

Confirmation Clarified

Confirmation is an admittedly complicated subject matter. The reason it's complicated is because Confirmation is a sacrament directly related to the unity of the Church, and sadly we live within an era in which the global Church is divided and confused.

Let's clarify what we know about confirmation. Confirmation is a sacrament in which the Bishop...

- Formally **acknowledges** your baptism
- Tangibly **receives** you as a direct, historic successor to the Apostles of Jesus, recognizing you as part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church by **anointing** and the **laying on of hands**.
- Prays for a **strengthening of the Holy Spirit's power and presence** for your continued growth in Christ
- **Commissions** you for ministry as a member of the priestly people of God, inviting the full measure of the Holy Spirit's power for ministry in a public service often including discerning or praying for particular gifts of the Spirit

Biblical Context:

In the New Testament era when a person came to faith in Christ and was ready to be incorporated into the Church, the process of initiation included not only baptism, but also special prayer for the Holy Spirit, the laying on of hands, and anointing with oil. We see this alluded to in various places in Acts and the New Testament:

- Acts 8:14-17 – The apostles laid hands on and prayed for the Samaritan new believers so that they would receive the Holy Spirit.
- Acts 9:1-19 – Saul of Tarsus, after encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus receives the Holy Spirit when Ananias lays hands on him and prays for him.
- Acts 19:1-7 – Some believers had been baptized but had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Paul laid hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit.
- Hebrews 6:1-2 – The author of Hebrews describes “laying on of hands” as part of the process of conversion.

Additionally, as background it's helpful to know that the Hebrew term *Messiah* translated into Greek as *Christ* simply meant “anointed one.” Prophets, priests, and kings were all anointed in the Old Testament. Jesus (being all three – prophet, priest, and king) is *the* “anointed one.” To be joined to Him is to become, by extension, an “anointed one”, a *Christian*. Thus anointing with oil became a key symbol in the baptismal/confirmation rite as practiced by the early church.

Historical Context:

In the very early days of the Church when bishops were always present for Baptism (there was typically one bishop per city), Confirmation (then called *Chrismation*) was always part of the same service / rite as baptism and included first Communion. It involved the anointing with oil, prayers, and laying on of hands by the bishop. The bishop, in part, was there to affirm by his authority that the baptized person was truly received as part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church and not some offshoot heretical group.

Part of the value and meaning of Confirmation, initially, was as a safeguard to keep rogue individuals from going off and baptizing people with heretical theology /practice, and then

declaring them unilaterally “Christians”. The role of the bishop was vital¹; he was the person with universally recognized (within the Church), apostolically-granted **authority** to regulate the standard of faith and practice amongst his churches. He determined who could be called a Christian and who couldn’t. Beyond this, as a member of the *college of bishops*, the bishop’s job was to maintain unity between himself and the other bishops in order to create a unified global Church.

Later on as the Church expanded and priests were entrusted with portions of the Bishop’s responsibilities (including Baptism and Holy Communion), Confirmation was separated from Baptism (until a time when the bishop could be present). So what used to be one unified rite (Baptism→Confirmation→First Communion) became separated into two rites: Baptism→First Communion, with Confirmation following when the bishop visited next.

And then, to make things even more confusing, in the Latin (Western) Church, as time went on, it got divided into three separate rites: Baptism (infant), First Communion (age 7-8), Confirmation (age 12-14). The intention was to allow individuals who were baptized as infants to have an opportunity to reaffirm their baptism and proclaim their personal faith publicly as an adult.

Complexity:

Unfortunately, separating the rite of Confirmation from the Baptism service / rite added some theological complexity. If you saw Confirmation as a formal and necessary sacrament² but separated it from baptism it risked sending the signal that:

- A) Baptism was NOT the moment when a person receives the Spirit (an easy assumption to make if you need a separate rite / service to receive the Spirit with the laying on of hands by the bishop)
- B) Baptism was NOT the moment when someone is recognized as part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church (again, an easy assumption to make if you need to be received / acknowledged after your Baptism into the Church in a separate rite / service)

Alternatively, if you affirm that by virtue of your baptism you DO receive the Holy Spirit and belong as a member of the Church, then Confirmation risks being merely an *elective* part of being a Christian... something you do *if* you so desire, but which, for all intents and purposes, is *unnecessary*. In that case, it’s sort of like a more robust version of asking the prayer team for special prayer during Communion – “all can, some should, none must” as Fr. Joshua sometimes says about certain practices.

More Complexity - Our 21st Century Ecumenical Context:

We live in a Christian context in which nearly all Protestants have NOT received Confirmation (all Protestants apart from those in the Anglican churches that still preserve Confirmation as a sacrament performed by a bishop in Apostolic Succession). We also live in a time when even those who practice the sacrament of Confirmation do so in some contradictory ways (Catholic vs. Orthodox).

¹ Note that in the absence of a theology of Apostolic Succession and a robust understanding of the role of the bishop, Confirmation will make no sense as a sacrament.

² The Church universally recognized Confirmation as a sacrament until some of the Reformers rejected it as a sacrament, preferring it merely as a discipleship rite.

What do we do about this? Our options are:

- 1) Declare that Confirmation isn't necessary – making it merely a supplemental or elective ritual.
Result: This removes the rub / discomfort of having to say that others around us (including loved ones, mentors, etc.) who have not been Confirmed by a Bishop are incomplete in their formation as Christians or are less-than-legitimate in some way.
- 2) Declare that Confirmation DOES matter, that it is essential.
Result: This is obviously a very hot and ecumenically difficult position to hold – the implication being that anyone who does not receive Confirmation is in some way incomplete or illegitimate. Our personal experience seems to press hard against this option.
- 3) Throw up our hands and shrug our shoulders and ignore the whole thing.
Result: This means Confirmation doesn't matter – essentially the same as #1 but maybe worse because it altogether dismisses something the Church has traditionally valued.

Or, option 4 – we can say as a historical fact that Chrismation/Confirmation has always been the normative practice of the Church in all eras when the Church was united and healthily functioning. We can say confidently that it DOES matter, but refuse to declare that those who have not received Confirmation are left out of God's grace or are, by default, considered illegitimate Christians. Instead, we can with humility and true sadness in our heart acknowledge that the global Church is fractured and confused on many things – meaning we need the grace of God more than ever. And, BECAUSE of that need for grace, we can submit ourselves to the rite of Confirmation as an act of humility and as an attempt to be part of the solution to bringing unity, purity, and health to the global Church.

Eucharist Church takes option 4. We refuse to say that Confirmation is merely elective; it matters. We also refuse to say that not being Confirmed marks a person as insincere in his or her Christian faith.

In practice, this means that we do not *require* people to be confirmed in order to receive Holy Communion. Due to our fractured ecumenical context we treat anyone who is baptized and who intends to live in obedience and faithfulness to Christ and His Word as a legitimate Christian. We do, however, guard the leadership of our church, and in particular roles related to Sacraments (altar guild, acolyte, etc.) as appropriate only to those who have been Confirmed.

Our Goal:

We want our church to be both ecumenically gracious and uncompromisingly faithful. To do both is challenging and requires vigilant discernment.

A unified Global Church is humanly impossible right now. All we can do is place ourselves in the most ecumenically advantageous and faithful position possible. Our belief as a church is that submitting ourselves for Confirmation with a bishop in Apostolic Succession is, perhaps, one of the most powerful and important ways we can do this.

In an earlier era when the Church was united, to *refuse* Confirmation was to effectively declare yourself outside of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. In our era, with a

fractured / divided Church, we have to recognize that we clearly are NOT in the same situation. –Many who desire to follow Jesus have never heard of Confirmation; many have no theology of Apostolic Succession or any conception of the importance of bishops; many have no understanding of ecclesiology (the theology of the Church) or sacraments. This is because the global Church has become sick, weakened, and confused as a result of being divided now for over 1,000 years. Again, Confirmation is a potential means of strengthening unity and moving things the right direction. It reinforces an important means of bringing about catholicity (worldwide Christian unity) via the role of the bishop in connection to other bishops.

So why be Confirmed?

Actually, the better question is why NOT be Confirmed? Why would we withhold ourselves from the grace imparted to us by the laying on of hands done via someone in direct Apostolic Succession to Christ Himself? Why would we not want to have our faith validated and recognized by an authorized representative of the global Church? Why would we not want to be prayed for in order to have the power and presence of the Holy Spirit strengthened in our lives for growth and ministry?

You should consider Confirmation if you...

- Desire the sacramental grace received through the laying on of hands and anointing of oil by the bishop
- Desire to have the presence of the Holy Spirit strengthened in you for ministry; to have your spiritual gift(s) fanned into flame
- Desire Christian unity with the broader, historic Church
- Desire an opportunity to give an adult profession of your faith in Christ
- Desire to submit yourself to the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church... to acknowledge that *she* is your mother
- Desire to serve in ministry as an accountable part of the leadership of our local church

Discernment | Preparation:

To prepare for Confirmation, you will need to read through and affirm the teachings and practice of historic Christianity found in the Anglican Catechism (*To Be A Christian...*). This is the focus of the Sunday morning Catechesis Module: Christian Foundations (6 week course). You will also need to select sponsors to present you to the bishop. In addition to this, preparation for Confirmation involves a conversation or series of conversations with a pastor who will walk you through any questions or concerns you have and talk with you about a personalized Rule of Life that allows you to be intentional in cultivating your life in Christ. The overarching hope is that this whole process will be tremendously valuable for strengthening your faith.