

The Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation

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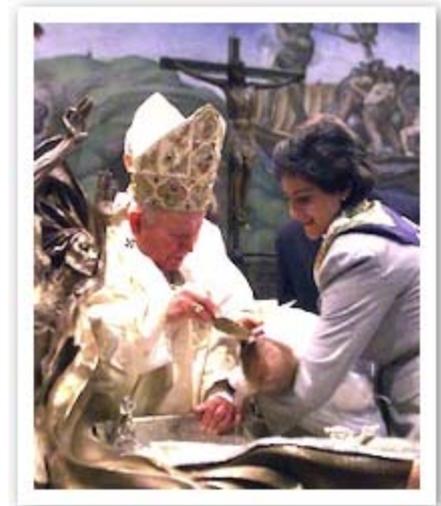
From the dawn of Christian history, Baptism and Confirmation have been very closely associated.

To this day, Catholics belonging to the Eastern rite receive both sacraments in infancy. Pope St. Leo I makes this relationship very clear. He compares the natural life of our bodies with the supernatural life of our souls. Baptism, he says, corresponds to our bodily birth. Confirmation corresponds to our bodily growth.

In order to do justice to each of these two sacraments and bring out how they are interrelated, we shall treat them in sequence, first Baptism, and then Confirmation. Always to be kept in mind that we have two levels of life as believing Christians and Catholics.

We have the natural life of the body, when God creates an immortal soul and infuses this soul into the body we receive from our father and mother. We have the supernatural life of the soul when at Baptism God creates sanctifying grace and infuses this "soul of the soul," in St. Augustine's language, the *anima animae*, into the immortal spirit received at the moment of our bodily conception in our mother's womb.

But this supernatural life of the soul needs to be strengthened in order to cope with the trials that God sends us in order to grow in His grace, during our stay in this valley of tears.



Baptism, the Sacrament of Supernatural Regeneration

There is more than passing value in noting that there is a growing spread of error in professedly Catholic circles about the meaning of the Sacrament of Baptism. On the grounds that there has been a development of doctrine in the Church, the author of *Doors to the Sacred* affirms that, "Contemporary theology and religious education texts now speak of Baptism as incorporating a person into the life of Christ which is

continued in the Church, and talk about its causing the forgiveness of original sin is slowly disappearing.”

As we go through our reflections on Baptism, we shall see how to cope with these domestic and alien critics of what we believe is the sacrament of regeneration and the supernatural life.

Importance

Baptism is not only the first of the seven sacraments; it is also the basic sacrament. How? Unless a person is baptized, none of the other six sacraments can be received. Only a baptized person can be confirmed. Only a baptized person can receive absolution in the Sacrament of Confession. Only a baptized person can receive the Sacrament of Matrimony. Only a baptized man can be validly ordained a priest.

Baptism first gives a person the supernatural life, whereas the other sacraments provide for the restoration, or growth, or healing, or communication of the supernatural life. As we shall see, the moment we are conceived in our mother's womb, we receive the principle of the natural life of our body, called the soul. When we are baptized, our soul receives its principle of the supernatural life. The foundation of supernatural existence is conferred by the Sacrament of Baptism.

Baptism clearly shows what the Catholic Church understands by the sacraments. They actually give, cause if you will, the grace which they signify. There need be no deliberate contribution from a newborn child. The sacrament itself confers grace from God just because the infant is baptized.

Meaning

Baptism can be defined as the sacrament of supernatural rebirth or regeneration. We should stress the prefix “re” when we speak of Baptism as a rebirth or regeneration. This brings out the astounding fact that although we are indeed generated or born naturally of our human parents, Baptism gives us a new life. This is a higher life, the

supernatural life that we need above our natural existence. Why do we need this life? Because we hope to reach heaven after our natural life expires when we die. Absolutely speaking, none of us will ever die. What we commonly call death is merely the separation of our immortal soul from our body. But the soul is meant to be alive twice over. As a spiritual reality, our soul will never cease to exist. But if our soul is not animated by the grace we received at Baptism, we shall die the double death of both body and soul.

Institution by Christ

Jesus Christ told us about Baptism during his conversation with Nicodemus. This Pharisee had just complimented Jesus. The Savior replied by saying, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is begotten from above." To which Nicodemus objected, "How can a man be born again? Can he go back into his mother's womb and be born again?" This was a perfect question to introduce Christ's revealed teaching about Baptism. He said, "I solemnly assure you no one can enter the kingdom of God without being begotten of water and the Spirit."

For no less than fifteen verses does Jesus explain the meaning of what He had just told Nicodemus. Underlying Christ's teaching is the fact that Baptism is necessary. So true is this that the Catholic Church recognizes the rite of Baptism practiced by other Christian churches, provided the sacrament is conferred by immersion in water or the pouring or sprinkling of water, while the same person pronounces the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

How necessary is Baptism? It is absolutely necessary to receive Baptism of water or at least of desire, which can be implicit, provided a person believes at least in God and His goodness and is faithful to the graces that God gives him.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "As regards infants who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward infants which caused him to say: 'Let the little ones come to me, do not hinder them,' allow us to hope that there is a way

of salvation for infants who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church's call not to prevent infants coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism."

Effects of Baptism

All the effects of Baptism are supernatural as we should expect. These effects are mainly five and may be summarized in five words: sin, life, power, Church and character.

Removal of Guilt and Penalty for Sin]

The first and most practical effect of Baptism is to remove the guilt of original sin and restore the corresponding title to heavenly glory. What does this mean? It means that all the guilt of all the sin a person may have on his soul is taken away. A baptized child who has not reached the age of reason, if it dies, has an immediate title to the beatific vision. After the age of reason, a baptized person is freed not only from original sin but all the sins committed, and all the punishment due to even a lifetime of personal sins.

We should immediately add, however, that two penalties for original sin are not removed by Baptism. Our first parents lost for themselves and all their posterity the gift of bodily immortality and of freedom from irrational desires. Baptism does not restore either of these, what we call, preternatural gifts that we would have inherited had we not inherited a fallen human nature.

Supernatural Life

By the sin of Adam, mankind lost its share in the divine life. By the death of Christ, the second Adam, this life can now be restored. Baptism restores what we call our supernatural life.

This is the new birth of which Christ spoke to Nicodemus, when He said that we must be born again of water and the Holy Spirit.

This is that life of which St. John writes in the opening chapter of his Gospel, when he says that we are children of God, "who are begotten not by blood, nor by carnal desire nor by man's willing it, but by God" (John 1:13). Because we have this life of God in our souls, we become heirs of heaven.

The only condition which God requires is that we remain spiritually alive when our bodies die. Provided we are in the grace of God when, as we say, we die, our souls will not only survive but will have a right to heavenly glory. In other words, this supernatural life received at Baptism is destined to continue, beyond our bodily death, into a heavenly eternity.

We have a name for the source of this supernatural life. We call it sanctifying grace. St. Augustine calls it the soul of the soul. What our soul is to our body, giving it natural life, sanctifying grace is to the soul, giving it supernatural life.

To be noted, however, is that sanctifying grace is already the created effect of the indwelling of the Holy Trinity. We may therefore say that the most important effect of the sacrament of Baptism is to have the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, dwell in our souls. This indwelling is called the uncreated grace that we have received when we were baptized and are to retain when the Lord calls us to our everlasting destiny.

Virtues, Gifts and Fruits

Baptism not only gives supernatural life to the soul, it also gives the soul supernatural powers, instincts and joys which we commonly identify as the virtues, gifts, and fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Another name for the virtues infused at Baptism is supernatural powers to do what is impossible to human nature alone. The three most important of these powers are the virtues of faith, hope and charity.

By faith we are empowered to believe everything which God has revealed: that God is the eternal Community of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; that God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of Mary; that Jesus Christ, the Godman, suffered and died for our sins; that Jesus Christ is now present, really and truly, actually and bodily on earth in the Holy Eucharist; that the Church which Christ founded is our road to salvation, and that the visible head of this Church is the Bishop of Rome, successor of St. Peter, whom Christ made the rock, so that what the Pope teaches the universal Church, it is the teaching of Christ Himself.

By hope we are empowered to confidently trust that all the good things promised us by God we shall obtain; that we will never be without the light and strength we need to fulfill the will of God; that no trials that God sends us will be greater than, with His grace, we can bear; that provided we cooperate with God's grace, heaven is ours. We are confident of His mercy, no matter how sinful our lives may have been. The only condition is that we repent, make a good Confession, and resolve to amend our lives.

By charity we are empowered to love God above all things; to love Him more than ourselves; to love Him even, or especially when He sends us sufferings and the cross; to love Him in all the circumstances of life, no matter how demanding His love may be.

By charity we are empowered to love others not only as much as we love ourselves. We are enabled to love others more than ourselves; to love others even as Christ has loved us, by suffering and dying on our cross out of love for others; to love others out of love for God constantly, patiently and generously beyond all human power and expectation.

Membership in the Church

The Sacrament of Baptism incorporates a person into the Church founded by Christ. What does this mean? In the words of the Second Vatican Council, it means that "All who have been justified by faith in Baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church."

Here we must distinguish. Every validly baptized person belongs to the Catholic Church no matter how unaware the person may be of belonging to the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church militant here on earth. However, we distinguish between belonging to the Church and being a member of the Church founded by Jesus Christ. To be an actual member of the Catholic Church, the baptized person must also be ready to profess what the Catholic Church teaches, and accept her laws and obligations with an open heart.

To belong to the Catholic Church further means that Baptism is the door to obtaining such graces as only baptized persons have a claim to. Certainly the Church is the universal sacrament of salvation and sanctification. All the graces that anyone receives from God are channeled through the Catholic Church. Those who are baptized have a special right to these graces to which no one else has a claim.

Indelible Character

The final and most mysterious effect of Baptism is to receive a permanent, irremovable character or seal. Baptism imparts a likeness to Christ, especially to Christ the priest. The seal will remain throughout our lives on earth and into the endless reaches of eternity. The baptismal character grafts a person into Christ the

Vine so that all the baptized share in a unique way in the graces of Christ's humanity. As a result, Jesus Christ has a claim on the baptized that no one else enjoys; and they have a claim on Him that no one else on earth can share.

The baptismal character is permanent because it is timeless; it is indelible because nothing, not even the loss of faith can remove it. Therefore a baptized person always remains a Christian. Why? Because the baptismal seal confers a permanent relationship with Christ.

How to Grow in the Gifts of Baptism

Gone is the day when a Catholic can simply possess the gifts of grace received at Baptism. These gifts must grow and develop at the risk of losing the divine blessings which Baptism confers. I would single out especially the need for growing in the most fundamental gift we received when we were baptized, namely the gift of faith. Either we grow in our faith or we risk losing not only the virtue of believing in God's revealed truth, but even the prospect of eternal salvation.

We are living in the most critical century of Christian history. Only firm believers who have grown in their faith will survive. Only firm believers will be used by Christ as channels of His grace to others.

How do we grow in our faith? We grow in our faith by studying our faith, by praying our faith and by putting what we believe into generous, even heroic practice.

By studying the faith, I mean that no Catholic today, no matter what his age or state in life or previous education, can be excused from learning more and more deeply what Christ has revealed and what the Church He founded teaches about the faith.

A word of warning, however — make absolutely sure that in studying the faith you read authors who support the faith, and consult people who themselves are staunchly Catholic, and listen to speakers and attend conferences and discuss with those who will fortify what you believe. Let their faith nourish yours and your faith nourish theirs. Never has it been more necessary to choose your close friends and companions. Studying the faith must be done with faithful persons, using faithful sources, and its purpose should be to acquire a clearer understanding, a deeper certitude and a greater appreciation of what the Holy Spirit has revealed. He wants the seed of His Word to grow. The first means for assuring that growth is study.

Study has to be joined with prayer. This can be meditation on the mysteries of faith, or petition for more light on the meaning of faith. It should always be a humble recourse to God if only with a moment's aspiration whenever a difficulty in the faith arises or when, as so often happens these days, we are faced with malicious attacks against our beliefs or forced to witness some conduct or read some writing or hear some statement that betrays the true faith.

In order to grow in the faith, we must use it. The duty is that simple, but also that necessary. Let me illustrate — we believe that nothing happens by chance, but that everything that occurs is part of the mysterious Providence of God. If we believe it,

and we do, let us act on our belief no matter how painful the things God sends us — ah, but we must believe that God sends it — or (how painfully) He takes pleasant things away. And no matter how unwelcome a duty, we do it; doing it infallibly strengthens the faith. We believe that Christ is really, truly and entirely present in the Holy Eucharist. We should act accordingly by visiting Him often in the Blessed Sacrament where we adore Him, telling Him how much we love Him and asking Him for whatever we need. That is why He is there, the same Jesus who raised the dead.

If He worked miracles then, trust Him, He will work miracles now.

Confirmation, the Sacrament of Spiritual Strengthening

When the Roman Catechism was published in 1566, the faithful were warned regarding the Sacrament of Confirmation, "There are found in the holy Church of God many by whom this sacrament is altogether omitted; while very few seek to obtain from it the fruit of divine grace which they should derive from its participation."

The same could be said today. Only the Lord really knows, but in my judgment, Confirmation is the most ignored sacrament of our faith.

Biblical Witness

The biblical grounds for our faith in Confirmation are Christ's promise to send the Holy Spirit on the apostles. Not surprisingly, it is the evangelist St. Luke who records the Savior's promise. Just before His ascension, Jesus told His disciples, "I am sending down to you what the Father has promised. Stay in the city, then, until you are clothed with the power from on high" (Lk 24:49). On the same occasion, the Lord promised His followers, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses, not only in Jerusalem, but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

In the same context, we are told that converts to the faith were first baptized, and then the Apostles "laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:17).

Immediately we see that the basic reason why Christ instituted the Sacrament of Confirmation was that His followers would witness to Him, even to the ends of the earth. The original revealed Greek term for witnesses, as quoted by St. Luke, is "martyrs." Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday to enable His disciples to be His martyrs until the end of time.

Divinely Conferred Effects

There is a mountain of implications hidden in this precious sacrament. We shall therefore concentrate on the effects of Confirmation and our responsibility to live as not only baptized, but confirmed Christians in our day.

We define Confirmation as the sacrament of spiritual strengthening, in Latin, *roboratio spiritualis*. Our English word "robust" comes from the Latin *robur*, which means "oak wood" or "hardwood."

More concretely, Confirmation strengthens the supernatural life we receive in Baptism. Confirmation increases our sanctifying grace in every way, but mainly in deepening our capacity to remain spiritually alive. It gives us the power of resistance, the ability to resist dangers, and the strength to become more Christ-like until the dawn of eternity.

Confirmation gives us, even before the age of reason, the title to such fortitude as no one else except confirmed believers can claim. It does nothing less than provide us with superhuman strength against hostile forces from within our own fallen nature and from the world and the evil spirit who is literally hell-bent to destroy us.

There are three sacraments that give a person what we call an indelible character. They are Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders. Confirmation confers the character of assimilation to Jesus Christ, the priest, teacher, and king.

On each of these levels, the assimilation is associated with Christ's role as Savior. As we know, the priesthood of Jesus is the mission that He came into the world to fulfill by offering Himself in sacrifice on the cross. We cannot repeat too often what sacrifice means. Sacrifice is the voluntary surrender of something precious to God. On Calvary,

Jesus offered His human life for our salvation. But the heart of His bloody sacrifice was in His human will, freely surrendering Himself to the Father.

On this first level of assimilation to Jesus Christ the priest, Confirmation gives us the strength to bear suffering (passively) in union with Him and the courage to sacrifice pleasant things (actively) out of love for the One who died on the first Good Friday out of love for us.

Confirmation assimilates us to Christ the teacher. We acquire a strong will in adhering to the faith in the face of obstacles, a strong mind in not doubting the truths of faith, a strong humility of spirit in professing the faith, and a strong wisdom that knows how to communicate the faith to others effectively.

Finally, Confirmation assimilates us to Christ the King. It gives us a quality of leadership that can direct others on the path of salvation. It gives us a strong character that can withstand the ravages of bad example or the snares of seduction, and a strong personality that will attract even the enemies of Christ to His standard.

We might describe the sacramental character of Confirmation by calling it the sacrament of witness to Christ, in the Church and before the world.

In other words, Confirmation is the sacrament of fearless apostolic zeal. Having said this, we are ready to spell out in as clear words as possible what this sacrament gives us the grace to do. In the words of the new canon of law, issued by Pope John Paul II on the first Sunday of Advent in 1983, we are told that by the sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized are "made strong and more firmly obliged by word and deed to witness to Christ and to spread and defend the faith."

Immediately we see that Confirmation is exactly what its name implies. It is the supernatural, which means superhuman, courage we receive to be apostles of Jesus Christ.

Witness

To witness means to testify to others of what we are absolutely sure is true. It is no mere cliché to say that not every believing Catholic is unqualifyingly sure of what he

believes. To be sure of the faith means to be certain that what God has revealed is unchangeably true. Certitude of faith is in the mind, convinced that the mysteries of our faith cannot be questioned because they are revealed by the all-wise and truthful God.

We get some idea of what Confirmation does by what happened on Pentecost Sunday. In the Church's tradition, it was on Pentecost that the disciples received the graces of their Confirmation when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, gathered with Mary, awaiting the coming of the power that Jesus had promised to send them.

Remember, it was just over fifty days before that Peter, the coward, three times denied that he even knew Jesus Christ. Yet now he stood before several thousand people in Jerusalem and spoke to them with such courageous conviction as he never had before.

Men of Israel, listen to what I am going to say: Jesus the Nazarene was a man sent to you by God. Miracles and portents and signs God worked through Him when He was among you, as you all know. This man, who was put into your power by the deliberate intention and foreknowledge of God, you took and had Him crucified by men outside the law. You killed Him, but God raised Him to life (Acts 2:22-24).

The result was that some three thousand Jews were baptized that very day.

The lesson is obvious. No less than what the Holy Spirit did to Peter on Pentecost Sunday, the same Spirit has done to us when we were confirmed on our Pentecost day. We have received nothing less than miraculous power to witness to Jesus Christ.



Spreading the Faith

Confirmation develops our sense of mission and inflames our desire to share with others what others had so generously shared with us.

According to St. John Chrysostom, on the Last Day, we shall be judged mainly on our practice of charity in spreading the faith. The number of ways of spreading the faith is beyond human reckoning. But the one way that has been most effective from the dawn of Christian history has been by living a life of selfless charity. The charity of

which we are speaking is not only, or even mainly, the charity of the corporal works of mercy. Certainly, as Christ tells us, we are to do everything we can to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and care for those who are in physical need. However, the principal form of charity, which is nothing less than a miraculous means of spreading the faith, is the interior charity of selfless love for others. No one has improved on the description of charity of Pope Clement I, writing in 90 AD. "Charity," he says, "bears all things. Charity is longsuffering in all things. There is nothing mean in charity, nothing arrogant. Charity knows no schism, does not rebel, does all things in concord. In charity, all the elect of God have been made perfect."

Is it any wonder that by the end of the first century of Christianity, over one hundred dioceses were established along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea? Without exception, the Church spread because Christians were confirmed by the Holy Spirit to love others with heroic charity. They loved those who hated them. They loved those who persecuted them. Like Jesus, they even loved those who crucified them.

We are talking about spreading the Faith as one of the gifts of the sacrament of Confirmation. It is especially by our love of others that we communicate our Faith to them. This spreading of the Faith is not only evangelizing unbelievers or converting sinners estranged from God. Confirmation so deepens the faith of a sincerely believing Catholic that he is the conduit for deepening and strengthening the faith of others in the measure of his own practice of self-sacrificing love.

How misguided we can be! We see all around us millions who either do not believe in Christ at all, or whose Christianity is confused, or whose faith in the Church's teaching is shallow at best and make-believe at worst.

How to bring to this ocean of souls the fullness of the true faith? Surely, our understanding of the faith is important. Our ability to prove the truth of our faith is imperative. But, the infallible talisman for spreading the faith, far beyond our wildest dreams, is living a life of loving surrender to the will of God and of selfless generosity in our dealings with everyone who enters our lives.

In one sentence, the key to putting the gift of our Confirmation into practice is to share with others the treasure of our Catholic Faith.

Defend the Faith

Here we could begin all over again. The Sacrament of Confirmation provides us with nothing less than miraculous power to defend the faith that we profess.

We cannot defend what we do not understand. Nor can we defend what we are not ourselves convinced is true. On this basic level of defending the Catholic Faith, there is no substitute for knowing what we believe.

But, to know what we believe means more than just understanding what God has revealed. Strange to say, we must also know how to cope with the prevalence of so much erroneous teaching that pervades our society like the air we breathe.

In an age like our own, when heresy is so pervasive and error has been elevated as master of human thought, we confirmed Catholics had better know why God permits heresy in the first place and how we are to benefit from the prevalent errors in faith and morals.

There are two statements of St. Cyprian, bishop and martyr of the third century, that deserve to be memorized. The first statement is his description of heretics. Says Cyprian: "Whoever has been separated from the Church is yoked with an adulteress, is separated from the promises made to the Church. Nor shall he who leaves Christ's Church arrive at Christ's rewards. He is a stranger, he is sacrilegious, he is an enemy. He who has not the Church for mother can no longer have God for his Father."

But then Cyprian goes on. "Nevertheless," he explains, "the Lord allows and suffers these (errors and evils) to be, while each man's will remains free. Why? So that while our minds and hearts are tested in the crucible of truth, the sound faith of those who are approved may shine forth more clear and undimmed" (On the Unity of the Catholic Church, 6, 10).

What are we being told? We are being told that heretics and enemies of the Church, dare I say it, are necessary. Strengthened by the Sacrament of Confirmation, we are enabled to become more convinced of the truth of our faith, because we have to defend what we believe against the errors among which we live.

Once again, what are we being told? We are being told that hostility to our faith convictions is God's mysterious way of making us more firm in holding on to what we believe, even though this perseverance may cost us our blood.

Confirmation is the Savior's great blessing for both our minds and wills. Our minds become more convinced that what we believe is really true. And our wills become more courageous in protecting this truth, even with our bodily lives.

The Church's literature is filled with statements that might be called aphorisms. In every language since the dawn of Christianity, believing Catholics are encouraged to imitate the saints whom we honor as martyrs. Let me just mention a few of these mottos: The ashes of martyrs drive away demons. The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians. Heaven is opened to martyrs. All times are the age of martyrs. The martyrs were bound, imprisoned, scourged, burnt, rent, butchered and they multiplied. The death of the martyrs blossoms in the faith of the living. The Lord has willed that we should rejoice even over persecutions because, when persecutions occur, then the faith is crowned.

So the litany of these proverbs could go on. They teach us one thing, the most important thing we need to believe in this valley of tears. Christ instituted the sacrament of spiritual strengthening so that His followers might follow Him on the road to Calvary. The Savior is now glorified, but only because He had been crucified. Our own glorious eternity depends on the courageous witness of our faith, made possible by our Confirmation by the Holy Spirit.

A special celebration like a Baptism calls for the best [baptism party favors](#) that can be found online.

Ref.: <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0285.html>