

CONFIRMATION
Our Lady, Star of the Sea; Solomons, Maryland
Sept. 30, 2012

Since all of you live near the water down here at Solomons, you no doubt know the potential force of water better than a landlubber like me who lives farther inland. Although this area will normally not be in the direct path of a hurricane, we all know from television the deadly force of a storm like hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans some years ago. And long before the advent of television, it was mostly gifted writers who could convey to the rest of us the terrific impact of such storms. When I once taught eighth-grade English in my monastery's school, we read and discussed a story by Joseph Conrad titled *Typhoon*. Conrad's story is set on a ship and is a magnificent description of awesome natural forces. Skilled storyteller that he was, Conrad prepared the reader for what was to come by describing the last thing the sailors on a small steamer could see as the sun set on the ocean one evening. He wrote: "A distant bank of cloud became visible to the north; it had a sinister dark olive tint, and lay low and motionless upon the sea, resembling a solid obstacle in the path of the ship. She went floundering toward it like an exhausted creature drawn to its death."

Then, in the middle of the night and with a devastating suddenness, the typhoon struck the ship. Here's the way Conrad described it:

It was something formidable and swift, like the sudden smashing of a vial of wrath. It seemed to explode all around the ship with an overpowering concussion and a rush of great waters, as if an immense dam had been blown up to windward. In an instant the men lost touch of each other. This is the disintegrating power of a great wind: it isolates one from one's kind.... A furious gale attacks a man like a personal enemy, tries to grasp his limbs, fastens upon his mind, seeks to rout his very spirit out of him.

As you might have guessed, the reason I began this homily with an account of the power of a great wind is that in the New Testament the original Greek word that we regularly translate as “Spirit” could also be translated as “wind” or “breath.” And we know that this Spirit is also very powerful, but with a huge difference from the great wind in Joseph Conrad’s story. The wind of that typhoon was isolating and destructive. It separated the sailors from one another and threatened the lives of each one of them. That’s why Conrad called it a “disintegrating power.” But the Holy Spirit of God is just the opposite. Just as our physical bodies cannot survive unless our lungs take in fresh air, the Holy Spirit is a life-giving wind or breath, upbuilding and unifying. When in the Acts of the Apostles St. Luke writes about the coming of the Holy Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost, he shows how this coming brought people together, enabling the disciples’ words to be understood by people of many different nationalities and leading several thousand to want to be baptized and so brought together into the community of the Church.

What we are doing here today is completing or confirming for you what began some years ago at the time of your own baptism, allowing you really to think of yourselves as being carried on through the rest of your life on the wings of a divine wind. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, you are being given the strength to proclaim your faith today as fearlessly as the original disciples did on the day of the first Pentecost, just as you are also being empowered to live according to the inspirations of the Spirit in all the circumstances of your daily life. If you are really open to receiving this gift, you will live out your Christian life with an undercurrent of joy that will sustain you even during the inevitable times of challenge and distress, whether it be a time when someone in your family has become severely ill or died, or when some relationship has gone sour, or when something you really wanted and strove for turns out to be unattainable.

This being open to the gift of God's Holy Spirit includes becoming familiar with the lives of holy men and women who have given us splendid examples of how to be a true follower of Christ. Some of these persons have no doubt been chosen by you as a special patron today, giving you a further name, a Confirmation name. I'm going to say a bit about three such persons, two of them not actually canonized—at least not yet—and all of them with names that are unfamiliar enough that I doubt any of you have chosen them for your special patron. Nevertheless, they are great models for all of us.

First is a man who is already called a saint by many people, especially in Latin America, and that is Oscar Romero, the former archbishop of San Salvador, who was assassinated as he was standing at the altar offering Mass on March 24, 1980. Our own former archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, was asked to preach in the cathedral of San Salvador on the 30th anniversary of Archbishop Romero's death. And why was he killed? Because, in the power of the Holy Spirit, he spoke out forcefully against all the murders that were being committed against poor, innocent people. The day before he was assassinated, he gave a homily broadcast on radio throughout the country in which he begged, pleaded, even ordered the members of the armed forces not to obey unjust orders. In his own words, "In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people whose cries rise up to heaven, I beseech you, I beg you, I command you, stop the repression." He well knew the risk he was taking, for several months earlier he had said, "I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in the resurrection." Here, clearly, was a man of deep faith and conviction, one who spoke with words inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Let me turn next to someone who lived much earlier, but whom Pope Benedict has very recently named a saint of the universal Church. St. Hildegard was the abbess of a monastery

near the Rhine River back in the twelfth century. Whereas Archbishop Oscar Romero spoke out against unjust civil rulers, Hildegard spoke out at one point against an unjust decision by church leaders. Someone in that vicinity had died after receiving the sacraments from a priest, and he was then buried in the monastery's cemetery. We don't know any details about the man's life, but apparently he had earlier committed some wrongful acts, and this led a few local prelates in Hildegard's diocese to order her to have his body dug up and buried elsewhere. She and her nuns refused, and her reply to the prelates included these forceful words:

We have dared neither to remove this man's corpse—seeing that he had received absolution, extreme unction and holy communion—nor to follow the orders of those who commanded us to do so. Not that we turn a deaf ear to the advice of wise men or the orders of our prelates, but [we do not want] to seem to be insulting Christ's sacraments, which had fortified this man during his lifetime... [She then went on to say:] Those who, without having sufficiently reflected, impose silence upon our singing God's praises, are unjustly robbing God of the beauty of these earthly songs. Such persons will themselves be deprived of taking part in the angelic choirs in heaven unless they remedy their fault by true repentance and humble penitence.

Those are obviously strong words addressed to one's ecclesiastical superiors, but Hildegard was courageous enough to speak them. At the same time, she and her community were willing to accept the penalty to which she referred, namely, to cease singing the Liturgy of the Hours in their church, and they had to endure this penalty for some time before the interdict was lifted. Ultimately, of course, Hildegard won out, for she is now honored as a saint and may soon be named an official Doctor of the Church, while those church leaders who wrongly silenced the liturgical songs of Hildegard and her fellow nuns have long since been forgotten.

Finally, I want to say something about a man who once lived and worked in this part of Maryland. After years of ministering in parishes in this part of the state, Fr. Horace McKenna of the Society of Jesus was sent to an inner-city parish in Washington, where his ministry was directed to homeless street people and others of the very poor whom most others ignored. A nurse who once accompanied him when he entered a dingy building to visit a family living there later said:

It was hard to understand why he would associate and work with these dirty people, but that was his life and he enjoyed it, every bit of it. He had to be a saint to go in with people like these. They are the throwaways. Society doesn't want to be bothered with them. But he never tired of trying to help them. He dedicated his life to them.

Not surprisingly, when Fr. McKenna was nearing the end of his life, many of these people would visit him in the Georgetown University Hospital. They were his people, and he was theirs.

Even though I don't expect any of you will have chosen the Confirmation name of Oscar, Hildegard, or Horace, these are the kinds of persons that we can all learn from and be inspired by. They are part of what the Letter to the Hebrews calls a cloud of witnesses, men and women who have given testimony to their faith by the very conduct of their lives. I urge all of you to become more and more familiar with the lives of such persons, for they are among the real heroes of world history. And even though I have heard that sometimes young people regularly attend Mass only up to the time of their Confirmation, with you let it be just the opposite. Let this day be a fervent, new beginning of dedication to God and to the Church, a day when you will resolve to be ever more heedful of the inspirations of the Holy Spirit made evident to you in the still, quiet voice of your conscience. Then you may be confident that this mighty breath or wind of the Holy Spirit will not be destructive and isolating, as was the typhoon in Joseph Conrad's story, but rather life-giving and unifying.