

Confirmation Lobster: Rethinking Confirmation Formation

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CHAPTER ONE

Opening

A Sacrament Searching for a Theology

When I was a freshmen in college I joined the Confirmation formation team for high school students at my campus parish. At our very first planning meeting, I was feeling overwhelmed as we looked over the wide variety of topics we'd been asked to cover. How were all these topics supposed to be cohesively woven together? How did this array of content particularly prepare anyone for Confirmation? It seemed more like a Catholic 101 overview course with a slight emphasis on a very abstract articulation of the Holy Spirit.

Someone on the formation team leaned over and said something I'll never forget: "You know what they say about Confirmation, right? It's a sacrament searching for a theology."

The statement struck me as incredibly sad. Was that true? It couldn't be true. The sacrament wouldn't have endured through our 2000 year history if it didn't have a deep and rich theology behind it. However, as I looked at what was laid out before me, the pieces of the puzzle didn't add up to anything very clear.

* * *

So I began my journey of searching, reading, questioning, studying, and praying for clarity. I needed to reconcile what I found in the Catechism and witnessing in the Rite of Confirmation, against what was often being taught in Confirmation curricula and spoken about in Confirmation retreats I attended around the country.

Eventually, I came to recognize the very real and tangible role the Holy Spirit had been playing in my own life. I realized how clearly and beautifully the scriptural account from which the Sacrament draws its theology catechises us about the sacrament. And finally, through a few hundred Confirmation events and retreats, I developed a way of articulating what Confirmation is and how this sacrament makes a powerful and tangible difference in our lives.

Fundamentally, the sacrament of Confirmation is often misunderstood and mis-represented. With this project, I'll lay out a proposal for how we can help the faithful understand

- Why there are so many misconceptions about the sacrament
- How Confirmation logically fits into the sacraments of initiation
- The scriptural basis for the sacrament
- The value proposition of Confirmation
- The tangible role the Holy Spirit plays in our everyday life.
- How Confirmation moves the faithful from discipleship into mission and apostolate.

NOTE

There is tremendous variety in Confirmation formation from diocese to diocese. You'll find everything from

Confirmation at the time of Baptism to Confirmation as late as junior and senior year of High School. Some diocese require two years of formation, others require just a few meetings over a handful of months. Generally speaking, it's most common in North America to find the sacrament being offered between 6th and 10th grade as the final sacrament of initiation.

CHAPTER TWO

The Lobster Analogy

For at least the past few generations, from what I can tell, we have largely undervalued Confirmation. It's been misrepresented, misunderstood, and often poorly explained. Because of this, many Catholics assume Confirmation is something it's not and look to themselves or to the secular world to fill the gaps that we should be looking to the Holy Spirit to fill.

The good news? Confirmation is spectacular and hiding in plain sight. This often overlooked, undervalued, and underappreciated sacrament has a powerful and important role to play in our daily lives, empowers us to be who God created us to be and enables us to pursue sainthood. Let's dive in.

Until the early 1900s, lobsters were trash. Today, they are not. Lobsters have not changed, but how we prepare them has - and now the world appreciates the beautiful gift this creature is.

Prior to 1900, lobsters, known as cockroaches of the sea, were considered a poor-man's food. They were used as livestock feed, combined with manure as fertilizer, or consumed by the

poor and commonly served to inmates at penitentiaries along the Eastern seaboard. If not thrown on a field or canned and shipped off to prisons, the crustaceans were chopped up in bulk, mixed with other sea refuse, and used as chum for commercial fishing. Poor little lobsters.

“Lobster shells about a house are looked upon as signs of poverty and degradation,”

- John J. Rowan, 1876

“Be fruitful and multiply” God said. Well, lobsters listened. Before 1900 there were so many four and five pound lobsters to be pulled out of the ocean that canneries and seafood processing houses wouldn’t bother with anything under three pounds — just too small to be worth the effort.

Why were these creatures so abundant and so despised? Simple. We didn’t know how to cook them. Well, we did, but the way we cooked them often made people sick. As it turns out, if a lobster is killed before cooking (which was the way they were commonly prepared at the time), harmful bacteria begin to multiply — rapidly. Within minutes of being dispatched from this world, lobsters go from viable food to the proud home of thriving bacteria colonies. Yikes.

However, all this changed! Two things happened:

1. We figured out how to cook them (safely).
2. We figured out how to market them.

Cook it better.

Around 1900 the culinary world discovered how to prepare the crustaceans as we do today — pop the poor little delicious guys in boiling water while still alive (sorry buddy) and serve them fresh! No bacteria. No disease. All kinds of beautiful meat and flavor. Get butter involved and maybe a bit of garlic and parsley... delicious.

* * *

Market them better.

Helping the world see the beauty of this food was crucial. At this time in US history, railroads began connecting the middle of the country with the coasts. States that had never had access to fresh seafood were able to access live lobsters delivered in tanks on rail cars. The presentation of bright pink lobster shells filled with fluffy white meat on a bed of green lettuce, punctuated with bright yellow lemon wedges was the kind of thing other diners noticed. Add bibs and lobster cracking tools - the meal becomes a party. This presentation eliminated fear of bacteria, revealed the beautifully nuanced flavors of their tender white meat, and elevated the lowly lobster to rockstar status. Lobster became a delicacy that could command a premium price.

Lobsters didn't change, but our appreciation of them did.

The world began to understand what they had, something they had all along, but didn't really grasp the potential of. There was a wild undervaluing of lobster until the world figured out what they had before them. I contend that there is a wild undervaluing of the sacrament of Confirmation - we've been cooking Confirmation formation wrong for generations. However, if we do it correctly, we are rewarded with a beautiful understanding of a sacrament that empowers and animates the church. A sacrament that enables us to answer the call of our baptism and turn to the Grace of God for strength and accompaniment through life's most challenging and pivotal moments.

If you are underwhelmed by what you have been told Confirmation is, or you don't know how to articulate why Confirmation is amazing, this book is for you. I don't care how you prepare lobster, or if you even like lobster - I want to

help prepare Confirmation better.

You won't find lesson plans here, but you will find an articulation of what Confirmation is and a few ways to approach explaining the sacrament to others.

CHAPTER THREE

A Huge Misundertanding

Since 2005 I've been speaking, performing, and teaching in the Catholic Church throughout North America and abroad. In that time, I've done hundreds of Confirmation retreats and events and developed relationships with teens, youth ministers, faith formation directors, diocesan ministry coordinators, priests and bishops along the way. Throughout all of these interactions it's rare to find anyone who is truly passionate about the sacrament of Confirmation. More often than not, I find that we, as a church, struggle to become passionate because we struggle to articulate clearly what Confirmation is and how it impacts our lives.

This misunderstanding happens in some combination of the following ways:

1. A misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the theology.
2. Confirmation becomes more of a cultural experience than a sacrament.

3. The theology is correct, but it has no obvious bearing, impact, relevance, or application in the teens life.
4. Confirmation formation becomes a last ditch crash course in Catholicism 101. A broad survey of all the thing they should have learened in missed years of catechetical formation.

Any and all of these result in teens trying to make sense of a sacrament that is ultimately, poorly represented.

We Fail Our Confirmands

- When the value of Confirmation and a relationship with the Holy Spirit can't be articulated.
- When the cultural experience doesn't match the theology.
- When the explanation a teen's parent or sponsor offers doesn't match the catechist's explanation.
- When the theology a teen is hearing makes sense, but lacks any practical application or tangible reality in their lives.
- When preparation specific to Confirmation is lost amidst an attempt to provide a broad overview of catch-up catechesis.

How do we address these things?

1. Make sure the formation director or whoever is in charge of Confirmation has a clear understanding of what Confirmation is and can articulate how the Holy Spirit is present in their own lives. If they can't point to how the Holy Spirit is active in their life, that's okay but they need help. Dig into that aspect of their relationship with God. Spend some time

praying about it, read Fr. Cantalamesa, maybe book a few sessions with a spiritual director, it's well worth their while to be able to articulate from their own life where the Holy Spirit is active.

2. Provide a Confirmation 101 course for parents, catechists, and sponsors. Be extremely intentional about getting all of these people on the same page. This is going to take repeated and sometimes blunt communication. It's imperative that we dispel the terrible theology that has been taught for so many generations.
3. Propose to parents, sponsors, and teens the Value Proposition of Confirmation (and faith generally). Help them see that the Holy Spirit provides aid and assistance in life that academics and extra curriculars do not offer... this is really important.

Often times, parents, families, sponsors, or even catechists and Formation Directors will fundamentally misunderstand the theology of Confirmation. At the very least, many catechists don't seem to be particularly excited about Confirmation.

If you are a catechist and you don't see where the Holy Spirit is actively, tangibly moving in your life, your work, your relationships, your family... please stop and figure that out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lies From The Pits of Hell

In addition to my ministry around the country, I work in a parish as the director of Youth Ministry and Confirmation formation. I've made it a practice to sit down and have a chat with each of the 70-90 teens entering the Confirmation formation program at my parish. Some teens have been in youth group for years, many I'm meeting for the first time. A significant portion of the confirmands are either attending Catholic High School or received a Catholic education through 8th grade. I ask them all the same questions, one of which I'm particularly interested in: "How would you explain Confirmation to a 10 year old?" They are given ample assurance that they can be wildly wrong with their answer and that's fine, I just want to get a sense of what they think they are preparing for. What have they heard from their parents? What have they heard from CCD, youth ministers sponsors, or theology teachers in the past?

The following is a list of my favorite half-truths, misconceptions and straight up lies people have perpetuated about Confirmation and I've heard from my teens:

* * *

Confirmation is the sacrament of choice, where one:

- Chooses to be Catholic for the rest of one's life.
- "Confirms" their Catholic faith.
- Finally makes an intentional decision about being Catholic.
- Becomes an adult in the eyes of the church.*
- Completes a person's religious education and formation. Congratulations, Grad!

**Confirmation is rightly called the sacrament of Christian Maturity, but we are equipped to develop and adult spirituality, not receive an instantaneous adulthood - (be mindful that Confirmation asd a teenager is a fairly recent innovation in the Church's tradition, for the majority of our history, we were Confirming at baptism and I can't imagine anyone holding up a newly baptized and confirmed baby and proclaiming "An adult in the eyes of the Church!" more on that later.*

"Why?" You ask.

"Why are these wrong?" You say.

"Where did these lies come from?" You proclaim, flabbergasted.

I'm glad you asked. I'll explain why these are wrong. And just so you know, these lies come from Satan in the pits of Hell (the same place cats and black licorice come from). Rebuke them. We will debunk these lies one-by-one using history, theology, scripture, and a bit of logic.

CHAPTER FIVE

Choosing to be Catholic and Other Misunderstandings

Lie #1 Confirmation is a Sacrament of Choice

Before I dive into this, it's important to recognize that free will is a thing and necessary to the sacrament, but choice is not the primary characteristic of Confirmation. More on this later, but it is important to note upfront.

The most prevalent lie perpetuated about Confirmation is that it's a sacrament whose primary characteristic is that through it a person "chooses the Catholic faith." This idea underlies the arguments for other widespread misconceptions and at first glance, seems to make sense. It's called "Confirmation" for crying out loud. If I confirm a reservation with a hotel I am telling them "yep, affirmative, I plan to stay at your hotel tonight." Similarly, many figure that "if I confirm my faith, then I'm choosing it." Nope.

The frequency with which I hear teachers, students, catechists, parents — even clergy, address Confirmation as a decision, a choice, a step into adulthood through decision

making is astounding. Heck, the current title of one of the most broadly distributed Confirmation curriculums in the United States, *Decision Point*, seems to affirm this fallacy of deciding or choosing

Note: I consider myself friends with a number of the great folks who worked on Decision Point, wrote the content, produced the video resources, and otherwise work for the publisher- I don't believe they intend to perpetuate a misunderstanding of Confirmation, but I'd love it if they considered either clarifying or changing the title.

Per my note at the beginning of this section, it's important to recognize that choice is an aspect of the sacrament — but it is not the defining characteristic of the sacrament. That choice is only relevant to Confirmation insofar as free will is a necessary condition of any sacrament and not unique to confirmation. We freely choose to receive the sacrament of confirmation in much the same way a person has to choose utilize their free will to be married or to go to confession or to receive holy orders. Even in infant baptism God Parents are involved to affirm the will of the parents that Baptism is the choice and the will of the community that will guide and nurture the infant through their life.

A sacrament received against a person's will is not valid. If someone is forced to go to confession against their will, that confession is not valid. Heaven forbid someone should point a gun at bride or groom and force them to go through with a marriage, that marriage would be invalid and easily annulled. Just as with these other sacraments, free will is a necessary condition of Confirmation, it is not, however, the identity of the sacrament.

If we don't choose to be Catholic for the rest of our life in

Confirmation, then when do we get to choose to be Catholic? When do we choose our faith? What is the sacrament of choice? When do we stand up and publicly profess our faith in Christ, when do we specifically choose the Catholic faith? When do we boldly proclaim “Yes, I do believe” before our community and God? We do this very explicitly every time we receive the Eucharist. It is in receiving the Eucharist that we are presented with a choice and we publicly respond.

The priest presents the Eucharist and says, “This is the Body of Christ.” The faithful respond “Amen” which can be translated “Yes, I do believe.”

It is easy to fall short of appreciating the gravity of that moment. When the minister of the Eucharist presents the Body or Blood of Christ, we are being presented with the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of God made flesh. The King of Kings, the Lord of all, the Source and Summit of our faith, the fount from which every teaching of the Church flows. The source of every Tradition and Dogma comes from this Word made flesh: the Eucharist. When we are confronted with Christ we are asked if we believe that this is Christ, we are asked if we are willing to make our faith tangible. Are we willing to outwardly proclaim our inward disposition of faith. Sometimes we boldly make this proclamation, sometimes we make that proclamation with the desperate prayer on our hearts that is so beautifully articulated in MATTHEW, “LORD, I BELIEVE, HELP MY UNBELIEF.” Our amen doesn’t have to be perfect, but it does have to be sincere and it has to be freely offered.

I often frame the “decision point” of choosing to say “amen” to the Eucharist similarly to a decision point in any relationship — a concept described in common parlance as a

moment to “define the relationship” or “DTR.” This is fitting because we are, in fact, defining our relationship with Christ. In the course of a relationship there are multiple moments where the parties involved implicitly or explicitly define the relationship, and in so doing, choose one another. Sometimes it's easy to choose that relationship, sometimes its hard. Sometimes we are close to the people we are in relationship with, sometime we feel miles apart but we choose them in the hope for a future reconnection.

Imagine Kyle and Kate, classmates and acquaintances, not quite friends. For what it's worth, Kate has fiery red hair and a beautifully kind personality. Kyle is a nice guy. Over the course of the year they strike up conversations, work on projects together, they become friends. A DTR moment exists where Kyle and Kate refer to each other as “friends” for the first time. Recognizing their shared enjoyment of one another, a moment arrives when they recognize the other person as more than an acquaintance and they officially become friends. Fast forward a few months, the friendship has grown, they want to spend more time together, emotions and feelings get involved, suddenly Kyle gets nervous that either he and Kate are going to start officially dating or he will soon get stuck in the Bermuda Triangle of complicated friendships, the “friend zone.” It is time to DTR, and in a moment that punctuates their ongoing and ever changing relationship, they become boyfriend and girlfriend. Aww, don't screw this up guys! We continue to follow their relationship to a moment when dating leads them to discernment and a desire to pursue a life together. They go on a picnic and as Kyle gets on one knee and Kate says yes, another moment occurs when the relationship is defined. An outward sign of an inward reality that they are choosing to take their relationship to the next level. Eventually family members gather, a cake gets

ordered, flowers are arranged, a pig dies and Kyle and Kate stand before friends, family, and God to define their relationship yet again. This time they enter into covenant with one another. As the years pass they continue to define their relationship, they continue to choose each other, sometimes its easy, sometimes not, but thats how relationships go in our fallen nature — they aren't always easy. All this is to illustrate that we don't define our relationships one time. We naturally define our relationships over and over again because relationship are dynamic things. So too is our relationship with God. It's too important, too real, too dynamic to only define it one time.

It is in the Eucharist that we are given the chance to outwardly, publicly, profess and choose to affirm our relationship with Christ. If a teen is nervous about Confirmation because of their false impression that Confirmation is the moment when we “choose our relationship with God” or “choose the Catholic faith,” tell them not to worry about Confirmation. Instead, they should be considering what they really mean when they say Amen to the Body and Blood of Christ at Mass. The reason Communion is referred to as such is because in that sacrament the faithful “come into communion” with the body of Christ. At the moment of our creation and then in a particular way in our baptism we are called to relationship with God, in a powerful and unique way we say “yes” to that relationship and receive particular grace through saying Amen and receiving the Eucharist.

It's not so much about what *we* are confirming, but what *God* is confirming, completing, and strengthening in us. This is one of my favorite aspects of the sacrament because so many people seem to be puzzled by the question: How does

Confirmation complete our baptism?

When we say Confirmation completes our baptism people often wonder if we are inferring that baptism is insufficient or the grace of baptism is somehow lacking, it is not. Baptism enjoins us into the family of God, through the power of God in the community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we are welcomed into the inheritance of the Kingdom of God. God's grace is poured out upon us in Baptism and through that grace we die to sin, we are born into life, and we are given a call and challenge to proclaim the Gospel with the life that lays before us. Confirmation exists to equip us with the particular graces we will need on the journey of proclaiming the Gospel with our lives.

It's not that the Holy Spirit is not active in our lives before Confirmation - look at the multitude of Saints who, as children before receiving Confirmation, were clearly filled with grace and guided by the Holy Spirit. However, not everyone has that kind of faith, most of us need all the extra help we can get and Confirmation acts to equip us on our journey in a particular way. See the section on the Disciples for more on being equipped.

CHAPTER SIX

Becoming an Adult & Spiritual Maturity

Isn't this the sacrament of Christian Maturity?

Isn't this when the Church looks at us as adults?

If the name "Confirmation" didn't lead you to believe it was a moment to choose our faith, then surely the age at which people receive the sacrament bolsters the assertion that this is a sacrament of choice. Generally, this sacrament is offered to teens who are standing on the threshold of adulthood. These teens are going through puberty, they are gaining independence and drivers licenses... this has to be a Catholic bar-mitzvah right? A coming of age? Nope.

Let's walk through the history of this sacrament, it starts with a pop quiz!

What is the correct order of the sacraments of initiation?

If you answered: 1st Baptism, 2nd Communion, 3rd Confirmation, then congratulations — you're wrong!

The correct order of the sacraments of initiation is Baptism, then Confirmation, then Communion. If someone comes into

the Catholic Church as an adult today, they will typically receive the sacraments in that order. Check out your local Easter Vigil to see this in action. Indeed, through most of the Church's history, the sacraments were offered in that correct order and currently in most other Rites of the Catholic Church, the order is still intact. From the beginning of the church, through about the 13th century, Baptism and Confirmation were celebrated closely together.

As the church came into the 1300s she became increasingly concerned with the formation and religious education of children. As a result, the rite of Confirmation started to be pushed back to the age of reason (an age that fluctuated from seven to fifteen over the years). After the Reformation in the 1500s, the ages of Confirmation and Communion tended to be pushed back even later. In 1917, the Code of Canon Law recommended Confirmation at age seven and it wasn't until 1932 that the Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments allowed the order of the sacraments to be changed in a given diocese when the Bishop deemed it necessary.

I think most of the misconceptions about Confirmation can be attributed to the age at which the Sacrament is offered and the order in which it falls among the sacraments of initiation. Most Catholics don't know the history of the sacrament nor do they spend a lot of time questioning what has been taught for generations. Add to that that the sacrament is rightly described as the sacrament of Christian maturity, and that the sacrament comes somewhere between 6th and 12th grade — a good period of time after first Eucharist (a sacrament that happens at the age of reason), and it's no wonder that Confirmation appears to signify a coming of age. This sacrament completely looks like the Church saying "You're an adult now, make an adult decision." The problem is that

this understanding and tradition does not jibe with our history or theology.

For the first 1300 years of the Church's history, I can't imagine anyone baptizing and confirming their infant then immediately looking at the swaddled child and proclaiming "Behold! An adult in the eyes of God and the Church!" That is ridiculous. No, a baby who receives the first two sacraments of initiation in the correct order is not miraculously deemed an adult. They are still an infant. However, they are now endowed with a particular outpouring of the Holy Spirit which equips them and enables them to grow into an adult spirituality.

In the same way, to confirm a 16 year old and proclaim "Behold! An adult in the eyes of the Church and God by virtue of their Confirmation!" is absurd. If that 16 year old has been well formed to recognize that now through Confirmation they are given the ability to be the son or daughter of God that they were created to be at their conception and were called to be in their Baptism, then absolutely, they are on their way to spiritual maturity. If they can recognize that through an awareness of the Holy Spirit in their life, through prayer and the graces that come from a sacramental life, they are indeed well on their way to an adult spirituality.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Confirmation is Graduation

I had a teen tell me once that Confirmation was a sign that the confirmand had learned everything that the Church had to teach.

I was drinking coffee when they said this.
That coffee nearly shot out of my nose.

Now, I've never directly laughed at a teen in one of these interviews, but that proposition was so unbelievable that I pretty much did. My bad. If Pope Emeritus Benedict (whom I consider to be a metaphorical tower of knowledge) is still learning new things about the faith, so are 15 year old confirmands whether they have received the sacrament or not. The point is, a disciple is one who learns, and we never stop learning.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Pitching Confirmation to Parents

I find that presenting the “value proposition” to parents is the most effective ways to get their buy in and support for Confirmation prep. Sure, some object to pitching a sacrament with a “What’s in it for me” consumerist mentality, but as far as I can tell, our desire for heaven comes from the same “what’s in it for me” mentality. That mentality isn’t bad. Failing to lead others to heaven is bad.

Preparation for Adulthood

As we covered earlier, Confirmation isn’t about magically becoming an adult the instant the bishop lays hands upon the Confirmand or the moment the Chrism oil hits the forehead. However, it is through Confirmation that we are equipped in a particularly powerful way with the Holy Spirit and in that way a Confirmand is uniquely equipped with everything they need to grow into a spirituality mature adult.

What I’m about to argue is that the Holy Spirit uniquely equips our children for their futures in a way academia and extra-curricular activities cannot. Because of this, I propose that faith generally, and Confirmation specifically, is the third

avenue of preparation that we are often overlooking or undervaluing.

The Three Avenues Pitch to Parents

It's safe to say that the desire of most parent's hearts is to see their children grow up into competent, healthy, well rounded, independent, happy adults. Parents want to ensure that their kids will be okay on their own, that their children will have healthy relationships and fulfilling lives, that their kids won't be unnecessarily living in their basements into adulthood. Generally speaking, the approach to preparing children comes through two main avenues: academics and extra curricular activities. Families can spend thousands or (tens of thousands) of dollars and countless hours in pursuit of these formation opportunities.

Avenue One: Academia

Families aim to live in an area with the best schools or leverage whatever resources they have to get their students into the best private schools. Early education, tutors, academic coaches, test prep courses, essay coaches, the list of ways families work to get their students the best education possible is a long one. And for good reason! That education equips a child to think critically, to be creative, to ask questions and seek answers. That education tends to have a heavy influence over the trajectory of their lives and what doors will be open to them. The Catholic Church (who pioneered the university system, developed the scientific method and is responsible for educating more people than any other private organization), emphatically agrees: education is critical.

Avenue Two: Extracurriculars

When they are little it's an hour twice a week to watch

them run around a field playing cluster-ball soccer (adorable), tee ball, gymnastics, and recitals of Ode to Joy on the recorder. As they get older it becomes five and six day a week practices and weekend competitions. It's computer coding club, debate team, robotics, jazz/tap/modern dance, piano, theater. Eventually, maybe the child gets a job; maybe they don't because so much of their time is already consumed with school and activities. Each step along the way they learn motor skills, team work, leadership and other skills that shapes and forms their personality and their view of the world. Good. That's important and the church supports these things.

Academics and extracurriculars are important for sure, but do these skills really equip us for adulthood? Do they prepare us to face what the world will throw at us? Nope, not adequately. I was an athlete throughout my life — baseball, swimming, tennis, water polo (I went to a weird high school), and finally I was introduced to rowing in high school (by a kid I met through my 10th grade confirmation class — coincidentally). I went on to study at Purdue University and rowed there all four years, I wrote for a college newspaper, I took up photography. In addition to those sports and extracurriculars, I fell deeply in love with music. I became a guitar player and wrote and performed music throughout high school and college. I come from a great family, we were military and moved often. The diversity of experiences that come from traveling widely were certainly influential in forming me for adulthood. Ultimately though, what I've found is that there is nothing I learned in a classroom or a boat, pool, court, or stage that prepared me to face the challenges that lay ahead.

There is nothing we learn in the classroom or on the sports

field that equips us to confront some things. When we are called to love when love is hard, when love ceases to be an emotion, when we have to choose to love our spouse not because it is easy nor because they are attractive, but because we made a vow to do so, the Holy Spirit is essential. When it's two a.m. and a couple finds themselves entering the third hour of their very own world war three, the Holy Spirit is essential. When we are called to a depth of love that is beyond our capacity, when we are confronted with mental illness and logic and reason have no bearing on the situation, the Holy Spirit is essential. When we are called to make a decision that is ours and ours alone, when that decision will change the trajectory of our lives and set us on an irreversible course yet feel woefully ill equipped to make such a decision, the Holy Spirit brings us wisdom and discernment. When we are offered the job, when we are choosing the school, when the opportunity arises, when he drops to one knee and pulls out a ring: the Holy Spirit is essential. When the phone rings in the middle of the night and what we hear from the other end of the line turns our lives upside down, there is nothing from a classroom or a stage or a club or a team that equips us to respond — but that is precisely what the Holy Spirit is there for. To assure us that we will never be alone. To be our advocate. To equip us to face the things that we are not equipped to face on our own. To accompany someone as they pass from life into death, the Holy Spirit is there. To get us through the long night and carry us into the light of a new day, to strengthen us when we are weak, to accompany us in our solitude, to embolden us when we are fearful, to give us wisdom and insight when we do not know what to do, the Holy Spirit is there.

I've been Confirmed, life has been hard, why have I not reaped the same benefits of this sacrament that you claim are being offered?

* * *

Have you been cultivating a relationship with the Holy Spirit? If not, then it might be difficult to see where the Holy Spirit is active in your life. If you don't have a relationship with your doctor, then the doctor can't help you very much. Sure in a moment of absolute crisis a doctor may rush in and save your life without you having any knowledge of who that doctor is, but honestly, you could have probably gotten along in life a little better if you had that relationship established. Further, you probably see the wisdom in having your child cultivate a relationship with their doctor. Same thing with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can certainly show up in crisis, but a relationship of prayer and seeking the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life could be a game changer.

CHAPTER NINE

Disciples to Apostles

Disciples to Apostles

I think one of the best illustrations of what Confirmation is and what the Holy Spirit does through it is to look to the Gospels and see what happened in the lives of the disciples. The transformation of that rag-tag group of Jesus' followers was remarkable. What we see from them before and after the upper room is stark and dramatic, a tangible, visible shift from disciple to apostle.

What is the difference between a disciple and an apostle? It's a fun question to pose to a class. Further, what's the difference between the Disciples and Apostles (proper nouns)?

In short: disciples learn, apostles do. There's a lot more to be said about what a disciple or apostle is, but this is it from a 30,000ft view. All apostles are disciples, not all disciples are apostles. We never stop being disciples, we never stop learning, but at a certain point we are called upon to put our learning and faith into action, to begin an apostolate or a ministry. This is the call of our baptism. While our parents (in

infant baptism) and God parents are charged with raising and forming the newly baptized in the faith, the charge of the baptized is to proclaim the Gospel with their lives.

We are charged to proclaim the Gospel in just the same way the disciples were charged with proclaiming the Gospel, in just the same way the church is charged to proclaim the Gospel. The proclamation of the Gospel is how we accomplish the mission of the Church, the same mission Christ gave to the Apostles, the same mission of Jesus Christ incarnate, which is the same mission of God: bring humanity (all of humanity) back to the Garden.

“But I proclaiming the gospel is hard! I don’t know enough about God or theology to proclaim the Gospel. I’m not a preacher, I’m not a theologian, I can’t explain what I believe, I’m not even sure I fully understand who God is or who I am in relation to him. I’m scared, I’m too sinful, I’m too doubtful, I’m too broken, too awkward, too messy, too ashamed, I’m unworthy. I can’t be an apostle, I’m a horrible disciple.” Of course you are, you’re human. That’s why you are not expected to answer this call on your own. You are never alone. Indeed, you have an advocate in the Holy Spirit, the helping action arm of God moving in the world, sent specifically to equip you to overcome your shortcomings and to be your aid in answering the call of your baptism.

My favorite illustration of this: consider who the disciples were. They were tradesmen who encountered Christ and were invited by him to leave their lives as they knew them, to follow him, and watch and learn the new message/gospel/teaching he was preaching. A fascinating way to understand

this is to look at the Jewish culture and customs of the time. Everything about who the disciples and apostles were is unlikely, ill equipped, and frankly — backwards.

At this time, Jewish children would go to school for their first few years to study and memorize the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. By the time they were 8-10 years old they were expected to have the entirety of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy committed to memory. At the end of this period of study, an exam would be given and the best students moved on in their studies. Most students however, would be dismissed from school, sent home to go learn their family trade and become an apprentice so they could start working. Those top tier students went on to further study scripture and the law through a series of phases. At the conclusion of each phase of education, exams would be given and only the best students with the deepest insight and understanding of the law and scripture moved on and again, most students would be dismissed to go home and work. Only the best of the best of the best would complete the various levels of study and those chosen few would then be able to find a rabbi to whom they would apply to follow as a disciple. The rabbi would test them, assess whether the prospective disciple had the aptitude to learn their particular view of scripture and accept or reject them. Becoming a disciple was an arduous process reserved only for the most gifted of a generation.

Jesus, it's worth noting, is something of an über rabbi. Remember when Jesus was 12 and he disappears from the family caravan? Mary and Joseph can't find him, they have to go all the way back to Jerusalem, a days travel and they find him. Where do they find him? We find him in the temple, blowing the minds of the rabbis with his remarkable insight

into scripture. He's 12! He's a child — not even 13 which would have made him at least a man by Jewish custom. He is teaching and offering insight that's not only above his age, but is radically new and insightful. Never mind the years of school, never mind applying to become a disciple of a rabbi, Jesus, at 12 is teaching the teachers.

When we fast forward to Jesus' calling the disciples (which he does at 30... ever notice that there's nothing about Jesus' life between 12 and 30? Was Mary so upset that he was missing at 12 years old that she grounded him for 18 years? Probably not, but it's fun to speculate) we see something that doesn't at all follow custom. Jesus doesn't wait for the best of the best to apply to be his followers, he goes out and intentionally calls the ill equipped. His disciples are James and John, Andrew and Simon, fishermen he encounters in the midst of plying their trade. These guys are the rejects! These are the guys that society said weren't good enough to be disciples. These are the guys who had been kicked out of school and sent home because they didn't have the aptitude or potential for rabbinic ministry. They didn't make the cut. Still, Jesus, the rabbi who is worthy of teaching rabbis, goes to them and calls them by name.

There is a beauty in the way they respond, dropping their nets and walking away from their livelihood, their families, their homes, and with a beautifully innocent and blind faith, like that of a child, they follow. They are ill equipped, but they are willing to go. At the onset of their ministry they don't know what they don't know, they don't know how hard it will get, they don't know what they will be called to, they don't know the miracles they will see, they don't know the trouble that will come because of the teaching of their rabbi, they set off on blind faith.

* * *

Fast forward to the end. The supper. The garden. Judas' kiss. Peter's denial. Simon the Cyrene. Where are the disciples? Well, John is there. But everyone else, where are they? Home? Hiding? Why? What we see is an absolute scattering of the disciples (here comes a lot of speculation). Makes sense; they are scared. They don't want to meet the same fate as their rabbi: the public persecution, the angry crowds chanting for their ultimate death. However, they know this is what they are called to do. They know that from the moment of their creation, they have been chosen to follow Christ, to learn his teaching and to proclaim the fulfillment of the scriptures and truth of the Gospel because it is good news for all people. It is a message of hope, redemption, forgiveness, and entering back into relationship with the Father. They are torn.

Perhaps my favorite scene in all of the Gospels comes as the fearful and confused Disciples gather in a locked upper room. They are safe there, they won't be found, they are able to meet "without fear of the Jews." They won't be accused, they won't be identified as followers of Christ. They are afraid. At this point, in the time since Jesus' crucifixion the disciples have scattered, they have regrouped, they have gone home, they have returned together again. Jesus has appeared, he has disappeared, and now he appears once more in what I believe to be one of the coolest ways possible — he walks through a wall.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the

Lord. [Jesus] said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

[But] later, as the eleven were at table, he appeared to them and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had been raised. He said to them, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents [with their hands], and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

The Ascension of Jesus.

So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.]

While they were still speaking about this, he stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." But they were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. Then he said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do questions arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have." And as he said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While

they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed, he asked them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of baked fish; he took it and ate it in front of them.

He said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And he said to them, "Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And [behold] I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.¹⁸ Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.¹⁹ 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,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Aware of the fear confronting his disciples, the first thing Jesus does in the midst of his disciples is he draws close to each of them, inches from their faces, and breathes on them. The breath of God falls on their cheeks and beards, they blink as his breath hits their eyes. Ruah, the breath of God, not just a sign of the Holy Spirit, but the actual breath of God, falls upon them. "When the Father sends his Word, he

always sends his Breath.” (CCC 689)

He tells them, “peace be with you.”

Jesus had the benefit of divinity, but imagine the view from his humanity as he enters the room of his. Disciples, locked away in hiding, shaking in their boots and paralyzed by fear. These were the ones who walked away from everything - their families, jobs, homes, comfort, safety, to follow Him. They spent three years listening to Jesus preach, witnessing healings and transformations, miracle after miracle, and still they are afraid. What are they afraid of?! Have they not been convinced of the truth and the promise of Christ? Jesus revealed himself to this group of disciples so they would go and proclaim it to the world... not so his message would die in the upper room. What will it take for them to overcome their fear?

“Peace be with you.” These words cast out fear, they calm hearts. From the mouth of the one who calms the storms and waves, he stills the tumult raging in the hearts and minds of his disciples.

There is a reason Jesus constantly comes back to the refrain, “do not be afraid.” Allegedly, there are roughly 365 quotes around variations on the command “do not be afraid.” We can read these words all we want, we can hear it in a new verse every day of the year, but that doesn’t make the fear go away. Overcoming this kind of fear is unlike anything else. This is the fear of putting ourselves out, vulnerably, to proclaim a gospel which by our very nature we struggle to live up to. Of all things to fear about the proclamation of the Gospel, hypocrisy is high on the list. This is the fear that compels us to doubt, questions our sanity and our fate, leaves

more questions than answers and calls us to a super human boldness. Which is why the words of John 14 are worth remembering- the promise of the Holy Spirit, the assurance that the Advocate will accompany them in their ministry. The power of the Holy Spirit is promised because with the Advocate, we are never left to face that fear alone. Indeed we are strengthened and equipped to overcome the fear that would hold us back otherwise. This is one aspect of the power of the Holy Spirit, this is one aspect of why Confirmation matters!

“The mission of the Holy Spirit is always conjoined to that of the Son” (CCC 484).

“Fire symbolizes the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit's actions.” (CCC 695)

Acts 1:8 “Behold, the power of the Holy Spirit will come upon you and you shall be my witness in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”