

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

**August 14, 2015**

**St. Mary's Parish  
Alton, Illinois**

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

My brother Bishops, Reverend Fathers and Deacons, Mother Maximilia, consecrated men and women, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here for this special celebration during which three new sisters have been received into the Novitiate for the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George. In just a few minutes, we will witness the first profession of four sisters, followed by the final profession of three sisters to this community.

Before leaving Springfield this morning for the drive to Alton, I was eating breakfast and glancing at the newspaper when this headline caught my eye: "What Motivates a Modern Nun." I thought, I'd better read this article! It is very timely for our celebration today, so I would like to read some excerpts from it for you. It is written by William McGurn and appears in THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

On a hot August morning, 30-year-old Sister Bethany Madonna sits before the altar of the Basilica of St. John the Evangelist. Seated alongside her are seven other women, also in their 30s, also dressed in blue habits and long white veils.

The moment has been years in coming: the day they consecrate themselves to Jesus Christ as they offer their final vows as members of the Sisters of Life.

Which provoked a question: What could lead a personable young woman from a happy family to give up everything -- especially at a moment when women have never had as many opportunities before them?

It's a reasonable question.

Yet amid the palpable jubilation of this jam-packed basilica, it is clear that this question is the wrong one. There are no sad sacks or martyrs on this altar today. These are happy, excited women. What is it they believe they have found?

Sister Bethany says it's the "peace in your heart" that comes from knowing you are where you are meant to be. In this case it's a place so countercultural, it's almost un-American. For in a nation founded upon the God-given right to the pursuit of happiness, these sisters vow to put the happiness of others before their own. . . .

Indeed, for all the material things the sisters lack, they say their work impresses upon them what they *do* have: the security of knowing they are loved, by God certainly, but also by their families and fellow sisters. It is a love, the sisters say, that many of the women who come to them for help have never felt before. . . .

In other words, the vows they make today and the rings they received as a sign of these vows isn't about "no." It's about a radical "yes," an echo of the assent given more than two millennia ago by a Jewish girl in Nazareth: *Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to thy word.*<sup>1</sup>

I believe you Sisters know this already, but I read this for the sake of your families and friends in case they were wondering why these women are doing what they're doing!

This liturgy takes place during a very special time in the life of the Universal Church. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has designated this year as a Year of Consecrated Life. During this year, he encourages the Church in general and the various religious communities in particular to “look to the past with gratitude”<sup>2</sup> for the many gifts that have been bestowed on the Church through the various forms and expressions of consecrated religious life. He also invites us to “live the present with passion,”<sup>3</sup> remaining ever faithful to the mission of the Church and the particular charisms of each community. Finally, the Holy Father urges us to “embrace the future with hope,”<sup>4</sup> seeing the consecrated life as a vehicle by which the Holy Spirit will continue to build up the Church.

This Year of Consecrated Life was called to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the promulgation of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church promulgated at the Second Vatican Council. This landmark document offers profound insights into the nature and

mission of the Church, which has been entrusted with the task of drawing the faithful into a deeper communion with the Mystical Body of Christ in her Head and members.

The document identifies several images used in the Scriptures to describe the mystery of the inner nature of the Church. Among those images is that of the “spotless spouse of the spotless Lamb.”<sup>5</sup> This bridal imagery is used throughout the document, finding its scriptural basis in the writings of St. Paul, who speaks of the relationship that Christ has with the Church whom He “loved and for whom He delivered Himself up, that He might sanctify her” (Ephesians 5:26).

This bridal imagery is also highlighted in the readings that we have just heard. The Song of Songs uses the descriptive language of lovers encountering one another. The Responsorial Psalm speaks of the captivating beauty of the daughter as she is invited into the palace of her King. And the Gospel recounts the parable of the ten virgins who eagerly await the arrival of the Bridegroom who, on His arrival, will welcome them into the joy of the wedding feast of Heaven.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World, Pope St. John Paul II writes that the consecrated life is a “particularly profound expression of the Church as the Bride who, prompted by the Spirit to imitate her Spouse, stands before him ‘in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish’ (Ephesians 5:27).”<sup>6</sup> He further writes that “[t]his spousal dimension, which is part of all consecrated life, has a particular meaning for women, who find therein their feminine identity and as it were discover the special genius of their relationship with the Lord.”<sup>7</sup>

It is this identity as a Bride of Christ, dear sisters, that you are called to embrace and live on a daily basis. Your entire life as a consecrated religious sister finds meaning in this spousal relationship that you share with the Bridegroom. This liturgy, in particular, highlights the many aspects, both exterior and interior, of that identity to which the Lord has drawn you through His loving invitation to give your life totally to Him.

For those of you who have just entered the Novitiate, you have heard in the interior silence of your heart the words of the Bridegroom, inviting

you with the words from our first reading: “Arise, my beloved, my dove, my beautiful one, and come!” (Song of Songs 2:10). It is He who has called you to this life, and you have said ‘yes’ to that divine proposal to begin to learn to live your life exclusively for Him in this particular community.

Your initial ‘yes’ to that invitation is demonstrated externally in your being clothed for the first time with that wedding garment of the spouse of Christ. The habit serves as a “sign of your consecration”<sup>8</sup> and is to be worn “as a badge of innocence and mortification, and a strong armor against the world, the flesh, and the devil.”<sup>9</sup> It will serve as an exterior reminder to you and to others that you belong to no one, except Christ alone, and your life must reflect the innocence and dedication to Him by saying ‘no’ to all of those things which try to lure you away from that union.

For those of you who are about to take your first vows, your initial ‘yes’ to live this life of a special union with the Bridegroom will be deepened through the profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. The words that you will speak will be the verbal expression of the interior offering of your heart to Him, resolving to follow Him unconditionally. “By his profession of the evangelical counsels, then,”

you will be “more intimately consecrated to divine service”<sup>10</sup> through which Christ’s merciful love will be made visible in a more profound way through your lives.

You will receive the black veil as an outward symbol of your “lowliness of heart and separation from the world.”<sup>11</sup> It is also “a sign of that wondrous marriage between the Church and Christ, her only Spouse, which should be made visible in your life.”<sup>12</sup> The crucifix will also be given to you as a reminder to keep Christ always close to your heart, especially as you follow Him into those areas of trial, that you may know the depth of His love for you and the special care that He will always bestow upon you as His beloved.

Finally, you will receive the Rosary of the Seven Joys of the Blessed Mother. She offers the preeminent model of consecrated discipleship. Her life was lived in constant union with her Son, thus enabling her to serve with purity of heart and maternal love. May you always look to her in order to imitate her example in the apostolates to which you are called and may you constantly be aware of her maternal intercession for you.

For those of you who are professing your final vows, you have reached a definitive moment in your life as a consecrated religious sister. Although you have professed and renewed your vows on several occasions, it has always been for a temporary amount of time. Today, you will profess them one more time, but this time, with a major difference – you will add to that formula that key word: forever.

Your ‘yes’ to Christ forever is the culmination of years of saying ‘yes’ to Him in the joys and trials that you have surely experienced in religious life. You make this choice freely with a heart that has been tested, stretched, and purified so that you can indeed give that definitive ‘yes’ without any delusions of pure sentiment, but with a love that has been molded and formed in the crucible of His love for you.

Your prostrating before the altar will be symbolic of your laying down your life to be of service to His will forever in the context of the life of this community. This humility is a recognition that it will not be by your own strength or effort that you will live this vocation, but it will be through His generous gift of grace, for He will give you the strength to do all things for love of Him and His Church.

The ring that you will receive will serve as a reminder of the everlasting covenant between you and Christ from this day forward. That bond of love will carry you through every trial that you may face, for as St. Paul reminds us, nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

I would like to conclude with a brief reflection on the mystery of the Transfiguration as it relates to you. Pope St. John Paul II speaks of how this mystery is a fitting icon for the consecrated religious life. You have been chosen by Christ to ascend the mountain with Him in order to experience the splendid glory of His divinity. In doing so, He invites you to live that life of transfigured holiness as a sign of your total consecration to Him and as a witness to the rest of the world of the happiness that comes from living a life dedicated to Christ.

With the beauty and joy of this day and this liturgy, not to mention the intense preparation that you have undergone in the past couple of months, you can surely identify with the sentiments of St. Peter, who, overwhelmed with the glory experienced, said to the Lord: “It is good that we are here!” (Matthew 17:4). We may feel the desire to remain in this

moment, not wanting it to end. But, as the Holy Father reminds us, “The dazzling event of the Transfiguration is a preparation for the tragic, but no less glorious, event of Calvary.”<sup>13</sup>

The path of every vocation necessarily involves the Cross, and your life as a Bride of Christ is no exception. This is not something to run *from*, but rather, something to run *to*, for as the Holy Father explains so well, “consecrated persons discover that the more they stand at the foot of the Cross of Christ, the more immediately and profoundly they experience the truth of God who is love.”<sup>14</sup>

So the Lord says to you, as He did to the Apostles at the Transfiguration, “rise and have no fear” (Matthew 17:7). The path that lies ahead may be difficult, but there is no room for fear for those who have the love of Christ so close to them as you do on your journey as His beloved brides. The light of this moment points to the greater light of the Resurrection, which is the glorious destination to which each of us aspires.<sup>15</sup>

May you be like those wise virgins who take care to guard this great gift of your consecration to Him in your heart, so that when the

Bridegroom comes to you, you will be found ready to enter the wedding feast of Heaven and experience joy and peace *forever* in the Kingdom of your beloved.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> William McGurn, "What Motivates a Modern Nun?" THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, August 14, 2015, p. A11.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter To All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, §1.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *To All Consecrated People*, §2.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *To All Consecrated People*, §3.

<sup>5</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, §6.

<sup>6</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §19.

<sup>7</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §19.

<sup>8</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §25.

<sup>9</sup> *Blessing of the Habits*.

<sup>10</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, §44.

<sup>11</sup> *Blessing of the Black Veils*.

<sup>12</sup> *Rite of Profession*.

<sup>13</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §23.

<sup>14</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §24.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §40.