HOMILY FOR THE MASS OF FIRST PROFESSION AND INITIATION INTO THE
NOVITIATE OF THE SISTERS OF ST. FRANCIS OF THE MARTYR ST. GEORGE
ALTON, ILLINOIS

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois
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Your Excellency, Most Reverend Archbishop Raymond L. Burke; Your Excellency, Most Reverend Archbishop Joseph Naumann; Reverend Fathers and Deacon; Mother Superior, religious sisters, our soon-to-be Postulants and Novices; my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good to be with you for this Mass of First Profession and Initiation into the Novitiate of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George.

As the new Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, it is indeed a privilege for me to be here with you for the first time and to celebrate the initiation into the Novitiate of Stephanie Gantt, Monica McKenzie and Katie Baumgarten, now to be known henceforth as Sister Mary Lucy, Sister Cordia Marie and Sister Karol Marie, respectively; as well as the First Profession of Sister Mary Benedict, Sister M. Chiara, Sister Mariela, and Sister Marysia.

At the beginning of his homily for the Chrism Mass in Holy Week 2007, Pope Benedict XVI recalled a short story of the Russian writer Leo
Tolstoy. In the story a harsh sovereign asks his priests and wise men to show him God. This they are unable to do. A shepherd coming in from the fields then volunteers to take on the task. He tells the king that his eyes are not good enough to see God, but the king persists in wanting to know at least what God does. “Then we must exchange our clothes,” says the shepherd. The king, reluctant but curious, consents. He gives his royal robes to the shepherd and has himself dressed in the poor man’s simple garments. “This is what God does,” says the shepherd.

Indeed, the Son of God, as St. Paul tells us, did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of humankind; and being found in human form he humbled himself, even to death on a cross. The Fathers of the Church spoke of the sacred exchange that happened between God and ourselves. God took on what was ours, so that we might receive what was God’s and become similar to God.

Today’s solemnity of Mary’s assumption into heaven is the fulfilment of this story of God emptying himself to take on human form, to be as we are, to see things through our eyes. Mary is the one who is most fully open to be changed and raised into glory. From the moment of her birth she is
free from sin, and her life is spent in openness to God’s presence in her heart and in her pursuit of goodness. Her words to the angel encapsulate her commitment: “I am the handmaid of the Lord; let what you have said be done to me.”

Mary stands at the closure of the Old Testament and the threshold of the New, spelled out most clearly in the words of the Magnificat, when she thanks the Lord for all he has done for her. She will be called blessed, for God has looked upon her in all her simplicity and changed her utterly into glory. Throughout her life she acts as God’s gateway. Through her the Son of God enters the world in human form. In John’s Gospel, at her behest Jesus begins his public life at the marriage feast of Cana. At the end of his life, it is to her that he hands over his beloved disciple so that she becomes at that moment the mother of his Church. And at end of her earthly life she is taken up body and soul into the glory of her son as a sign of hope and deliverance for all who follow him.

All of us, as followers of Christ, the members of his Church, try to follow Mary in our pattern of life. In doing that we are also imitating her Son, who emptied himself to take on our human form. But you, dear sisters, by entering into religious life, are embarking on a special path to
emulate the Blessed Mother and her Son, Jesus, through the specific charism of your congregation. The charism of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George – to make the Merciful Love of Christ visible – begins with the incomparable gaze of Christ upon each and every young woman who enters the Congregation. This call to return love for Love expresses the core of what it means to be a Sister of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George.

In 1869, your foundress, Mother M. Anselma Bopp, in collaboration with Father John Gerard Dall, adopted for community the Rule of the Third Order of St. Francis with the mission to be simply ready in obedience to God’s call. The spirituality of this new Franciscan Community centered on the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Whom it is said in Scripture: “They shall look on Him Whom they have pierced” (John 19:37).

Your charism and your spirituality coincide with my own coat of arms and Episcopal motto, *Lex Cordis Caritas*, Latin for, “The Law of the Heart is Love.” In chapter 31 of the Book of Jeremiah, the prophet tells us that God has written His law on our hearts. In chapter 13 of the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul says that love is the fulfillment of the law. To depict this visually, my coat of arms has two scales of justice to reflect my
background in civil law and canon law, but above them both is the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On the cross, from His heart, He poured out for us His unconditional love and divine mercy. The Preface for the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, says: “Lifted high on the cross, Christ gave his life for us, so much did He love us. From His wounded side flowed blood and water, the fountain of sacramental life in the Church. To His open heart the Savior invites all men, to draw water in joy from the springs of salvation.”

The name of your congregation also calls to mind the example of the two great saints who serve as the holy patrons of your community, St. Francis of Assisi and the Martyr, St. George. We know much about the life of St. Francis: his radical poverty, his virtuous chastity, his humble obedience, and his simple love for all of God’s creatures. We know less about St. George, but we do know that St. George is honored in the Catholic Church as one of the most illustrious martyrs of Christ. He is said to have been himself a great soldier and is usually depicted on horseback and tilting at a dragon under his feet. This representation is an emblematical figure, purporting that by his faith and Christian fortitude he conquered the devil, called the dragon in the Apocalypse, which we heard in today’s first reading.
My dear Sisters, if you follow the example of these two great saints, you will succeed in your noble endeavor. You must love with the heart of St. Francis, but you must also do battle with the courage of St. George. Yes, dearly beloved, we are engaged in a great battle and we must never forget that. The Evil One would certainly like us to forget about him, to let down our guard and give him free reign to work his wiles in the world. We cannot do him that favor. We must be vigilant, and we must use all of the weapons at our disposal to fight this battle.

Sister Mary Lucy, Sister Cordia Marie, Sister Karol Marie, Sister Mary Benedict, Sister M. Chiara, Sister Mariela, and Sister Marysia: I come to you in this liturgy as a successor of the apostles and as spiritual leader of this local Church to give you the weapons that you will need to fight this spiritual battle effectively: the veils, habits, crucifixes and rosaries.

Your veils are emblems of lowliness of heart and separation from the world, providing divine protection of mind and body. Your habits are garments to be worn as a badge of innocence and mortification, and as a strong armor against the world, the flesh and the devil. The crucifix is the instrument by which Christ Himself conquered sin and death, putting all his enemies under His feet. The rosary, dedicated to the Seven Joys of the
Mother of Christ, pours out the great strength of the Holy Spirit upon everyone who prays these beads or reverently keeps them in order to be free from visible and invisibles enemies and receive the grace to be presented to the Lord by the glorious Virgin Mary at the hour of death.

I would like to close with a song, for to sing is to make our prayers doubly effective, and so I invite you to join me in singing for the intercession of our Immaculate Virgin Mary:

Immaculate Mary, your praises we sing;
You reign now in splendor with Jesus our King.
Ave, ave, ave, Maria!
Ave, ave, Maria!

In heaven, the blessed your glory proclaim;
On earth we, your children, invoke your sweet name.
Ave, ave, ave, Maria!
Ave, ave, Maria!

Amen!