

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

## **CONFIRMATION**

**(Catechism nn. 1285-1321)**

## Jesus and the Spirit

Closely linked with the Sacrament of Baptism is the Sacrament of Confirmation (Catechism n. 1285-1321), which completes and confirms the grace received at Baptism. The focus of baptism is on our dying and rising with Jesus. The focus of Confirmation is on Jesus giving us his Spirit, the Spirit of love binding Jesus in intimate communion with God.

### Jesus and the Spirit

The Gospel of Luke highlights the role of the Spirit in Jesus' conception (1:26-38). Mary gave her first love to God, and her conceiving of Jesus was the fruit of God's loving embrace. Luke describes also how the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus at his Baptism (3:22), and how 'Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness'(4:1), after which 'Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee'(4:14). In the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus chose a text from Isaiah 61:1-2 to describe how he saw his mission (Catechism n. 714):

'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus' public ministry is the story of how he responded to the inspiration and guidance of God's Spirit, and how he shared this same Spirit with others. As John says (Catechism n. 1286): 'He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure'(John 3:34). Jesus exclaimed: 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!'(Luke 12:49; Catechism n. 694). The fire he longed to kindle was the fire of God's love, the love of the Spirit that bound Jesus completely to God. His giving reached its climax at his crucifixion, when he could say from the cross 'It is finished'. Only then, when he bowed his head in death, could he give over the fullness of the Spirit (John 19:30). John goes on to describe what happened just after Jesus' death (Catechism n. 694):

'One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out ... As Scripture says: They will look on the one whom they have pierced'(John 19:34, 37).

Father Jules Chevalier, Founder of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in his book on the Sacred Heart (1900) wrote:

'From the heart of Jesus pierced on Calvary, I see a new world coming forth: a great and life-giving world, inspired by love and mercy; a world that the Church must perpetuate on the whole earth.'

John referred to this outpouring of the Spirit earlier in his Gospel:

'Jesus exclaimed: Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water". Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified' (John 7:37-39).

This is the Spirit that Jesus promised at the Last Supper:

‘I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever’(John 14:16).

‘The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you’ (John 14:26).

The Spirit is Jesus’ parting gift – a fact reinforced in the following scene (Catechism n. 1287):

‘On the evening of his resurrection Jesus was with his disciples in the upper room. He breathed on them and said to them: Receive the Holy Spirit’(John 20:22).

### **The action of the Spirit in the early Church**

In his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke chronicles and reflects on the action of God’s Spirit in the Church. He begins with a brief reminder that the disciples had various encounters with the risen Jesus, including the following instruction given to them by Jesus just prior to his ascension:

‘Jesus ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This”, he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now”’ (Acts 1:4-5).

The disciples gathered in the room in which they had celebrated their last supper with Jesus:

‘In the upstairs room where they were staying, the Twelve were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers’ (Acts 1:13-14).

In a powerfully dramatic scene, Luke links the gift of the Holy Spirit with the Jewish Feast of Pentecost (Catechism n. 1287, 1302), for it was when the pilgrims returned to Jerusalem after the Passover of the crucifixion, that the disciples began their mission, inspired and encouraged by Jesus’ Spirit:

‘When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together, when suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:1-4).

Luke also describes the outpouring of the Spirit on a Gentile community (Catechism n. 1315):

‘When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 8:14-17).

## Confirmation

The Letters of Paul are filled with references to the Spirit experienced in the Christian community (see Volume 1 Chapter 12). The following should suffice as a reminder:

‘God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying “Abba!” (Father)’ (Galatians 4:6). ‘The Spirit of God dwells in you’ (Romans 8:9).

‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5).

In John’s Letter we read:

‘The anointing that you received from him abides in you’ (1John 2:27).

‘There are three that bear witness to Jesus: the Spirit and the water and the blood’ (1John 5:7-8; Catechism n. 694).

### **The Sacrament of Confirmation**

Against the background of this Newer Testament material, let us look at the Catechism’s teaching on the sacrament of Confirmation. The Catechism (n. 1303) describes how the sacrament of Confirmation increases and deepens baptismal grace:

‘It roots us more deeply in sharing the life of God’s Son, which makes us cry, “Abba! Father”; it unites us more firmly to Christ; it binds us more perfectly to the Church; it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess him more courageously and never to be ashamed of the Cross.’

The Spirit of Jesus is given us in Confirmation to strengthen us to share Jesus’ mission. The Catechism (n. 767) reminds us that:

‘The Church by its very nature is missionary, sent by Christ to all the nations to make disciples of them’ (see Matthew 28:19-20).

The Catechism (n. 1294) states:

‘Those anointed in Confirmation share more completely in the mission of Jesus Christ and the fullness of the Holy Spirit with which he is filled, so that their lives may give off “the aroma of Christ”’ (2Corinthians 2:15).

### **The Christian Community is the Temple of the Holy Spirit.**

In his Book Against the Heresies (AH 3.24.1), Irenaeus wrote:

‘Where the Church is there also is God’s Spirit. Where God’s Spirit is, there is the Church and every grace.’

It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now that Jesus has been raised to the fullness of life by his Father, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus – the Spirit of love which binds him to the Father – that fills all things, giving life wherever it is welcome. The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus’ Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus’ body, carrying out the will of God and bringing about on earth the reign of God’s love (see Colossians 1:19 and 2:9).

In the words of the Second Vatican Council (GS 38):

‘The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only arousing in them a desire for the world to come, but also animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end.’

Each disciple has his/her special grace from God to contribute to the mission of the Church. In his First Letter to the Corinthians (12:4-7), Paul writes:

‘There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit.  
There are varieties of ministries but the same Lord.  
There are varieties of ways of exercising power but the same God  
who activates all of them in everyone.  
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for a good purpose.’

This text highlights the Trinitarian dimension of grace. The Spirit’s gifts are given with a view to the carrying out of the mission of Christ, and are effective because empowered by the creating energy of God.

### **The gifts of the Spirit**

A long tradition in the Church has reflected on the following statement from Isaiah as a way of meditating on the gifts of the Spirit given to us at Confirmation. The Greek Version of Isaiah 11:2 reads:

‘The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and courage, the spirit of knowledge and piety. He will fill him with the spirit of the fear of the Lord.’

The Rite of Confirmation (n. 25; Catechism n. 1299) alludes to this text:

‘All-powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life.  
Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their Helper and Guide.  
Give them the Spirit of Wisdom and Understanding,  
the Spirit of Right Judgment and Courage,  
the Spirit of Knowledge and Reverence.  
Fill them with the Spirit of Wonder and Awe in your presence.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.’

The gift of Wisdom opens us to what Jesus reveals about God and about ourselves.

The gift of Understanding opens us to grasp the implications of revealed truth for our lives. We are reminded of the statement of Augustine:

‘Do not seek to understand in order to believe. Seek rather to believe in order to understand.’

The gift of Understanding is a gift of the Spirit, welcomed by faith.

## Gifts of the Spirit

The gift of Right Judgment opens us to the inspiration of Jesus' Spirit guiding our decisions: how best to respond to circumstances in a way that is true to our deepest self, responsive to grace, and creative.

The gift of Knowledge opens us to grasp truth more readily and more profoundly.

The gift of Courage keeps us trusting and alert to God's grace even when circumstances tend to reduce us to fear and impotence. Saint Paul writes:

'God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it'(1Corinthians 10:13).

As one writer puts it:

'It is courage that makes saints and courage is nothing more nor less than trusting in God's grace which is always present. For in our trials and sufferings God is always there like the space that surrounds a bird.'

The gift of Piety is the grace to know God as "Father/Mother", and to relate to others as brothers and sisters.

The gift of Fear of the Lord (perhaps better expressed as 'Fear from the Lord') is the grace to be conscious of the presence of the Lord at the heart of and beyond everything. This sense of the sacred stops us taking God for granted and awakens in us a profound sense of awe, wonder and respect for God and for all that God holds in existence. The following texts help clarify its meaning:

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10).

'The fear of the Lord is the fountain of life' (Proverbs 14:27).

'The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil' (Proverbs 8:13).

'Do not be afraid. God has come only to test you and to put Fear of the Lord upon you so that you do not sin' (Exodus 20:20).

'Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments' (Psalm 112:1).

'Let those who fear the Lord say: His steadfast love endures forever' (Psalm 118:2).

'The Lord looks on those who fear him, on those who hope in his love' (Psalm 33:18).

## Fruits of the Spirit

Perhaps a more simple and accessible way of thinking about the gift of the Spirit is to look at Paul's lists of what he calls the 'fruits' of the Spirit. The grace of Jesus' own communion with God that is poured into our hearts in a fuller way in the sacrament of Confirmation has the effect of producing a harvest in our lives of the following virtues. The more we are receptive, the greater the fruit. Paul writes:

'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control'(Galatians 5:22-23).

Since the Spirit is the Love that binds Jesus in an intimate communion with God, the gift of the Spirit draws us into this same intimacy: an intimacy that is the essence of prayer. Paul writes (Romans 8:26-28):

‘The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. All things work together for good for those who love God.’

The reader may wish to pray the Sequence sung in the liturgy of Pentecost (see page 138).

### **The Rite of Confirmation**

The Catechism (n. 1288) notes that the bishop lays hands on the person to be confirmed. This is an ancient action, symbolising the passing on of God’s Spirit. It is normally the bishop who administers this sacrament. The Catechism states (n. 1313):

‘The administration of this sacrament by the bishop demonstrates that the effect of the sacrament is to unite those who receive it more closely to the Church, to her apostolic origins and to her mission of bearing witness to Christ.’

The Rite includes the anointing with Chrism (n. 1289, 1293). The anointing with the sacred oil is a symbol of consecration to Christ as priest-prophet-king (see Chapter 20 on the Sacrament of Baptism), with a special reference to our continuing Jesus’ mission. Just as baptism marks us forever with a seal that consecrates us to Christ, so Confirmation marks us forever with a seal that consecrates us to the Holy Spirit (Catechism n. 1295, 1304). Confirmation, like Baptism, cannot be repeated. It is possible for us to deny the consecration to the Holy Spirit brought about by the sacrament, but from God’s side the grace is never withdrawn. We read in Paul:

‘God establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts’ (2Corinthians 1:21-22).

‘You were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit’ (Ephesians 1:13).

‘Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption’ (Ephesians 4:30).

