

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

August 2, 2017

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

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

Your Eminence, Cardinal Rigali, Your Excellencies, my brother Bishops, Reverend Fathers and Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here on this joyful occasion as we witness the gift of seven sisters, who each take another step forward in their vocations with this community of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George.

Just this past Sunday, I had the opportunity to celebrate Mass at Mundelein Seminary in the very sanctuary where I was ordained both a deacon and a priest. I always enjoy the opportunity to be there because it allows me to come back to the roots and the very beginnings of my priesthood and to be renewed in that way. I am sure that many of the sisters of this community are experiencing that same sense of renewal as they remember with fondness that day on which they took the very steps that you, dear sisters, are taking today.

We all need to go back to our roots from time to time, reflecting on the way things were at the beginning, and recapture those treasures which may have been lost or corrupted over the years. Going back to the roots is a very radical thing to do, since the root of the word 'radical' is the Latin word *radix*, which means 'root.'

For us individually, going back to our roots as Christians means revisiting what it means to have been baptized. It means trying to recapture the meaning of what it means to be a Christian, or discovering that meaning for the first time in case we have never truly appreciated the true significance of being adopted sons and daughters of God. It means delving deeper into the implications of having been confirmed in the faith and being fully initiated as adult Christians filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit. It means truly comprehending the consequences of our bodies and our blood being transformed by the Body and Blood of Christ when we receive His Real Presence in the Eucharist. It means acknowledging the need to repent and confess our sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a firm purpose of amendment when we have strayed from His path, so that

we can be restored to a right relationship with our heavenly Father through His bountiful and merciful grace.

For us as a Catholic community, going back to our roots as Christians means living as a people whose collective memory of the faith goes back two thousand years to the time of Jesus Christ and the early post-resurrection Christian community, and even beyond to our Old Testament roots of the twelve tribes of Israel as the Chosen People of God.

As a religious community, it is also important to go back to your roots, especially on a day such as this one. Today, August 2nd, marks an important part of the roots of the Franciscan tradition, for this day is the Feast of Our Lady of the Angels of the Portiuncula. This “little portion” was one of the three chapels Saint Francis set about repairing after hearing the Lord speak to him those memorable words: “Francis, go and build up my house which, as thou seest, is falling into ruin.”¹ That site would become the motherhouse of the Franciscan friars in their earliest years. It was also there where Saint Clare came to take her vows. Finally, it was there that Sister Death came to St. Francis as he passed from this life to eternal life in Heaven.

From these roots, the Franciscan family would continue to grow as more friars chose to follow this new way of life as First Order Franciscans. Women began to join the Second Order, known today as the Poor Clares. Many other communities, this one included, would be founded which follow the Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis. At the root of each of these communities is a specific charism taken from the Franciscan spirituality which guides the direction of that community. The charism adopted by this community of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George is to make the merciful love of Christ visible.

All of you, dear sisters, are invited to let this reminder of your roots be a source of renewal for your vocation, regardless of where you find yourself on that journey. For the seven of you for whom we are gathered today, may you see the words, actions, and symbols, specific to this day, through that lens of your charism, and so serve as the guide for how you will live this next stage of your journey in religious life.

While it is true that all three of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience are channels through which Christ's merciful love

is made visible, I would like to focus on just one of those today, the vow of chastity for the sake of the kingdom. I do this for two reasons. First, because “the Church has always taught the pre-eminence of perfect chastity for the sake of the Kingdom, and rightly considers it the ‘door’ of the whole consecrated life.”² Second, I believe at this time in our society, it is the authentic witness of this virtue of chastity that we most need, and one that you have the privilege of offering in a special way.

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 about the challenges that exist to living a life of consecrated chastity. He says the following:

The first challenge is that of a hedonistic culture which separates sexuality from all objective moral norms, often treating it as a mere diversion and a consumer good and, with the complicity of the means of social communication, justifying a kind of idolatry of the sexual instinct. The consequences of this are before everyone's eyes: transgressions of every kind, with resulting psychic and moral suffering on the part of individuals and families.³

In the twenty-one years since the Holy Father issued that document, this reality has become even clearer with so many instances in which the culture has distorted the meaning of love and sexuality as intended by God at the very root of our existence in the Garden of Eden.

The sainted Holy Father responds to these challenges to chastity by holding up consecrated life as a joyful witness to draw attention to the beauty of this virtue. He says the following:

The consecrated person attests that what many have believed impossible becomes, with the Lord's grace, possible and truly liberating. Yes, in Christ it is possible to love God with all one's heart, putting him above every other love, and thus to love every creature with the freedom of God!⁴

To many, the idea of chastity is seen through a negative perspective, and as such, a burden. Your witness, however, points to the fact that chastity is not a rejection or negation of love, but rather a "joyful affirmation" in which chastity "is simply to say Yes to His Love, with an affection that is clear, ardent, and properly ordered."⁵

The joy that comes from embracing this virtue of chastity is not automatic, however. Just pronouncing your vow to “forego the joys of marriage and unite yourselves more closely to Christ”⁶ is not sufficient. Nor is the wearing of the religious habit and veil a guarantee to success in living this virtue. While they provide a helpful visible reminder “as a sign of that wondrous marriage between the Church and Christ,”⁷ they will not guard your heart from the attacks against this prized virtue.

Joy will come when you freely accept the gift of Christ’s unconditional love for you in the depths of your heart. Hear the poetic words of the Bridegroom in our First Reading from the Song of Songs speak to you: “Arise, my friend, my beautiful one, and come! (Song of Songs 2:10). He invites you to come and experience His unique love for you. Having received that gift of His love, just as He has received the love of His Father, He speaks those words we just heard in the Gospel: “Remain in my love” (John 15:9).

To live this vow well, remaining steadfastly in His love alone, you will need to be ever vigilant, guarding against letting any other love enter that place which, by your vow, is reserved to Him alone. Resolve “to want

to please God in everything, to think of Him continually, to consecrate body and soul completely to Him.”⁸ May the image of Christ’s supreme act of love for you and the whole world, the crucifix, which will remain close to your heart, be an ever present reminder to you of that love. In the words of St. Augustine, “let Him who was fastened to the cross be securely fastened to your hearts.”⁹

Vigilance in protecting this gift, important as it is, will also not suffice. As he states in his Encyclical on Consecrated Virginity, Pope Pius XII writes that “those helps must also be used which entirely surpass the powers of nature, namely prayer to God, the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist, a fervent devotion to the most holy Mother of God.”¹⁰ These are the most effective means of remaining in His love, for they foster the divine life in the soul which enable you to say with confidence those words of St. Paul: “I can do all things in Him Who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

Therefore, dear sisters, ask for the grace today to be Christ’s humble instruments in making His merciful love visible to the world around you through your witness of consecrated life. In particular, ask Him for the

grace to live that virtue of chastity well. In our culture, such a witness has the power to be a “captivating”¹¹ example which invites others to see that living the virtue of chastity, and indeed all virtues, is not only possible with God’s help, but also joyful.

May our Blessed Mother, Queen of Angels and Virgin of virgins, intercede for you at all times, and thus obtain for you the gift of being constantly aware of Her Son’s love for you. May that merciful love of Christ enflame your hearts and free them from every earthly love, so that you may more freely devote yourself to assisting others on their pilgrimage through life. Then, when you and all of those whom you have assisted through your dedicated service of charity come at last to the throne of Christ the King, may you not fear Him as your judge, but hear the voice of the Bridegroom lovingly inviting you to the wedding feast of heaven.¹²

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ St. Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, 18.

² Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §32.

³ Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §88.

⁴ Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §88.

⁵ St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, §177-178.

⁶ *Rite of Profession*.

⁷ *Rite of Profession*.

⁸ Pope Pius XII, *Sacra virginitas*, §15.

⁹ St. Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, cc. 54-55; PL XL, 428.

¹⁰ Pope Pius XII, *Sacra virginitas*, §61.

¹¹ Pope Pius XII, *Sacra virginitas*, §29.

¹² *Rite of Profession – Solemn Blessing of the Newly Professed*.