

THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

By Bishop Raymond A. Lucker

The Second Vatican Council has often been called the Council of the Laity. In its main document, "The Constitution on the Church", it emphasized that the church is the kingdom of God, now present in mystery, growing visibly in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit in its members. The church is the people of God, or body of Christ, in which every person shares in the very life of God through baptism. Moreover, each Christian is given the gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation and is called to participate in the life and mission of the church, not through the call of the bishops and priests but by the invitation of Jesus.

There is an ancient formula, "les orandi, lex credendi – the law of worship is the law of faith." In other words, if you want to know what the church believes, look at how she prays. Authentic worship points to true doctrine. Look at how we celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation.

It is now twenty-five years since the publication of the Rite of Confirmation, following the directive of the Constitution on the Liturgy that the rite was to be revised. I believe the revised way of celebrating confirmation is one of the success stories of the Second Vatican Council.

During the twenty-six years I have been a bishop, I have used only the new rite. But, I remember the old one and notice a remarkable difference. In the old days, confirmation was not celebrated during the Eucharistic liturgy. There were no special readings from scripture about the Holy Spirit in the life of the people of God. No connection was made with the other sacraments of initiation. What people remembered was that they were terrified at being questioned by the bishop and that they received a blow on the cheek reminding them to be soldiers of Jesus Christ.

The primary source for any confirmation preparation program should be the rite itself and the accompanying instruction by Pope Paul VI. We need to allow the ritual itself – the lectionary texts, symbols and ritual gestures, the meaning and intention of the rite – to tell us what needs to be done to celebrate the sacrament correctly.

One time recently I was praying and reflecting before the celebration of the sacrament in one of our large Churches. I asked myself, "How often have I done this?" I quickly calculated that I had celebrated the sacrament of confirmation about a thousand times since the new rite was published. The hardest part for me is to be psychologically and emotionally "up" that often for the liturgy, which for the parish is a major annual event. I am impressed by the excellent preparation of the candidates, the involvement of parents and sponsors, and indeed whole communities, and the obvious faith and reverence with which the candidates approach the sacrament. Yes, we have come a long way.

At the very center of the celebration of confirmation is that in this sacrament we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We receive the Holy Spirit as gift. The bishop prays at the moment he lays his hand on the one to be confirmed and anoints him or her with Chrism on the forehead, "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit." Over and over the ritual prayers say, "Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their Helper and Guide." "Send your Spirit to help us walk in unity of faith and grow in the strength of his love." And again, "Send the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and lead us to all truth."

Since the conferring of the Holy Spirit is so central to the sacrament, why is it that so many miss it? Why is it that the emphasis is on "becoming an adult in the Church" or "being recognized as an adult" or "making my own decision"? Why is it that candidates count the number of classes attended, the number of hours of service projects, being able to answer a set number of questions about Catholic teaching, and then say "I have completed all the requirements; now I am ready to be confirmed."

I have felt for a long time that the hardest part about the sacrament of confirmation is to really believe that God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit and that this gift will make a difference in our lives.

Yet, that is what we believe. In baptism we truly enter into the death and resurrection with Jesus and rise with new life. In the Holy Eucharist we the assembled community gather around the altar with Jesus and join our lives with his sacrifice. We believe that we truly receive his Body and Blood and are sent forth to bring Jesus with us into our daily life and work. So, in Confirmation we truly receive the Holy Spirit. The very Spirit of God is “poured out” on us.

The prayer of the Church teaches us that the special purpose of receiving the gift of the spirit is to help us to be more like Christ in bearing witness to the world. As Jesus was led by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free, so we are to love one another as he did, we are to forgive each other, to uphold the sacredness of life, and to work for justice and peace in our society.

As Jesus could say, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me” and “has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Lk 4, 18), so we believe in his promise, “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. You will receive Power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1: 5,8)

I have discussed the sacrament of confirmation with young people many times. They assure me they understand that being a witness might call them to ministries within the Church, but it also calls them to work for the transformation of society. They have told me about visiting our mission in Guatemala, serving the homeless at soup kitchens, being part of organizations like Students Against Drunk Drivers (SADD), working on various projects to save the Minnesota River, or passing sandbags during the recent flood. All of these were opportunities to be “more like Christ in bearing witness to the world.”

Openness to the Spirit, being more like Christ, and being witnesses of the Gospel in our daily lives are emphasized in our Confirmation preparation programs. This sacrament, as all others, will be effective in our lives to the extent we are ready to receive it. That is why the Second Vatican Council, when it ordered the revision of the rite and that the connection with the whole of Christian initiation be more clearly set forth added, “for this reason it will be fitting for candidates to renew their baptismal promises just before they are confirmed.”

The renewal of baptismal promises or the profession of faith has to come from the candidates' whole being. Faith is the total human response, under the grace of God, to the living word of God. With mind, heart, body, emotions, with our whole being we declare, “I love you. I believe in you. I trust you. You are my creator. You are my Lord. You are my strength. I believe in what you taught us through Jesus, and continue to teach through your Church. Jesus, I am ready to follow you the rest of my life. Send your Spirit. Give me the gifts I need to be more like you in my life, in my school, in my work, in all that I am and do.”

The challenge to catechists, parents, sponsors, and the whole Christian community is to provide an atmosphere where this personal relationship with the Lord Happens. We are invited by Jesus to be open to the Holy Spirit and to work for the renewal of the Church and the transformation of the world. That is what the ministry of the lay faithful is all about.

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