

Recently I placed an order for an article on-line, a common experience today. After submitting my order I received a message that read: "Email of confirmation will be sent shortly." I found myself amusingly thinking, "Wow! Now you can get confirmed on-line! What next, Confession?" (There have been suggestions!)

Today's Scriptures prepare us for next weekend's celebration of the Ascension of Jesus and the following weekend's celebration of a renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. While references to the Sacrament of Confirmation are not as direct in the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, as are the sacraments of baptism and the Holy Eucharist to which it is linked, all of today's Scripture readings provide insight into the nature and mission of the Sacrament of Confirmation. In the first reading from Acts we learn of the acceptance of the Christian faith by people in an unnamed city of Samaria at the preaching of the deacon Philip. Jesus, in the Gospel, speaks to the nature and effect of our faith.

At its heart, Christian faith is belief not in an idea or philosophy of a divine being, deism, but entering into a personal relationship with God, and for we Christians, God who chose to reveal himself in uniting our human nature to himself in the person of Jesus. Henri Nouwen, the late twentieth century spiritual writer, discussing this relationship as revealed in the Bible as a covenant between God and us states: "When God makes a covenant with us, God says, 'I will love you with an everlasting love. I will be faithful to you, even when you run away from me, reject me, or betray me.' In our society we don't speak much about covenants; we speak about contracts. When we make a contract with a person we say, 'I will fulfill my part as long as you fulfill yours. When you don't live up to your promises, I no longer have to live up to mine.' ...But God did not make a contract with us; God made a covenant with us." Jesus is the ultimate expression of the Covenant of God! Preparing, in the scene from today's Gospel, to physically leave this world he promises covenant fidelity by dwelling within the life of believers through the Holy Spirit through whom the Father and Jesus continue to remain in and with the believers, to speak and act in the world through them.

As word of the coming to faith of the Samaritans reached the church in Jerusalem in the first reading, we learn that the apostles Peter and John are sent to them that “they might receive the Holy Spirit”. Peter and John are sent to “confirm” the faith of these believers. Peter and John’s “confirmation” of the faith of the believers in Samaria links them and their community to the wider “catholic church”. While the gift of faith and its expression are unique and personal to each believer, from its beginning the Christian faith, like its Jewish roots in the covenant of the Old Testament, is lived in community, for the Christian, the Church. This is why by long-standing practice the bishop (or today, in some cases, his delegate) is the official minister of the sacrament. In the person of the bishop who has succeeded to the person and role of the apostles in the church the individual believer is linked to the whole community of the local church (the diocese) and to the world-wide Catholic Church.

The mission of Peter and John is not only to “confirm” the faith of the believers, but also to assure that the person and message of Jesus do not suffer distortion in transmission, to “confirm” that what has been taught believed and lived in action is God’s revelation. In the Church the pope, as successor to the person and position of St. Peter as head of the church and the bishops in union with him, carry out this same responsibility, assuring and protecting the gospel message as it has come down to us from Jesus through the centuries whole and entire without error.

Finally, the “confirmed” faith of believers is oriented outward in mission to the world. In the second reading we are exhorted: “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pt. 3:16). To whom this week is God sending each of us as a messenger of Gospel salvation?

“Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful. Kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and you shall renew the face of the earth.”