

**First Profession of Vows and Reception into the Novitiate  
of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George**

**August 14, 2013**

**Immaculate Conception Church  
Alton, Illinois**

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

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, Mother Regina Pacis and Mother Ingeborg, consecrated men and women, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is with great joy that I gather with you today as we celebrate with the community of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George as four young women have been welcomed into the Novitiate and as three others are about to make their first profession of vows. I would like to thank Father Jim Walther and all the Oblates of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Parish of St. Mary's, for their hospitality in welcoming us today for this great day for the Church, not just here in this diocese, but everywhere the sisters carry out the mission of "seeking to make the merciful love of Christ visible" with fidelity and joy.

In 1996, Blessed John Paul II, soon to be St. John Paul II, issued the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, in which he addresses

the consecrated life and its mission in the Church and in the world. In the conclusion of that document, he makes the following observation:

Many people today are puzzled and ask: What is the point of the consecrated life? Why embrace this kind of life, when there are so many urgent needs in the areas of charity and of evangelization itself, to which one can respond even without assuming the particular commitments of the consecrated life? Is the consecrated life not a kind of "waste" of human energies which might be used more efficiently for a greater good, for the benefit of humanity and the Church?<sup>1</sup>

In our modern society, there is a strong emphasis on getting things done with greater speed and efficiency. Whenever we identify something which appears to be slowing the process down, or when an element of the process seems to be beyond what is needed to get the job done as quickly and easily as possible, it is deemed unnecessary and a "waste." It is this mindset, so prevalent in our world today, which tends to look upon religious life as somehow inefficient and, to some extent, no longer necessary for the Church in her role of charity and evangelization. Knowing this to be untrue, we take the opportunity today to reflect on how the religious life which you have entered into is far from being a waste.

On a purely practical level, it is true that any Christian can do the "work" that you do, for all of the members of the Church are called to

participate in apostolic tasks of the Church, as the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council reminds us.<sup>2</sup> But this universal call to the apostolate does not render the need for those consecrated in religious life to be unnecessary. Rather, the witness that you give by living out your vocation is a blessing and a benefit to the entire Church in many ways. Drawing upon our readings for today, I would like to reflect on how it is that your participation in religious life is invaluable to the life of the Church.

Let us begin by considering the call that you have received. In the Gospel, we hear Jesus speaking to His disciples and He reminds them of something very important when He tells them: “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you.” (Jn 15:16) It is Christ who has called you to this life, not the other way around. Of course, you are called to cooperate in responding to His invitation, but you must never forget that the initiative always comes from Him. The reason this is so important is because it frees us from setting the parameters on how it is that you think your vocation should be lived out, a dangerous attitude to have in religious life. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis commented on this dynamic in an address he gave this past May to a group of Women Religious Superiors. He told the

sisters that: "It is Christ who has called you to follow him in the consecrated life and this means to continually engage in an 'exodus' from yourselves to center your existence on Christ and on his Gospel, on the will of God, divesting yourselves of your plans, to be able to say with Saint Paul: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. (Galatians 2:20).<sup>3</sup> This notion of an exodus from the self is important to be mindful of as you are in your early years of religious life. By submitting to this exodus from yourselves, joyfully and serenely accepting the sacrifices and renunciations that come with putting your will aside in favor of God's will, you will be preparing yourself for a more freeing and enriching experience of religious life because you will realize that it is not about you and what you think is best, but that it is all about Christ who truly knows what is best. St. Paul, in the first reading from his letter to the Philippians, uses the language of being taken possession of by Christ, something that can only happen by letting go of our will and surrendering our whole being to Him, which is at the heart of what religious life is all about.

This openness to being led by Christ in an unconditional way highlights the value of the vow of obedience which is one of the three vows

taken as a part of religious life. Obedience is manifested in various ways in the life of a religious. First and foremost it involves obedience to Christ and His will in your life. One of the ways of assuring that you are being obedient to Christ in your lives is to be obedient to the Church. We know that Christ has founded His Church in order to continue His mission in the world until His return at the end of time. As a result, following Christ necessarily means following the Church and that by following the Church, we can be certain that we are following Christ. Obedience to the Magisterium of the Church will free you to follow the truth of the Gospel and faithfully proclaim it in all of your activities. Finally, you are called to be obedient to your religious community. By submitting yourself to the direction of your superiors, you freely accept the will of God as it is expressed through them to make use of you in a way that is best suited for the good of the community and the Church. All of these expressions of obedience, contrary to popular belief, are a source of great freedom which allows you to be a more docile instrument in the hands of our Lord as you serve His Church.

These reflections lead us to see how your witness of religious consecration is of great value to the Church. Many of the principles behind the living out of the religious life seem to fly in the face of the values of our modern world. In a society which exalts human autonomy and the power to choose one's direction in life, your witness proposes something different. You show that there is another way, a way which involves rearranging the order of things and placing Christ first and not yourselves, letting yourselves be guided completely by Him, trusting that the plan that He has is always better than anything you could dream of. It is an encouragement, especially to young people, to say "yes, let it be done to me" as the Blessed Virgin Mary proclaimed her "*fiat*" to the Archangel Gabriel, to have the courage to let Christ be at the center of their lives, to follow Him with trust and confidence, knowing that He loves them and will not lead them to disappointment, but will lead them to a life of true peace, true joy, and true fulfillment. Your witness of obedience, especially to the Church, sends a powerful message to the faithful that the Church is our Mother who cares for us. She helps us to navigate the challenges and errors of this world in order to deliver us safely to our final destination. In a world that has

become skeptical of the Church, you affirm that the Church can be trusted, that you can love the Church and that to follow her is a good thing.

To return to that question posed by our world as to whether religious life is a waste and no longer necessary, we can say with great confidence that the religious life is far from being a waste. Rather, it is a gift of extremely great value. It is that gift which the Lord has given to you, dear sisters, which we celebrate today. May you be ever conscious of this gift and accept it each day with a spirit of gratitude. May that gift then translate in your being a gift to others by giving yourself completely to the apostolic service that you will undertake throughout your religious lives. Live that gift with joy and continue to provide that inspiring witness of a life totally centered on Christ, a witness which will encourage countless others to place their trust more firmly in Him, allowing all of us to be led by Him to the joys of the Kingdom, where we hope to be for all of eternity.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 104.

<sup>2</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to Women Religious Superiors*, 8 May 2013