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Catholic Update
guide to
Confirmation



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Series Editor

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RESCRIPT

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Catholic Update Guide to Confirmation

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Archdiocese of Cincinnati
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An Analogy: Washing, Drying, Eating

Consider for a moment what you do when you are invited out to eat. Let's say that you have been out working in the garden and a friend calls and asks if you would like to come over for dinner and you accept the invitation. What happens next? Probably, three things: First, you would take off your work clothes and wash up, perhaps taking a shower or a bath. Second, you would dry off and put on clean clothes. And third, you would go over to your friend's house and eat.

This sequence of events is perhaps the simplest way to understand the sacraments of initiation. God has invited each of us to dine with Christ at the eucharistic banquet. When we come to this table for the first time, we put off the "old self" (see, for example, Romans 6:6; Ephesians 4:22; and Colossians 3:9) and wash away the stain of original sin. This is the sacramental bath of baptism. Second, we dry off. In the first and second centuries, however, Romans would rub their bodies with oil after bathing to moisturize the skin as it dried. In our sacramental system the bath of baptism is followed by the oil of confirmation. And, third, clothed with the Holy Spirit, we are invited to the eucharistic table.

This three-step sequence can help us understand some of the contemporary development and understanding of the sacraments of initiation, for example, the sequence of the three sacraments

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when they are celebrated together in our parishes at the Easter Vigil. Of course, the historical development of the rites is much more complex, especially the development of the rite we call confirmation.

We do not find much written specifically about confirmation in the early Church, because when the early Christian authors wrote about baptism they often implied both the water bath and the anointing with oil—what today we call baptism and confirmation. For example, if you invited me out to eat and I said, “Let me wash up first, and then we’ll go,” by “washing up” I would imply both the washing and the drying; there would be no need to specifically mention the “drying off” (or anointing, if we were ancient Romans).

Baptism and confirmation are also intimately related in another way. When we take a bath, we get clean by washing off the dirt. We can speak of “getting clean” and we can speak of “washing off dirt” but, actually, removing “dirtiness” and receiving “cleanliness” go together. They are two ways of looking at one action. In a similar way, early Church writers described baptism with the “washing off” metaphors and spoke of confirmation with the “getting clean” metaphors. Baptism washes away all sin, original and actual; and confirmation gives us the grace and presence of the Holy Spirit. Of course, taking away sin and being filled with grace are but two ways of speaking of the same action, something like “washing off” and “getting clean.” The two actions go together

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even if we call them by the different names of baptism and confirmation.

This analogy of “washing up, drying off, going to eat” works especially well for baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist when they are celebrated in that sequence—as they were in the early Church, and as they are today in most of the non-Roman Rites of the Catholic Church, and as they are in the Roman Catholic Church for adults and children of catechetical age at the Easter Vigil.

RCIA: A New Look

In the years preceding the Second Vatican Council, Church leaders looked carefully at the current state of our initiation rites in light of this long and rather complicated history, and they decided that some changes in emphasis should be made to better adapt these sacraments to the pastoral needs of the contemporary Church. Following the discussion of these matters at the council, the Church published four documents: *Christian Initiation: General Introduction*, *Rite of Baptism for Children*, *Rite of Confirmation*, and *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, which has come to be known by its initials, RCIA. Each of these revised rites, and especially the RCIA, has had a profound effect on Church life in the United States.

The RCIA restores the order of baptism-confirmation-Eucharist and emphasizes the interconnectedness of these three sacraments (as we saw above: washing up, drying off, and going to eat). These rites are neither separate nor are they static; they are part of an ongoing process. The RCIA speaks of our faith journey. And this journey does not end at baptism or First Communion, or even at confirmation, but continues throughout our Christian life. The sacraments of initiation are a continual invitation to continued conversion.

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This faith journey is not merely a matter of learning about the faith, not merely instruction, but also a true conversion process. It involves the whole life of the candidate and the whole life of the Church. These sacraments are not private events. They affect the whole Church. Conversion takes place in community. Conversion implies initiation into that community, initiation into the body of Christ.

In 2000 the bishops of the United States published *Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States*. The results of this comprehensive study make it clear that the RCIA is renewing the life of the Church in the United States, say the bishops. “This study also affirms that faith formation is a lifelong process.... The image of a journey is one that is often used in reference to the RCIA and that fits with an understanding of catechesis/adult faith formation as a lifelong process.” Again and again the report stresses that the initiation of catechumens is a “gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful” (<http://old.usccb.org/evangelization/journey>).

Fr. Richstatter’s remembrance of his confirmation and his analysis of the sacraments of initiation affirm the communal nature of these sacraments and put the initiated squarely in the mission and ministry of the Church: Theologian Karl Rahner saw in baptism and confirmation the sacramental basis for the position of the laypeople in the Church. Through these sacraments a

person receives the divine call and becomes a contributing member in the work of the Church. The Church is composed of the faithful, or as the Second Vatican Council called them, “the holy people of God.” Bishops, priests, deacons, and members of religious communities are members of the people of God long before they begin their special ministries.

Vatican II’s Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) makes it clear that through baptism and confirmation the faithful have an obligation to profess their faith and are strictly obliged to spread the faith by word and deed (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11). All the holy people of God share in Christ’s priestly and prophetic office.

Rahner acknowledged that as a dogmatic theologian he found it difficult to distinguish between baptism and confirmation regarding their meaning and their effects. He considered them taken together as constituting a single initiation into becoming Christian. And as a result the confirmed Christian, whether lay or cleric, is in the position of one who has a mission and a task. The baptized/confirmed Christian, Rahner said, has a personal responsibility for the world in virtue of his initiation into the Christian faith.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why are we asked to choose a saint’s name for confirmation?
Why do we need to choose a sponsor?

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2. How does the RCIA program affirm the intimate relationship between baptism and confirmation?
3. As baptized and confirmed Christians we are members of the “community of the faithful.” Are we an inviting community? What makes people want to join us?