



Catholic Answers

# WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH BELIEVED

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## Confirmation

The sacrament of confirmation is found in Bible passages such as Acts 8:14–17, 9:17, 19:6, and Hebrews 6:2, which speak of a laying on of hands for the purpose of bestowing the Holy Spirit.

Hebrews 6:2 is especially important because it is not a narrative account of how confirmation was given and, thus,

cannot be dismissed by those who reject the sacrament as something unique to the apostolic age. In fact, the passage refers to confirmation as one of Christianity's basic teachings, which is to be expected since confirmation, like baptism, is a sacrament of initiation into the Christian life.





We read: “Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment” (Heb. 6:1–2).

Notice how in this passage we are walked through the successive stages of the Christian journey—repentance, faith, baptism, confirmation, resurrection, and judgment. This passage encapsulates the Christian’s journey toward heaven and gives what theologians call the order of salvation or the *ordo salutis*. It well qualifies as “the elementary teachings” of the Christian faith. The laying on of hands mentioned in the passage must be confirmation: The other kinds of the imposition of hands (for ordination and for healing) are not done to each and every Christian and scarcely qualify as part of the order of salvation.

As the following passages show, the Church Fathers and early Christian writers also recognized confirmation as a sacrament distinct from baptism, even though it was usually given simultaneously with baptism. Their words speak powerfully about this anointing and imposition of hands for reception of the Holy Spirit and the role it has in Christian initiation.

### **Theophilus of Antioch**

“Are you unwilling to be anointed with the oil of God? It is on this account that we are called Christians: because we are anointed with the oil of God” (To Autolycus 1:12 [A.D. 181]).

### **Tertullian**

“After coming from the place of washing we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction, from the ancient discipline by which [those] in the priesthood . . . were accustomed to be anointed with a horn of oil, ever since Aaron was anointed by Moses.

... So also with us, the unction runs on the body and profits us spiritually, in the same way that baptism itself is a corporal act by which we are plunged in water, while its effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from sins. After this, the hand is imposed for a blessing, invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit” (Baptism 7:1–2, 8:1 [A.D. 203]).

“No soul whatever is able to obtain salvation unless it has believed while it was in the flesh. Indeed, the flesh is the hinge of salvation. . . . The flesh, then, is washed [baptism] so that the soul may be made clean. The flesh is anointed so that the soul may be dedicated to holiness. The flesh is signed so that the soul may be fortified. The flesh is shaded by the imposition of hands [confirmation] so that the soul may be illuminated by the Spirit” (The Resurrection of the Dead 8:2–3 [A.D. 210]).

### **Hippolytus**

“The bishop, imposing his hand on them, shall make an invocation, saying, ‘O Lord God, who made them worthy of the remission of sins through the Holy Spirit’s washing unto rebirth, send into them your grace so that they may serve you according to your will, for there is glory to you, to the Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit, in the holy Church, both now and through the ages of ages. Amen.’ Then, pouring the consecrated oil into his hand and imposing it on the head of the baptized, he shall say, ‘I anoint you with holy oil in the Lord, the Father Almighty, and Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit.’ Signing them on the forehead, he shall kiss them and say, ‘The Lord be with you.’ He that has been signed shall say, ‘And with your spirit.’ Thus shall he do to each” (The Apostolic Tradition 21–22 [A.D. 215]).

### **Cyprian of Carthage**

“It is necessary for him that has been baptized also to be anointed, so that by his having received chrism, that is, the anointing, he can be the anointed of God and have in him the grace of Christ” (Letters 7:2 [A.D. 253]).



“Some say in regard to those who were baptized in Samaria that when the apostles Peter and John came there only hands were imposed on them so that they might receive the Holy Spirit, and that they were not re-baptized. But we see, dearest brother, that this situation in no way pertains to the present case. Those in Samaria who had believed had believed in the true faith, and it was by the deacon Philip, whom those same apostles had sent there, that they had been baptized inside—in the Church. . . . Since, then, they had already received a legitimate and ecclesiastical baptism, it was not necessary to baptize them again. Rather, that only which was lacking was done by Peter and John. The prayer having been made over them and hands having been imposed upon them, the Holy Spirit was invoked and was poured out upon them. This is even now the practice among us, so that those who are baptized in the Church then are brought to the prelates of the Church; through our prayer and the imposition of hands, they receive the Holy Spirit and are perfected with the seal of the Lord” (ibid., 73[72]:9).

“[A]re not hands, in the name of the same Christ, laid upon the baptized persons among them, for the reception of the Holy Spirit?” (ibid., 74[73]:5).

### **Council of Carthage VII**

“[I]n the Gospel our Lord Jesus Christ spoke with his divine voice, saying, ‘Except a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’ [John 3:5]. This is the Spirit which from the beginning was borne over the waters; for neither

can the Spirit operate without the water, nor the water without the Spirit. Certain people therefore interpret [this passage] for themselves wrongly, when they say that by imposition of the hand they receive the Holy Ghost, and are thus received, when it is manifest that they ought to be born again [initiated] in the Catholic Church by both sacraments” (Seventh Carthage [A.D. 256]).

### **Treatise on Re-Baptism**

“[I]t has been asked among the brethren what course ought specially to be adopted towards the persons of those who . . . baptized in heresy . . . and subsequently departing from their heresy, and fleeing as supplicants to the Church of God, should repent with their whole hearts, and only now perceiving the condemnation of their error, implore from the Church the help of salvation. . . . [A]ccording to the most ancient custom and ecclesiastical tradition, it would suffice, after that baptism which they have received outside the Church . . . that only hands should be laid upon them by the bishop for their reception of the Holy Spirit, and this imposition of hands would afford them the renewed and perfected seal of faith” (Treatise on Re-Baptism 1 [A.D. 256]).

“[B]y imposition of the bishop’s hands the Holy Spirit is given to every one that believes, as in the case of the Samaritans, after Philip’s baptism, the apostles did to them by laying on of hands [Acts 8:14–17]; in this manner also they conferred on them the Holy Spirit” (ibid., 3).

### **Cyril of Jerusalem**

“After you had come up from the pool of the sacred streams, there was given



chrism, the antitype of that with which Christ was anointed, and this is the Holy Spirit. But beware of supposing that this is ordinary ointment. For just as the bread of the Eucharist after the invocation of the Holy Spirit is simple bread no longer, but the body of Christ, so also this ointment is no longer plain ointment, nor, so to speak, common, after the invocation. Further, it is the gracious gift of Christ, and it is made fit for the imparting of his Godhead by the coming of the Holy Spirit. This ointment is symbolically applied to your forehead and to your other senses; while your body is anointed with the visible ointment, your soul is sanctified by the holy and life-giving Spirit. Just as Christ, after his baptism, and the coming upon him of the Holy Spirit, went forth and defeated the adversary, so also with you after holy baptism and the mystical chrism, having put on the panoply of the Holy Spirit, you are to withstand the power of the

adversary and defeat him, saying, 'I am able to do all things in Christ, who strengthens me'" (Catechetical Lectures, 21:1, 3–4 [A.D. 350]). "[David says,] 'You have anointed my head with oil.' With oil he anointed your head, your forehead, in the God-given sign of the cross, so that you may become that which is engraved on the seal, 'a holy thing of the Lord'" (ibid., 22:7).

### Serapion

"[Prayer for blessing the holy chrism:] 'God of powers, aid of every soul that turns to you and comes under your powerful hand in your only-begotten. We beseech you, that through your divine and invisible power of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, you may effect in this chrism a divine and heavenly operation, so that those baptized and anointed in the tracing with it of the sign of the saving cross of the only-begotten . . . as if reborn and renewed through the bath of regeneration, may be





made participants in the gift of the Holy Spirit and, confirmed by this seal, may remain firm and immovable, unharmed and inviolate. . . .” (The Sacramentary of Serapion 25:1 [A.D. 350]).

### **Council of Laodicea**

“[T]hose who have been illuminated are, after baptism, to be anointed with celestial chrism and thus become partakers in the kingdom of Christ” (Canon 48 [A.D. 360]).

### **Pacian of Barcelona**

“If, then, the power of both baptism and confirmation, greater by far than charisms, is passed on to the bishops, so too is the right of binding and loosing” (Three Letters to the Novatianist Sympronian 1:6 [A.D. 383]).

### **The Apostolic Constitutions**

“[H]ow dare any man speak against his bishop, by whom the Lord gave the Holy Spirit among you upon the laying on of his hands, by whom you have learned the sacred doctrines, and have known God, and

have believed in Christ, by whom you were known of God, by whom you were sealed with the oil of gladness and the ointment of understanding, by whom you were declared to be the children of light, by whom the Lord in your illumination testified by the imposition of the bishop’s hands” (Apostolic Constitutions 2:4:32 [A.D. 400]).

### **The African Code**

“[T]he former council . . . decreed, as your unanimity remembers as well as I do, that those who as children were baptized by the Donatists, and not yet being able to know the pernicious character of their error, and afterward when they had come to the use of reason, had received the knowledge of the truth, abhorred their former error, and were received in accordance with the ancient order by the imposition of the hand, into the Catholic Church of God spread throughout the world” (Canon 57[61] [A.D. 419]).

NIHIL OBSTAT: I have concluded that the materials presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.

Bernadeane Carr, STL, Censor Librorum, August 10, 2004

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+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, August 10, 2004

