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Sacrament of Confirmation, Sacrament of Champions - Part II

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Jesus' anointing marked Him out as a prophet greater than all the rest, including Elijah, Elisha, and Moses. Through His miracles, conversations, and entire being, Jesus was God's spokesman. This is a prophet's main job description. In fact, it's the literal meaning of the Greek word for prophet: one who speaks on behalf of another.

Speak up for God

Being a prophet has nothing necessarily to do with foretelling the future. To share in Jesus' prophetic anointing, then, means being called to speak for the living God in our deeds and words — that is, to proclaim the gospel to all people.

When I was growing up, I thought only bishops and missionaries were called to evangelize. Looking around, I saw no need for spreading the gospel in this "one nation under God."

Certainly, the work of foreign missions is an urgent necessity for the whole Church. Ever since the Second Vatican Council, however, the Church has been pointing to the emergence of a *new* evangelization, a work which every one of its members is called to embrace.

What's "new" about this evangelization? First of all, the mission field: our formerly Christian society must be re-evangelized. A recent Gallup poll showed that the overwhelming majority of American church-goers live in a way that is indistinguishable from everyone else in America. Also, many people in our society are unchurched; they have no religious identity whatsoever and are hungering for meaning in their lives. Who is going to speak for God to all these people? No way that missionaries, bishops, and religious alone can do the job. It's too big.

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That's another reason this evangelization is called *new*: it needs to be carried out by new evangelizers. By people who may never have thought of themselves as missionaries.

Fortunately, confirmation equips *everybody* to proclaim the gospel. It "gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ" (*Catechism*, para. 1303). In fact, a Vatican II document pointed out that Catholics who have been confirmed are "more strictly obliged to spread the faith by word and deed" (*Lumen gentium*, para. 11).



I've heard a lot of homilies that advise, "Don't worry about talking about your faith. Just be a good example." But this is *not* the teaching of the Church! Certainly, it's disgraceful to speak God's word without bearing witness to it by our actions. But a silent witness through example only is bad evangelizing too. If you never explain why your life is different — why you have a smile on your face and peace in your heart — people are likely to draw the wrong conclusions. Instead of seeing God in your life, they may think you are just especially well-adjusted.

Of course, to explain the faith successfully, we need to study it. Studying, understanding, and then speaking out boldly for God — this is part of what it means to share in Christ's prophetic anointing. The Church is essentially missionary, so unless we accept the call to mission, we're not fully Catholic.

An Apostolic Commission



If baptism is like getting your foot in the church door, confirmation is like coming into the living room. There we are personally welcomed by the host of the house, the bishop, who is a successor of the Apostles and the visible center of the local church. He is the original minister of confirmation who signs and seals those receiving the sacrament.

The connection with the Apostles is also evoked when confirmation is conferred by a priest, since the sacred chrism he uses must be blessed by the bishop. Whether present in person or through the use of this blessed oil, the bishop is our living link with those to whom Jesus first entrusted the great commission to

"go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). In confirmation He conveys that commission to others.

Fortunately, the Lord never imposes obligations without equipping us to carry them out. As we're anointed, we're empowered to serve as apostles, evangelists, intercessors, servants. Because God's word never returns to Him empty, things happen through the sacramental signs and words of confirmation. The Holy Spirit, a Spirit of power, is always given to us. We can count on it.

The prophet Isaiah describes the Spirit and His power in terms of seven gifts that rest upon the Messiah: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear

of the Lord (see Is 11:2). Poured out on Jesus as the anointed king, this seven-fold Spirit is likewise poured out on us in confirmation.

Each of these gifts is fabulous and would warrant a book in itself. But in an age when there is such ignorance of the faith and such fearful passivity on the part of so many of the faithful and the clergy, here are reflections on just two of them.

• **Fortitude:** This supernatural courage characterizes the Apostles once the Spirit comes at Pentecost. What a transformation! Fearful no more, they burst out into the same streets through which Jesus was dragged to Calvary, proclaiming publicly that Jesus is risen from the dead. Their bold witnessing has a powerful effect: “about three thousand souls” are baptized and added to the Church that day (Acts 2:41).



Stories like this comfort me. Even though I’m not courageous by nature, I know that the Holy Spirit can give me *supernatural* courage when I need it. All I have to do is yield to this gift of holy boldness.

• **Understanding:** Through the power of the Spirit, we’re equipped to understand biblical truths with our heart, not just our rational mind. The Holy Spirit helps us to penetrate their meaning in a supernatural way. This is how St. Thomas Aquinas explains the spiritual gift of understanding.

This certainly rings true to my own experience. Following my personal Pentecost, I developed a hunger for the Bible. Things I had found boring and meaningless suddenly came to life; they nourished and excited me. If this has happened to you too, know that this is the gift of understanding. If this gift hasn’t been activated in you yet, ask the Holy Spirit’s help. The gift is already yours through confirmation.

“Accept the Charisms with Gratitude!”



The Holy Spirit also brings us gifts called “charisms.” While the “seven gifts of the Spirit” build us up and enable us to grow in sanctity, charisms enable us to build up the Church and serve others. Charisms are supernatural gifts of grace, but sometimes they build on humble, natural foundations. That’s the way God usually works: grace builds on nature; it perfects and elevates it.

Having always believed in and encouraged charisms, the Catholic Church is officially the largest Pentecostal church in the world! The *Catechism* calls the charisms a “wonderfully rich grace for the apostolic vitality and for the holiness of the entire Body of Christ” (see *Catechism*, paras. 799-801). The Second Vatican Council, in its “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” teaches that the Holy Spirit “distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank.... These charismatic gifts, whether they be the most outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with

thanksgiving and consolation, for they are exceedingly suitable and useful for the needs of the Church” (*Lumen gentium*, par. 12).

More dramatically, on Pentecost 1998, John Paul II said: “Today to all of you, and to all Christians, I want to cry out: Be open and docile to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Accept with gratitude and obedience the charisms that the Spirit never ceases to bestow. Come, Holy Spirit, and make the charisms you have bestowed ever more fruitful.”

What charisms does the Spirit bring? I can’t enumerate them, because charisms are so varied and specific to particular needs that they can’t be compiled into an exhaustive list. One famous listing in 1 Corinthians 12 mentions charisms like *teaching*: supernatural instruction that gives inspiration as well as information. There’s the mountain-moving *faith* that Jesus talks about in the Gospels. There’s supernatural *healing* and *miracles*, *prophecy*, *discernment of spirits*, *tongues* and *interpretation of tongues*.

But 1 Corinthians 12 also speaks of humbler charisms. *Administration*, for example. Doesn’t this sound like a gift for an accountant? Well, the charism of administration is broader than the ability to manage finances or business affairs. It refers to the Spirit-inspired ability to oversee a project, mission, or other service to God’s people in a way that builds up the Church, glorifies God, and doesn’t bog down in bureaucracy.

Other humble charisms are mentioned in Romans 12. The ministry of *service* sounds unexciting — but remember, this is what Christ demonstrates in the foot-washing episode of John 13. Housework for an elderly person, planning a Holy Week liturgy, working on a parish hospitality team — all these ordinary services are supernatural, if done with the joy and love of the Spirit. Romans 12 also mentions the charism of *exhortation*, the ability to motivate others to greater love and service of Christ. Calling people on without cajoling and brow-beating, in a way that inspires, uplifts, and encourages is a supernatural gift. Doing *works of mercy* is a charism (see Rom 12:8). Some so-called charitable works demean people, keep them dependent, and take away their dignity. What a contrast with the way Mother Teresa and her sisters would perform these works! One with those they serve, they enhance and elevate the dignity of the poorest of the poor and make them feel like the princes and princesses they really are in God’s eyes.



Another mention of charisms appears in 1 Corinthians 7:7, where Paul calls *Christian marriage* itself a charism. Marriage is a natural institution which offers many natural goods, such as companionship and children. A Christian marriage, though, is supernatural. Building on a natural foundation, it turns a marriage heavenward and bases it on the rock that is Christ. Christian marriage also reveals the love and unbreakable bond between Christ and His Church.

Celibacy, too, is a charism of the Spirit, says St. Paul in the very same verse. He’s not talking about people who stay single to have a fun-filled life without the burden of caring for children. Charismatic celibacy means being single in imitation of Christ, for the sake of greater freedom to serve a bigger family. It’s a gift of love to the Lord and to the whole church.

Unwrapping Our Charismatic Gifts



Three points about the charisms. First, it's important to remember that they're *gifts* for the good of the Church. We can't just pick out the ones we want and use them as we please. Our charisms need to be discerned and coordinated. Bishops, priests, and deacons have a special charism, received through ordination, for this discernment, and we should all work together with them to build up the whole Church (see *Catechism*, par. 801).

Second, keep in mind that the humble charisms are just as important as the flashier ones. I have to admit that I'd love to be able to raise the dead and work miracles! But this doesn't seem to be how God normally works through me. Right from the beginning, God called me to serve Him in more ordinary ways — like offering my music as a gift for use in prayer and the liturgy. I saw my natural gift gradually transformed into a supernatural one that enables people to lift their hearts and minds to God. If we're faithful in little things like this, the Lord will often give us greater.

Finally, St. Paul gives us the most important directive of all about the Spirit's gifts when he teaches the preeminence of love. If I have spectacular gifts of tongues, prophecy, or healing but "have not love, I am nothing," he says (1 Cor 13:3). Every charism in the Christian life is intended to build and serve charity or *agape*. This is the totally self-giving kind of love that God has for us and invites us to return to Him and others. Without charity, everything is in vain (see *Catechism*, para. 800).

A Word to the Confirmed and the Not-Yet Confirmed

If you're awaiting confirmation or preparing others for this sacrament, I encourage you to realize that the *experience* of the Holy Spirit — His joy, gifts, and charisms — should be seen as normal for adults who are being confirmed. It destroys faith to entertain thoughts like, "Gee, this might not happen. Better not get my hopes up." The Holy Spirit does come in power, and we need to be prepared for that — disposed and ready to respond.



Interestingly, in the early Church receiving the Spirit seemed to be a perceptible experience; it made a difference that was noticeable to everyone. Otherwise, how could Paul have told the Galatians: "Have you had such remarkable experiences all to no purpose...? Is it because you observe the law or because you have faith in what you heard that God lavishes the Spirit on you and works wonders in your midst?" (Gal 3:4-5, NAB).

This palpable coming of the Spirit was also reported by Church Fathers writing over an eight-hundred-year period in both the East and the West. As shown in a 1991 study by two accomplished theologians, biblical scholar George Montague and patristics scholar Kilian McDonnell, the Fathers indicated that adults who were baptized and confirmed *experienced* a difference in their lives. In the words of St. Hilary of Poitiers, “We who have been reborn through the sacrament of baptism experience intense joy when we feel within us the first stirrings of the Holy Spirit.” Speaking of the charisms right afterwards, he adds, “Let us make use of such generous gifts” (See *Fanning the Flame*, Collegetown, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991, 16).

“But I’ve already been confirmed,” some people say, “and I didn’t feel anything happening.”

This is certain: the grace and power of the Spirit really were communicated to you in confirmation. But the gifts need to be unpacked. It’s like getting a new credit card that can’t be used until you call in and activate it. St. Paul uses another image to make the same point when he tells Timothy to “stir into flame the gift of God bestowed when my hands were laid on you” (2 Tm 1:6, NAB).



There are sparks deep within everyone who has been confirmed. Some of us have already felt them leaping up into the fire of the Holy Spirit. Others need to pray that the sparks will burst into flame and that the gifts of the Spirit will be activated and become fruitful for the life of the Church.

“What have I done with my baptism? How do I answer my vocation? What have I done with my confirmation? Have I used the gifts and charisms of the Spirit to bear fruit?” These are the fundamental questions that Pope John Paul II suggests we ask ourselves in light of this new millennium. For each of us, may these questions serve as both an examination of conscience and a spur to action. Let’s ask for the strength of the Spirit to respond to God’s call and live out the grace of confirmation.

This is Part II of The Sacrament of Champions - To read Part I visit The Crossroads Initiative Library.

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