

CONFIRMATION
Our Lady, Star of the Sea; Solomons, Maryland
Oct. 6, 2013

I will, of course, be addressing this homily primarily to the young men and women who are receiving the sacrament of Confirmation today, but I hope that what I say will be of value to everyone. No doubt some of your earliest memories are of gifts that you received at Christmas or on your birthday, so I want to remind you *confirmandi* that what you are receiving today is itself a gift, and actually one more wonderful than anything that you might once have found gift-wrapped under a Christmas tree or next to a birthday cake. Today's second reading, from a letter of St. Paul to his friend Timothy (2 Tim. 1:6-8, 13-14), began with these words: "I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands." There are probably all sorts of ways to describe the gift he is writing about, but perhaps the best way of all is to see what he says at the very end of that same reading, where he writes: "Take as your norm the sound words that you heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard this rich trust with the help of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us." To me, those words mean that the gift is above all the Holy Spirit, and that is exactly what I will say to each of you as I anoint your forehead with sacred chrism in the rite of Confirmation itself, for after addressing you by your Confirmation name, I will add the words: "be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Now what does this gift do for you? What does it do for any of us? As a good answer, I think we should look at still another phrase from that letter of St. Paul to Timothy, where he writes: "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice bur rather of power and love and self-control." Those three spirits—of power and love and self-control—are absolutely crucial for any Christian today, and one way that we can be inspired to let them characterize our own lives is to see how

they were lived by some wonderful members of the Church who have gone before us, so let me say something about each one of the three, showing how each was especially manifested in one or another person's life.

First, power. We might be tempted to shy away from using that word in a positive sense, for power is sometimes understood as implying all sorts of strong-arm tactics: forcefully acting so as to get one's own way, brutally shunting aside anyone or anything that stands before us as an obstacle. But in fact, every single person whom we revere as a saint was truly a person of power, far removed from the cowardice that is so demeaning to any human being. Let me give you an inspiring example from the life of a French woman who is perhaps not very well-known, at least not in our country, but who was really remarkable.

At my monastery in Washington I teach a course to the seniors in our abbey school, and in just a few weeks we're going to study the life and writings of Madeleine Delbr el, who lived mostly in Paris during the first six decades of the twentieth century. Like many young people in France, she grew up in a family that didn't practice the faith. In fact, her father was so critical of the church and of anything religious that his influence led Madeleine to have almost nothing to do with the church for the first twenty years of her life. Then, however, she happened to be at a dance hall one night and met a group of high-spirited young people in their late teens or early twenties who "danced as well as she danced, . . . lived as freely as she lived, and even had a better technical and scientific education than she had," but who also spoke about God as someone "as indispensable to them as the air they breathed."¹ This meeting was Madeleine's first step on the way to faith. With her new-found friends' support, she started meeting regularly with a priest who took her through a careful reading of the Bible in such a way that the Scriptures came alive with meaning, and before long she was a deeply committed Catholic and, for the rest of her life,

exuded what I can only call “the power of the Holy Spirit.” She opened a series of houses in poor sections of Paris and its environs where the women who lived there had only one rule, the Gospel, which taught them to serve the Lord Jesus in the least of their brothers and sisters. Madeleine and her companions practiced generous hospitality to the poor and homeless, even letting a Moroccan family of twelve occupy the entire second floor of their residence for several months, whereas the family had previously lived in a single room without windows. When the German army occupied Paris during the Second World War, Madeleine would visit Nazi prison camps and detention centers in order to be of help to French men and women held there, disguising herself as an authorized medical assistant or as a prisoner’s relative, even though she risked severe punishment or even execution if caught. That’s the kind of power that St. Paul was talking about in that letter to Timothy, the kind of example that all of us need in order to really live out our faith in deeds and not just in words. Madeleine Delbrêl may one day be beatified and canonized as a saint, but whether or not that happens, she is certainly among those whom the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews calls “a cloud of witnesses,” witnesses and models who strengthen our own faith.

Second, let me say something about what St. Paul calls the spirit of love. Here, too, I’m going to take an example from a French woman, one better known because she is already recognized as a saint: St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Whereas Madeleine lived in the midst of society, as most or all of you will do for the rest of your life, Thérèse lived a strictly enclosed life in a Carmelite convent, and yet her autobiography has inspired millions of people and has been translated into at least a dozen languages. More than anything else, she models for us the spirit of love, all the more strikingly because it was practiced in such unobtrusive ways. For example, in her convent there was an elderly nun who was very cranky, very hard to deal with, always

complaining that those helping her get around were going to let her fall down, and so forth. It was to such a nun that Thérèse went out of her way to be especially kind and helpful. About this she later wrote: “When I was guiding Sister St. Pierre, I did it with so much love that I could not possibly have done better had I been guiding Jesus himself.”² She does go on to say that she didn’t always *feel* such love in helping Sisters who were hard to get along with, but no matter how she felt, she really did try to serve others as if she were serving Jesus. For any of us, this is a wonderful example of how to practice the most important of all the Christian virtues, love. Some of you may already be having to help sick or elderly relatives or friends, and it may not always be pleasant or come easy, but I urge you to be fully convinced that the gift of the Holy Spirit given in this sacrament of Confirmation will strengthen you to perform such service in a manner befitting a genuine follower of the Lord Jesus.

Third and last, St. Paul writes of the spirit of self-control. This might not sound too exciting, but that great saint actually considered it very important. In one of the few scriptural verses that I’ve ever memorized, he writes in his letter to the Galatians of a ninefold “gift of the Spirit,” rounding out the list precisely with the practice of self-control: love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If there were more of this in our American society, we’d all be a lot better off than we are with what some commentators call our “instant-gratification society.” Self-control isn’t just a matter of refusing to do something that would be really unhealthy if not immoral. Even when we want to do something good and virtuous, it will often be more fruitful in the long run if we first have the patience and self-control to get the requisite training. Let me give you another example from the life of Madeleine Delbrêl. After she had become a dedicated member of the church, she wanted to serve people in the best way possible, but she knew that this called for more than just jumping

in and immediately doing whatever seemed most helpful to others, so she enrolled in a rigorous three-year course of social work, part of which meant spending time in a foreign country. She worked so hard at this that at the end of the program she got the highest grade possible on her final exam and then, during the Second World War, was asked by the French government to take charge of all the health and social services in the city of Paris, a remarkable sign of the trust that the government had in her. And yet Madeleine constantly insisted that there was nothing extraordinary about her or her fellow-workers, all of whom she referred to as “we, the ordinary people of the streets.” (That’s also the title of her best-known book.)

I should add, by the way, that saintly people like this are not at all gloomy or ultra-serious. Madeleine Delbrêl loved to joke, write funny skits in which she and her friends would be the actors, sometimes dress in ridiculous costumes, and she always preserved a light touch in the way she dealt with others. As St. Teresa of Avila once said, “Lord, preserve us from sad-faced saints.” Good humor is another precious gift of the Holy Spirit, one that we should cultivate along with every other good gift that comes down to us from the one whom St. James, in his epistle, calls the Father of lights. This should be a happy, joyful day for all of you, and I trust you will rejoice with your friends and family throughout this day and, indeed, throughout the year. Once Madeleine Delbrêl turned her life over to the Lord, she said that she had become happier than she ever imagined possible. I know that everyone here at Mary, Star of the Sea parish joins me in wishing such happiness for each of you as you are today sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. May this milestone in your spiritual life be a joyful step on the path that will lead you eventually to the most precious gift of all: eternal life with our loving and saving God.

¹ Charles F. Mann, *Madeleine Delbr el: A Life Beyond Boundaries* (San Francisco: New World Press, 1996), 43.

² Th r se of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Th r se of Lisieux*, 2nd ed., trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976), 249.