

**Homily for the Initiation into the Novitiate of the
Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George and the
Golden Jubilee of Sister Mary Bernard Simmons, FSGM**

**St. Francis Covent
Alton, Illinois**

August 2, 2016

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

My brother bishops,
Dear priests and deacons,
Mother Mary Maximilia, dear Sisters,
My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Our Lord says to each of us today, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm” (Song of Songs 8:6). Though he says these words to each of us today, he particularly invites you, Sister Mary Bernard, to set him as a seal upon your heart and upon your arm as you celebrate your Golden Jubilee in the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George. We thank God in this Eucharist for your fifty years of dedicated religious life. He also makes this invitation especially to you, Molly Larkin and Rachel Garzon, as this community receives you into the novitiate with your new religious names, Sister Mary Maris Stella and Sister Maria Consuela. We are all delighted and honored to celebrate this festive day with you, but our

hearts will be all the more joyful if we ponder what this seal is, and why we are invited to set it upon our hearts and arms.

In his theological and spiritual reflections *On the Perfection of Life*, the Seraphic Doctor Saint Bonaventure gives a clear instruction to the Poor Clares, an instruction that no doubt also applies to you, dear Sisters, as it does to each of us: “What you should do is to put Jesus Christ crucified ‘as a seal on your heart’ and, just as a seal is set in soft wax, so you should imprint your spouse Jesus in your heart and say with the prophet: ‘My heart has become like wax melting away’ (Song of Songs 8:6; Psalm 21:15).”¹ Is this not why the Apostle says we are “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body” (II Corinthians 4:10)? Friends, after all, become friends by spending time with each other and thinking often about each other.

While we often think of the seat of the intellect as being in our heads and the seat of our emotions as being in our hearts, the ancient Hebrews thought slightly differently; they thought of the seat of their intellect as being in their hearts and the seat of their emotions as being in their stomachs. You might say that we simply shifted things up a bit, which makes setting Christ as a seal upon our hearts something of a romantic

notion for us, though it might not have been the case for the original hearers of the Song of Songs.

When he reflected on this verse in one of his sermons on the life of Saint Francis of Assisi, the Franciscan Cardinal Matthew of Aquasparta, who was born between 1238 and 1240, noted, “our mind has a flexible quality.”² He was not speaking of the physical elasticity of the brain, but rather of a spiritual or symbolic understanding. He went to say:

The mind is pliable and so for an impression to remain in it there has to be a vigorous pressure from continuous remembering and acknowledgment. Something is impressed by one thought, more is impressed by a second thought, and from repeated, frequent and continuous recalling an impression and image remain, so that when the mind thinks on God as creator, governor, redeemer, the one who forgives sins, especially when the mind thinks of God born, suffered, crucified and dead for it, the thought never leaves the memory, the understanding, the tongue nor the hand. The memory always recalls, the understanding always reflects, the tongue always speaks of Christ and the hand always moves to make the form and sign of the cross. In this way the beloved spoke to the bride: ‘Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm’ (Song of Songs 8:6).³

When taking into account the ancient understanding of the heart and our own understanding of the heart, we might rightly say that we impress the image of Crucified Love in our minds so that we might love him more deeply in our hearts. We might also say that we impress the image of Jesus crucified in our hearts so that we might better understand him with our

minds. This is, perhaps, why Saint Ambrose of Milan says, “Christ is the seal on the forehead, the seal on the heart — on the forehead that we may always confess him, in the heart that we may always love him, and a sign on the arm that we may always do his work.”⁴

If we truly set the image of Christ crucified on our hearts to know him and to love him, and on our arms to carry out his work, then the joy of Christ will be in us, our joy will be full, and we will bear great and abiding fruit (cf. John 15:11, 16). I know, dear Sisters, that many of you are disappointed that this year we are not receiving the profession of any women into your community; I urge you not to let this disappointment dampen the joy that comes from your own profession into this community. Because this joy is born of your love for Jesus and of his love for you, “many waters cannot quench” it and “neither can floods drown it” (Song of Songs 8:7). To celebrate a Golden Jubilee of profession is no small affair, nor is the reception of two novices; both are occasions which should move our hearts to great rejoicing. The first, because of a long life of fidelity to Christ; the second, because of two souls desiring to be “rooted and grounded in love” with you (Ephesians 3:17).

With the image of the Crucified Christ set upon your hearts and arms, strive together, dear Sisters, to enter into the “breadth and length and height and depth” of the love of Christ so that all of your apostolic endeavors will always leave a visible imprint of merciful love, for those with eyes to see, on the hearts and minds of those whom you encounter each day (Ephesians 3:18). Living in this way, you, both as individuals and as a community, will reap a rich harvest for the Lord and attract more young women drawn by the witness of your joyful love.

As you seek, then, to impress the image of Christ Crucified ever more deeply within you, I take these words of Saint Bonaventure as my own prayer for you: “May peace glow in your heart[s], Christ in your works, and may there be formed in you wisdom and justice and redemption.”⁵

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ St. Bonaventure, *On the Perfection of Life*, VI.11. In *Works of St. Bonaventure, Vol. X: Writings on the Spiritual Life*. F. Edward Coughlin, ed. (Saint Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2006), 184.

² Matthew of Aquasparta, *Second Sermon on St. Francis*, VI. In *Early Franciscan Ascetical Writings, Vol VII: Sermons on St. Francis, St. Anthony, and St. Clare*. Campion Murray, trans. (Phoenix, Arizona: Tau Publishing, LLC, 2013), 20.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ St. Ambrose of Milan, *Isaac, Or the Soul*, 8.75. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament Vol. IX: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*. J. Robert Wright, ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2005), 365.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter 80, To Laymen. In *ibid.*, 364-365.