

for “booklets or pamphlets” and offers as one of its reasons “the limited audiences to which the materials may be directed.” (This would not be a valid argument, of course, if the copies were actually destined for use as catechetical texts and/or sold in oratories or churches.)

Returning to the idea of an electronic (i.e., non-printed) text, if a particular work that qualifies as one of the listed theological disciplines is to be posted on the Internet, one could certainly make a case, strangely enough, that such a “writing” is actually being spread throughout the whole world and, unlike a limited run of a printed text, is truly something that qualifies as *divulgatio publica*. If so, in my opinion, it should be submitted for approval and appropriate notice of such ecclesiastical approval should be displayed in the online text. Such reasoning, of course, would apply even more forcefully to an online text that would be used for catechetical purposes or would be sold in some sort of electronic format in a church or oratory – if it has not happened already, there is no question that this kind of product marketing will be taking place.

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## CANON 880

### SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION

*I recently attended a rite of confirmation and I believe that the minister said over each confirmand “Be sealed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit,” that is, with “gifts” in the plural, and not, “Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit,” that is, with “Gift” in the singular. If this altered form were in fact used for these confirmations, would they be valid, and if such attempts to confer the sacrament were invalid, what should be done?*

### OPINION

The form of confirmation in the Roman Church is “*N., accipe signaculum doni Spiritus Sancti*”, which, in the approved English translation is rendered, “N., be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.” Use of the phrase “gifts of the Holy Spirit” instead of “Gift of the Holy Spirit” (as required by both the Latin *editio typica* and the authorized English translation) would be, at a minimum, gravely illicit (cc. 846 §1 and 880). But your question specifically goes to the validity of the sacrament attempted with this modified form. Granting that sacraments are not to be found invalid lightly, that this appears to be a small change in the form (indeed, but a single letter!), and that there is no reason to believe such a change would be made maliciously, nevertheless, I think that such an altered formula would be invalid.

In the eighth article of Question 60 of the Third Part of the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas, discussing the nature of a sacrament, states: “Words belong to a sacramental form by reason of the sense signified by them. Consequently any addition or suppression of words which does not add to or take from the essential sense, does not destroy the essence of a sacrament.”<sup>1</sup> It is important to realize first what St. Thomas is *not* saying here: he is not saying that ministers are free to vary sacramental form as circumstances, at least in their opinion, might suggest, a point reinforced for us today by canons 838 §1, 841, and 846 §1, nor is he saying that just any form which seems to convey “the essence” of the sacrament actually does so upon closer inspection.<sup>2</sup> But,

<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Complete American Edition, in 3 vols., Blackfriars’ trans. (New York: Benziger, 1947) 2: 2352, or Pars 3, Q. 60, art. 8, reply obj. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of such variations in form resulting in failure of the sacrament might include changing the form of baptism from “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (CCC 1240) to “I baptize you in the name of the Trinity.” While conceptually the referents in both formulae might be the same, the alterations are considered as introducing concepts foreign

St. Thomas is saying that, if an alteration in words changes the substantial sense of the prescribed form, such alteration would destroy the essence of the sacrament. As Regatillo observed, "A *substantial* change in form occurs when the sense of the words does not remain the same. A *substantial* change, even if done by mistake or through inadvertence, renders the sacrament null."<sup>3</sup> *Quid ad casum?*

The approved phrase "Gift of the Holy Spirit" in the context of confirmation has but a single referent, namely, the Holy Spirit himself, that is, *the* Gift of God (CCC 733). In contrast, the substituted phrase "gifts of the Holy Spirit" would have, in ecclesiastical parlance, a very different referent, indeed, several referents, namely those "permanent dispositions which make men docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit" (CCC 1830/1845). Those lasting dispositions toward the Holy Spirit are traditionally reckoned seven in number, namely, wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord (CCC 1831). I can see no way in which invoking *dispositions for* a gift could be substituted for *conferring the* gift itself without having significantly departed from the essence of the normative utterance. If this analysis is correct, then an attempt to confer confirmation with such an altered form would be invalid, and all persons undergoing the rite described above should be confirmed absolutely (not "re-confirmed", which is impossible, of course, per 1983 *CIC* 845 and CCC 698). Moreover, the superior of the minister in question would have to be informed in case others had undergone a similar rite unaware of its invalidity.

The alternative to finding such attempted conferrals of confirmation flatly invalid would be to find them "doubtfully valid" as anticipated by canon 845 §2. I think it obvious that there would be grave doubts about the validity of such an altered form, and therefore — recalling that confirmation confers a character (c. 845 §1), is necessary for full Christian initiation (c. 842 §2), contributes to the mature practice of the faith (c. 874), and helps prepare one for the licit reception of holy orders or matrimony (cc. 1033 and 1065 §1) — I

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to the sense of the sacrament or as eliminating concepts essential to the sense of the sacrament. See Dominicus Prümmer (Dominican, 1866-1931), *Manuale Theologiae Moralis* [1914], in 3 vols., 10th ed. (Barcelona: Herder, 1946) 3: 85 (rejecting baptism in the name of the Trinity). For that matter, see also CCC 232-233 precisely on the importance of baptism "in the name" (singular), and not, "in the names" (plural) of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

<sup>3</sup> Eduardo Regatillo (Jesuit, 1882-1975), *Ius sacramentarium* [1945], 4th ed. (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1964) 6, wherein: "Mutatio substantialis in forma, quando sensus verborum non manet idem. Substantialis, etiam ex errore vel inadvertentia, sacramentum reddit nullum." Emphasis in original. See also Nicholas Halligan (Dominican, 1917-1997), *The Administration of the Sacraments* (New York: Alba House, 1963) 8-9.

would advise persons who underwent such a ceremony to seek, individually if they prefer, a conditional conferral of confirmation from another minister qualified under law. Special faculties for private celebration of the rite can be requested by a presbyter (cc. 882 and 884 §1). As a precaution against overly facile resort to absolute or conditional rites, the bishop being petitioned should insist that an outline of the facts be included in the request along with, perhaps, some indication that an independent expert concurs in the need for absolute conferral and/or the appropriateness of conditional conferral.

Because whatever catechesis was indicated for confirmation would presumably have been completed before these flawed rites were performed, there would be no need for those seeking absolute or conditional conferral to wait until the next "parish confirmation cycle" or, for that matter, even to receive the sacrament publicly or in Mass. Private conferral, using the *Rite of Confirmation Outside of Mass*, at an early, mutually convenient time seems best.

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