



The Power of Confirmation

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I remember the day I had the enormous privilege of performing my first confirmation as a bishop. It took place at Holy Cross Parish in Moor Park, California, a large, bustling, and bi-lingual parish in my pastoral region. I told the confirmandi—and I meant it—that I would keep them in my heart for the rest of my life, for we were connected by an unbreakable bond.

Confirmation is sometimes underappreciated as a sacrament in search of a theology. It is indeed true that most Catholics could probably give at least a decent account of the significance of Baptism, Eucharist, Confession, Matrimony, Holy Orders, and the Anointing of the Sick, but they might balk when asked to explain the meaning of Confirmation. Perhaps they would be tempted to say it is the Catholic version of a Bar Mitzvah, but this would not even come close to an accurate theological description. Confirmation offers a powerful transformation of grace. Now what makes this transformation possible is the third person of the Holy Trinity, who comes bearing a variety of powers, which the Church calls the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I reminded those I confirmed that their confirmation was meant to set them on fire with the Holy Spirit, precisely so that they in turn can set the world on fire. Once again, the gifts that they received were not for them. Now, in order to share these insights more broadly, I devoted an entire episode of the “Word on Fire Show” to discussing the power of confirmation.

Below you'll find an edited transcript of the show so you can read it slowly, at your own pace, and reflect on the blessings of this sacrament.

Peace,

+ Robert Barron

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WORD
on FIRE

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QUESTION: This year you had a momentous experience, you celebrated your first confirmation as Bishop. Tell us a little bit about that. What was that like as a bishop confirming people for the first time?

BISHOP BARRON: I must say it was a great experience. It's one of the things that really is tied to the episcopacy. Although priests can be designated to confirm on a one-off basis, the standard approach of the Church is to have the bishop confirm. In the sacrament of confirmation, I'm doing one of the things a bishop is uniquely supposed to do. That was a thrill. I've now administered 6 of the 7 sacraments. As a priest, obviously I baptized, I heard confessions, I anointed the sick, distributed the Eucharist, and I married. But now I've administered the sacrament of confirmation. The one that remains now is Holy Orders, so I suppose at some point, I'll be asked to ordain priests. That'll be the seventh sacrament that I've administered. It was a thrill.

What I got that day, what I felt, let's say on the inside, was this connection to the ancient Church. Going all the way back to Jesus' time, even before. This gesture of laying on of hands and of anointing, such an ancient gesture in the life of the Church, but it's another one of the vehicles by which the Holy Spirit enters our lives. I felt this continuity with bishops all across the centuries, going all the way back to the apostles who anointed and laid hands on people. I felt that very strongly; a sense of connection and continuity with my predecessors across the ages.

QUESTION: Now, it's sometimes said that confirmation is a sacrament in search of a theology. Many Catholics can at least get a basic account of baptism, Eucharist, confession, matrimony, Holy Orders, anointing of the sick, but they might be confused or left at a loss of words for explaining what confirmation is. Let's spend some time on the basics of confirmation. First of all, what is it? What happens when somebody is confirmed?

BISHOP BARRON: Confirmation is a gift to the Holy Spirit. It's a moment when one receives the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit. Confirmation is for the sake of strengthening, so *confirmare* in Latin, *firmare*, to make strong, we are made strong in our relationship with the Lord Jesus. That's the first thing the church says about confirmation. By the way, take a look at the Catechism of 1992, the document of Vatican II, and the code of canon law, and you'll find these descriptions. I found them helpful as I was approaching this first confirmation. Obviously I had studied the sacrament many years ago, and I have attended confirmations, but I hadn't done a real serious study. So when I looked at it in some of these more contemporary documents that's what I found. It strengthens us in our relation to the Lord, and then by extension, it strengthens us to defend the faith, and spread the faith.

I thought it was very interesting, in light of today, where there's a new emphasis on apologetics, defending the faith, and evangelization. I see confirmation a sacrament for our time, in many ways.

When the Church is under such attack, when we have to equip, especially young people, for defending and spreading the faith, confirmation is the sacrament to administer. In my first sermon at my first confirmation, I emphasized that point. I said, “This is a sacrament of evangelization. The gifts are given largely for that purpose.”

You mentioned, “It’s a sacrament without theology.” One reason for that is in the long practice of the Church over the centuries, we’ve tended in the West to separate out baptism and confirmation. Often in the east, and much of the ancient Church, confirmation happens right after baptism. In fact, so does the Eucharist. Placing a little bit of the consecrated wine, on the lips of the child, so that the initiation sacraments were in place together. Baptism, confirmation, Eucharist.

There is a kind of coherence to that. What happened of course in the West, we tended to separate them out. There’s baptism, then there’s Eucharist, and then finally, around adolescence we have confirmation. That lead people to say, “Oh, it’s the Catholic version of the bar mitzvah. It’s a kind of

coming of age sacrament.” That really isn’t true. The age we choose to do it is more of an accident. Some bishops put it much earlier, they’ll confirm fourth graders, third graders. Some around eighth grade. Here in Los Angeles, we confirm midway through high school. The kids are about 15. You can make arguments for all 3 of those, but in some way, it’s made the theology a little more confusing for people. Indeed, confirmation is the third of the great initiation sacraments, but the specificity of its purpose is to strengthen recipients through the gifts of the Holy Spirit for a relationship with the Lord and for defending and spreading the faith.

QUESTION: One of the preaching themes that you commonly emphasize is “Your life, is not about you.” When you confirmed this group of people in the Santa Barbara region, you told them that the confirmation is not really for them, it’s for the Church and the wider world. What did you mean by that?

BISHOP BARRON: I'm glad you mentioned that theme. I think it's really important in the life of the church in general. I told them specifically. I said, "This sacrament is one of the ways of signaling that your life is not about you. You're being confirmed for the sake of the Church. It's not a little private spiritual bonbon that you're getting, that you can rest in. No, you're strengthened precisely for the sake of the Church. You're strengthened..." and I emphasized, "... at this difficult time in the life of the Church, when it's under a lot of assault. You've been strengthened to defend it, and to spread it." That's the link then to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. You've been given these gifts not for you, not for you to savor, but for you to use for the good of the Church.

QUESTION: Let's talk about some of those gifts. When somebody goes through confirmation and the Holy Spirit is activated through them, what gifts does the Holy Spirit impart?

BISHOP BARRON: Go back to the book of the prophet Isaiah, you find the origin this. Then it's been adapted over the centuries in the Church commentary tradition. You receive these 7 gifts: wisdom, knowledge, understanding, council, piety, fear of the Lord, and fortitude. Those 7 gifts. Go back to Isaiah and you'll find the beginning of this, when they talk about the gifts given to the Messiah. I think it's a very rich thing to think about. Wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. For the sake of our time, I'll bring those three together. If you're going to defend the faith, and spread the faith, what do you need? You need a lot of knowledge and wisdom. Technical knowledge, yes, but not just technical knowledge, which you can get that from reading books and so on, but you need wisdom as well, which is a deep spiritual vision. It's seeing the world, Aquinas says, "From the standpoint of the First Cause." That means you look at the world, consistently from the standpoint of God, and not just from the standpoint of "Well what's in our national interest, what will help us economically, what will help me, will help my family." Those are

all legitimate perspectives, but the wise person sees the whole world from the standpoint of the First Cause. And also you'll need understanding of your knowledge. If you don't comprehend it, you can't defend it or spread it.

I talked a lot about the new atheism, and about this vehement opposition to Catholicism in our culture. I suggested, would you go to a doctor who dropped out of med school? I doubt it. Would you even bring your car to someone who knows nothing about mechanics? Well, of course not. You're assuming knowledge and understanding on the part of these people. You're also assuming a kind of wisdom. Think of going to your doctor. You want him to be not only knowledgeable but also wise. In the same way, when someone is looking for eternal life. They're searching. They're lost spiritually. Would you recommend they go to someone who has no knowledge, wisdom or understanding of Christ, the Church, and spiritual matters? Of course not. In fact, such a person would probably do damage.

The Holy Spirit gives these gifts. Mind you, we're Catholics here, it's not *grazia sola*. The Holy Spirit gives these gifts and now we're called upon to cooperate with them. This is theological reading and prayer and study. It's cooperating with and deepening your gifts of wisdom, knowledge and understanding. I gave my first confirmandi that charge. You're not here for yourself. You're here for the Church. You owe it to the Church to cooperate with these gifts given to you.

QUESTION: The next couple gifts of the Holy Spirit, include fortitude, and courage. You've asked them if the defense of faith will stir up opposition. I think the answer's a clear, yes. Why are these two gifts especially necessary today?

BISHOP BARRON: Fortitude, strength, courage. The opposition is after us. You and I know that. I don't mean that in some kind of paranoid way, but we know that. If you go look at TV or a paper, but above all, on the internet. You propose something out of the Christian faith, you're going to get a lot of opposition. Even, I

talked about the martyrs. There's the limit case of it of course, where someone will go after your very life because of your faith. But there are a lot of quieter forms of martyrdom around today. When people have to put up with a lot of humiliation, maybe their reputation suffers. They're being attacked regularly. I remember when I first started doing Youtube commentaries, and I didn't even know people could comment. I was demoralized in the beginning. It was this innocent little video I thought I was putting up, and I'm just getting attacked right and left. I'm not claiming to be a martyr, I'm not, but I'm claiming you'll need at least a bit of courage to face that down.

Also, declaring your faith publicly might cost you friends. I know a lot of people where that's the case. It might compromise your reputation. It might make your work life more difficult. Those are all true. You got to have some courage. You're at a cocktail party, you're at a ball game or something, surrounded by a lot of people, and someone starts attacking the Catholic Church. What do you do? Well a lot of us, including myself will maybe want

to slink to the sidelines and avoid the fight, but the courageous person gets in the arena. Remember they're taking on your mother; the Church is your mother. What if someone was publicly berating your mother? What would you do? Slink to the sidelines? Or would you put up a fight? The Church is our mother, and she's the bride of Christ. When the Church is being attacked, Christ is being attacked too. It's the mystical body of Jesus, I mean all of that. Do we have the courage to fight, not violently or obnoxiously, but to come forth and defend the faith with our words and actions? We must in this way cooperate with the gift of *fortitudo*, fortitude.

QUESTION: Couple other gifts of the Holy Spirit include, piety, and fear of the Lord. Now, I know a lot of people would hear that and those words will be stuffy and have a fussy connotation, but what do they actually mean and why are they important?

BISHOP BARRON: They're so good and so strong really. The trouble is they've been misconstrued in translation. Things can get distorted, *pietas* in Latin. Go back to Virgil's great *Aeneid*, one of the best epic poems of the whole tradition. The adjective he uses for Aeneas, the hero of the poem, is always "pious" Aeneas, *pious* in Latin. Like Pope Pius XII, Aeneas was anything but puritanical and fussy and like Aunt Pittypat from *Gone With the Wind*. He was this very virile, and very strong and accomplished figure. What Virgil meant by "pious" was this deep sense of connection to duty. Now we realize it's not a fussy, puritanical term at all. The pious person is dutiful; she does what she is supposed to do. Now, part of that for the ancients and the medievals was, the worship of God. Part of what we're called to do is worship God. Why? Because God is owed everything. God gave us whatever we have, and so in justice, I owe God praise, which is why the pious person in our context would go to Mass. He would do his duty; he'd stand his ground. It's related to fortitude that way.

Fear of the Lord, as we all know, doesn't mean you're afraid of God. What it means is to have a deep abiding respect for the primacy of God. I put it that way. The deep abiding respect for the primacy of God. God matters above all. God alone is worshiped, now to use biblical categories. The person of piety who has fear of the Lord knows that God matters above all. Nothing is more important than God. The praise of God is the number one value of your life, period. Everything else now is going to revolve around God, and the duty that you owe God. That's what it means to be pious and have a fear of the Lord.

I told my first confirmandi, "Pious reverence for God is essential to defending and spreading the faith. This is what people are going to see. They'll hear your words and your arguments and those are important. I'm not for a minute denigrating them, but above all they're going to see you. They're going to see what kind of person you are. People notice when a person's life is totally organized around God, when a person thinks God should be honored above all. That has evangelical power.

People say, “Wow, that’s intriguing to me, I want to find out more about that, I want to see where he got that from, why he is that way.” Piety and fear of the Lord are really important for evangelization which is the purpose of confirmation.

QUESTION: I was confirmed Catholic as an adult, because I entered the Church back in 2008. I don’t remember much of it, but one part that stuck out is that during the process of preparing for confirmation we were asked to choose a saint’s name, a confirmation name that we would use for the sacrament. I thought that was strange but delightful that I got to research different saints and find one that really connected with me. It was very poignant, that during the actual confirmation, the bishop identified me as the saint’s name. Not as my name but as the saint’s name. Why does the church do that and what advice would you give to people preparing to be confirmed on how to choose the right confirmation saint?

BISHOP BARRON: They're all good questions. What's your confirmation name by the way?

QUESTION: Mine's Saint Lawrence, the early deacon of the Church because I loved his boldness, his courage, his jest. When he was being grilled alive he says, "I'm done on this side, turn me over." I also love that he cared for the poor. He ushered in the poor and the lame and the crippled, and told the emperor, "Here are the treasures of the Church." That's the kind of man I wanted to be.

BISHOP BARRON: It's that second quote that I love. Everyone knows the first one, which is wonderful. That kind of Thomas Moore, showing us insouciance in the face of death, but that second one is wonderful though isn't it? He was ordered to bring the riches of the Church to the emperor. With wonderful irony, but also a deep piety, he brings the poor, very much in the spirit of Pope Francis. Yeah that's wonderful. Going back to the name thing, Balthazar said that we

don't really know who we are until we find our mission, which is why in the scriptures people often get new names when they find their mission. Whether it's Abram becoming Abraham, Jacob becoming Israel, or Saul in the New Testament becoming Paul, it's a very cool thing that when you discover what God wants you to do you know who you are and therefore get a new name. Prior to that, you had a vague sense of your identity. Here's the name my parents gave me. Here's the identity my society gives me and maybe a nickname my friends have given me. That all tells you something about yourself, but you don't know who you are truly until God names you and sends you on mission.

At confirmation, you're being sent on mission in a new way. You're being strengthened for the sake of defending and spreading the faith. Now you know who you are. You get a new name. It is true, when I confirm people, I don't call them by their baptismal name. They all are wearing their name on their lapel or something, so I'll say, "So-and-so, I confirm you. Be sealed with the gift of

the Holy Spirit.” I think that’s wonderful because, and maybe more of us Catholics should remember and claim our confirmation names, because even if we choose them in a somewhat casual way, I’m sure the Holy Spirit’s working there to make sure we get a name that really speaks to us.

Mine by the way is Patrick. I’m all Irish, and my parents are very strong on Ireland, so I took Saint Patrick. The strange thing is, when I was confirmed I was in sixth grade. I had no idea of the priesthood. I wanted to be a baseball player at that point of my life. Strangely, what has my whole life been about but sort of evangelizing and reaching out to a culture increasingly anti-Christian. I’ve become in some ways like Patrick, who was a great evangelist. It’s mysterious. I think it’s the Holy Spirit claiming us in his own way.

I would say to those about to be confirmed, take that very seriously and yes, go through books of Saints perhaps. Is there a saint that means a lot to your family? Is there a saint that you’ve always resonated with? Or even is there a saint that you

don't really get? Have you heard his or her story and remain confused? Read up on that saint. Maybe choose someone not like you. Maybe choose a saint that's really different from you and who might fill out your spiritual background a bit. I think a wonderful part of the process of choosing your name is challenging yourself and discussing your reasons. All that's great.

QUESTION: Your first confirmation was the beginning of what I assume will be many many confirmations over the coming months and years. I'm sure that there are a lot of parents out there who have young children all the way up to high school getting ready for confirmation. What advice would you give them? How can parents help prepare their children for this sacrament?

BISHOP BARRON: I would say, get into it with them. There's all kinds of materials the kids use as they are studying. Get into that with them. Read that with them, and help them think it through. Show an interest in the process of

confirmation. We put a great stress appropriately on service, and I love that. They all have to do a service project. Parents, get behind that in any way you can.

One thing I keep emphasizing is what I said to the confirmation leaders, “I totally get the service aspect of it. I totally get it and totally support it.” But I said, “At the same time, Hindus and Buddhists and Jews and even atheists of goodwill, are dedicated to service.” It doesn’t really set us apart. What sets us apart I think is a deep knowledge of biblical religion. The great story of salvation. The story of Israel. How does Jesus bring that story to its climax? How do we fit into it? I love a confirmation kid to know, “How do I fit into this great story that stretches back all the way to creation, and comes up through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Moses and the whole story of Israel, culminating in the cross and Resurrection of Jesus? I’m a player in that story. That’s what all the saints knew. We’re players in that story. Help them understand that. I’d ask parents to help them understand what that’s all about.

I would finally say, pray with them. I know we Americans are kind of awkward about praying with our kids. Do it though. Take the time. If you want to get really ambitious say the rosary together. Or simply say the night prayer of the Church before the kids go to bed, a simple prayer. I taught the Jesus prayer the other day. I was out at one of the parishes on Ash Wednesday and we had a school mass, and I said to the kids, “I want to teach you a prayer that’s really simple, but it’s a really great ancient prayer.” I taught them the Jesus prayer. Do that with your kids. Those are all good ways to help them prepare.

QUESTION: Let me ask one final question about confirmation. I’ve heard this from a lot of younger friends who have recently been confirmed, and many who have recently been baptized. They understand that these are great sacraments of importance, initiation, but afterward, they don’t feel as if there’s been an immediate change. “I just went through baptism and I don’t feel any different.” Or, “I just went through confirmation.

I don't see any immediate evidence that something changed in my life." What would you say to people who go through these sacraments, who understand that they're important and meaning-filled, but who don't feel affected?

BISHOP BARRON: I'd say first, when you go to Mass and the great wonder of transubstantiation happens, when the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ, what do you see? You see precisely nothing. It's not something that you see. It's a change taking place at a level that's greater than, deeper than the merely visible. Sometimes the sacraments are accompanied by extraordinary experiences. Sometimes, they are. Why God deigns to do that, who knows? That's in God's mind, why God wants that. Maybe someone needs that special insight or a special incentive, but customarily no. The sacraments aren't accompanied by great experiences, but we mustn't reduce grace to an experience.

Normally grace works in the manner of Elijah who heard the tiny whispering voice. Remember

that passage? He goes into the cave and then the earthquake comes and the great storm comes, and even the rocks are rent by the wind, but God was not in any of that. He was in a tiny whispering voice. That's the way it usually works with grace. Something has changed in you when you're confirmed. You've received these new gifts. Wait, watch. You'll see how they are activated with our cooperation, but don't expect some massive experience on the day of your confirmation. It might be years later, that you sense, "Ah! Where'd that come from? Where'd that courage come from that I was able to muster? Where'd those words come from I was able to speak when the faith was being attacked? Where did that sudden impulse to go back to Mass come from?"

I know a lot of people who've drifted away from the faith, and then it's like time Thomas Merton in *Seven Storey Mountain*, when he says, "I woke up one Sunday morning with this overwhelming sense, 'Go to mass. Go to mass.'" That was a grace. How about Merton picking up that book of Étienne Gilson, that ended up changing his en-

tire life. His entire life! Then the lives of millions who've read him. Think of that. How did that happen? This young kid walking past a bookstore window and sees this book and bought it. See, that is grace. That's what grace is like. It's a tiny whispering voice that has an enormous impact, but you're not perhaps going to feel it right away. Don't expect that, but expect the Spirit to work in you in extraordinary ways in the course of your life.

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