

Sacrament poses questions of origin, order

The SACRAMENTS

PART III OF A SERIES

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At Pentecost, Scripture tells us, tongues of fire descended from the heavens to rest on the heads of the disciples. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in a multitude of languages.

Peter then stood up and proclaimed:

"It will come to pass in the last days," God says, "that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh..." (Acts 2:17)

Many regard this outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples as the foundation of the sacrament of confirmation. Yet the rite's actual origins remain unclear.

According to Dr. Joseph Martos, author of *Doors to the Sacred — A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*, the rite now called "confirmation" has had a variety of meanings throughout history.

St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, argued that only rites instituted by Christ himself deserve the status of sacrament. Students of Aquinas, therefore, cited such New Testament references as the baptism of Jesus as the basis for confirmation:

"On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him." (Mark 1:10)

Using this passage as justification for a sacrament of confirmation also points out a longstanding debate about the time at which the rite should be performed.

Although the sacraments of baptism and confirmation are today administered as different and separate rites, Christians of other eras received both sacraments simultaneously, noted Father Thomas Mull, priest consultant to the diocesan liturgy office.

In the early church, after a Christian was baptized by immersion, the presiding bishop anointed the candidate's forehead with chrism, explained Father Mull, pastor of Sacred Heart Cathedral. This anointing sealed or "confirmed" the person's baptism — giving rise to the term "confirmation."

Whereas baptism cleansed and purified the newly initiated Christian, confirmation enabled him or her to receive the seven gifts of the Spirit cited in Isaiah 11: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord.

In the early years of the church, the local bishop baptized and confirmed candidates. As leader of the local Christian community, the bishop's presence symbolized the candidate's acceptance into the church.

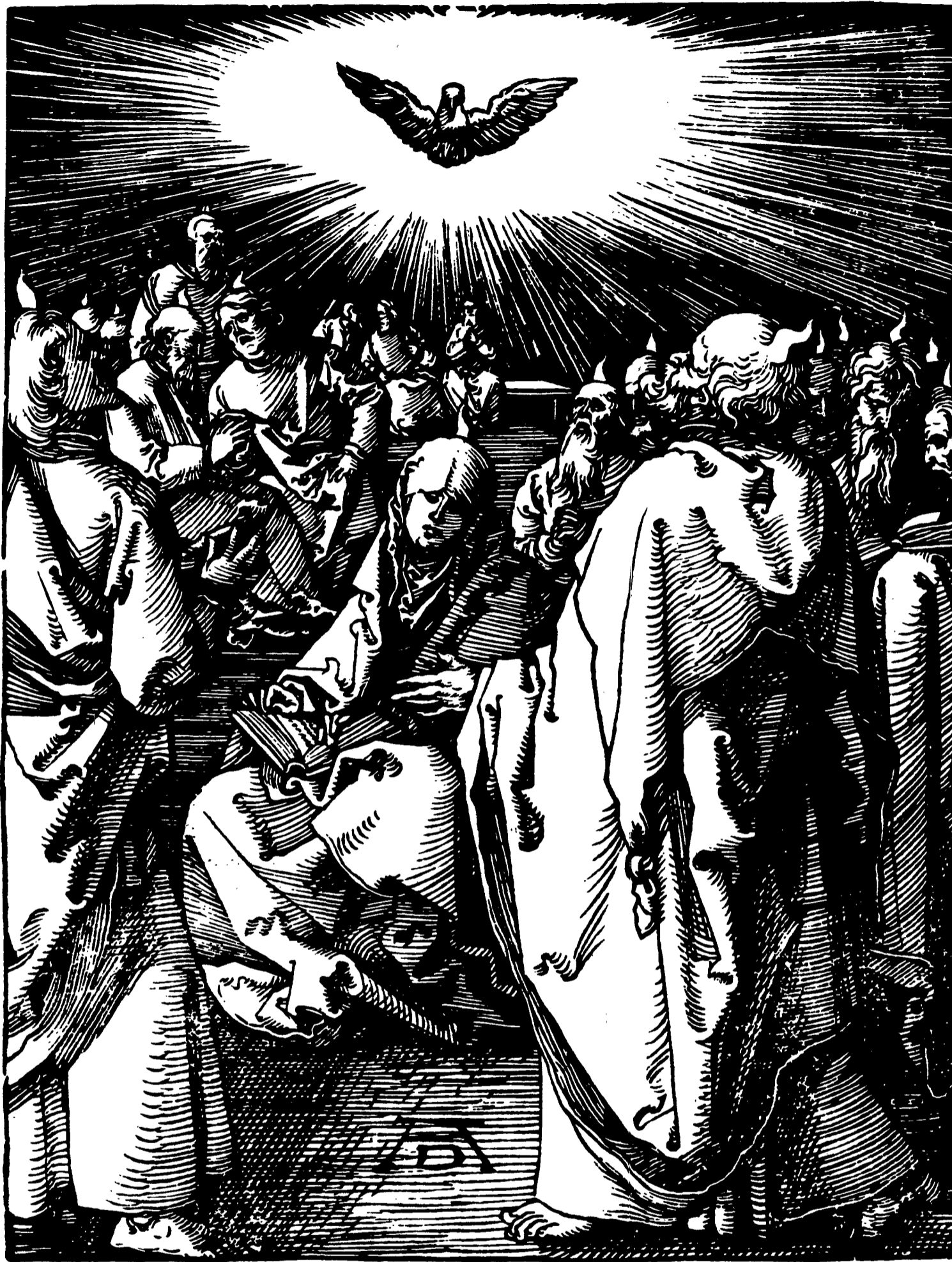
But by the fourth century, the Christian community's scope dictated changes. The establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire dramatically increased the number of candidates for baptism and confirmation.

Although baptism originally had been administered only to adult converts to the faith, it became the custom for children to be baptized at birth.

And in the fifth century, St. Augustine proclaimed that baptism was necessary for the remission of original sin. Fear of eternal damnation also served to expand the ranks of candidates for the sacraments of initiation.

Thus it soon became physically impossible for a bishop to preside at every baptism and confirmation within his jurisdiction. Since the need for baptism was considered more immediate, the church delegated to priests the authority to perform that rite.

Confirmation, however, remained the privilege of bishops. According to Father Mull, starting in the fourth century bishops confirmed candidates in large groups. The period between reception of the two sa-



A woodcut by Albrecht Durer (1471-1528) depicts the disciples' reception of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

craments ranged from a few months to several years.

To enable candidates to better understand the role they were taking on as confirmed members of the Christian community, some theologians proposed that confirmation should not be performed at baptism, but rather at a more mature stage of life.

During the 12th century, confirmation became known as the sacrament of maturity when Aquinas stated that candidates for the sacrament should actively decide to confirm their baptismal promises. This view required that candidates had achieved the age of reason, defined in the Catholic Church as 7 years of age.

The three sacraments of initiation originally had been administered in the order of baptism, confirmation and Holy Eucharist. Postponing confirmation until adolescence prevented young children from receiving Holy Communion.

Thus in 1903, Pope Pius X changed the order — placing Eucharist before confirmation — so young unconfirmed children could receive Communion.

Nevertheless, Father Mull observed that liturgists and religious educators continue to discuss the possibility of returning to the original order. That order is currently used in today's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the process by which adults enter the Catholic Church.

Outside of the RCIA, however, the order set forth by Pope Pius X is used for administering the sacraments of initiation in the Diocese of Rochester. All three diocesan bishops — Bishops Matthew H. Clark, Joseph L. Hogan and Dennis W. Hickey — administer the sacrament of confirmation to classes of young people in parishes throughout the 12-county area.

The sacrament always takes place within the context of a Mass, Father Mull noted. After the Scripture readings, the candidates are presented — by name — to the presiding bishop. He then delivers a homily to the candidates and their sponsors.

Bishop Hickey, who has been confirming candidates in the Rochester diocese for 23 years, said he uses the homilies to speak to young people about the meaning of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

"I kind of zero in on what I consider their problems," he said. "I tell them the spirit of courage is coming to them, and they need it at this point in their lives, especially in three areas — to avoid drugs, to live a chaste life and to consider vocations."

After the homily, the bishop asks the candidates to renew their baptismal vows, pointing out the link between the two sacraments.

The bishop then extends his hands over the class as he says a prayer to the Holy Spirit. Then he anoints each candidate with the chrism, saying, "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit."

The Rite of Confirmation, although simple, has been improved over the years, Bishop Hickey remarked.

As Martos observed, "Through the character of baptism Christians received the power to achieve salvation; through that of confirmation they received the power to attain spiritual perfection and to combat the enemies of the faith."

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NEXT WEEK: Anointing of the Sick.