

**Homily for Golden Jubilee of Sister M. Christine, FSGM
St. Francis Convent – Alton, Illinois
October 10, 2015**

**†Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here for this joyful celebration of the Golden Jubilee of Sister Christine. We offer thanks to God for the gift of her vocation to the Church and to this community of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George. We bring these offerings of gratitude to the altar where we express our most perfect act of thanksgiving in the celebration of the Eucharist, giving thanks to God for all of His blessings, asking that He will continue to multiply them in our lives.

The celebration of a jubilee is always a special occasion in the life of the Church. Whether it is the commemoration of a diocese, a parish, or an individual who has served in the Church, it is an opportunity to look back with joy on how God has been at work in a wonderful way in His Church. It is a time to celebrate accomplishments achieved, graces received, and obstacles overcome in carrying out the mission entrusted to us by Jesus.

In his recent visit to the United States, the Holy Father spoke on several occasions about the history of the Catholic faith here in our country. More than once he mentioned the important role that consecrated religious have played in that development, with a special expression of gratitude for the special role that women religious have had in our country. In fact, in his in-flight press conference on his return to Rome, he commented on women religious by saying the following:

The Sisters in the United States have done wonders in the areas of education and health care. People in the United States love the Sisters. ... They are good women, very good women.¹

Please know, therefore, dear sisters, just how much the Holy Father and the Church here in the United States loves you and how we are indeed grateful for all that you have done and will continue to do for the love of God and love of neighbor.

Regarding this looking back on the past with gratitude, as we do in a particular way with you today, Sister Christine, the Holy Father offered a helpful reflection that I think is very fitting for our celebration this morning. In his homily to priests and religious gathered at St. Patrick Cathedral in New York, he said the following:

Truly, we have received much, so many graces, so many blessings, and we rejoice in this. It will do us good to think back on our lives with the grace of remembrance. Remembrance of when we were first called, remembrance of the road travelled, remembrance of graces received ... and, above all, remembrance of our encounter with Jesus Christ so often along the way.²

I have no doubt that your heart, Sister, is filled with this grace of remembrance as you reflect on the many ways in which the Lord has worked in you and through you in so many powerful ways. I would also guess that you have the memory of various trials and difficulties that you have encountered in more than half a century of religious life. At the time, it may not seem as though those moments were occasions for joy. But with the passage of years and the larger perspective, you can see how even those moments have been a part of the beautiful tapestry of God's loving Providence unfolding throughout your religious life, thus prompting you to be grateful for every moment of the past fifty years.

As joyful as it can be for us to look to the past with gratitude, our celebration today also invites us to look in another direction. We are invited to look to the future as well, for you have yet to reach the end of the

road on which you embarked more than fifty years ago. There are still steps to be taken on that journey.

The Holy Father reflected on this after speaking about the need for developing the grace of remembrance. That grace, in a sense, is not meant to be a passive experience, but rather a motivating factor to move forward with greater dedication and love. He said the following:

a grateful heart is spontaneously impelled to serve the Lord and to find expression in a life of commitment to our work. Once we come to realize how much God has given us, a life of self-sacrifice, of working for him and for others, becomes a privileged way of responding to his great love.³

While fifty years of service is indeed a long time, and while the secular world might suggest that you have earned the right to 'retire,' we know that such a concept is foreign to the one who has given her life to Christ and His Church as you have. Consecrated Religious cannot help but continue to live that life of self-sacrifice and work until their very last moment.

This is the predominant theme that we find highlighted throughout our liturgy this morning. In our second reading from the Letter of St. Paul

to the Philippians, we hear St. Paul write about how, even after all of the work that he has done for Christ and the Church, he fixes his gaze on the future as he says: "Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

He realizes that the one thing that is of greatest importance is the one goal for which we have all been created: eternal life in Heaven with God. In just a few moments, Sister Christine, you will renew your profession, introducing that renewal by thanking God for the many years the Lord has guided and protected you with His love, then expressing your wish to serve Him until death with more fervent love. There is no talk of easing into a life of comfort and relaxation, but rather, the pressing forward with everything that you have, with greater fervor and greater love than ever before.

In some sense, the desire to serve Him more fervently increases as the years go by, for we know that our time on this earth is limited, and even what we have given up to this point is so little in comparison to what He has given to us in His love and mercy. This was the mind of St. Francis, whose feast day you celebrated this past Sunday. At the end of his life,

after many years of dedicated service to the Church, he still saw that there were many opportunities that he had for returning His love to Christ.

St. Bonaventure, in his biography of this holy saint, records the following words of advice that he offered to his brothers at the twilight of his life. He said: "Let us begin, at last, my brethren, to serve the Lord our God, for hitherto we have done but little."⁴

Such words, coming from one who, according to our estimation, did so much service for the Lord and His Church, could only be the fruit of one totally captivated by the love of God. As we hear in the Gospel, Jesus invites us to "remain" in His love (John 15:9). The more we remain in that love, the more we will desire to give everything to Him, holding absolutely nothing back so that when we do reach that final moment, there will be nothing which still clings to us that would prevent us from entering into the loving embrace of the Father in Heaven freely and joyfully.

As we continue our celebration of this Mass, we give thanks to God for the many blessings that you, Sister Christine, have received, and for the blessing that you have been for the Church and this community. But, we also offer our heartfelt prayers for you, that you will continue to remain in

the love of Christ and to press on with greater fervor toward the goal that still awaits you at the end of your journey.

I would like to conclude by offering one final reflection from our Holy Father's visit to the United States. It comes from the homily for the Mass of Canonization of St. Junípero Serra, also of the Franciscan family. His words are so fitting for you, Sister, on this special day. But they are also good for all of us in our journey toward the final destination of Heaven. The pope said the following:

Father Serra had a motto which inspired his life and work, not just a saying, but above all a reality which shaped the way he lived: *siempre adelante!* Keep moving forward! For him, this was the way to continue experiencing the joy of the Gospel, to keep his heart from growing numb, from being anesthetized. He kept moving forward, because the Lord was waiting. He kept going, because his brothers and sisters were waiting. He kept going forward to the end of his life. Today, like him, may we be able to say: Forward! Let's keep moving forward!⁵

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *In-Flight Press Conference*, 27 September 2015.

² Pope Francis, *Homily for Vespers with Priests and Religious*, 24 September 2015.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ St. Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, 130.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Homily for Mass of Canonization for St. Junípero Serra*, 23 September 2015.