

CONFIRMATION

By JOHN F. CLARKSON

MEDIEVAL scholasticism, especially in the person of St Thomas Aquinas, had arrived at a doctrinal synthesis of the principal elements handed down by tradition concerning the sacrament of confirmation. Little was added to this synthesis in the centuries that followed the Council of Florence which, in its decree for the armenians (1439), took over St Thomas' rather jejune summary of the scholastic systematization. The decree teaches that confirmation is a sacrament, one of the seven of the new law. Its matter is chrism blessed by a bishop; its form, the words used by the confirming bishop, who is the ordinary minister of this sacrament; although sometimes, by dispensation of the apostolic See, a simple priest can also administer it. This is one of the three sacraments that imprints an indelible, distinctive, spiritual character, and for that reason it cannot be received more than once. In this sacrament the holy Spirit is given, as he was given to the apostles at Pentecost, to strengthen the christian for bold witness to the name of Christ. Adding nothing new, the Council of Trent merely emphasized those elements of this doctrine which had been denied by the sixteenth-century reformers.

In teaching the catechism, we have been inclined to insist on these same doctrinal elements, often in too apologetic a manner. As a consequence, we have, unfortunately, neglected the deeper theological riches contained in the scriptural and patristic teaching about confirmation. In consequence, many christians lack any vivid appreciation of the dignity their confirmation character gives them. They do not feel the sense of responsibility that goes with full participation in the messianic community of the new covenant. And they do not see the sacramental rite in its relation to the mystery of Christ as the sign that confers on them the full maturity of the christian life, by establishing them as christians 'in power' and visibly designating them to participate in the Spirit-giving activity by which the Church prolongs the mystery of Pentecost.

In recent decades, however, Catholic theology has 're-discovered' the intimate relation that exists between the saving mysteries of Christ in history and our own sacramental participation in his

redemption. Patristic studies have produced a lively awareness of the truth expressed by St Leo the Great: 'The [redemptive mystery] that was visible in Christ has passed over into the sacraments of the Church'.¹ With regard to baptism and confirmation in particular, these studies have revealed the richness of the Fathers' understanding of the one complex initiation rite, by which new believers were incorporated by distinct steps into the mystery of Christ and the sharing of his Spirit. In the following pages we shall first consider briefly the unity of the christian initiation rite as a whole. Afterwards, we shall look more closely at the proper nature of confirmation itself as distinct from baptism.

The unity of the christian initiation rite

In the first kerygma of the good news on Pentecost, St Peter announced that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the messianic prophecies had been fulfilled. 'God has made both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified'.² 'And now, exalted at God's right hand, he has claimed from his Father his promise to bestow the holy Spirit; and he has poured out that Spirit, as you can see and hear for yourselves'.³ As one example of the promise, Peter referred to Joel's prophecy: 'Then afterward I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind . . . even upon the servants and the handmaids, in those days, I will pour out my spirit'.⁴ The references, however, could easily be multiplied. The theme of a great outpouring of God's spirit in power, as the mark *par excellence* of the messianic times, runs throughout the Old Testament prophets.⁵

Peter's good news was this: that in Jesus Christ the gift of this saving Spirit was now offered to all who would accept it. Conscience-stung, his hearers asked what they should do. Peter told them simply, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to have your sins forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit'.⁶ This gift is called 'the gift of God' by Peter:⁷ this was one of the ways in which Jesus himself described it, when, in speaking to the samaritan woman, he referred to the living water (the Spirit) which he would give as 'the gift of God'.⁸

To receive this gift means to be fully at home in the kingdom of

¹ *Sermo* 74, 2: PL 54, 398.

² Acts 2, 36.

³ Acts 2, 33.

⁴ Joel 2, 28-9.

⁵ Cf Ezek 11, 19-20; 36, 26ff; 37, 14; 29, 29; Isai 52, 13-53, 12; Zach 12, 10.

⁶ Acts 2, 38.

⁷ Acts 8, 20.

⁸ Jn 4, 10.

the people of God.¹ Through baptism, those who believe in the exercise of power by which God raised Christ from the dead are 'united with Christ's burial, united, too, with his resurrection';² and so in him they find their completion, as the whole plenitude of the godhead is embodied in him. To the galatians St Paul writes: '... in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham was to be imparted to the gentiles, so that we, through faith, might receive the promised gift of the Spirit'.³

The manner in which this gift of the Spirit is conferred is shown in several places in the New Testament. Two accounts in Acts are classical: 8, 4-20 and 19, 1-7. In each we see clearly that, according to the practice of the apostles, there seem to have been two ritual steps in the incorporation of new members into the christian community. In the first account, after the preaching of Philip the deacon, the people of Samaria 'found faith and were baptized, men and women alike, in the name of Jesus Christ'.⁴ Then, when the apostles in Jerusalem heard about this, they sent Peter and John to visit the new believers. 'So these two came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the holy Spirit, who had not, as yet, come down on any of them; they had received nothing so far except baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then the apostles began to lay their hands on them so that the holy Spirit was given them'.⁵

A comparable event is related when St Paul arrives at Ephesus and finds there some disciples - that is, believers in Christ. He asks them if the holy Spirit was given to them when they learned to believe. They reply that they know nothing of the holy Spirit;⁶ they had received only the baptism of John. Then Paul, explaining the insufficiency of John's baptism, told them: 'John baptized to bring men to repentance; but he bade the people have faith in one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus. On hearing this, they received baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus; and when Paul laid his hands upon them, the holy Spirit came down on them and they spoke with tongues, and prophesied'.

If we keep these two accounts in mind when we read the opening lines of the sixth chapter to the hebrews, in which the author says there is no need to review such fundamentals as 'instructions about the different kinds of baptism, about the laying on of hands, etc.,'⁷

¹ Cf Eph 2, 8; 2, 19.

⁴ Acts 8, 12.

⁷ Heb 6, 2ff.

² Col 2, 12.

⁵ Acts 8, 15-17.

³ Gal 3, 14.

⁶ Acts, 19, 2.

we can sense how familiar to the earliest christians must have been the pattern of an initiation ceremony, in which an imposition of hands to confer the holy Spirit followed upon the baptism of water. We may be sure that the Church must have initiated her new members, from the very time of the apostles, by means of a twofold rite which included a washing with water and a laying on of hands to signify the gift of the Spirit.

The writings of the Fathers confirm and develop our understanding of what we have seen from the New Testament. Often the Fathers use simply the one term baptism to refer to the whole complex of several initiatory rites. They do not, by this, mean that the water-ablution alone accomplishes the whole initiation. Rather, they simply use the word appropriate for the first and most visually striking part of the ceremonies, and allow it to stand for the whole of the initiation rite. In a famous text in which he extols the role of the body in the salvation of the soul, Tertullian lets us see most clearly this unity of the whole initiation rite, including its goal of participation in the holy eucharist.

The flesh is washed, that the soul be cleansed; the flesh is anointed, that the soul be consecrated; the flesh is marked, that the soul also be strengthened; the flesh is overshadowed by the laying on of the hand, that the soul also be illumined by the Spirit; the flesh is nourished upon the body and blood of Christ, that the soul be enriched by God.¹

With the passage of time, there is a growing consciousness of the distinction between baptism and confirmation, so that the latter comes to be understood more clearly as a sacramental rite in itself. In the third century, St Cyprian seems to see confirmation as somehow independent when he writes that, in the case of the samaritans baptized by Philip,

only that which was lacking was done by Peter and John: that is, the holy Spirit was invoked and poured out upon them by their prayer for them and the imposition of their hands. And this is still done in our midst: those who have been baptized in the church are brought before the bishops of the church, and through our prayer and imposition of hands, they receive the holy Spirit and are perfected with the seal of the Lord.²

¹ *De Resurrectione Carnis*, 8: PL 2, 806.

² Ep LXXIII, 9, 1.

In the fourth century, the independence of confirmation is already quite clearly recognized. A canon of the Council of Elvira, about 305 A.D. provides that when emergency baptism has been given to a catechumen, he should if he survives, be brought to the bishop, 'in order to be perfected by the imposition of hands'.¹ St Cyril of Jerusalem points out that the two rites supplement one another and only together do they produce the complete christian: 'only after holy baptism and mystic chrism [the anointing of the confirmation rite] have you put on the full armament of the Spirit . . .'² (The anointing here mentioned appears early in association with the imposition of hands. It is often difficult to say which rite was regarded as the central act of confirmation, or whether both were. In the present-day rite, there is a simultaneous anointing of the forehead and imposition of the right hand on the head of the one receiving the sacrament).

With the recognition of the independence of confirmation as a distinct sacrament, from the fourth or fifth century there was a tendency, for various practical reasons to separate the administration of confirmation from that of baptism. However, the consciousness that they belonged together remained strong, and drew support from the liturgical books. The Gelasian Sacramentary, which exhibits the oldest form of the baptizmal liturgy in the roman Church, ordains that at the end of the baptizmal ceremony the bishop gives 'the seven-fold Spirit', a prescription that must not be neglected 'because then every legitimate baptism is confirmed with the name of christianity'.³

Vatican Council II, in its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, calls for a revision of the rite of confirmation, so that this intimate connection with the whole of the christian initiation may be more clearly visible. To accomplish this, the Council strongly recommends that a renewal of baptizmal promises precede the reception of confirmation.⁴ The rite hitherto in current use contained only one reference to baptism: in the first prayer said by the bishop: 'Almighty and eternal God, who in thy kindness hast given to this thy servant a new birth through water and the holy Spirit, and granted to him remission of all his sins . . .'

Besides the connection with baptism, the Council wished also to

¹ Denzinger (ed xxiii) 120 (52 d).

² *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 3, 4.

³ Cf Neunheuser, B., *Baptism and Confirmation* (London and New York), pp 166-7.

⁴ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 71. Cf also Instruction, 65 (September 26, 1964).

reassert the role of confirmation as part of an initiation rite that leads to participation in the eucharistic community. Hence, it gave permission for administering confirmation during mass.¹ In this case, the new rite for the administration of holy communion under both species permits those who are confirmed to receive the body and blood of Christ under both kinds at their confirmation mass. This is a very appropriate way of giving expression to the full right with which the confirmed, now a mature christian, partakes in the eucharistic celebration. The instruction also says that it is fitting for the bishop to celebrate the mass himself and confer confirmation while vested in the mass vestments.² All these prescriptions tend to show the close link between confirmation and participation in the eucharist: and, indeed, in a eucharistic celebration so arranged as to be an ideal manifestation of the community of the people of God, of the messianic kingdom into which the initiate is being incorporated to the full. For, as the Constitution on the Liturgy teaches,

the liturgical life of a diocese centres around the bishop and

the Church reveals herself most clearly when a full complement of God's holy people, united in prayer and in a common liturgical service (especially the eucharist), exercise a thorough and active participation at the very altar where the bishop presides in the company of his priests and other assistants.³

The distinctive nature of confirmation

After having seen the close connection between baptism and confirmation – these two sacramental nuclei that make up the one rite of christian initiation, it is only natural that we now ask what it is that is really distinctive about confirmation. A number of hints for answering this question have already been given. We have seen that St Peter calls the effect of the imposition of hands 'the gift of God'⁴ and 'the gift of the holy Spirit'.⁵ The Fathers too, when they distinguish clearly between the effects of the baptismal and of the confirmational rites, assign the giving of the holy Spirit as the proper effect of confirmation. In discussing these rites, the Fathers have before their eyes the scene of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, followed

¹ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 71.

⁴ Acts 8, 20.

² *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵ Acts 10, 45.

³ *Ibid.*, 41.

by the descent of the holy Spirit upon him in the bodily form of a dove.¹ They remark that in this event of his earthly life, Jesus undergoes, as it were, a second birth in the holy Spirit. Unlike his first birth from the virgin Mary, in which the holy Spirit also plays a role,² but a hidden one, the new beginning or 're-birth' at the Jordan, when Jesus begins his public life, is accompanied by a visible manifestation of the Spirit. The Fathers interpret this visible descent of the Spirit on Jesus as a first realization of all the Old Testament promises about the outpouring of the Spirit in the messianic times. These events at the Jordan, then, provide the background for their explanations of the initiation rites of the christian neophytes. Thus, St Cyril of Jerusalem tells those who have been baptized:

After being washed in the river Jordan and having communicated the perfume of his divinity to the waters, Christ came out and received a substantial communication of the holy Spirit; thus like reposed upon like. You also, when you came out of the pool of sacred waters, received an anointing, a sign of that with which Christ was anointed . . . i.e., of the holy Spirit who is called the 'oil of gladness', as he is the cause of spiritual gladness.³

If we look again at the text of St Luke's gospel, we shall notice that the two actions of Jesus, related immediately after the theophany at the Jordan, are both closely connected with that mysterious event. 'Jesus returned from the Jordan *full of the holy Spirit*, and *by the Spirit* he was led on into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil'.⁴ Accordingly, one of the first works of Jesus, after he was filled and led by the messianic Spirit, was to enter into conflict with his adversary the devil. The implication is clear: his victory over the devil's temptations is a victory in the power of the Spirit. Again, immediately after the narration of the temptations, St Luke reports the first preaching of Jesus: 'And Jesus came back to Galilee *with the power of the Spirit* upon him; word of him went round through all the neighbouring country, and he began to preach in their synagogues, so that his praise was on all men's lips'.⁵

Preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus applies to himself

¹ Lk 3, 21ff.

⁴ Lk 4, 1.

² Cf Lk 1, 35.

⁵ Lk 4, 14-15.

³ *Mystagogical Catecheses*, III, 1-3.

the prophecy of Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me, and sent me out to preach the gospel to the poor . . .'¹ The use of this figure of speech of anointing to designate the outpouring of the messianic Spirit became a commonplace among the followers of Christ, the anointed One. Thus, in one of his kerygmatic sermons, St Peter tells the story 'about Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the holy Spirit and with power, so that he went about doing good . . .'² Seen in this light, the anointing with chrism or myrrh, so often mentioned in connection with the conferring of the holy Spirit in the initiation rites, is understood as a very proper symbol of the messianic gift.

The biblical and patristic background helps us to understand this gift of the Spirit which the sacrament of confirmation confers. The Spirit given is a Spirit of prophecy; he 'anoints' the christian to carry the good news of the mystery of Christ before the world.³ There is one kind of confirmation catechesis which emphasizes the sacrament as that which makes of the christian a soldier of Christ and arms him for spiritual combat against the powers of Satan, for the defence of truth and the destruction of error. This theme has indeed been inspired by the temptation scene of the gospels. But we must not forget Jesus' evangelization of Galilee 'in the power of the Spirit', which manifests the positive aspect of the Spirit's anointing. The task to be done is one of witnessing, by word and by deed. To some extent, perhaps to a large extent, this may involve conflict with Christ's enemies; but this is only a negative aspect of the commission received.

When confirmation is regarded in its relation to the mystery of Pentecost, its apostolic import is more evident. For, although the Jordan events show in a visible way the saving reality that Christ was to accomplish fully in history through his death and glorification, that is, in the easter and pentecostal mysteries, these latter are to be seen as the central mysteries of salvation into which we enter through the sacraments.

On Easter day the Father showed his acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus by raising him from the dead and establishing him in power in his humanity;⁴ so that, perfectly filled himself with the holy Spirit, he could become the source of the same Spirit for all men. In the Church, this easter and pentecostal mystery of Christ is

¹ Lk 4, 18; cf Isai 61, 1-2.

² Acts 10, 38.

³ Cf Acts 1, 8; Isai 42, 1.

⁴ Cf Rom 1, 4.

prolonged and rendered visible for men of every age in the sacraments. For the Church, Pentecost meant her own establishment 'in power': she received from Christ a full participation in his Spirit-sending power when she was filled with his messianic Spirit. But before she can bestow the fulness of the Spirit, the Church must first associate men with Christ's sacrifice by introducing them into his paschal mystery, through the mystical death and resurrection of baptism.¹ Accordingly, as baptism is understood as an initial participation in the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, so confirmation should be understood as the mature christian's participation in the mystery of Pentecost. Confirmation is then related to baptism as Pentecost is to the paschal mystery. By baptism, the neophyte has become a member of the community of the Spirit in Christ, and a partaker of the easter mystery celebrated in the eucharist. But by confirmation he begins to share in the fulness of the Spirit. He is, so to speak, not only 'a son in the Son' (baptism's effect); he now becomes partaker in the mystery by which the glorified Christ was 'constituted Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness'.²

Confirmation completes the commission, given in baptism, to take part in the eucharist and the other sacraments, because confirmation establishes that commission in full power. This is a primary effect of confirmation; it perfects the baptized person as such. As Schillebeeckx says: 'Not until his initiation has been completed by confirmation can a person take part in the celebration of the eucharist as a child of the Father established in power; not until then does his share in the offering of the eucharist begin to function fully as a share in the work of propagating and strengthening the Church'.³

A further distinctive effect of the character given at confirmation is the commission of the christian to share in the visible ecclesial activity of bestowing the Spirit. The charismatic activity of the confirmed christian visibly manifests the Church's exercise of her charge to extend and diffuse the kingdom. Before the ascension Jesus told the apostles: 'the holy Spirit will come upon you, and you will receive strength from him; you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and throughout Judea, in Samaria, yes, and to the ends

¹ Cf Rom 6.

² Rom 1, 4; cf Schillebeeckx, E., O. P., *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (London and New York, 1963), pp 159ff.

³ *Ibid.*, p 164.

of the earth'.¹ The character of confirmation ordains the christian to bear witness in just this way. The very ancient closing prayer of today's rite of confirmation reminds him that he has received the same Spirit that was given to the apostles, to be given through them and their successors to the rest of the faithful.

In its Decree on Missionary Activity, Vatican Council II stresses the obligation of christians to witness to the power of the Spirit by whom they were strengthened at confirmation.² In the Constitution on the Church, the Council says that the christian is 'bound more intimately to the Church' by confirmation. Endowed with special strength by the holy Spirit, the christian is more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith.³ But the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity is most emphatic about this duty and right.

The laity derive the right and duty with respect to the apostolate from their union with Christ their head. Incorporated into Christ's mystical body through baptism and strengthened by the power of the holy Spirit through confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself. They are consecrated into a royal priesthood and a holy people (cf 1 Pet 2, 4-10) in order that they may offer spiritual sacrifices through everything they do, and may witness to Christ throughout the world.⁴

In consequence, it is important to note that the right and duty to engage in the apostolate of the Church belongs to the mature (confirmed) christian by his baptism and especially his confirmation. Although it is entirely appropriate for the hierarchy within the Church to direct and regulate this missionary activity, it must not be forgotten that the fundamental right and duty that all christians have to share in the Church's apostolic mission, comes to them not through any juridical 'mandate of the hierarchy', but directly from God, inasmuch as it is a sacramental commission of which Christ himself is the author.⁵

¹ Acts 1, 8.

² *Ad Gentes*, 11.

³ *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

⁴ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 3.

⁵ The question of the proper age for confirmation is not an easy one, nor does space permit us to treat it adequately here.