

BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

Baptism and Confirmation are the sacraments of initiation into Church. They are also, by that fact, sacraments of salvation, because they effectively signify and bring about unity, a unity with God through faith in Jesus and a visible unity with the People of God, the Church. This is the unity depicted in Genesis, the condition of *peace* intended for us by the creative spirit of God, but which is destroyed by sin.

Originally, the rites which comprise Baptism and Confirmation were celebrated together as a single sacramental rite. Early in the history of the Church the basic elements which are now associated with Confirmation - anointing with oil, laying on of hands and the kiss of peace - were part of the baptismal rite of adults. Later, after the 4th century, as infant baptism gradually became the norm, these rites, usually reserved to the bishop, were delayed till a later date when the bishop could be present and evolved into a separate sacrament, except in the case of adult baptism.

Baptism of Adults

Pre-history

Baptism with water was not unknown to the Jewish people before Jesus. For centuries various pagan baptisms had been part of the general culture in which the Jewish people lived. More importantly, the Jewish community had a history of baptizing converts. In the time of Jesus, gentiles who wanted to become Jews were admitted into the community through sacrifice, circumcision and baptism. In the waters of baptism, converts symbolically joined the ancient Israelites in their Exodus and passage through the "Red Sea". The Dead Sea Scrolls also attest to the practice of ritual baths or baptisms by the Jewish religious sect known as the Essenes. However, for the Essenes, the ritual bath was only a sign of an inner personal disposition of submission to God.

Baptism was also prominent in the ministry of John and he was known by that title, John The Baptizer. John's baptism, however, was importantly unique. The pagan baptisms were understood to work magically and Jewish baptisms or ritual baths were based, for the most part, on the legalistic notions of ritual uncleanness, but John's baptism required a change of heart necessary for the forgiveness of sins in preparation for the coming Day of Judgement (Mk, 1:4). Jesus accepted baptism by John at the beginning of his public ministry and this could have helped set the stage for the apostles later using baptism as a sign of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John, however, attests that one mightier than he will come to baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mk. 1:7-11; Acts 1:5).

While Paul attests to his own baptism in 1Cor.12:13, it seems clear that the apostles and perhaps other early disciples, never underwent Christian baptism. If baptized at all, they were probably baptized by John as Jesus had been. In the Gospels, the apostles are seen as baptizing, probably in the manner of John (Jn 4:2), for the baptism in which the Spirit was given probably took place only after Pentecost when it is recorded that the apostles

themselves first received the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4). While there is some confusion in the NT (see Jn 3:22-23; then Jn 4:1-4), most scholars agree that Jesus Himself did not baptize.

Baptism in Apostolic Times

The manner of baptism in the early Church was most commonly that of immersion in a stream or river and in most cases included a laying on of hands to receive the Holy Spirit. However, no exact rite or formula was defined in the NT. Soon after the resurrection or certainly from the day of Pentecost onward, the apostles adopted the practice of baptism and baptized new converts to their fellowship with the formula “in the name of Jesus” (Acts 10:48) and they imposed hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit which was sometimes manifested in the “speaking in tongues” and other charismatic gifts.

In later developments, a commission to the apostles was recorded in Matthew 28:19-20, attributed to Jesus in a post resurrection appearance: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...”. This invocation of the Trinity probably reflected a later liturgical development from the earlier form of baptizing “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38) and was probably in use after 80 or 90 AD, when most agree that the Gospel of Matthew was composed. In another development, *The Didache*, an early book of Christian instruction, speaks of pouring water over the head, if no running water was available.

We tend to think that in the apostolic times conversion rites would be fairly uniform, however, scriptural evidence seems to indicate a significant diversity. For example, the reception of the Holy Spirit did not always coincide with baptism. Acts 8:12-17 tells of Philip baptizing new converts in Samaria, but that they did not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John came from Jerusalem and “placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit”. On the other hand, prior to baptism, the manifestations of the Holy Spirit were observed in those who simply heard Peter preach. They were baptized afterwards (Acts 10:44-48).

Then in a most unusual account in Acts 18:24-28, some 30 years after Pentecost, a Christian disciple named Apollos from Egypt visited Ephesus. He is described as accurately teaching “the things concerning Jesus”. In other words, he was making Christian converts. However, “he knew only the baptism of John”. On hearing him preach, the Christians in Ephesus “expounded to him the way of God, more accurately”. So it seems that for some 30 years after Pentecost converts were being received into the Church in Egypt with only the baptism of John the Baptist.

In a similar example, in Acts 19:1-7, Paul comes to Ephesus and finds disciples (perhaps followers of John the Baptist?) who declare: “No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” They also tell Paul they too had been baptized into the baptism of John. Therefore, Paul baptizes them “in the name of the Lord Jesus”, lays his hand upon them and they receive the Holy Spirit.

We can only wonder at what else was taking place in other early Christian communities of which there is no record. However, while there was obvious ritual diversity, there was a common core. The early Church taught the need for baptism to enter into the fellowship of the Church. The conditions were repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Given these interior conditions, in being baptized they would receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38). This common core remains today.

Later developments

Quite naturally, the rite of Baptism developed in the centuries that followed. The sacramental rituals often change form because the Church is a living organism and its expressions of worship go through a natural process of change to reflect the Church's new cultural circumstances and a deepening understanding of itself and of the mysteries which it mediates. Traditionally we have said that in some sense that all the sacraments flow from Jesus. However, He certainly did not "institute" them in any formal way and certainly did not leave a set of ritual instructions.

Throughout the next five centuries of the process of development, the basic elements of the baptismal ritual did remain fairly constant -- a profession of faith, rejection of evil, (in the person of Satan), exorcisms (rites to expel evil spirits), immersion or the pouring of water in the name of the Trinity and the invoking of the Holy Spirit with the laying on of hands and the anointing with oil in the form of a cross on the forehead by the bishop. To these rites were added the wearing of a white robe and later the tasting of salt and the carrying of candles. The completed rite of baptism was followed immediately by full participation in the Eucharist.

Later, before baptism, a period of preparation was added. In the apostolic Church this could consist of simply a sermon, as on the day of Pentecost, later more elaborate forms developed. By the second century this period of preparation consisted of doctrinal and moral teaching plus the practice of prayer and fasting. By the beginning of the third century, a definite preparatory rite had been established. It was composed of two stages:

- 1) The first was a long range preparation called the catechumenate lasting various lengths to a limit of three years. It consisted of moral teaching and testing. The teacher, often a layman, would end each service with a prayer and the laying on of hands as a blessing. The catechumens (literally "those under instruction") were allowed to take part in the readings and the sermon of the Eucharistic celebrations, after which they left the assembly.

- 2) The second stage was a proximate preparation during the time before Easter. This consisted of an examination of the life of the candidate, teachings of the Gospels and daily exorcism from the powers of Satan. On Holy Thursday the candidates bathed, on Friday and Saturday they fasted. Later on Saturday they gathered with the bishop who breathed on their faces, laid hands upon them and signed their foreheads, ears and noses.

During the night-long Vigil of Saturday, they heard final readings and instructions. At dawn on Easter Sunday, they went to the baptismal font and disrobed for baptism. Before plunging into the water, they renounced Satan and were anointed with the oil of exorcism.

The actual baptism was a triple immersion after declaring faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Coming out of the font the candidates were anointed with oil by a priest, dressed in a white robe and taken into the Church. There the bishop laid hands on them and invoked the Holy Spirit. He next anointed them again, sealed their foreheads, gave them a kiss of peace and invited them to the celebration of the Eucharist. (It is important for a later understanding of Confirmation to note that in the early adult baptismal rite it was reserved to the bishop to lay hands, anoint with oil and give a kiss of peace to the newly baptized.)

Developments up to the sixth century were mainly an enlargement of these rites with the proximate preparation now being confined to the six weeks of Lent. From the sixth century until the middle ages significant changes had come about in the administration of the sacrament. By the middle ages the catechumenate fell into disuse, largely because adult baptism became a rarity (Europe was now Christian) and infant baptism was the rule. A revival of the catechumenate did not occur until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's.

The Symbols of Baptism

Various signs and objects are used symbolize our identification with the life of Jesus throughout the baptismal rite. Only by understanding their intended meaning can they become effective symbols for us.

Water - Water is the fundamental and only necessary symbol needed for the celebration of the sacrament of baptism. The Greek word "to baptize" connotes the notion of "dipping", "immersing" or "washing". Water as a symbol had various meanings to the people of biblical times. Most importantly water signified life. Water was essential to life, especially important to a people with a desert heritage and it was believed that from the waters all life had its beginnings (Gen. 1:1-1). The waters of baptism symbolized that the newly baptized were taking on a new life - the life of a follower of the Risen Lord, Jesus. Some writers compared the waters of baptism to the waters of the "Red Sea" through which the ancient Israelites passed from an old life of slavery (sin) into a new life of freedom as the People of God.

In direct contrast, water could also signify death. The Hebrews feared the sea, for it represented the primal chaos and darkness. Water had the power to destroy life as portrayed in the story of the Flood. Later explanations of baptism included both of these significations. Thus the triple immersion in the ancient rite of baptism was seen as "dying to an old life of sin" and "rising to a new life in Jesus". These and other broader symbolic meanings were given to the waters of Baptism, especially its natural symbol of cleansing and regeneration. Thus the newly baptized were cleansed from sin and their life given a

new start, i.e. regenerated.

St. Paul used the dual signification of water as death and life in the Letter to the Romans where he said:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death: We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (6:3-4) .

Oil -- After the baptism with water, the Oil of Chrism is traced on the forehead of the baptized. The Oil of Chrism (olive oil and perfume), now blessed by the Bishop on Holy Thursday, symbolizes the gift of the Holy Spirit and unity which the newly baptized has with Jesus the Christ - the Anointed One.

The word *Christ* means “one who is anointed with oil”. The word “Christ” comes from the Greek form of the Hebrew word for messiah (*mashiah*) from the Hebrew verb “anoint” (*mashah*), thus the word messiah means “one who is anointed”. For example, when Saul and later David were made kings, oil was poured over their heads to seal their kingship. They were the “anointed ones of Israel”.

At the time of Jesus there were several strands of “messianic hope”. One foresaw the coming of another anointed king (messiah) like David who would save his people from oppression and again rule Israel in glory. David was identified with the town of Bethlehem and both Matthew and Luke place of birth of Jesus in Bethlehem as a further indication that Jesus was of the lineage of David.

The High Priest was also anointed with oil and thus the Letter to the Hebrews spoke of Jesus as a new and eternal High Priest.

The white garment -- As in the early Church, the white garments symbolizes that the baptized is now a new creation and has been clothed in Jesus Christ.

The candle -- Lighted off the Easter Candle which symbolizes the risen Jesus, this candle symbolizes in another way that the newly baptized now shares the life of the risen Jesus and is commissioned to be “the light of the world”.

Note: In the present day Church in the United States adult baptisms are relatively rare. Most adults joining the Church have already been baptized in another Christian community. In days gone by, converts were often accepted into the Church through a “conditional baptism” which stated that “If you are not baptized, I baptize you etc.” We now recognize the majority of non-Catholic Christian baptisms as valid and instead of conditional baptism, the rite of initiation is called a Profession of Faith in which the Creed is recited and certain specifically Catholic beliefs affirmed. However, the rite of adult baptism is the model for the theology of baptism.

Other Kinds of Baptism

Baptism of Blood -- During the early persecutions of the Church it happened that some who were in the process of becoming Christians (catechumens) also gave up their lives as martyrs before receiving baptism. Were they to be considered lost or damned because they had failed to receive baptism of water? If baptism was the rite which established unity with Jesus, for forgiveness of sins and entry into the Church, what was the fate of unbaptized martyrs who had died because of their faith in Christ? The answer was that they had received a "Baptism of Blood". This was seen as a sacrament by analogy (it was "like" the sacrament) that, however, had the same effect as a baptism with water. In the 13th century, St. Thomas reasoned that faith is more important than the sacramental ritual expressing that living faith. The sacrament is a sign of faith and without that faith the sacrament would have no effect.

Baptism of Desire -- The Church also came to recognize that catechumens who died a natural death before receiving baptism could also be saved because they had desired to be baptized. Later, considering the universal will of God that all be saved, this "baptism of desire" was extended throughout all of human history to those upright, loving persons of other religions or no religion who had never heard of Jesus, but would have accepted Him if they had.

The Second Vatican Council in its *Constitution on the Church* further expanded the concept of baptism of desire:

"Those can also attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive to do His will as it is known through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace (no.16).

In effect, the Council is teaching that while baptism is indeed necessary for entry into the Church, it is not necessary for salvation.

Theology of Baptism

A response to a call

Baptism is a call, a call to unity -- to be united with God through Jesus by an act of faith and with the company of His followers, the Church. Therefore, according to the overall theological perspective we have used throughout these chapters, baptism is an experience of *peace*, an experience of *salvation*, a participation in the creative power of God moving in the world. It is a moment when personal faith is expressed, sin (alienation) is erased and peace -- the right relationship with self, others and God -- is established. When an adult responds to this call we see a dual activity, a divine call and a human

response, which is present in all the sacraments. This dual activity is necessary because the essence of the sacraments is the personal encounter between Jesus (mediated through written and spoken words) and the believer, not a magical rite or simply some kind of unseen, unexperienced metaphysical activity within a person's soul.

In baptism the risen Jesus becomes personally present in a way that we ordinarily become present to each other, through words and ritual signs. There is an old saying that "faith comes by hearing". So it is with Jesus, He becomes personally present through the spoken and written word prior to and during the rite itself (divine activity) and the person to be baptized makes a response (human activity) of faith and a request to be baptized which includes human words and bodily actions. How does all of this take place within the sphere of human experience?

In some form of ordinary human experience, a person must become aware of Jesus and His message, in this case as presented in the Catholic Church. This awareness comes about ultimately only by the divine initiative in which the Word was made flesh in the historical Jesus.

For example, the presence of Jesus may "break into" a person's life mediated in some way through the Scriptures, the Church, a book, a family, a friend or loved one or some combination of these. Often the next step is for a person to enroll in a RCIA class in a parish and with a sponsor and other candidates explore further the reality of Jesus and the Church. The RCIA is a process that encompasses many small experiences of unity - meeting other candidates, teachers, the pastor; sharing individual stories of faith; sharing refreshments; praying together; asking questions and entering into discussions.

In whatever form this experience takes, this personal presence of Jesus elicits a human response to this call to unity. In response, a person establishes a special unity with Jesus Himself through a personal act of faith and a unity with the Church through participation in the rite of baptism and entry into the life of the local Church. So it is that we *see, touch and feel* this dual activity - human and divine - acted out in the ritual of baptism, which, as the old catechism said, is a sign (sacrament) which actually brings about what it signifies.

The Church has traditionally presented the Exodus as a prototype of Baptism, for the Israelites were saved by this same dual activity -- a divine initiative (God's revelation to Moses) and their human response in faith (leaving Egypt). The powerful Word of God, which broke into the life of Moses, was mediated to them by a call from Moses to respond in an act of faith in which they would put their trust in God, leave their old way of life in Egypt and follow Him into a new life of freedom. Their escape from servitude in Egypt (symbolic of the sinful condition of mankind) was made final in their passage through the waters. In doing so, they were entering into a new way of life, life as a people (Church) united in a covenant of love with one another and with God all of which was accomplished only by the power of God.

An experience of salvation

We have said that Baptism can be initially experienced as a call - a call to faith a call to join the Church. When a person receives Baptism it is then experienced as a unique moment of salvation. What do we mean by this? How do we see, hear, feel and touch this experience of salvation? We have spoken of salvation as the creative movement of God Who offers us *peace*. We have also defined peace in terms of the Old Testament theology which we found in the first chapter of Genesis. There peace is seen as the condition of “right relationships” with self, others, the world and God which we were created to experience. Since these relationships are on the personal level, they manifest themselves in terms of love -- love of self, love of others, love of the world and love of God. Therefore, let us examine how Baptism is an experience of salvation on each of these levels.

1) Love of self -- It is common human experience that if we are going to be able to love ourselves, we need to know that we are accepted by another. For each of us, acceptance by another in love is assurance for us that we are good, that we are lovable. It allows us to love ourselves. Baptism is a rite of initiation or acceptance into the Church where we hear in the Gospel proclamation that we are children of God and that God accepts us unconditionally like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Paul Tillich, the great Protestant theologian, wrote that the greatest test to our Christian faith is “to accept that we are accepted”. Baptism initiates us into a community where the Good News -- the Gospel -- is proclaimed and the Good News we hear from Jesus is that God’s love for us is unconditional, He loves us despite our sins and failings. In fact, it is because of our need (sin) that He comes to us. He loved us so much that He sent His only beloved Son for us. When we experience this message it frees us from our guilt, uncertainty and fear and allows us to love ourselves. Here we experience peace, here we can establish a right relationship with ourselves, here we can truly love ourselves because we know that we are lovable.

2) Love of others -- The salvation of God comes not just to individuals, but always to individuals as part of a social group, e.g. the Exodus. By definition, Baptism is an initiation into the Church and it is important to note that the rite of adult baptism takes place within the celebration of the Eucharist with the Church assembled and is completed by the newly baptized receiving communion within this family meal of the Church.

The Church is a people, the people of God who are trying to live out a life in the imitation of Jesus. In Jesus we know that our lives are to be lived out in service to one another, and not just to those in the Church, but to all who are created and loved by God. We receive our strength to serve others from the example of Jesus and are sustained with the sure knowledge that this way of life conquers sin and even death as we recall and celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in the sacraments of the Church.

We say that a person joins the universal Catholic Church, that is true, but it is a specific

parish filled with a certain number of local people with whom this person now identifies. There are certain experiences -- meeting new people, joining parish groups, participating in the liturgy, going to the parish picnic -- that can certainly be seen, heard, touched and even smelled at the parish bar-b-que. These moments of shared friendship are moments of salvation, they are everyday experiences of the unifying effects of the creative power of God in our lives. And as the local Church renders service to the wider community of its fellow citizens we can experience giving love to others as did Jesus. These are special moments of salvation, moments where we establish peace -- right relationships -- with our fellow human beings.

So Baptism is an experience of love of others because it is our entrance into a Church - a people - who accepts us, welcome us and joins with us in serving others as did Jesus. So in this specific process of salvation we have an actual, observable, physical and spiritual unity of those who have responded to the call of God in faith. Again, it is a partial realization of *peace*, a partial "restoration" of the unity which is destroyed by sin (Genesis) - in other words, an ongoing experience of salvation. And the Church is not simply called together as an end in itself, but is called together to hear and live out the message of Jesus to serve others as Jesus served and thereby bring *peace* to the world insofar as we have time, talent and energy. Baptism is not the end, it is a beginning -- a new birth.

Effects of baptism

For centuries prior to Vatican II, the effects of the sacrament of baptism, especially infant baptism, were explained in such a way that they seemed to ordinary people to be somewhat mechanical or magical. The effects of baptism were explained as "taking away original sin and giving sanctifying grace". This process seemed to portray some kind of *unexperienced metaphysical occurrences* in which a person's soul was washed clean of sin, original and actual, and infused with sanctifying grace -- all of which (soul, sin and grace) were invisible and beyond ordinary experience. The process seemed more "mechanical" than personal. Let me be quick to say that the Church has never taught that the sacraments work by magic.

However, during apostolic times and for several centuries to follow, the understanding of the baptism of adults did not lend itself to any such "magical" interpretation. Here baptism was seen as symbolizing the dual activity of a divine call and a human response -- all on the personal level. In response to the call of Jesus, present in spoken and written word, the person to be baptized responded by an act of faith and entrance into the Church. This personal union with Jesus and union with the Church was ritually acted using the symbols of water, oil, a white garment, a candle and reception of the Eucharist. The notion of taking away original sin was unknown in the apostolic Church and not fully developed until early in the 5th century by St. Augustine.

So how can we best describe the effects of adult baptism? Perhaps a few short observations will help:

1) A New Life in Jesus -- In adult baptism we are called to commit ourselves to a new life in the imitation of Jesus and our response in accepting baptism indicates that we are willing to do so. We shall call this commitment an *act of living faith*. We reject sin and are assured that our sins are forgiven.

We are enabled to do this by the power of God in our lives (grace), without which we can do nothing. Understood correctly Luther was right -- we are saved by faith alone. We certainly do not earn salvation for ourselves by our good works or religious acts. But the kind of faith that saves is a *living faith*, not simply an intellectual act of saying "I believe in Jesus as my personal savior" or an assent to a list of "divine truths". We are not saved by testimonials or the recitation of creeds -- "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 7:21). And to know what "to do the will of the Father" looks like, we need look no further than to the example of Jesus, His life of service -- giving life, healing, feeding, accepting, forgiving -- and His words about the Kingdom of God.

Living faith means a commitment of the self, so that one's life is defined by that faith. In other words we act differently because of our commitment. This commitment, of course, implies a rejection of sin, however it may ask of us more than we can now imagine. Think of the Christians thrown to the lions or Mother Teresa or the untold numbers of ordinary people whose commitment to Jesus cost them a great deal. Jesus was very clear, discipleship does not come cheap. Jesus said "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt.16:24). While we will always fall short, we are certainly called to strive in our daily lives to treat others as Jesus did -- forgiving, feeding, healing. Jesus asked us to believe that God is Father, if we really believe this, then we try as best we can to treat others as family.

While Luther was correct in his insistence that we cannot save ourselves, the Letter of James reminds us of the necessity of our response of a *living faith*:

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

For our faith to be salvational it must be alive, not dead. It must open us up to the creative power of God, so that our lives can be transformed into a life of loving service to self, others and the world in imitation of Jesus. In the words of Paul, we must become a "new creation" (2Cor.5:17).

2) Full Unity with the Church -- This new life of loving service is always lived within a community, the human community in general and the Christian community in particular. So baptism is not simply a personal matter -- me and Jesus -- but is always social.

Baptism is entrance into the People of God, i.e. the Church. As noted above, the ancient rite of baptism (which included Confirmation) was immediately followed by joining the assembled congregation for the celebration of the Eucharist. Baptism and Confirmation are still defined as sacraments of initiation into the Church and the local Church becomes present and visible in the celebration of the Eucharist.

The Catholic Church accepts baptisms of other Christian communities and so, for those who have been baptized in other Christian Churches, a Profession of Faith joins the convert in full unity with the Catholic Church

3) Sin is “Forgiven” -- All the Gospels quote Jesus as saying that sins are forgiven through faith or because one has “loved much”. If sin is that which shatters the peace for which we were created, that is, if sin is that which ruptures right relationships and alienates us from ourselves, others, the world and God, then the life of the Risen Lord which we accept in faith, express in love and celebrate in Baptism, will give us the power (grace) to establish that peace in our lives. Sin is not just forgiven, it is destroyed. Truly, it is God’s creative will that we live in peace. John quotes Jesus: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you “(14:27) and “I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (16:33). In Chapter 20 John records three instances after the resurrection where Jesus greets His disciples with the phrase “Peace be with you”.

Infant Baptism

We noted earlier that as Christianity spread and became the religion of the Empire, adult baptism was largely replaced by infant baptism. The question then arose: Do we need to baptize infants? And if so, why? In answer to this, St. Augustine, in the 5th century, developed the concept of “original sin”. In Augustine’s judgment it was a condition of sin (a sin of nature) inherited from Adam and Eve and passed on through parents to all offspring. He felt that St. Paul supported such a concept in his writings (1Cor. 15:21-23; Rom 5:12-21). (Few scholars today would agree with such a judgment.)

For Augustine, original sin made infant baptism a necessity. In fact, he taught that infants who died without baptism were denied salvation. They were denied heaven and condemned to the real, though diminished, pains of hell. So from that time on, infant baptism became an urgent matter.

As time passed, many theologians felt Augustine’s view was inconsistent with the belief in an all-merciful God. A solution was proposed in the 12th century by St. Anselm of Canterbury. He agreed that baptism was necessary and that unbaptized infants could not go to Heaven, but he did not believe that God would torture them in Hell, even a diminished Hell. So he proposed an alternative place for these infants, a place of natural happiness on the “border” of heaven, which he called *Limbo*. This “solution” held sway well into the 20th century.

Current theology stressing the universal salvific will of God and approaching the concept of original sin in new ways no longer uses the concept of Limbo to explain the fate of infants who die without baptism. Their fate is a mystery and we should be content to place them in the “loving arms of God” -- not a bad place to be.

Modern Questions

If we no longer consign unbaptized infants to either Hell or Limbo, then why do we have infant baptism? Is it not true that for the sacraments to be effective in us we require an explicit faith and an explicit desire for the sacrament? How is this possible for infants? If sacraments are not magic, where is the personal response required in the case of an infant? Ought we not to wait until they are older and can express this explicit faith and desire?

The traditional answer to this question was that whatever understanding we have of original sin and its effects, we believe that it is real and that Baptism “removes” it. Furthermore, we held that in some way the Church “supplies” faith for the infant. Up until the Second Vatican Council (1960’s), the rite of Infant Baptism was actually the same as the rite for adults, but in this instance the baptismal sponsors answered for the infant. Questions were posed to the infant as if he/she were an adult and then the sponsors answered for the infant. Statements of belief, indicating the required faith, were also made by the sponsors in place of the infant. Often the parents were not involved actively involved.

Vatican II, however, saw the need to revise the Rite of Infant Baptism based on a more developed theology of the sacrament, a newer understanding of original sin and a more realistic view of how the Church might “supply” faith for the infant.

A Modern Approach

Since baptism is not magic, how is the infant personally involved? Consider this. When we celebrate any sacrament we celebrate the *fact* that the personal presence of the Risen Lord has a real effect on the life of the person receiving the sacrament.

In baptism we are celebrating the *fact* that the presence of the Risen Lord is right now a part of the life of the child being baptized. This is based on our common experience that from the moment of birth the life of a child is being formed by the parents. The child will look like the parents, speak the language of the parents, be of a specific race, participate in the family history, will share in the values and beliefs of the parents and will likely grow up within the community of the Church. These are facts of life.

Since it is the faith of the parents that moulds their love, values and beliefs, this faith is a real part of this infant’s life from the moment of birth. The presence of the Risen Lord in life of the parents is already making a real difference in the life of their child. We know that the learning process of all humans begins at birth and continues until death. In a real

sense this child is coming the “know” Jesus on a personal level through the parents, relatives and friends. Jesus in a very real sense is already “present” in a very human way to this child through the mediation of the parents. This is a present fact in the life of the child and perhaps in this sense we can say that “faith is supplied” for the child. *It is this fact that we celebrate in the sacrament of Infant Baptism.*

Another important effect of the revised Sacrament of Infant Baptism is the strengthening of the faith of the parents and the immediate family. Before an infant is baptized, the pastor interviews the parents to find out whether or not they are active members of the Church and intend for this infant to also be an active member. Some period of instruction may be required for parents who have been inactive members of the Church.

The sponsors also pledge their support in the duty of the parents to impart the Christian faith to this child. The sponsors also represent the local Church and indeed the entire Church whose faith will influence the life of this child. In this way perhaps we can understand how the Church “supplies” the faith for the infant. The people who make up the Church -- parents, relatives, friends -- share their faith in a very real and personal way with this new member. Thus the Risen Lord become really present to the child, not in a magical way, but in a very human way and in such a way that the life of the infant is fundamentally affected.

The new Rite of Baptism for Infants reflects this new understanding of the sacrament. No longer are questions directed to the infant as if it were an adult with the sponsors answering. Rather the rite is addressed to parents and sponsors. Let us examine the initial part of the rite -- The Reception of the Child:

Celebrant: What name do you give your child?

Parents: (name)

Celebrant: What do you ask of God’s Church for (name)?

Parents: “Baptism” or “faith” or “entrance into the Church”, or other appropriate response.

Celebrant to Parents: You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training him/her in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring him/her up to keep God’s commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?

Parents: We do.

Celebrant to godparents: Are you ready to help the parents of this child in their duty as Christian parents?

Godparents: We are.

Celebrant: (Name), the Christian community welcomes you with great joy. In its name I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of his cross. I now trace the cross on your forehead, and invite your parents (and godparents) to do the same.

The rite continues with scriptural reading, a homily (sermon), prayers of the faithful, the baptism, etc. The point here is that the questions and instruction in the new rite are addressed not to the child, but to the parents and godparents. It is their faith and their responsibility to share it with their newborn that is the focus of the rite. It highlights that the presence of the Risen Lord is mediated now through the parents to their child and that this “presence” is having and will continue to have a profound influence on the life of their child. Baptism is a celebration of this event and the reality symbolized by baptism - new life - is present now, not through magic or some unseen spiritual reality, but in real life. A life you can touch, hear and hold.

Since the time of Augustine, the Church has taught that original sin is forgiven in baptism. This is a difficult concept and so we will take some time to investigate what modern theologians are saying about original sin.

Original Sin

The concept of original sin is still linked to the sacrament of baptism. Earlier we discussed briefly the origin of the concept with St. Augustine. However, perhaps a fuller treatment would be helpful. This material is part of a paper on the Theology of Genesis

St. Augustine

In popular understanding, the Catholic doctrine of “original sin” is usually related to the story of Adam and Eve and so some comments seem appropriate here. Based in part on an analysis of the custom of infant baptism, some of the early Fathers of the Church proposed that all are born in some way into a state of sin. However, the term “original sin” was coined and finally became a permanent part of the Christian vocabulary through the writings of St. Augustine (354-430 AD). While it may be granted that there is an important insight contained in this doctrine, Augustine’s formulation left much to be desired, to say the least.

Augustine defined original sin within the context of his confrontation with the Pelagian heresy. Pelagius had denied that grace (the enabling power of God) was necessary for the observance of the moral law and that individuals could sanctify themselves by the exercise of the God given gift of free will. Furthermore, infants were born sinless and they could not be guilty for sins they did not commit. Augustine disagreed stating that all were born into a “state of sin” from which there was no escape, except through baptism. He called this state *original sin*. He held that original sin was a dogma of faith and appealed to Scripture and the practice of infant baptism to verify his position.

Based on a literal interpretation of Genesis, with Adam and Eve as historical people, Augustine’s position went something like this: Adam was first in a state of perfection (Paradise). He sinned and thereby lost his original state of perfection. Adam passed on his sin, within the reproductive act, to the rest of his descendents, who received it not as a personal sin, but real sin, although in an “analogous sense”. As a result, all descendents of

Adam were cut off from God. On reaching the age of reason, individuals could respond in faith to God in Jesus and be baptized and thus free themselves from original sin. He conceded that infants could be baptized and freed from original sin, *however those infants dying before baptism and all adults who were not baptized were condemned to Hell, albeit a Hell of diminished punishment.*

Limbo

When the logic of this position was played out, most of humanity was condemned to hell. Later, in the 12th century the prominent theologian St. Anselm and others could not reconcile this position with their concept of an all-merciful God. They agreed that unbaptized infants could not enter heaven, but denied that they would be condemned to hell, even a modified hell. So they created a place called Limbo. Limbo was a place of natural happiness on the “border of heaven”. Those in Limbo could not enjoy the Beatific Vision of heaven, but neither did they suffer the torments of hell.

While few reputable theologians would accept either of these formulations today, Augustine’s view, modified by Anselm, persisted with only slight modification well into the 20th century and is still held by many fundamentalist Churches. Certainly we can no longer accept the Augustinian scenario, but can we still speak of original sin and, if so, what possible insight could the notion of original sin contain for us today? Is there any kind of a salvational, life transforming message embedded in this doctrine?

Original Sin and the Scriptures

First let us examine the biblical sources. The actual term “original sin” does not occur in the Bible. Furthermore, except for the Genesis story, Adam and Eve are hardly mentioned in the OT and there is certainly no such thing as a tradition in either the OT or the NT or in the teachings of Jesus which indicates that human kind needs redemption specifically from the effects of Adam’s sin.

While the OT is not aware of original sin in the strict sense, as we noted above, the stories of Creation and the Flood do point out the social nature of sin and describe a sinful situation, evident from the dawn of human history, from which no one is saved, except by the power of God. The myth of the Flood relates that human sinfulness can take on a power of its own, becoming larger and more powerful than the individual or the entire community of mankind. But anything close to the theory of St. Augustine is certainly foreign to the OT. In fact, the OT does not depict God as alienated from mankind by the sin of Adam. In Chapter 4, God protects Cain, the first murdered, from reprisals by putting a mark on his forehead. In Chapter 9 God is seen as making a covenant with Noah and blessing him and his descendents. In Chapter 12 God is seen as bestowing blessings on Abraham and his posterity and making a covenant with him. Thus the sin of Adam and Eve is never depicted as a barrier to the love and care of God for his people.

It is also significant that the Gospels contain no reference to a “fall” which produces a

sinful human condition. Jesus makes no such reference to “fallen human nature” in His teachings, nor does He ever mention Adam and Eve. Jesus never states in any way whatsoever that His purpose is to rectify the “sin of Adam and Eve”. And the early rituals of baptism never mention any relationship with the “sin of Adam and Eve”.

However, it is in St. Paul, (1Cor. 15:21 and esp. Rom 5:12-21), that Augustine thought he found his greatest ally. Even a survey of the many and varied interpretations of Paul’s comparison of Adam and Christ, is beyond the scope of this Chapter, but some observations may help.

In Romans, Paul assumes the OT view that sin brings death and since all die, all are in the state or condition of sin, even if they have not sinned personally. There is a valid insight here because sin, by our definition, is that which destroys authentic human life, it leads to death rather than to life. However, we must keep in mind that physical death is implied in the fact that we are finite creatures, physical death is not the result of sin. In his notion of “Adam”, Paul does not imply that all share in some way in the personal, sinful act of a single ancestor. They do, however, share in the condition of estrangement from God which sin, including the first sin created.

In contrasting Adam with Christ, Paul is expressing, without explaining, the biblical belief of solidarity and *representative personality* (e.g. the suffering servant found in Isaiah). From his point of view, St. Paul asserts that Jesus must play this role as the representative personality in solidarity with the entire human race. His resurrection brings life to all people as Adam’s sin brought death to all people. As Paul states in I Cor 15:21ff :

For since it was a man who brought death into the world, a man also brought resurrection of the dead. As in Adam all men die, so in Christ all will be brought to life...

It seems fair to say that in these passages from Romans and I Corinthians, Paul uses the Adam / Jesus comparison as a literary device to stress the fact and meaning of salvation, rather than to define what we have come to call “original sin” in Augustine’s sense. In other words, for Paul, sinful humanity (Adam) is on its way to death, because sin destroys authentic human existence (peace) for which we were created, but Jesus will bring us new life and victory over death. (Most scholars doubt that St. Paul would have agreed with St. Augustine’s interpretation of this passage.)

Toward an Understanding of Original Sin

In my view, any formulation of the idea of “original sin” must be based on the universal human experience that the world we live in is broken. Not that it is simply, “not perfect”, because it is created and therefore finite and limited, but because throughout all human history there have been decisions made - conscious destructive decisions - that are contrary to the “creative movement” of God (again Rom. 1:19-20). These sinful decisions

have left the human family broken and in need of salvation.

Evil forces have been unleashed in the world that are now beyond our limited human power to control - social injustice, economic injustice, people without conscience, racial conflict, atrocities beyond human understanding, greed translated into inordinate wealth for individuals, countries and organizations and on and on. These are the Principalities and Powers personified in the NT, they may be mythological, but the evil forces they represent are all too real.

There is no human history without these evils. They are part of the matrix of human existence and it is within this matrix that we are born and exercise our freedom. We only have to read the newspaper or turn on the nightly news to be forcefully reminded of the unbelievable magnitude of evil in the world. This is not to imply that we are totally determined by our broken circumstances, but they are a real factor in our becoming and have real power to seduce us.

And so we are all born into this world and we experience the “sin of the world” (Jn 1:29), unfortunately in our freedom we become part of it, we become in some degree part of the problem. And with only our own limited resources, there is no ultimate solution. We cannot build Paradise on earth - we can and must strive for it, but it eludes our grasp. Like Humpty Dumpty we cannot put all the pieces back together. As it was with our ancestors in Egypt, we are helpless and in desperate need of salvation.

What then is the salvational insight, what is the Good News in all this bad news? Interestingly enough it comes from Paul in Romans (5:18). If we in our human solidarity (Adam) are responsible not just for individual sins, but in some way for the “sin of the world” and this condition leads to death (the lack of peace - authentic human existence) and, furthermore, is beyond our power to rectify in any way, then the Good News is that in Paul’s view we have a new solidarity in Jesus the Christ. Jesus has overcome sin and death and now incorporates us into His victorious, risen life so that we become the Body of Christ and truly share His life. Like our ancestors in Egypt we are saved, saved from sin and death through the power and unmerited love of God.

This all sound very nice, but what does it all mean? How can we relate to such “theological” verbiage? What does it mean to say that we are “incorporated” into the life of Jesus? What does this salvation look like? Can I get out of bed tomorrow and see it, touch it, experience it?

I believe the answer is yes. Every time we love ourselves, others and the world this salvation is being actualized in us and the power of sin is destroyed and peace is being established. When we go to work to make a living for our families, when we play with our children, when we visit someone in the nursing home, when we take care of our own health, when we resist the temptation to do evil, when we forgive one who has offended us, these are all moments of salvation. These are moments when we strengthen or restore “right relationships” with self and others. These are moments of peace, moments of

salvation. These are moments when the power of sin (alienation) is overcome.

We are “hip deep” in the creative presence of God. We must stop thinking of God as an entity somewhere else (above us) watching us “from a distance” with interest and sometimes intervening in our lives. If Paul’s notion of “incorporation” and “body of Christ” has any meaning at all it means that we somehow really share the life of God. We are in the *corpus*, in the living body of Christ. This is not some metaphysical reality operating beyond our senses and outside of our real lives. This sharing in the life of Jesus is something we can experience in the moments of ordinary life. When we say that the Church can be seen as the Body of Christ, we mean that its members live or strive to live a certain kind of life. The life of Jesus.

We experience this “sharing of life” everyday. When we share the life of a family we tend to become like them. When we join a group -- the Lions Club, a group of medical missionary sisters or the Sierra Club -- the sharing of the life of that group changes our life in a fundamental way. When we decide to share our life with another in marriage it is because we want to become one with another and live a common life together. The principle of the life of the Church, the Body of Christ, is the Risen Lord. As we open ourselves to the power of this life, we become transformed we experience salvation and become instruments of salvation in our corner of the world.

And so we believe that we can, *with God’s grace-God’s gift of life*, realize in a partial, but real way our own transformation from sinner to saint. We are always in the process of becoming, becoming someone. When we respond to life like Jesus did, we actually “live like Jesus”. Think of the people whose lives were literally transformed by the example of Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King. There is a power (grace) in those lives that we can share and which in that sharing can transform us. So we can truly say we share not just Jesus’ way of life by way of imitation, but we actually share in His divine life itself. Thus Paul’s metaphor that we become life living “parts” of the Body of Christ can be very apt.

This is the insight which Augustine had and Pelagius did not. We are indeed born into and participate in a broken world, a world broken by sin. We need salvation. And we do not simply “save ourselves” by good works in the imitation of Christ. The ultimate source of our ability to overcome evil and do good is the creative presence of God within us. We do not have the power in and of ourselves to save ourselves from the powers of evil or save our world. When we go to work to feed our family, when we study to improve our understanding, when we forgive an old wrong, when we call on a sick friend, when we choose truth instead of lies, when we have friends over to share a meal, when we care for, instead of use others, when we bury the dead and comfort the living we are indeed experiencing salvation, *but our very ability to participate in this process is made possible by the unmerited gift (grace) of God’s creative presence in us.*

This is what Luther sensed. However, he failed to believe that this unmerited gift (grace) could actually transform us when we opened ourselves in faith to its powerful presence.

To paraphrase Sam Keen (Hymns to an Unknown God) - "(The power of grace), like wind, is visible only in the movement that results from its presence." Living faith results in acts of love as we are reminded in I John 4:19 " But if a man says, 'I love God', while hating his brother, he is a liar" and in James 2: "So it is with faith; if it does not lead to action, it is in itself a lifeless thing." A person with dead faith says: "I believe my dad will catch me if I jump". A person with living faith - jumps!

We do not exist on our own. Our being is ultimately grounded in God, Who alone is our life and our salvation. We are intimately involved in something, or better Someone, larger than ourselves. This is the creative presence of God which we have come to know by His gracious self-revelation. This is not meant to be some theological jargon, but it is a fact of life, our lives seen and experienced in depth.

Maybe using the example of a "radio" will help. In this modern culture of ours at every moment of our lives we are surrounded by the radio waves or signals from a number of commercial broadcast stations. We are generally not aware of them, we cannot see, feel, hear or smell them, but there are there. Of course, it is possible for us to receive their message, maybe a life giving message of an approaching storm, but only if we have the ability and make the effort to tune into them. Perhaps saying that we are surrounded by the creative movement of God calling us to a way of life, means that by the grace of God we are able to look at life "in depth", analogous to tuning into the ever-present, invisible world of radio, which also may have the power to save our lives.

We believe the Risen Lord is present at every moment of our lives whether we "tune in" to it or not. We believe that this presence is a real power, available to us that can change our lives and help us actualize our true humanity. It is a personal presence sustaining us in our existence and calling us to become like Him, to live the life of a servant as He did. The life giving message is that we cannot make self, power, money, country or even church our ultimate concern. For they will become idols with the power to destroy us. We are to give ourselves over to the creative power that surrounds us, which we glimpse in a special way in the life of Jesus. It is here in our act of living faith, that Jesus is the Way, that we find our salvation. The power that makes it possible for us to do this is what we call grace, the unconditional graciousness of God in and through which we have our existence.

Without our awareness of original sin we could be tempted to blame God for evil in the world, or we could lose sight of the fact that "we are in this together". More importantly, without our awareness of the salvation offered us in Jesus, we could be tempted to despair in the face of our individual and corporate evil, to lose our faith in the presence of God in our lives, to fail to open ourselves to the power available to us in following Jesus in faith.

Today, of course, we reject any notion that either infants or adults dying without baptism are *by that single fact* condemned to eternal separation from God. Theories abound on exactly how the undoubted salvation of adults outside of Christianity is accomplished, but the fate of unbaptized infants we confidently leave in the "good hands" of God. We no

longer view original sin as an invisible spot on an invisible soul removed in some automatic or “magical” way in the act of baptism, but we do appreciate that the “sin of the world” is very real.

Some modern theologians hold that the meaning of original sin is that we are born into “egocentricity” and with the grace of God spend the rest of our lives emerging from self-centeredness into a life for others as exemplified in the life of Jesus. But perhaps an ancient theologian, St. Irenaeus (130-200 AD), said it best: “The history of man is not that of a laborious ascent after a vertical fall, but a providential progress towards a future that is full of promise”. So how can we today understand the concept of original sin as part of our world of experience? One thing is sure, we all experience alienation in one form or another. Perhaps a simple definition will suffice: *original sin is that state of man-made alienation from God, each other and the world into which we have all been born and from which we need to be saved.*

The actual historical origins of this state of alienation remain a mystery within the mystery of the origins of the universe and the advent of life, but it is the universal experience of all people that we are born into a broken world. William O’Malley (Pursuit of Happiness) made this somewhat humorous observation:

“Now I have strong doubts that this proclivity (the effects of original sin) is traceable back to a not-overly-bright pair of nudists who fell prey to a slick-talking snake. But I haven’t the slightest doubt about its effects. One has only to check the daily newspapers for evidence beyond rebuttal.”

The presence of unthinkable evils bombards us daily through our news media. Ours is a world crying out for salvation and Christians believe that it is a world that can be saved from these evils only by the power of God revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This power of God (grace), working in and through us, will enable us to take on the task of building up the Kingdom of God if we open up ourselves in loving service to self, others and the world.

Confirmation

Early History

As we indicated earlier, the modern sacrament of Confirmation evolved out of the original baptismal rite for adults. After the immersion in water, the newly baptized were usually presented to the bishop who laid hands on them and/or signed them on the forehead with the sign of the cross, traced in holy oil. This was a sign that they were the elect of God and had received the Holy Spirit. Confirmation as a separate rite did not exist before the 3rd century and did not become a regular practice until after the 5th century and its theological development continued into the 13th century. To understand how the sacrament developed, it is important to note that the rites involved with Confirmation have always been associated with the invocation and reception of the Holy

Spirit and were conferred by the bishop.

The conferring of the Holy Spirit has its roots in Apostolic times. As recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, the apostles often laid their hands on the newly baptized and they received the Holy Spirit as the apostles had received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. However, the reception of the Holy Spirit did not always coincide with baptism. For instance, Philip had baptized new converts in Samaria, but they did not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John came from Jerusalem and “placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:12-17). On other occasions the Holy Spirit was manifested in those who simply heard Peter preach and they were baptized afterwards (Acts 10:44-48).

Historically, two points are important in Catholic understanding of Confirmation. First, from the 2nd century on, the rites of anointing and the laying on of hands were considered part of the initiation rites for all members and an integral part of adult baptism. Secondly, these rites were usually reserved to the bishop.

Later Developments

During the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine (288-337), the Edict of Milan in 313 granted religious tolerance to all religions and recognized the Christian Church as a legal entity. Under imperial protection, Christianity flourished and later became the official religion of the empire. And so by a change of historical circumstances, this growth in Christianity laid the groundwork for the separation of the rites of Baptism and Confirmation.

This happened for these two reasons. First, since most of the Roman world was now Christian, there were fewer adult conversions and thus fewer adult baptisms. And in light of the teachings of St. Augustine about the necessity of infant baptism for salvation, infants were typically baptized soon after birth. Thus for all practical purposes, infant baptism replaced adult baptism as the norm.

Secondly, since the Christian community had become so large, the bishops were obviously unable to be present at the baptism of infants (now performed by priests) and so the rites reserved to the bishop of anointing and the invocation of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands necessarily had to be postponed until the bishop could be present. Separated now from baptism, these postponed rites performed by the bishop gradually developed into the Sacrament of Confirmation as we know it today.

The age for reception of Confirmation differed widely. In the Eastern Orthodox Churches the rite was and still is conferred on infants at the time of their baptism, while in the Roman Church it has varied from the age of seven well into the late teens.

Current Practice

Confirmation for unbaptized adults joining the Church has been restored to the ancient rite of initiation which combines Baptism with Confirmation and is usually performed at the Easter Vigil Service (the presence of the bishop is not required). Completion of the RCIA process is normally required. For those baptized outside the Catholic Church, the rite is the same except there is no requirement for “re-baptism” unless a conditional baptism is indicated because of serious doubt about the fact or validity of a prior baptism.

Confirmation for those Catholics baptized as infants or as adults outside the Easter Vigil Service is a separate service scheduled when the bishop of the diocese is available. Candidates as usually required to take extensive time, up to two years, to prepare for the Sacrament.

The essentials of the sacrament were described by Pope Paul VI in his 1971 *Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation*: “The sacrament of confirmation is conferred through the anointing with chrism on the forehead, which is done by the laying on of the hand, and through the words: “be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit”. The rite concludes with the bishop saying “Peace be with you”.

The Pope goes on to stress the ancient sequence of Baptism-Confirmation-Eucharist as practiced in the ancient and modern rites of adult initiation into the Church. He says: “The faithful are born anew by baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of confirmation, and finally are sustained by the food of eternal life in the Eucharist”.

In this document the Pope allows for local bishops to determine the age of reception of Confirmation for those who received infant baptism. Recently the United States bishops have suggested a range of ten to sixteen years of age.

A Theology of Confirmation

The notion that we are “sealed” with the Holy Spirit taken from St. Paul who wrote: “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership upon us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come “ (2Cor 1:21-22).

In this passage the “anointing” makes us one with Christ (the Anointed One - messiah) and the idea of “seal” is taken from the commercial world of the time and indicates that the newly baptized is publicly marked as a follower of Christ. While Paul was not speaking of a particular rite of anointing, the theology is the same - through our living faith as experienced and expressed in baptism, we now share the life of Jesus. The Holy Spirit which He promised is the Spirit who can transform our lives in the imitation of Jesus.

Certainly we received the Holy Spirit first in Baptism. Now this same life of the Spirit is being reaffirmed or “confirmed”. In fact, the confirming of ourselves in faith is a life-long process. It begins with our baptism and continues throughout life. It is a process of

responding the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Lord in our lives. The sacrament itself is a ritual celebration of this fact and our response to it. Again, the dual activity of God calling us to a life of “peace” and our response in faith to that call - all acted out in the ritual of the sacrament.

The Sacrament of Confirmation is a moment in time in which a life-long commitment is expressed. It is a special moment of salvation, in which the candidates experience the acceptance of God and the acceptance of the Church which frees the candidates to accept themselves as at peace with self, others and God. The individual rite ends with the blessing of the bishop: “Peace be with you”. We hold in faith that the Father sent the Son that we might have new life and the Son promised His Spirit as an everlasting font of that newness of life which St. Paul proclaimed would make us “a new creation”.

In the Introduction the Rite of Baptism for Children the following statement is made:

To fulfill the true meaning of the sacrament (baptism), children must later be formed in the faith in which they have been baptized. The foundation of this formation will be the sacrament itself, which they have already received. Christian formation, which is their due, seeks to lead them gradually to learn God’s plan in Christ, so that they may ultimately accept for themselves the faith in which they have been baptized (no.3)

The present rite of Confirmation is part of this process in which the child grows in the understanding of their faith and then “accept for themselves the faith in which they have been baptized”.

In answer to the question “who confirms”, perhaps in some sense there are four answers:

- 1) God confirms - in the sacrament we are reminded that our faith is a gift from God and that God is constant is His love for us. The sacrament is a sign in which God confirms that love for us.
- 2) The person receiving the sacrament confirms - Those being confirmed say publicly that they believe in the presence of the Risen Lord in their lives. In ritual form they “accept for themselves the faith in which they have been baptized”. It is a second public step in their initiation into the Church.
- 3) The community confirms - the assembled Church and especially the sponsors confirm the faith of the young people by being there and giving public witness to their faith and sharing their faith with those confirmed.
- 4) The bishop confirms - The bishop is the official representative of the universal Church. The Church founded upon the Apostles. The presence of the bishop is a sign that the whole Church confirms the faith expressed by the individual candidates.