

Who's Confirming What?  
Acts 11:1-18  
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As you know, this Confirmation Class has been studying for several months in preparation for this evening. Tonight, they have but one lesson left to learn, and it is a lesson in Latin, of all things, and the difference between *ex opere operantis* and *ex opere operato*. If there are Latin scholars in the room, please forgive me for probably butchering the pronunciation of these words. And if there are some here who are still reliving the trauma of taking Latin in high school, I apologize. But these famous words, uttered in the midst of the theological battles of the fourth century, still have something important to say to us tonight as we consider this act of Confirmation we will undertake in a little while, and the words of the Apostle Peter in our reading from Acts, when he says, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

Those Latin phrases, *ex opere operantis* and *ex opere operato* come to us from what is known as the Donatist controversy that took place beginning around the year 313. It seems that certain priests and bishops caved in under persecution by the Roman Emperor Diocletian, and recanted their faith. The problem actually arose later, when these leaders were returned to their positions by the Emperor Constantine, a contradiction that some in the church could simply not abide. To

those whose capacity for forgiveness was smaller than others, no amount of repentance could set aside the fact that they had renounced Christ, and so they, and any religious acts they performed, such as baptism, confirmation, or the Lord's Supper, were considered illegitimate, null and void. The Donatists, as the more extreme opposition was called, held to the position of *ex opere operantis*, Latin for *from the work of the one doing the working*, that is, that the validity of the sacrament depends upon the worthiness and holiness of the minister conducting it. The traditional position has always been *ex opere operato* — *from the work having been worked*; in other words, that the validity of the sacrament depends upon the holiness of God, the minister being a mere instrument of God's work, such that that any priest or bishop, even one in a state of mortal sin, who speaks the formula of the sacrament with valid matter, and the intent of causing the sacrament to occur, acts validly. While I could more than understand how a survivor of the current Roman Catholic clergy sexual abuse scandals could find it impossible to receive the Sacraments from a known abuser, the theological silver lining of that awful cloud over the church is that the efficacy of the Sacrament does not depend on that priest, but rather on God. It is God, and God alone, who shares grace, mercy, and blessing. Those of us privileged to be agents in the revelation of Christ through these acts of the church are humbled, and even made grateful, by the knowledge that we are not ultimately responsible for what takes place. No matter however what takes place is experienced in the hearts and minds of the faithful, we

are responsible only for doing our best to set the stage for that experience. God works perfection through imperfect vessels.

For the Christian traditions generally represented at ECF, and for Peter in our passage from Acts, protecting this sovereignty of God to do God's thing, however God chooses to do it, has been of first importance. There are varying viewpoints as to what exactly happens at baptism, if anything at all, and to the form and degree of Christ's presence in Communion, but what we can all agree on is that whatever happens happens because God wants it and wills it to happen. There is nothing we can do about it. And so, as we approach the Confirmation of six of our teenagers, it is fair to ask, in the light of all of that preamble, and the fact that we come from a very wide range of backgrounds, to ask certain questions like, "What is being confirmed?" and "Who is confirming what?" There are long answers to those questions, but tonight I will offer the short ones, as the water in the baptistery is getting cold, and the food is calling our names.

To begin with, we must remember what John the Baptist said, what Peter reminds us of, and what those Gentile converts experienced, that "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." In the earliest days of the faith, the church affirmed with humility that the best it could do, like John the Baptist, was baptize with water. But it wanted to recognize the baptism of the Holy Spirit, so as not to let that very important fact go unnoticed in the midst of the visible aspect of the Sacrament. And so was introduced Confirmation, which

confirmed the presence of the Holy Spirit on the one who had just undergone baptism by water. The Rite of Confirmation was not the church mediating the Holy Spirit, bestowing it like Christmas gifts on those who had behaved, but rather giving visible and tangible witness to a mystery beyond mysteries, and making sure no one would forget the untamed power of God. The Spirit blows where it wills, as it says in the Gospel of John.

So, in one sense, even today when we confirm, we are confirming the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those professing their faith. We don't know exactly how or when they received it – before or during baptism – but we believe that they have indeed received it; God has promised it, and God delivers it. We are not certifying it, like taking a car to be inspected. But we are proclaiming it. We are not authorizing it, like the dealer of some proprietary merchandise. But we are celebrating it. We are not acting as judge, but rather witness. It is the Holy Spirit, in all the ways that it is present in our lives, tangible and intangible, that we celebrate when we “confirm” its presence the way we will tonight.

In a more practical sense, we are also confirming that these young people have done due diligence in preparing themselves to profess faith in Jesus Christ. That is not to say that anyone is required to go through months of classes and homework assignments, and memorizations to be able to believe. But it is to say that we can affirm that when they profess their faith, they know something about what they are professing. They are not being duped or coerced. They are not being

asked to affirm something in the absence of evidence, or under the threat of social ostracism. They may not have it all figured out; who among us does? But they have been able to make an informed decision, their own decision, and we must honor that decision as we would have our own decisions honored. The Jewish Christians of Peter's time were appalled at the thought of Gentiles being welcomed into the community of God, but Peter makes clear to them that indeed that is exactly what has happened, and that they are bound to honor the faith that God has given these newcomers. "The Spirit told me," he says, "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." Peter rightly places the emphasis on God's action; he accepts the Gentiles because God has accepted them. Likewise, as we confirm tonight, we are only confirming what God has already confirmed: the faith of these young disciples.

This Sunday is one of those Sundays when we celebrate the mystery who is God, and give thanks that making it make perfect sense isn't our job. That's the nature of God, and of God's grace. And it is that grace we celebrate tonight, in all the ways we will experience it: through water, through the laying on of hands, through the bread and the cup, and through one another as we have gathered as witnesses of the power of Jesus Christ to transform our lives. May we celebrate with abandon and abundance. Amen.