SILENT HOMILIES

The Oil That Stays

The sacrament of Confirmation



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures

The Oil That Stays

The sacrament of Confirmation

Before You Begin

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This is not a long book, and it is not meant to be. Confirmation looks, from a pew, like a queue and a smear of oil. It is easy to treat it as a graduation: a photograph, a new name, a party, and then the long silence of not coming back. The Church has never thought that.

She thinks a bishop has sealed a baptised person with the Gift of the Holy Spirit, and that the seal stays after the oil has dried. Read this before the day if you are preparing. Read it after, if the day went by in a blur of robes. The oil is dry. The seal is not.

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Chapter 1

Not a Graduation

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In many parishes Confirmation has drifted toward looking like the end of school. There are classes. There is a date. There are families in good clothes. Then, too often, there is an empty pew. The sacrament did not fail. The story we wrapped it in did.

Catholics do this with other sacraments as well. Baptism becomes the photographs. First Communion becomes the dress. A wedding becomes the reception. The celebration is good. The danger is remembering the celebration and forgetting what God did. Confirmation is especially easy to misread, because it often comes at the age when school itself is ending. A date, a certificate and a party can look like a leaving ceremony.

The old word confirmare means to make firm. Confirmation is not the Church saying you have finished. It is the Church saying you have been strengthened for a life that has not finished. Baptism already opened the door and named you. Confirmation is the same Lord strengthening the same person for a public Christian life. A graduation hands you a certificate and sends you out. A sacrament gives a gift you cannot hold up to the light, and sends you back into the week.

If you were confirmed years ago and quietly left, you were not expelled. You were sealed. The oil does not disappear because a diary filled with other things. This book is not a scolding. It is a reminder of what was done while you stood there. The photograph is allowed. The misunderstanding is not, if the only thing remembered is that the classes ended.

Reflection

What if the day was twenty years ago, and the photograph is in a drawer? A sacrament is not kept alive by the memory of the afternoon. Baptism mattered on the day you cannot remember it. Confirmation can matter on a Tuesday when you have forgotten the bishop's name.

The Church's reason is simple, and we will come back to it. Christ acted. The action left a mark that does not need to be done again. You can neglect the grace. You cannot rewind the sacrament and say it never happened. That is either a burden or a mercy, depending on whether you still want the Lord who marked you.

So the next time a parish throws a good party, enjoy the party. Then ask the quieter question. What did God do, and what is still true when the clothes have been put away?

A Short Prayer

Holy Spirit, I thought the day was an ending. Teach me that it was a beginning with oil on it. Amen.

Chapter 2

Pentecost on a Forehead

†

The picture behind Confirmation is Pentecost. Fifty days after Easter the apostles are in a room, still a little afraid, and the Spirit comes as wind and fire. They go out speaking. The Church is no longer only a locked door. She is a voice in the street. Confirmation does not try to repeat the wind. It claims that the same Spirit has not retired.

Acts then shows the gift being given through the apostles' hands. In Samaria, people have already been baptised by Philip. Peter and John come down from Jerusalem, pray, and lay hands on them, and they receive the Holy Spirit. In Ephesus, Paul finds disciples who know only John's baptism. He baptises them in the name of the Lord Jesus, lays hands on them, and the Spirit comes. The New Testament is already distinguishing the water from a further gift given through the apostolic hand. That is why the Church can speak of Confirmation as its own sacrament, and not only as a decoration on Baptism.

From a pew, the scene has become a parish hall and a queue. The fire does not show. The wind does not rearrange the flowers. What remains is the gesture the apostles used: a hand, a prayer, an anointing. The Church is not pretending that your cathedral is the upper room. She is saying that the Spirit still comes through the Church the apostles left behind.

If you felt nothing on the day, you are in ordinary company. Most of the confirmed have not felt fire. Grace is not the same thing as emotion. The Holy Spirit is not measured by goosebumps. A sacrament does not become real because someone cries, and it does not become unreal because someone does not. Christ acts in the sacrament even when the person experiences the afternoon quietly.

Reflection

The question people rarely ask out loud is, "What if I felt nothing?" It deserves a plain answer. Feeling is a gift when it comes. It is not the test. Pentecost was a public miracle. For the rest of us the same Spirit is given in a quiet sacrament, and the quiet is how the gift travels through ordinary time.

Acts 8 is a help here. The Samaritans had already believed and been baptised. The further gift still came through the apostles' hands. Your Confirmation was not a second attempt at Baptism, and it was not a reward for feeling ready. It was the Church doing, in her ordinary way, what Peter and John did when they came down to Samaria.

If the day was a blur, you have not missed the sacrament. You may only have missed the explanation. The oil dried. The Gift was given. You can still ask for the courage to live what you did not feel.

A Short Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit. If You will not come as fire, come as the oil that stayed. Amen.

Chapter 3

Why a Bishop

†

The ordinary minister of Confirmation is the bishop. That is not snobbery. It is a memory. The apostles laid hands. The bishop is the man in the local Church who stands in that line, not because he invented the sacrament, but because the Church received it and hands it on. Apostolic succession is that handing on. A parish did not invent Christianity. A bishop did not invent the Holy Spirit. He is the sign that this gift comes from the same body that sent Peter and John to Samaria.

When he walks down the aisle at a Confirmation Mass, he is not a visiting celebrity. He is the man who also ordains priests and dedicates churches. For one afternoon a teenager meets the whole local Church in one person. The date sometimes waits on a diary in the cathedral. The wait is inconvenient. It is also a lesson. The Spirit is not a parish project. He is given through a Church larger than one font and one school year.

A priest may confirm when the law gives him the faculty. In the Latin Church that faculty belongs to him by law when he baptises someone who is no longer an infant, or receives someone already baptised into full communion, and whenever someone is in danger of death. The bishop can also grant it in other cases. The exception does not make the sacrament smaller. It shows what the Church is protecting. She wants the link with the bishop to be visible whenever it can be, and she refuses to leave a dying person, or a new Catholic at the Easter Vigil, without the strengthening that belongs to Baptism.

A priest at the Easter Vigil gives the same oil, the same words and the same seal. It is not a lesser sacrament.

Reflection

People sometimes hear "the bishop stands in the line of the apostles" and think it is a slogan. It means something more ordinary. The Church does not start again in each generation. She receives, and she gives on. The hands on your forehead were not the first hands. They were hands that had themselves been ordained by other hands, back through a history the parish cannot see.

That is why the bishop's presence matters even when a priest could, in some cases, do the rite validly. The visible minister teaches the invisible fact. This gift is not the property of one school year. It belongs to the Church that came from the apostles.

If you have only ever seen the bishop on that one afternoon, you have still seen the point. Confirmation ties a baptised person to the whole local Church, not only to a classroom.

A Short Prayer

Lord, thank You for the hands that still remember the apostles. Amen.

Chapter 4

The Oil Itself

†

Chrism is olive oil mixed with balsam, or another fragrance, and consecrated by the bishop. In the Latin Church that consecration happens at the Chrism Mass, usually on the morning of Holy Thursday. The priests of the diocese gather. The bishop may breathe over the vessel of chrism, and he prays the consecration. The jars then go back to the parishes. So the oil on a forehead in September was already prayed over in Holy Week, by the bishop of the place.

The smell is deliberate. Oil in Scripture marks kings, priests and prophets. Aaron is anointed. Samuel anoints David. The very title Christ means Anointed One, the Greek Christos for the Hebrew Messiah. When chrism touches a forehead, the Church is saying, without a speech, that this Christian shares more deeply in the anointing of Jesus. You do not need to become a priest to be anointed. Baptism already made you a member of a priestly people. Confirmation strengthens that belonging.

The same chrism is used, in different ways, at Baptism on the crown of the head, at Confirmation on the forehead, and at the ordination of a priest on the hands. One oil, three moments, one belonging. St Cyril of Jerusalem, teaching the newly baptised in the fourth century, told them not to suppose that the ointment was plain ointment. After the prayer, he said, it becomes Christ's gift of grace, able to impart the Holy Spirit. Christians were explaining sacred chrism more than sixteen centuries ago.

Oil does linger on the skin differently from water, and that is a beautiful image. It is only an image. Baptism does not touch us merely on the surface. Baptism itself gives the Holy Spirit and leaves an indelible sacramental character. Confirmation strengthens and perfects that

baptismal grace, and leaves its own indelible spiritual mark. The difference between water and oil can help us remember. It does not explain the sacraments by itself.

Reflection

St Paul tells the Corinthians that they are the aroma of Christ. He is not writing a history of the Chrism Mass. He is saying that a Christian life should carry Christ the way a fragrance carries through a room. The balsam in the oil lets a parish hear that sentence with the senses.

You receive a fragrant chrism, and then you are meant to carry Christ into a school, a kitchen, an office, a hospital ward. The smell fades on the way home. The vocation does not. Cyril's Christians were anointed so that the Spirit would sanctify them. Paul's Christians were told that other people should be able to tell, somehow, that they had been with Christ.

If you remember the cold of the oil, or the perfume on a fringe of hair, keep the memory. The Church chose a matter you could smell. She wanted the day to follow you into the car, and then further than the car.

A Short Prayer

Christ, Anointed One, let the oil that touched me still mean what it meant on the day. Amen.

Chapter 5

Be Sealed

†

The words in the present rite are short. The bishop dips his right thumb in chrism, makes the sign of the cross on the forehead, and says, "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit." The candidate answers, "Amen." That is the form. The name, the sponsor's hand, the prayers around it, all gather around those words.

A seal, in the ancient world, marked a letter as genuine, or goods as belonging to an owner. It was not a decoration. It was a claim that could be shown later. Paul uses the image more than once. He tells the Corinthians that God has anointed them and set his seal on them, giving the Spirit as a pledge. He tells the Ephesians that they were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, and later that they must not grieve the Spirit, in whom they were sealed for the day of redemption. The Church took that language and put it on a face.

The forehead is public. A hidden oil under a shirt could be a private comfort. A cross on the face is harder to treat as a secret. The Church is not claiming that every confirmed person must make a speech. She is saying that the gift is for a faith that can be professed, not only felt.

The older Latin formula was longer. "I sign you with the sign of the cross and confirm you with the chrism of salvation, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The meaning did not change when the sentence grew shorter. Signed. Confirmed. Named by the Trinity. Until the revised rite, the Roman books also included a light tap on the cheek. Later catechisms sometimes explained it as a reminder to suffer bravely for Christ. Historians are more cautious. The gesture may have grown out of the kiss of peace.

Reflection

If you muttered Amen because everyone else did, you can say it again now. The sacrament did not depend on the quality of your voice. It does ask, over the years, that the voice become true.

Paul's seal is not a decoration for the afternoon. It is a pledge toward the day of redemption. That is a larger horizon than a parish photograph. You were marked for a faithfulness that outlasts the clothes you wore. You can grieve the Spirit, Paul says. You cannot decide that the seal was only a ceremony.

The forehead still matters for that reason. Confirmation is not a private arrangement between you and God that the Church happened to witness. It is the Church, in public, saying that the Spirit has been given to you as a gift that stays.

A Short Prayer

Holy Spirit, You sealed me. Let the Amen I said grow up. Amen.

Chapter 6

The Gifts Nobody Can See

†

Isaiah speaks of a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and of the Spirit resting on him: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. In the Hebrew the list is completed by repeating the fear of the Lord. The Greek Bible, and then the Latin tradition the Church received, heard a seventh: piety. From that reading the Church has long spoken of seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, and has said that Confirmation strengthens them in the baptised.

They are not seven emotions that arrive with the oil. Wisdom is learning to see a life from God's side. Understanding goes further into what the faith actually says. Counsel is the help to choose well when the choices are not obvious. Fortitude is remaining faithful when it costs something, including when the cost is only dullness. Knowledge sees created things in relation to God, rather than as an end in themselves. Piety is the instinct to love God as Father and to belong to his household. Fear of the Lord is reverence, not terror. It is the refusal to treat holy things as toys.

You will not feel a package of seven arrive. Gifts of this kind show in decisions nobody photographs: a kind word you did not have to say, a Sunday you kept, a truth you did not swallow. Confirmation is not a personality transplant. It is help. The help is usually quiet.

If you have been waiting to feel qualified, the Church did not wait for that. She confirmed you on the evidence of Baptism and a serious intention, not on the evidence of a mood. The gifts are the Spirit's. The work of a life is to stop sitting on them.

Reflection

Fortitude is the gift teenagers are usually told about, because it sounds like courage in an argument. It is larger than an argument. It is the gift of remaining when remaining is ordinary. Most Christian courage never gets a story told about it.

The other gifts are easy to skip because they do not sound dramatic. Piety, especially, is misunderstood. It is not softness, and it is not religious fuss. It is the family instinct of the faith: God as Father, the Church as a household you do not have to earn your way into every morning.

None of this appears on a certificate. That is why the chapter is called what it is called. The oil is visible for an hour. The gifts are judged, if they are judged at all, by the years.

A Short Prayer

Spirit of counsel and fortitude, make me usable on ordinary days. Amen.

Chapter 7

When the East Does It at the Font

†

In the Eastern Catholic Churches, chrismation is given with Baptism, even to infants. The priest anoints with chrism consecrated by a patriarch or bishop, and the child is sealed at the beginning. There is no decade of waiting for a bishop's diary. The Orthodox Churches keep the same order. The Holy Spirit is not different. The pastoral shape is.

The Latin West developed differently, and the story is more complicated than a single decision. As infant Baptism became the ordinary practice, a bishop could not be at every font. The West wanted to keep the post-baptismal anointing connected with the bishop, the successor of the apostles. Over time that desire separated Confirmation from Baptism. The Catechism says this plainly. In the East the sacraments of initiation remain together. In the West the bishop's role is made more visible, and Confirmation often comes later. Both practices are Catholic. Both are old.

It would be a mistake to say the East has a cost because the child cannot remember. Sacramental grace does not depend on autobiographical memory. Most Latin Catholics cannot remember their Baptism either, and nobody calls that a defect in Baptism. What each tradition makes especially visible is different. The East shows the unity of Christian initiation: water, chrism, and, as soon as possible, the Eucharist. The West shows the connection with the bishop and the wider apostolic Church. A Catholic who has only ever seen teenagers in a queue has not yet seen the whole Church.

Adults received at the Easter Vigil in the West are often baptised, confirmed and given the Eucharist in a single night. That night is the old

order restored. It is worth watching if you have only ever seen a Saturday afternoon. You will see what the sacrament is when it is not competing with a school calendar.

Reflection

Catholic is larger than the Latin custom you happen to know. An infant chrismated in a Ukrainian church and a fifteen-year-old sealed in a cathedral have received the same sacrament. Neither is late. Neither is early in the sense of having missed something essential.

The argument about the hour can become a way of not looking at the gift. East and West are not two Holy Spirits. They are two ways the Church has kept a treasure she did not invent. If you were confirmed as an infant in an Eastern rite, you are carrying the oil from the first hour. If you were confirmed at fifteen, you are a Western child of a Church that wanted you to meet your bishop.

The useful question is not which queue was better. It is whether the oil, whenever it was given, is being lived.

A Short Prayer

Spirit of the whole Church, East and West, keep us from arguing about the hour You chose. Amen.

Chapter 8

The Hand on the Shoulder

†

A sponsor stands with the candidate. The Church prefers, where it is suitable, that this be the same person who was the godparent at Baptism. The reason is theological, not sentimental. Confirmation continues and strengthens the baptismal life. It does not begin a second Christian identity. One story is better served by one companion, if that companion is still able to stand there honestly.

Canon law is plain about who may do it. The sponsor must be a Catholic who has been confirmed, has received the Eucharist, and lives a life in keeping with the faith. A kind person who does not share the faith can love a teenager. He cannot stand as the Church's witness to a sacrament he does not receive. If the baptismal godparent has become a stranger, another sponsor may be chosen. That choice is sometimes a grief and sometimes a mercy. Better a living companion than a name from a certificate nobody can find.

In the Order of Confirmation the sponsor places a hand on the candidate's shoulder and gives the name to the bishop. The gesture is in the rite, not only a local custom. The bishop seals. The sponsor steadies. Confirmation is not a private transaction between a young person and a travelling prelate. It is a person being held in place by the household of the Church while the Spirit is given.

If you are asked to sponsor, you are being invited into the years after the photograph. The real question is not whether you can stand still for ten minutes. It is whether you will still be there in five years. Write. Appear. Ask whether they still go. The oil is the bishop's work. The remaining is partly yours.

Reflection

A hand on a shoulder is easy to treat as a photograph. The rite means more than that. The sponsor is there to say, in public, that this candidate is ready, and then to help the readiness last.

Most of that help will be dull. A text before a difficult Sunday. A lift. A question that is not an interrogation. The failure of a first promise, if a godparent disappeared, does not cancel the second chance. The Church would rather have a living witness than a perfect certificate.

If you were confirmed and cannot remember your sponsor's face, you have not been abandoned by the sacrament. You may simply need a companion now. The oil did not depend on the hand. The life after it often does.

A Short Prayer

Lord, give every sealed person a companion who does not disappear when the robes are returned. Amen.

Chapter 9

Soldiers, Witnesses, Ordinary Tuesdays

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Older catechisms liked the image of a soldier of Christ. The phrase can sound like a costume. What they meant was simpler. A confirmed Christian is not only a child who has been washed. He is a person publicly marked to profess the faith when professing it costs something: a conversation, a reputation, a Sunday morning, sometimes much more. The image is about courage and belonging. It is not a licence for military language, and it is not the meaning of the old tap on the cheek.

The ordinary cost, for most of us, is not a Colosseum. It is a Tuesday. A joke you do not join. A child you still take to Mass when they would rather sleep. A kindness that is not useful. Fortitude is usually this size. The sacrament was not given so that you could wait for a noble scene. It was given so that you would not go missing in the small ones.

Witness is the useful word, and it has a history. The Greek martys means a witness. The Church later used martyr for the witness who told the truth with his life. Most witnesses do not bleed. They tell the truth and stay. Confirmation is the Church's way of saying that the Spirit is not only for mystics and missionaries. He is for the queue, the office, the parish that is slightly tired, the family that is slightly frayed.

St Cyril, teaching people who had just been anointed, was not sending them into a pageant. He was telling them that the chrism had made them sharers in Christ, and that their senses, beginning with the forehead, had been claimed. The claim is the same in a quiet parish. If you have been waiting to feel brave before you live as if you were sealed, the order is backwards.

Reflection

Most Christian witness happens on an ordinary Tuesday, not in a story that will be written down. The word and the death are on the same road. A martyr is a witness who was not allowed to stop at words. A confirmed person has been told, in oil, not to treat the faith as a private matter.

You do not have to invent a crisis in order to use the sacrament. The next ordinary refusal, or the next ordinary faithfulness, is enough material. The Spirit was not given for a feeling of bravery. He was given so that the faith could be lived in public, including the small public of a kitchen.

Live. The courage, when it comes, will recognise the oil.

A Short Prayer

Holy Spirit, make me faithful on the days that will never be written down. Amen.

Chapter 10

Living as if the Oil Soaked In

†

Confirmation cannot be repeated. Like Baptism and Holy Orders, it imprints a spiritual character, a mark that does not wash off. The Catechism's word is indelible. It is not a physical mark you could find. It means Christ has acted sacramentally in a way that does not need to be done again. A second ceremony would deny the first.

You can ignore the grace. You cannot undo the sacrament. A person can stop praying, stop coming to Mass, and live as if the afternoon never happened. The character remains. That is why the Church does not confirm the same person twice, even after a long absence. She invites him back to the grace he neglected. She does not start the sacrament again.

Living it is not a programme. It is a set of returns. Return to Mass, where the Spirit is given and the Body of Christ is received. Return to Confession when you should. Pray, "Come, Holy Spirit," as if you meant the oil and not a mood. The classes mattered. The oil mattered. The years after matter most. A seal you never live from is still real. It has simply stopped shaping the week.

If these pages have done their work, the next Confirmation you attend will not be only a procession of outfits. You will watch a thumb and a forehead and know what you are seeing. A person is being sealed. The fire does not show. The oil stays.

Reflection

The permanent mark is a mercy before it is a demand. It means that a wasted decade does not erase what Christ did. It also means you cannot honestly say, "That was only a family occasion." The family occasion may have been real. The sacrament was more than the occasion.

Grace neglected is not grace cancelled. The way back is the ordinary Catholic way: Mass, Confession, prayer, and the small public faithfulness of a Tuesday. None of that repeats Confirmation. All of it lives from it.

The oil dried on the day. The seal is the reason the book has this title. The oil that stays is not the perfume. It is the Gift.

A Short Prayer

Spirit of God, You were given. Let me live as if the seal still holds. Amen.

A Last Word

†

If these pages have done their quiet work, the next forehead you see anointed will not be only a queue moving. It will be a seal.

Keep the book if it helps. Give it away before a Confirmation, or years after, when the oil is only a memory and the seal is not.

May the gift remain. May the Amen grow up. May no one you love live as if the day were only a photograph.

St Cyril of Jerusalem, pray for us. Come, Holy Spirit.

Sources and Further Reading

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Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1285–1321, especially 1290–1292 on East and West, 1297–1301 on the rite and chrism, and 1304–1305 on the indelible character. Code of Canon Law, 879–896, on the sacrament, the bishop as ordinary minister, the faculties of priests, and sponsors. Canon 893 §2: it is desirable that the baptismal godparent be the sponsor.

The Order of Confirmation: "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit," and the sponsor's hand on the shoulder. The older Latin form signed with the cross and confirmed with the chrism of salvation. The light tap on the cheek belonged to the Roman books before the revised rite. Its origin is uncertain. A later "soldier" explanation should not be confused with a documented origin.

Scripture: Acts 2; Acts 8:14–17; Acts 19:1–7; Isaiah 11:1–3, read with the Greek and Latin tradition of the seven gifts; 2 Corinthians 1:21–22; 2 Corinthians 2:15; Ephesians 1:13; Ephesians 4:30.

St Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catechesis 3, on the chrism after the prayer of consecration. The seven gifts come through Isaiah as received in the Septuagint and Vulgate, where piety is distinguished from fear of the Lord.

For the Next Forehead

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The chrism on a forehead looks like a very small amount of oil. The preparation is not small. Olives were grown. Oil was pressed. Balsam was added. A bishop consecrated it at the Chrism Mass. A parish prepared a candidate. Someone taught. Someone stood with a hand on a shoulder. Then one thumb touched one forehead.

A Little Treasure is similar. The finished booklet is small. The work behind it is not: Acts, Isaiah, the Catechism, the canons, the Order of Confirmation, Cyril of Jerusalem, the history of East and West, and the slow removal of clever sentences that did not actually explain.

These pages are free to read. A gift is not payment for them. They are already yours. A gift, if you are able to give one through the Silent Homilies website, is a little oil for the next forehead: time and practical resources to research, check, write and prepare the next book. I would be truly grateful.

If you cannot give, nothing is owed. Share this with someone preparing for Confirmation, or with someone confirmed years ago. Pray for a young person who will stand in the queue. Or simply pray, “Come, Holy Spirit.” That would already be a good use of these pages. www.silenthomilies.com

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