin will bring, we should think of it in terms of the full, noble growth of grace within the soul that will bring this person to the fullness of sanctity destined for him by almighty God. What we need is a little Christian optimism.

The baptized infant belongs to the family of God supernaturally just about the same way he belongs naturally to the family of his parents and brothers and sisters. He shares their lifeblood and is theirs but really hasn't done anything other than be born. Later on, as he develops and matures, he will become the son whose accomplishments his parents can be proud of, the brother his siblings will learn to love for his

goodness. His future is bright with promise.

Confirmation: Call to Action

And that holds true in the supernatural order also. At Baptism our life is just beginning; the future of our supernatural life shines brightly. God, like our parents, has given us a new life, but as yet we haven't returned anything. So too, God, like our parents, has a right to expect great things from us.

Maybe it's this last point that really marks the biggest divergence between God's thinking and our own. God can see us as saints; we can't see ourselves as such. We just don't have enough faith to believe that the merits of Christ's Passion and Death are quite enough to make saints out of such unlikely material as we know we are. Maybe that's the hardest act of faith that God asks us to make.

We spoke of Confirmation as a call to action, a challenge—and it is just that. The world needs saints today, and God needs saints today to Christianize a world which increasingly ignores Him. We can, we *must* become those saints.

To us alone this would be impossible, but we're not alone; God is with us. The graces He gives us through the sacrament of Confirmation will give us the strength to achieve the deeds He foresaw for us on the day we were baptized—the deeds of His saints.



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