

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

August 2, 2021

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

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

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good for us to be here!

My dearest sisters, four of you have just been welcomed into the Franciscan novitiate, and have received the Franciscan habit, rule, and particular constitutions of the Franciscan Sisters of the Martyr St. George, as well as the breviary of your congregation. Stacy Butler, Claire Callahan, JinYu Burnham, and Amber Robinson – now called Sisters Mary Giorgiana, Mary Paul, Stana Maria, and Mary Magdalena, respectively – these are all tremendous gifts. They are the instruments through which Our Lord will draw you upon the road to salvation.

Sister Mary Elizabeth Grace, you have now treasured those same gifts for some time and today approach the glorious moment of entering your First Profession of full, vowed, religious life with this Franciscan

Community. You too will be given gifts this day: the vows themselves of poverty, chastity, and obedience; the black veil; as well as crucifix and rosary. Each of these items have been blessed and sanctified by Christ through his priests, and through the many saints who have carried them before you in Franciscan religious life.

I have reflected in past years on all these various beautiful gifts of God – the vows, the rule, the habit, the rosary – all of them make up part of the path of sanctity that Jesus continues to lead you upon today. But Our Lord has given you an additional gift: each of you now bears the *name of Mary*. Though the gifts mentioned above are preeminent instruments of Christ's grace, rightly referred to as means of your salvation, I think this final gift is perhaps the most beautiful one that Jesus can give someone, and it is this gift that I would like to praise Him for today.

Moments ago we heard the everlasting words of the Archangel Gabriel to Mary. Luke carefully gives us all the details we need: names and places and situations and dates. But then we are amazed by something utterly new: an angel bursts from His place before God into our world and enters this solid, simple, sublime, scene. He is sent from God ... to Galilee; from heaven ... to the handmaid of the Lord; to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,

“and the virgin’s name was Mary.” She is there, ready to receive God’s messenger. He, a mighty angel, pauses as he enters her presence, and then speaks those words of God that announce the Lord’s coming to save the world: *“Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.”* We hear these words so many times each day, let us ask God for the grace to hear them anew today!

Before all else, we find ourselves in *a city of Galilee, called Nazareth*. An impoverished outpost at the northernmost reaches of promised land, impoverished physically as well as culturally and religiously, Nazareth is just about the most unlikely place for an angel to appear – unless you know God, and know His humility. Ours is a God who cares about both the great delta of the Nile and the gray desert of Sinai. He created a world filled with wonders ... and wildebeests, and he saw that *all of it “was good.”*

Moreover, God *loves* both the multitudes of Nineveh ... and the meek in Nazareth. It is first of all this poverty and humility – in her home, and her heart – that marks Mary. Many would assume a mighty angel would be disappointed to leave the splendor of heaven to enter this simple abode, but nothing could be further from the truth. Heaven is glorious *because God is there*, and that glory was just as present in Mary’s home as it is in the heights of heaven, because God was just as honored there. Ours is a God who

chooses "*what is weak in the world to shame the strong.*" He did so in choosing Mary, and He does so in choosing us. Our poverty – physical, cultural, spiritual – is no obstacle to Him unless we make it so. In fact, the heart that is empty and lowly is the best place in the world for God to find the greatest praise.

My dear sisters, as you take the name of Mary, allow your hearts, like hers, to become another Nazareth, poor, humble, but filled in giving glory to God. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.*

Luke includes another essential detail for our meditation today: Gabriel comes to "*a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph.*" For centuries, the Israelites had awaited the return of the Lord to His temple. Yet, on the wondrous day of the annunciation, a single daughter of Zion is saluted as the place where God desires to draw near to His people. Hosea's words are fulfilled: "*in that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'My husband.'*" The angel comes as a messenger of the King, asking if Mary would be the bride of God. Her virginity is in both body and soul, and she has waited for His invitation.

"Mary," the name recalls for all of us one who was totally available to God; totally transformed by His grace; totally open to His Presence. My sisters, you are given this name to remind you that this same invitation –

into spousal love with God – is yours too! You are meant to be an icon to the world of how far God’s love is willing to go, and what it can achieve through all who are open to it. If God can bring His own Son into creation through the willingness of the virgin, He can do great and marvelous and eternal things through your openness too! Your complete and faithful response to His love will be both your own salvation, and will also bring life to so many who will be united with you in walking towards God.

As you treasure Mary’s name as your own, treasure, too, this invitation into receiving a love like she was given! God’s love in her was poured out in a mother’s embrace; it can work the same transformation in each of you as well. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.*

One final detail prefaces Gabriel’s words to Mary: Luke simply states that the angel “*came to her.*” Of course, this reminds us again of the divine juxtaposition of poverty and glory, and virginity and motherhood, that we have already seen as Gabriel approached Mary ... but this simple statement leaves us with a final, and further juxtaposition as well: *obedience and joy.* Again, our world cannot comprehend these joined together. Would not an angel begrudge such a simple mission? No wrestling with Jacob here, nor bringing about the nuptials of Tobias. Ah, but Gabriel was *sent*, commanded,

entrusted with a Word from God, and can anything give greater joy than free participation in the will of God? The archangel was suffused by the *joy of obedience* – of hearing God’s voice, and putting it into action in his person. Mary, too, is given this joy: “*behold the handmaid of the Lord,*” she prays in response, anticipating the anthem of every saint: “*Your will be done.*”

My sisters, you will be blessed with the joy of the incarnation insofar as you emulate Mary’s obedience at the annunciation. The Lord will give you the joys of her who bore the name of Mary, insofar as your own obedience is just as permanent as your new name. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.*

Mary. She to whom God gave the gifts of poverty with glory, virginity with motherhood, obedience with joy. May her name, now your own, be a constant reminder that you are each day offered those same gifts! Receiving this new name takes nothing away from the particular person that God has made each of you to be, nor does your receiving *any* of the many gifts that God offers today. The Lord’s gifts do not take away anything from us! They are always His own self-gift to us, and as we receive them, we will discover that with Him, we only find ourselves all the more.

Hail Mary; Gentle Woman

Hail Mary, full of grace
The Lord is with you
Blessed are you among women
And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus

Holy Mary, mother of God
Pray for us sinner now
And at the hour of death
Amen

Gentle woman,
Quiet light,
Morning star,
So strong and bright
Gentle mother, peaceful dove
Teach us wisdom, teach us love

You were chosen by the father
You were chosen for the son
You were chosen from all women
And for women, shining one

Gentle woman,
Quiet light,
Morning star,
So strong and bright
Gentle mother, peaceful dove
Teach us wisdom, teach us love

May God give us this grace. Amen.