

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

**August 2, 2019**

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

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

Your Excellency, Bishop Liesen, Reverend Fathers and Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here for today's celebration, which is filled with Divine Joy as we join together to witness and celebrate the reception of now Sisters Mary Elizabeth Grace, Mary Avila, and Mary Emmaus into the Novitiate, and the first profession of vows of Sr. Mary Clare, each further giving their lives over in consecration to the life and charism of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George.

Upon arriving here today, it was with sadness but with hope in eternal life that I learned that Mother Ingeborg had passed away early this morning. Over the past nine years that I have been Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, I have had many occasions to come here to St. Francis Convent of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George. On several of those occasions, I had been forewarned that Mother Ingeborg was not feeling well, but each time she seemed to rally herself and make her way to see me in the Bishop's Room prior to Mass before I had a chance to go to her room myself. So I was somewhat surprised to hear that she had died prior to this Mass

today, but then I remembered that Mother Ingeborg always had exquisite timing: she died on the day of the anniversary of her own religious profession, but I also think she really wanted a better seat from which to see today's liturgy! Let us pray for the repose of Mother Ingeborg's soul. Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord, and may her soul and the souls of all the faithful departed rest in peace.

In addition to thanking God for the life of Mother Ingeborg, there are many others to thank today. I thank my brother Bishop Jan Liesen for his presence and for his leading the Sisters in their retreat these past days. I thank all the Oblates of the Blessed Virgin Mary, especially Fr. Jeremy Paulin, for their yearly hospitality in this beautiful Church. Also, it is with fatherly delight that I greet and thank all my brother priests who have come here for this occasion. I thank Mother Maximilia, and all the Franciscans Sisters here for their preparation, excitement, and prayers for this day and even more for their constant love and fidelity here in our diocese, confirmed by the fruit it bears in these new members of their community. I thank, as well, all of you dear brothers and sisters in Christ for your joy and prayers this day. Finally, but most importantly, I thank Our Good Lord for the abundant graces He has poured out upon all of us, most profoundly my dear Sisters!

St. Paul sums up what has been made visible in this liturgy today: "over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection."<sup>1</sup> His words, directed to "God's chosen ones," certainly apply to all of us, but today most particularly, they are addressed to you, Sister Mary Elizabeth Grace, Sister

Avila, and Sister Emmaus, as you enter the novitiate and receive your religious names.

Throughout Sacred Scripture we see again and again God's choice of certain people reflected in their reception of a new name. Think of Abram receiving a name befitting one promised innumerable descendants, *Abraham* – and chosen to transmit to the world God's covenant and blessings. Think of Jacob, receiving that name marking his perseverance in wrestling with God, *Isra-el* – and chosen as the faithful patriarch of the chosen people. Think of Simon, a sinner, but graced to recognize Christ the Son of the living God, named *Peter*, rock – and chosen to be Christ's Vicar in His Church. Today my dear *Sisters*, with your new names know that the Lord has chosen you, holy in His sight, *beloved* by Him, to enter more closely in relationship with Him, and here, in this community, to put on "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience,"<sup>2</sup> that is, *to put on love*.

Sister Mary Clare, you have already received your name, now two years ago at your own entrance into the novitiate, but today, more than then, *you choose* that love. In a few moments you will resolve, having *received* God's love, to consecrate yourself to Him in spousal love. Today, having lived these past years with your heart stretched and tested and molded to be like Christ's Sacred Heart, now, today, with the freedom that only comes from constancy and devotion, you choose Him. To the Colossians, Paul describes that love he calls them to "put on" as "the bond of perfection" and the "peace of Christ."<sup>3</sup> It is not a love from your human capacity, but a love that has been elicited and made possible by His love first, perfect and infinite, unique and personal, not as the world gives, but as Christ gives.

Today you make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, to give yourself over to His love, His peace, *to Him*, that everything you do and say from this day on may be done “in the name of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul’s words are addressed to all those at Colossae, and they are addressed to *all of us* today. Baptism is where that first abundant gift of God’s love chooses us to be His beloved children, and purifies our hearts in and for Divine compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love. We too are called then, and every day after, in our being named as *Christ-ian*, to choose for ourselves to “put on love,” that is, to receive and seek ever more the perfection and peace of Christ, doing *everything* in the name of the Lord Jesus. This is the foundation and profundity of every Christian vocation, this is the universal call to holiness, and the invitation Christ offers all of us of His love into eternity as saints.

But today, my dear sisters, is the day that this call is made particular in your lives, today that love takes flesh in your lives. Pope St. John Paul II speaks to this reality in *Vita Consecrata*:

In fact, all those reborn in Christ are called to live out, with the strength which is the Spirit’s gift, the chastity appropriate to their state of life, obedience to God and to the Church, and a reasonable detachment from material possessions: for all are called to holiness, which consists in the perfection of love. But Baptism in itself does not include the call to celibacy or virginity, the renunciation of possessions or obedience to a superior, in the form proper to the evangelical counsels. The

profession of the evangelical counsels thus presupposes a particular gift of God not given to everyone, as Jesus himself emphasizes with respect to voluntary celibacy (cf. Mt 19:10-12). This call is accompanied, moreover, by a specific gift of the Holy Spirit, so that consecrated persons can respond to their vocation and mission.<sup>5</sup>

Where can we turn to know this particular gift of God? How does this specific gift of the Holy Spirit come upon you dear sisters today? For our reflection, we are given part of the High Priestly Prayer that Our Lord allows His apostles to hear in the moments before His passion. Jesus prays “that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me.”<sup>6</sup> That love of the Father for Christ, Christ bestows on us, “that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them.”<sup>7</sup> True love is never given conditionally, but to an entire person, *completely*, no strings attached. True love is never given theoretically, but in *concretely*, not merely as an interior feeling. True love is never given generically, but *personally*, to another, because of who that person is. Today, that love with which the Father loves the Son, is given completely, concretely, and personally to each of you in an indescribable and incredible way. This, the love of the Trinity, is *the* gift that will bring you to *perfection* – no passing love will do that, only the constant and unconditional Love of God. This is a love that is stronger than any death, any difficulty, any trial, and any temptation that lies in your future consecrated lives – God

absolutely, concretely, in sacrament and sacrifice, sustains and transfigures you, sends and inspires you. This love is *to be known by God*, completely and utterly – there is no more *personal*, no more intimate, no more particular gift of Divine Charity. It is a Love that will be renewed each day in the Eucharist, and in Christ’s presence in your Sisters, and all the “little ones” you care for in your lives as Religious Sisters.

But, dear Sisters, is also a Love that *you* must return constantly, concretely, and personally. Sisters Mary Elizabeth Grace, Mary Avila, and Mary Emmaus ... Every day you will clothe yourselves again in the habit of St. Francis that you have received today; let it be a constant and daily renewal of your love for the Lord. Everything you do will be in that habit, so let everything you do be an oblation to Christ’s Love! As you wake each day, you will choose again to take up the Rule and Constitutions of this community; let it be a concrete way for you to express your love for Him Who leads you through those means to perfection and peace. Let them be the terrain and foundation upon which you freely give yourself back to Him in all the innumerable opportunities you have to do so each day!

Today in a particular way you are entrusted with the Breviary, which you will pray throughout each day in community; let it be the refrain and heartbeat of your personal love for Christ. Receive His peace as you return for each hour to the chapel, and let the prayers He inspired, and prayed Himself, become your own words of love for Him!

Sister Mary Clare, your reception and reciprocation of Christ’s love takes the even more particular form of your profession of the Evangelical Counsels. These vows will be your constant bond to God in the years to

come. May poverty, chastity, and obedience, in all the ways small and large that they mold your life, become the incarnation of Christ's constant love in you. They are His gift to you today; receive them each day with love! Concretely placed in your hands today is the crucifix. Carry Jesus with Love. Kiss His cross as you take up your own crosses and follow Him. Receive every trial as a type of *stigmata* like His, a concrete imprinting of His own wounds in you. You are also given the rosary of Our Lady's joys, and no gift could better remind you of God's personal love for you, and allow you to return that kind of love to Him. May Mary's pondering heart lead you to see the Father's Love for you, His daughter, in all things!

Finally, each of you today has received the veil along with these other gifts. Perhaps most of all, this, the white and black veil, captures a final aspect of your consecrated life: to a world that needs love, *you are its beacon*. Your veil will be a constant reminder that you have offered all the wealth of your house for eternal-love, and though at times you will be utterly despised and misunderstood for it,<sup>8</sup> you are also overshadowed by God's Fatherly care, purified by His Body and Blood, and protected by His indwelling. Today, and every day, you are a sanctuary of His love, you beckon us to keep our eyes fixed on heaven, and you live in yourselves the mystery of the Church's marriage with Christ. The world does not know this kind of love, but Christ does, and today He sends you to make known the Love of the Father, "that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them."<sup>9</sup> *Never fear to "put on love," never fear to witness to the love Christ bestows on you today!*

A religious vocation is a call of love from God, so I think it is fitting to close with a song called simply, "The Call," by Ralph Vaughan Williams:

*Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:  
Such a Way, as gives us breath:  
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:  
Such a Life, as killeth death.*

*Come, My Light, my Feast, my Strength:  
Such a Light, as shows a feast:  
Such a Feast, as mends in length:  
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.*

*Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:  
Such a Joy, as none can move:  
Such a Love, as none can part:  
Such a Heart, as joys in love.*

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 3:14.

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 3:12.

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 3:14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 3:17.

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, #30.

<sup>6</sup> John 17: 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> John 17:26.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Song of Songs 8:7.

<sup>9</sup> John 17:26.