

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

**August 14, 2014**

**St. Francis Convent  
Alton, Illinois**

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

My brother bishops, reverend Fathers and Deacons, Mother Regina Pacis, consecrated men and women, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: around this time every year, thousands of people from all over Poland journey on pilgrimage to the country's most famous religious shrine, the monastery at Jasna Góra where the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa is housed. Pilgrims travel here to give thanks for the many blessings received through the intercession of Our Lady, while at the same time bringing various petitions for their needs and those of their families and friends. Many travel here on foot, sleeping along the way in tents, and enduring whatever weather comes their way as they advance toward this sacred place.

This is just one example of the rich tradition in our Catholic faith of making pilgrimages to various holy sites. These pilgrimages are distinguished from vacations because they are religiously motivated and

often involve a fair amount of difficulty and sacrifice. These sacrifices have a purifying effect so that upon the arrival at the destination, the pilgrim is more open to the spiritual gifts that await them.

The notion of a pilgrimage in our faith extends beyond the experience of just travelling to a specific geographical destination. We often speak of our lives as Christians as being a pilgrimage. Our pilgrimage begins on the day of our Baptism when we become members of the pilgrim Church of God. The journey is not an easy one and it requires many sacrifices from us in order to reach our final destination of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Yet, the hope that we have of reaching that goal spurs us on to persevere despite the obstacles that we may encounter. St. Paul, in our first reading, captures the attitude that we should all have as we journey along our pilgrimage: “forgetting what lies behind, 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).

While all are called to the same destination on this pilgrimage, how we undertake this journey is unique to each of us. Today, we gather to witness how these four young women are entering more fully into the particular role that they have been called to in following that path of

holiness. The life of a consecrated religious, particularly those involved in the apostolic life of the Church, is a special role that adds immense value to the pilgrim Church on earth. The documents of the Church speak of the importance of the witness of religious to the rest of the faithful, how your lives point to something greater than what this world has to offer, encouraging the faithful to conform their lives more fully to Christ. Your unique role, then, can be likened to that of a guide for the rest of the faithful as we all journey together to the Promised Land of Heaven.

There are some characteristics that are essential for a good guide on a pilgrimage. First of all, the guide needs to be identifiable. Leaders in a pilgrimage often distinguish themselves by distinctive clothing or by carrying a flag or marker so that people have a visible point of reference. As religious, the wearing of the religious habit is a visible sign that sets you apart and which draws the attention of others whose first reaction is to identify you as one who is expected to set an example to be followed.

Being aware of this expectation placed upon you by the faithful simply by how you are dressed, it is all the more important that your lives reflect the holiness to which you have been called. Just as a guide who only dresses the part, but has no idea where he is going or how to get there,

is meaningless to his followers, so too is the one who wears the religious habit but is not guided by a life of virtue. The vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience which religious make are an act whereby you give your entire life to Christ, external and internal, providing a witness “of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world.”<sup>1</sup> Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe, the Polish priest and martyr who was killed at the Nazi concentration camp in Auschwitz and whose feast day is today, once wrote in a letter that “it is obedience and obedience alone that is the sure sign to us of the divine will. A superior may, it is true, make a mistake; but it is impossible for us to be mistaken in obeying a superior’s command. . . . Obedience raises us beyond the limits of our littleness and puts us in harmony with God’s will.”<sup>2</sup>

A good guide also needs to be attentive to the people that they lead. There are many people whom we will encounter on our pilgrimage who are trying to go the same way that we are, but find the journey difficult for one reason or another and may be wondering if continuing along the path is worth the effort. Others may be wandering about aimlessly with no real sense of purpose or concern for their final destination. Still others may be heading in the opposite direction altogether. It is to all of these people that

you are called to witness with your lives so as to attract them to follow Christ with renewed energy.

In a recent address to religious superiors gathered in Rome, Pope Francis said that those in religious life invite the people to go beyond a mundane horizon and to look forward to the Kingdom. “The Church,” therefore, “must be attractive.” He then invited the religious to “wake up the world” and “[b]e witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living!” He sums it all up by saying: “It is this witness that I expect of you. Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up.”<sup>3</sup>

These words of our Holy Father are helpful not just for those of you who are at the early stages of religious life, but they serve as a helpful reminder to all of the sisters of this community of your privileged role of being an instrument of “making the merciful love of Christ visible” to those you have been called to serve in the various apostolic works of the order. By doing so, you provide a much-needed wakeup call to them to redirect their gaze toward Christ and His Kingdom with a new sense of purpose and hope.

For the four of you sisters who are celebrating these important early steps of your vocation, it is natural that you might be feeling a sense of inadequacy or anxiety with the responsibility of being a consecrated religious. Today's Gospel offers some words of consolation that will hopefully ease some of those feelings. We hear Jesus reminding His disciples: "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you" (John 15:16).

It is important never to lose sight of the fact that although you have freely chosen to undertake this way of life, the initiative of this call comes first and foremost from God. In calling one to follow Him more closely in consecrated life, He also gives the graces necessary to accomplish His will as He promises that whatever you ask in His name, He will give you. May the words of St. Paul, which members of this community recite after professing their vows, be a constant reminder to you that it is Christ who calls you to this, and that you can do all things through Him who strengthens you.<sup>4</sup>

Today marks a special time in your pilgrimage of faith toward Christ. There are still many steps to take and much formation to undergo. Never

let your attention be drawn away from the goal for which you have been called, namely, eternal life. If you keep that prize ever in front of you, you will be able to navigate amidst the winds and storms of this world which threaten to distract you. Remaining faithful to your vocation will not only benefit you, but those you will guide by the example of your witness.

Take every opportunity to learn from the other sisters of the community, especially those who have been on this pilgrimage for many years. They are a unique source of blessing to you as they offer valuable insights and lessons to you from their experience of journeying with their beloved. Their example of perseverance is one that will help to sustain you as you follow in their footsteps.

On behalf of the Church here in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, I thank you for your generous acceptance of this vocation to which the Lord has called you. Your presence in this local Church is a bright light that is a source of inspiration and encouragement to me and to the faithful of this diocese. May all of you continue to be steadfast in your commitment to Christ and His Church, serving as shining examples which motivate all of us to move forward with greater intensity and confidence

toward our final destination among all of the saints in the heavenly Kingdom.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §20.

<sup>2</sup> From the Letters of Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe, priest and martyr, Office of Readings, Liturgy of the Hours for August 14.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Wake up the World*, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 17 March 2014, trans. Fr. Donald Maldari, S.J.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 4:13.