

“Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the Word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14-17).

Like Peter and John did so long ago with the Samaritans, on Monday, February 13th, Bishop Persico will celebrate the sacrament of confirmation with the candidates from our parish, together with those of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and of Corry. This provides us with a good opportunity to reflect on the meaning of that sacrament.

While not called confirmation back then, the practice goes back to the earliest days of the Church. With the laying on of hands, an ancient gesture of imparting the Holy Spirit that is still central to the rite of confirmation today, a Christian’s initiation into the Church, and into the life of grace that brings, was complete. This was normally done at the same time as baptism, though that was not always the case, as we see in the reading above from the Acts of the Apostles. The practice of completing baptism within a single ceremony by the laying on of hands, today called confirmation, made sense when most of the people being baptized were adults, and that is still the practice when we baptize adults today through the process known as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

Historical circumstances conspired to change this arrangement, however. As Christian communities grew too large for bishops to personally celebrate every baptism, a new practice began to emerge whereby priests baptized people, usually as infants, and bishops confirmed them in their baptism later on. The importance of the bishop as the ordinary minister of the sacrament reflects the fact that, through baptism and confirmation, we are initiated, not only into a parish, but into the Church, the basic, complete unit of which is the diocese, over which the bishop is the chief shepherd. In times before highways, cars, and easy transportation, travel was much more difficult, even within a diocese. That meant that sometimes it could take months, even years, for the bishop to visit every parish in his diocese, which also meant that it could be months or even years between ones baptism and confirmation.

This separation between the two sacraments led to a new understanding of confirmation as a sort of maturation or a rite of passage for Catholics into Christian adulthood. Since the vast majority of those being confirmed had been baptized as infants, they never had the chance to claim ownership of their faith themselves. Their parents and godparents acted on their behalf. Confirmation became the opportunity for them profess the faith for themselves and to confirm their commitment to the Catholic faith, a pledge which God himself blesses and confirms through the grace of the sacrament. Thus the practice today of requiring that those to be confirmed be of the age of reason (at least seven years old), so that they can understand and make that personal faith commitment. The bishops’ conferences have been given the authority to determine when the most appropriate age would be for people to celebrate confirmation in their territories, provided that it be at least the age of reason, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has given that authority to diocesan bishops to decide for their own dioceses, given the unique circumstances of each area. The bishops of Erie have historically set that age at sixteen, during a person’s junior year in high school, and Bishop Persico has continued that custom.

Pulling all of these eras and theological understandings of the sacrament together, we can see how rich and important the sacrament of confirmation is. It imparts the special grace of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, sealing and strengthening the grace of our baptism. It completes the sacraments of initiation

and makes us full-fledged members of the People of God, the Church. It signifies our public commitment to the faith that we received from our parents and godparents and strengthens us with God's grace to carry out that commitment. That is what our parish's candidates for confirmation will celebrate on Monday. Please pray for them, that the fullness of the graces of this sacrament may be theirs, and pray too that, by reflecting on the meaning of our own confirmation, we may be renewed in our commitment to the faith we all profess.