

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

August 2, 2020

**St. Mary's Parish
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 for today's celebration, which invites us to receive for ourselves the abundance of love offered to us by Our Lord as we join together to witness and celebrate the reception into the novitiate of Clare Kennedy, now Sister Mary Veronica; Gabrielle Burnham, now Sister Bethany Marie, and Sidney Ramaekers, now Sister Mary Magnificat, as well as the first profession of Sisters Mary Rose Thomas Weighner, Mary Cecilia Abbadessa, Mary James Becker, and Peter Marie Tran. All of them this day are received more fully into this congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Martyr St. George, and all of them receive in return the symbols of their deeper self-surrender to the rules, habit, prayer, and charism of this order.

I am reminded this day, looking out upon all these Franciscan Sisters, of the example of St. Francis of Assisi. At the Basilica built over his grave in Assisi, Italy, there is a tremendous collection of frescoes painted by the Italian painter, Giotto, at the end of the 12th century. Just that date alone is impressive, since it is only several decades after Francis had died in 1226. During that time, not only had he been canonized merely two years after his death, but they had already begun building the giant Gothic basilica that would stand atop his tomb. If the speed with which they worked does not already give us an idea of how much the memory of Saint Francis was held sacred, Giotto's frescoes would leave no room for doubt.

Christian art had depicted saints since the catacombs, so that was nothing new. Yet in the Basilica in Assisi, you do not merely have a depiction of St. Francis, you have 28 giant wall-sized depictions of scenes of his life. As you stand there at the altar, they wrap out down the left side of the nave, around the far wall, and back along the right hand side, depicting his youth, his conversion, his rebuilding San Damiano, casting himself into the Heavenly Father's hands in the main square of Assisi, establishing the order, receiving visions of Christ, going to convert the Saracen invaders, establishing the first creche scene, preaching to the birds, receiving the

stigmata, as well as his death. All the stories we know and love of St. Francis are found stretched upon the giant canvases of that Basilica's walls, with the vivid colors and energetic characters for which Giotto was famous. Yet there was more to tell of Francis' life and holiness.

As one's gaze lifts from the scenes of St. Francis' life, above them we find giant panels again, this time depicting the life of Christ, and above them, stories above our heads, before the ceiling reaches its peak, scenes of the history of salvation, from Adam and Eve, through all the major characters of the Old Testament leading up to Christ. Even more marvelously, *the scenes match up*. As Francis takes off his clothes and gives them back to his father, to take God the Father as his only protector, he looks past the edges of the scene of his own life, and God the Father's hand reaches down from the scene of Noah and the Ark. God's providential care for Noah is made manifest again in the life of his servant Francis. In the famous scene of him preaching to the birds, as we look higher, Our Lord tells his apostles to "go, preach the Gospel, baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit". Francis was not a priest, and so he lived the great commission in the humblest way possible: speaking about Jesus to whomever was placed in front of him. As Francis receives the stigmata, the rays of light beaming

down direct our gaze upwards, where we find below the scene of Christ's Crucifixion. Our Lord's wounds are pressed into Francis' flesh; and he becomes for all of us an icon of the Savior that he so wonderfully emulated.

This was the marvel of St. Francis! In his life and death, he had given himself over to God to such an extent that he was widely known before dying as an *alter Christus*, another Christ, an image of Christ. *This, his holiness*, was why he was canonized in merely two years, and why the greatest painter of that century was tasked to depict the entirety of his life in paint, and more than that, to relentlessly connect Francesco d'Assisi's life to that of Christ, and to the entirety of God's salvific work.

These scenes depict a man of *poverty* – Francis gave away *everything* to give himself totally into the hands of God. A man of *humility* – he preaches, prays, and lies prostrate before God, with no regard for who is looking, who is not looking, or any other visible fruit from his faithfulness. Finally, they depict a man of *charity* – he gives his body so totally to the Lord that he dies at the age of 44, with the marks of Christ's passion in his hands, feet, and side.

My dear novices, today you receive the habit, and your sisters, soon to make their first profession, will receive the completion of their habit with the black veil. You are called this day to a *poverty* after the model of the *poverello* of Assisi. Never fear to surrender your belongings, your self-sufficiency, even your relationships and the desires of your heart into the hands of God. Today you confirm this intention and symbolize it by wearing the habit and abiding by the rule, but every day you will be offered the opportunity to renew this decision, and to rely on your Heavenly Father for everything. As you put your habit on each day, recall St. Francis divesting himself of everything in the piazza of Assisi, and take for your only possession the grace and love of God! St. Paul reminds us, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the *riches of his grace which he lavished upon us.*" Dear sisters, be joyful and content in becoming poor that you might be made rich with the graces and virtues of Christ!

Choose *humility* as well. Today this community is brought together in great joy. Today every sacrifice, work, labor, and stress that may come from the charism you take on, seems easy and light. Today your family and friends are watching with such love and happiness for you as you follow the

call Our Lord has planted in your heart for all eternity. But there will be less peaceful days to come. When those tensions come up, when communal life feels less like camaraderie and more like conflict, choose humility. When you find the work before you to be burdensome, fruitless, or challenging, imagine St. Francis preaching to the birds. When there is less reward and praise as the world sees your witness, when you confront the rocks and weeds in your own heart, offer them to the Sower in *humility*. Again, it is precisely in the “forgiveness of our trespasses” that we are filled with the riches of God’s grace.

Finally, my beloved sisters, put on love. Abide ... remain ... stay in the love of Christ. Just a year before he died, St. Francis established the first manger scene, which he cherished beyond so many other moments in his life, that chance to hold in his arms a baby representing the infant Christ. Carry your crucifix and rosary as if you were carrying the Christ Child! Take delight in cherishing Him, the greatest of all treasures. But also cherish and love those moments when, like St. Francis, it seems more like you are carrying Christ in his wounds and cross. The rosary reminds us of all the mysteries of Christ’s life, and as you carry it, you will walk through Christ’s entire life again and again. Let your life, and your love, be conformed in all

the mysteries of the days that lie before you, more and more to the mysteries of Christ's own life, and love.

It is He who chose you, this day, and from all eternity, to go and bear fruit, to go and love one another as He has first loved you, to go and abide in His love forever. Trust in His love for you, and never fear to let His love shine through your lives to all the world.

May God give us this grace. Amen.