

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

August 2, 2018

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

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

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 six sisters, who each take another step forward in their vocations with this community of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George.

In an unusual novel called, *The Way to Paradise*, writer Mario Vargas Llosa reimagines and then reports the partially true adventure of two people in search of paradise. As the story unfolds, the painter Paul Gauguin and his grandmother Flora leave their comfortable but dull and wearisome lives behind and rush into the world to discover utopia. Paul journeys to the faraway island tropics in search of a place not yet defaced or contaminated by modern Western industry. His grandmother, on the other hand, remains in the developed world and works to obtain the political power needed to transform society, to produce with her own hands the long-desired paradise.

The painter looks to untouched nature without humanity, while his grandmother seeks to save the world herself. He hunts for paradise in the survival of the past and she anticipates it in a self-made egalitarian future. But after fruitless searches and years of exertion, neither find what they are looking for; both end their quests in despair.

I said the story is partly true because Llosa based this work on the actual travels of the artist Paul Gauguin at the end of the 19th century, who had fled Western civilization in search of paradise in Tahiti. When he found it ruined by tourists, he moved to the more remote Marquesas Islands, but when he arrived, he found the missionaries already there. Paradise was no more; Gauguin despaired, and attempted suicide.

Yet a year prior to this attempt, Gauguin had finished his masterpiece, a 55 x 148 inch painting that he titled with three questions: "*From where do we come? What are we? Where are we going?*" On one canvas, Gauguin poses the three questions each one of us asks himself or herself over a lifetime. They compel us to search out a paradise where answers may be found. In searching for these answers, many trudge the same paths as Gauguin and his grandmother.

Some look to the past, to a time and a place without humanity, thinking the problem is other people. The more common choice today is Flora's: thinking humanity itself is the paradise — that we are perfectly capable of producing the utopian future ourselves.

Christianity furnishes no easy answers to Gauguin's questions, no roadmap to take to uncover and inhabit paradise; instead, it offers an alternative. It advances a story that some may consider odd, a story of the God of Israel who becomes human in the person of Jesus. And the indispensable core of His story is the last three days of his life, taking us from the Last Supper to the empty tomb. That is where we find Jesus in today's Gospel from St. John: we are with Him at the Last Supper in the middle of his Farewell Discourse (John 15:9-7). In a matter of hours, He will be arrested; a few hours more, arraigned before Pilate; and a few hours more, crucified. And those now with Him, to whom he addresses His command to love as He loves, will flee. One will betray Him, another deny Him, and the rest, except for John, will not emerge until after the resurrection.

This is our foundational story, and we gather together at the altar every day to re-live it. Yet it is a story which tells of the moment when there was no story to tell, when our future disappeared.

We gather as a community around the altar and remember the night that the community disintegrated: our founding story is of the collapse of any story at all, and our community looks back to when it fell apart.

I said that some may consider the story of Christianity to be odd. Is it not odd that weekly, even daily, God returns us to a moment when we lost our certainty of what lay ahead, our certainty of entering into the paradise of the Kingdom where Jesus would reign, and justice, political and social, would be delivered by those closest to Him? That is what the disciples were waiting for; that is what they yearned for. Yet, hours later, they betrayed and abandoned Him.

Today, dear Sisters, five of you will enter the novitiate and one will make her first profession of vows. It is a day of celebration, love, and joy, when the whole of the future of your life now seems so certain. God has chosen you – chosen you to do magnificent things, as the Gospel tells us: to bear spiritual fruit in the world, and to intercede for it too, knowing that the Father hears you.

But the scriptures also tell us that every day of your religious life, even the best days like today, you will witness, confront, and live in this fragile moment of the disciples at the Last Supper: the moment of human weakness

and failure – not just in the scriptures, or in the Church today, or in the Sister next to you, but in your own life.

Today, and every day from now on, you are with the Lord – there, in that place, and He commands you: Remain in my love ... even if trial and crucifixion may be only hours away. Love one another as I love you ... even if they do not. Go and bear fruit that will remain ... no matter the cost.

It cost St. Paul his freedom and eventually his life. Yet listen again to the instructions he speaks to his fellow disciples at Colossae: “Put on ... heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also do” (Colossians 3:12-13). Paul wrote these words from prison. Even there in that darkness and seeming failure, he allowed the words of Christ to dwell richly in him.

This indwelling and imitation of the Incarnate Word is baptism’s gift, and its growth is the particular work of Consecrated Religious, as St. John Paul II makes clear in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*:

From the first centuries of the Church, men and women have felt called to imitate the Incarnate Word who took on the condition of a servant. They have sought to follow him by living in a particularly radical way...the demands flowing from baptismal participation in the Paschal Mystery of his Death and Resurrection. In this way, by becoming bearers of the Cross (staurophoroi), they have striven to become bearers of the Spirit (pneumatophoroi), authentically spiritual men and women, capable of endowing history with hidden fruitfulness by unceasing praise and intercession, by spiritual counsels and works of charity. (VC, 7)

Endowing history with hidden fruitfulness. This is your task, and you accomplish it by praise, prayer, poverty, chastity, obedience, and, over all these, says St. Paul, love — the bond of perfection.

To live in this way, of course, is to prove there is another way, a way other than that of Gauguin and his grandmother. Your life will be fruitful, proving that you will discover paradise not in avoiding your own or others' humanity, nor in perfecting it yourself. Both of these approaches end in disappointment and despair. But your life, even if it be within hours of the cross, will be one of joy, because Jesus has given you His. And others will see you are a friend of God, one who remains in His love, and they will want that too.

So, choose to live your profession in the moment of the Last Supper. Remain by Christ's side and in His love; know your weakness and rely on His strength; and let the word of Christ, Scripture and Eucharist, rich as they are, dwell in you. Then you will know what Gauguin did not, you will answer the questions, the masterpiece, he posed: "From where do we come? *The Love of the Father; What are we? The Bearers of His Cross and Spirit; Where are we going? To Calvary, to Paradise, to God.*

The best part of all is that we do not have to go looking for it. Paradise cannot be found on the other side of the globe; it will not be found without humanity or in a utopia. But it can be revealed in the glorified humanity of Christ and His Body the Church, who lays down His life for His friends, bearing the Cross, so that they might bear the Spirit.

There is no greater love, says the Lord,

Than to lay down your life for a friend.

There is no greater love, no greater love,

Than to lay down your life for a friend.

May God give us this grace.