

**Final Profession of Vows
of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George**

August 3, 2020

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

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

My brother Bishop, John Quinn, Reverend Fathers and Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here to celebrate once again these sacred mysteries. Yesterday we had the glorious celebration of the entrance of three new sisters into the novitiate, and four into temporary vows, and today we join together in this Mass to witness the final profession of six additional sisters. These six women, your daughters and siblings, and sisters in their consecrated life to all of the other Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George, today will ratify for the rest of their lives, their vows of consecrated chastity in the celibate state, poverty, and obedience. The promises they will take make clear the purpose of these evangelical counsels: to “forever forego the joys of marriage and unity yourselves more closely to Christ ... *to make visible the love of the Church for Christ,*” to “continue in poverty Christ’s life of self-denial *in the*

service of others,” and “through your obedience in this Community, at the call of the Church, to build up the Kingdom of God.”

Celibate chastity to make visible the love of the Church for Christ ... Poverty to continue Christ’s self-denial and service ... and Obedience to build up the Kingdom of God. Each of these vows, my dear sisters, you have already taken, and for the past few years, you have lived them out. Yesterday, some of your fellow sisters made them in a preliminary way, making them, like yourselves, Junior Professed sisters. But today is the moment you make them for the rest of your lives, and so it is fitting that we contemplate this particular attribute, *permanence*, as we ask the Lord today to open our minds and hearts to the reality of these vows at this Mass.

Our world is allergic to permanence, to surrendering one’s freedom, to commitment and obligation. We squirm at the thought of a two-year mobile-phone plan, much less the weight of a mortgage, or the surrender asked for in marriage. Our desire seems to stem from not knowing what, or who, will come along after today, and so we want to keep our options open, just in case something better turns up. Some would describe this as FOMO, fear-of-missing-out, yet the disease that afflicts our hearts goes deeper than seeking to always achieve the best option, or even to protect our freedom

from unnecessary commitments. Rather, we are afraid *to entrust ourselves* to someone, or something, beyond our control; *to give ourselves* away; fundamentally we are afraid *to love*. Because when we choose to love, we open our hearts to pain and rejection, the possibility of being not-loved in return, or worse, being denigrated, disdained, and discarded. Worse, it seems, when we choose to love permanently, we think we are all the more risking the depths of who we are, our worth, our dignity, our selves.

This tendency, this concupiscence, that shows itself in our unwillingness to commit, is not new. Ever since Satan in his pride said he would not serve, and Adam and Eve in their disobedience would not trust, we have constantly been afflicted with this aspect of Original Sin, and the propensity to trust ourselves instead of God, our plan instead of His, our future — not in His hands, but our own. Even creation itself seems now to groan under the burden of temporality and decay. It seems that sin has made all things passing, and our typical response to the situation has been not a turn back to God, but an attempt to grasp all the more tightly to the fleeting persons, possessions, and power that surround us. We search there for solid ground, but we fail to find it.

Today, however, you make a choice in the opposite direction. Chastity, lived in the celibate state as a consecrated religious Sister; poverty, lived in the charism of St. Francis of Assisi; and obedience, lived in imitation of Christ himself, are three different ways to choose not the ephemeral, but that which is eternal; not the passing or incomplete, but that which is perfect and permanent, not the conditionally-given life, but a life totally-given, nothing held back. The truth you have discovered, and which you exemplify for all of us today, is that we are made for eternity, and nothing less than eternity will be sufficient to fill us. Your anthem could well be Saint Augustine's famous line: "you have made us for yourself, O, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Yet your vows go even further than this! Many would look at the decision you make today and say, "Well, if it makes her happy..." And, yes, of course, joy is a byproduct of a life given to the Lord, so if anyone were to step into this Church right now, they could not help but feel the absolutely supernatural joy that saturates this place. But subjective happiness is not the end-goal; rather, eternal communion with God Himself is our ultimate aim. We do not follow God *because* He promises joy, or *because* He fulfills our

hearts. Rather, we follow Him first, and in so doing we find that He fills us with joy, and fulfills every desire we have.

My dear sisters, Sister Mary Lucy Gantt, Sister Karol Marie Baumgarten, Sister Teresa Maria Leis, Sister Mary Francis Goodson, Sister Mary Caterina Vola, and Sister Mary Gemma Kissel, your vows remind all of us, and they protect in your own lives, that truth! Celibate chastity, poverty, obedience ... none of these vows specifically assures you of happiness. Rather each of them assures you of something more fundamental than happiness: *Christ's love*. Celibate chastity: to make visible the *love* of the Church for Christ ... Poverty: to continue *Christ's self-denial* and service ... Obedience: to build up the *Kingdom of God*. The truth that they speak loud and clear to a world desperately hungry for it is this: that **Christ-like love is not conditional**, and *Christ-like lives cannot be conditional either*.

Our fear to commit, our distaste for obligation, our unwillingness to surrender ... all of those things come from a fear that we will *lose love*. And so, in the fullness of time, it is God Himself Who comes to our rescue, to promise definitively, forever, eternally, that His covenantal love for us *will never end*. He surrenders His freedom to incorporate ours into it. He offers His life so that we might live ours in Him. He offers His love no matter the

cost, and no matter the rejection, so that we might begin to trust again, and might slowly open our hearts again to our Heavenly Father.

He can barely say it any more clearly than in our readings for this Mass: from Hosea: "I will betroth you to me forever ... with justice and with judgement ... with loyalty and with compassion ... with fidelity, and you will know that I am the Lord." From St. Paul: "[H]e chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ." From Our Savior Himself: "I made known to them your name, and I will make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

But God *does* say it more clearly, when at every Mass the priests repeats Christ's words, "***This is my body*** which will be given up for you ... ***this is the chalice of my blood***, the blood of the new and eternal covenant."

My dear sisters, and all of us here present, let us choose this day, resolutely, freely, fully, to entrust ourselves to God. Open wide the doors of your hearts to Him; we will lose nothing in doing so. Rather, we will be brought back into the freedom of the sons and daughters of God, and made more open to the never-ending Love God holds for each of us.

Our world is hungry for this kind of love, for an unconditional kind of love. May our lives exemplify the reality that we receive: precisely this gift of love at every Mass. And may we all keep these soon-to-be finally-professed Sisters in our prayers, as they exemplify in their lives a reciprocal gift of themselves back to Our loving Lord.

May God give us this grace. Amen.