

**First Profession of Vows and Golden Jubilee Celebration
of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George**

February 2, 2017

**St. Francis Convent
Alton, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated men and women, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: one of the most iconic symbols in the world of sports in the Olympic flame. For more than 80 years, the flame has been the central symbol associated with this event which brings athletes together from every corner of the world to compete in a growing variety of sporting events.

It has been the tradition that the person to light the official Olympic torch, which remains burning throughout the games, be somebody of sporting significance from the host country. In the last Olympics held in the United States, the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, the person who was given this honor was Mike Eruzione, the captain of the 1980 US gold-medal hockey team, and the player who scored the winning goal in their famous “Miracle on Ice” victory over the highly favored Soviet Union.

As he prepared to light the cauldron at the top of the Olympic stadium, Eruzione waved for his teammates who were standing nearby to join him and they all lit the torch together in a gesture acknowledging that their success was not the result of one man alone, but of the whole team who worked together to achieve one of the most memorable victories in Winter Olympics history, a victory celebrated not just by that team, but by the entire country.

This image is a fitting one for the Feast of the Presentation which the Church celebrates today. As Mary and Joseph presented their child in the Temple, the prophet Simeon praised the Lord, proclaiming that Jesus is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel” (Luke 2:32). This light, which has come into the world, is meant to draw all people together from every corner of the world so that they might share in the victory that He would accomplish over sin and death in His Passion, Death, and Resurrection.

Unlike the 1980 US Olympic gold-medal hockey team, this victory *is* the result of one man, for He alone was able to accomplish the defeat of our ancient enemy. However, that victory was won for the purpose of us all, so

that we too might share in the fruits of His victory, namely new life in Christ and the possibility of eternal life in Heaven.

The Feast of the Presentation also has a special connection to the consecrated religious life. In fact, twenty years ago, Pope St. John Paul II decreed that this feast day should be celebrated as the World Day of Consecrated Life. The Holy Father, referring to the Gospel passage of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, said the following:

In this way the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple is an eloquent icon of the total offering of one's life for all those who are called to show forth in the Church and in the world, by means of the evangelical counsels "the characteristic features of Jesus -- the chaste, poor and obedient one."¹

It is therefore fitting that we gather today for this special celebration in which we will witness the First Profession of these vows by Sister Pieta as she begins her life of consecration in this religious community. We are also blessed to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of Sister Mary Gabriel, who has faithfully lived her life of religious consecration for sixty years.

Normally, the profession of vows and the celebration of jubilees take place at separate liturgies, highlighting the unique nature of each

milestone. Today, we have the privilege of looking at both, seeing consecrated religious life in a much broader way from the early stages of the journey to the final stretch that culminates in being welcomed into the fullness of life in Christ in Heaven.

While there are differences to be observed in these two milestones, there are also similarities. In our Gospel for today's Mass, Jesus urges His disciples: "Remain in my love" (John 15:9). It is that light of His love that burns in the heart of each of you and keeps you firmly rooted in this way of life.

For you, Sister Pieta, that fire of Christ's love has drawn you here and consumed you with the desire, as St. Paul says in the first reading, to accept "the loss of all things" so that you might "gain Christ and be found in him" (Philippians 3:8-9) through a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. You are about to profess that you desire to belong to Him alone, and through that belonging to Him, to be that light which makes His merciful love visible to the world around you.

For you, Sister Mary Gabriel, the fire of Christ's love has continued to burn in your heart for these past 60 years. That fire has undoubtedly been a purifying agent in your life so that what shines forth is brighter and purer

than when you were first consecrated to this way of life so many years ago. And yet, as you will express later in this liturgy, you desire to live with an even greater perfection as you look forward to being more deeply integrated into the love that the Lord has kindled in your heart.

The words of St. Paul in our first reading provide a fitting summary of where you are at this stage of your journey, as he writes: “It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ [Jesus]” (Philippians 3:12). While you have much to be thankful for in your many years of religious life, you are called to make it your longing not to dwell on the memories of the past, but to continue moving forward, as St. Paul once again so clearly articulates: “forgetting what lies behind but 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).

The witness of these two sisters on their special day is an invitation to all of you, dear sisters, who make up this community of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George. Those of you who are young can look with hope to the future, seeing in those who are older the joy of a life well-

lived. These older sisters have had their lives molded by Christ by conforming them more closely to the Cross, an experience that will bring suffering at times, but always with the sweetness of knowing that the Lord, who is the love of your life, will never abandon you, but will always give you the strength to become more perfect through those sufferings. Be eager to learn from their wisdom and experience so as to benefit richly from the gift of their presence in the community.

For the older sisters, you can look with hope on those who are younger, seeing in them the love of Christ burning brightly as they eagerly desire to carry on the charism of this community to which you have dedicated your lives. Your efforts have not been in vain, and even if you cannot engage in the apostolic work that you once were able to do, you can make Christ's merciful love visible to these, your sisters, by offering your prayers, sacrifices, wisdom, and love, thus encouraging them to build upon the foundations to which you have contributed through your life in this community.

In one of his final homilies before entering into a life of more dedicated prayer and penance in preparation for the final leg of his journey here on earth, Pope Benedict XVI addressed the consecrated religious of the

world with words that beautifully summarize our celebration today of these two sisters and of your common celebration of the gift of consecrated religious life. He said the following:

Lastly, I invite you to renew the faith that makes you pilgrims bound for the future. By its nature the consecrated life is a pilgrimage of the spirit in quest of a Face that is sometimes revealed and sometimes veiled...May this be the constant yearning of your heart, the fundamental criterion that guides you on your journey, both in small daily steps and in the most important decisions.²

May the Eucharist, which we are about to receive, nourish you, dear sisters, as that bread for the journey which you need in order to persevere in running the race that lies ahead of you, so that you may reach the finish line of this pilgrim journey of faith. There, you hope to receive neither a medal nor a crown. Rather, you hope enter into the blessed company of those who have completed the journey ahead of you, and who are urging you on to enter into the presence of your Beloved and to look with joy upon His Face for all of eternity.

In closing, I would like to sing a song that sets this message to music. Last summer at World Youth Day in Krakow, about 20,000 young people

from North America gathered in a basketball arena for a Holy Hour, which included a song by Matt Maher called, “Your Grace is Enough.” My dear Sisters, always remember this: God’s grace is all you will ever really need!

Great is Your faithfulness, oh God
 You wrestle with the sinner's restless heart
 You lead us by still waters into mercy
 And nothing can keep us apart

So remember Your people
 Remember Your children
 Remember Your promise, oh God

Your grace is enough
 Your grace is enough
 Your grace is enough for me

Great is Your love and justice, God of Jacob
 You use the weak to lead the strong
 You lead us in the song of Your salvation
 And all Your people sing along

So remember Your people
 Remember Your children
 Remember Your promise, oh God

Your grace is enough
 Your grace is enough
 Your grace is enough for me

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Message for the 1st World Day of Consecrated Life*, 6 January 1997.

² Pope Benedict, *Homily at Mass for 17th Day of Consecrated Life*, 2 February 2013.