

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

**August 3, 2024**

**St. Mary Church  
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 that we are here this morning for the joyful celebration of this Mass for these eight Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George, three of whom are being received into the Novitiate, two are making their First Profession of Vows, and three are making their Final Profession of Vows.

In the Rite of Initiation into the Novitiate that took place at the beginning of Mass, the postulants who received their habit and veil and their new religious names are Kristen Leaderstorf, now known as Sister Mary Emmanuel, daughter of Marc and Delphine Leaderstorf of Buffalo, New York; Taylor Smith, now called Sister Mary Grace, daughter of Randy and Lori Smith of Newton, Illinois; and Bridget May, now known as Sister Mary Solanus, daughter of David and Stephanie May of Shawnee, Kansas.

The two Novices who will make first profession of vows after this homily are Sister M. Magdalena Robinson, daughter of Nick and Becky Robinson of Glen Carbon, Illinois; and Sister Mary Kolbe McMullin, daughter of Scott and Theresa McMullin, of Brandon, Mississippi.

The three junior Sisters who will make final profession are Sister M. Veritas Wilks, daughter of Mark and Peggy Wilks of Gardiner, New York; Sister M. Philomena Cagandahan (*kah-gahn-DAH-hahn*), daughter of Crisostomo and Gracia Cagandahan, originally from Quezon City, Philippines, and later from Richmond, Texas; and Sister Mary Joseph Kneemiller, daughter of Robert and Elaine Kneemiller of St. Charles, Missouri.

It was not so long ago, in fact just this past Monday, that many of us were gathered in this very church for a Mass of a different nature, the Mass of Christian Burial for Father Steven Sotiroff, the Chaplain of your community for the past nine years. Although the mood from that Mass compared to this current one is markedly different, these two are actually more connected than we might initially realize.

I would suggest that the key that unites these two Masses celebrated here this week can be found in yet another recent gathering that brought many of you here to this church. That event was the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage which passed through Alton last month on July 9<sup>th</sup>, where the Blessed Sacrament was carried in precession through the streets of Alton, beginning at Ss. Peter and Paul Church, continuing to your Motherhouse, and finishing here at St. Mary's for the final Benediction.

The Eucharist is the key that unites Father Sotiroff's funeral this past Monday and this Mass of Religious Profession today. In his years of ministry to your community, the greatest gift he offered to you each day was the gift of celebrating the Mass, at which you were fed with the Bread of Life in the Holy Eucharist. The graces from those many receptions of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament have guided you and formed you into the sisters you are today, such that you are ready to take the next step in religious life, conforming yourselves more closely to the Heart of Jesus. To be sure, there are other aspects of Father Sotiroff's ministry that were impactful and important, and there have been many other elements of your

formation that have assisted you in your growth, but in both cases, there is nothing, rather nobody, more significant than Jesus in the Eucharist.

I understand that some of you also had the opportunity to participate in the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis two weeks ago. During those days, the gift of the Eucharist in the life of the Church was on full display. Of particular note was the significant number of consecrated religious women present for the Congress, a stunning testimony of the importance of the Eucharist in religious life. In this regard, Pope St. John Paul II reflected on the Eucharist as it relates to consecrated life in his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World, where he writes:

In the first place, the *Eucharist* “contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ himself, our Passover and living bread, who, through His very flesh, made vital and vitalizing by the Holy Spirit, offers life” to the human family. This is the heart of the Church's life, and also of the consecrated life. How can those who are called, through the profession of the evangelical counsels, to choose Christ as the only meaning of their lives, not desire to establish an ever more profound communion with him by sharing daily in the Sacrament which makes him present, in

the sacrifice which actualizes the gift of his love on Golgotha, the banquet which nourishes and sustains God's pilgrim people? By its very nature the Eucharist is at the center of the consecrated life, both for individuals and for communities. It is the daily viaticum and source of the spiritual life for the individual and for the Institute. By means of the Eucharist, all consecrated persons are called to live Christ's Paschal Mystery, uniting themselves to Him by offering their own lives to the Father through the Holy Spirit. Frequent and prolonged adoration of Christ present in the Eucharist enables us in some way to relive Peter's experience at the Transfiguration: "It is well that we are here." In the celebration of the mystery of the Lord's Body and Blood, the unity and charity of those who have consecrated their lives to God are strengthened and increased.<sup>1</sup>

Dear sisters, as you prepare to take the next step in your life of consecration to the Lord, I encourage you to find in the Eucharist the means by which your union with Him will be guarded and deepened. In the Gospel that we just heard from John 15, Jesus invites His disciples to "remain in my love" (Jn 15:9). This command of the Lord is given to you today as well, so that by remaining in His love, readily available to you in

the Eucharist, you will be able to live more effectively your community's charism to make that love visible.

At the Last Supper, when Jesus instituted the Eucharist, there are four verbs used to describe the action of what He did as He gave us this great gift: "And as they were eating, He took bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them" (Mk 14:22). These four actions can be a fruitful source of meditation, not just on what Jesus did then, but what He continues to do in and through you who are united so closely to this mystery, and so I would like to offer a few reflections on each of these actions.

First of all, Jesus took the bread. At some point in your journey of faith, Jesus called you to consider coming here to this community. For each of you, your discernment has been unique, and the path that led you here is different for all of you. Although you have freely chosen to enter into this way of life, the initiative is from the Lord. As we heard in the Gospel, "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you" (Jn 15:16). The Greek word used for "chose" can also be translated as "being elected", but this election is not how we have come to understand that term in our society. Thankfully, there are no election campaigns, advertisements, or debates!

There is no vote requiring a majority. Rather, God alone is the one who does the election through His Son Jesus. Today, you rejoice in the gift of being taken, of being chosen, being elected, by Jesus, to be His Bride, to live in closer union with Him, a union which will continue to deepen through the love communicated through the Eucharist.

Second, Jesus blessed the bread. When He took the bread, He did not leave it as it was. His blessing transformed it into His very Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. Such has been His work in you as well, dear Sisters. Having taken you from the world to enter this community, He has not left you unchanged. Rather, through His many blessings, He has molded you and shaped you into a more perfect reflection of His love. Perhaps it is not always easy to see those blessings, for we tend to focus on the less perfect parts of our lives, those places in our lives - visible and invisible - that remain unfinished. But you can have great faith in knowing that despite these imperfections, the Lord has blessed you generously during your time here. With all humility, you acknowledge that there will always be more work to do in your lives, and when that awareness comes, do not be discouraged, but rather bring those unfinished areas of your heart to Him

in the Eucharist, placing them on the paten, so that as the Holy Spirit blesses and transforms the bread and wine, so too will you continue to be transformed, so as to “bear fruit that will remain” (Jn 15:16).

Third, Jesus broke the bread. There was a practical reason for this action, to ensure that all of His disciples could share in the gift of the Eucharist. On a spiritual level, however, the breaking of the bread can signify how we have to be broken, so that the gift of Christ’s love in us can be shared more generously to more and more souls. There have doubtless been occasions during your time in this community where you have felt that you have been broken, being asked to take on a challenging apostolate, to move to a different house, to work on a particular aspect of your life. Those moments can be painful, leaving you to feel broken. Nevertheless, the Lord has not been far from you in those experiences, and has indeed used those times of brokenness to better prepare you for sharing His love with others, whether it be your fellow sisters, or the people whom you serve in your apostolates. We do not always see how that brokenness is at the service of something greater, but in faith we accept the truth of which St. Paul reminds us: “We believe that all things work for the good for those

who love God and are called according to His purposes” (Rom 8:28). Perhaps the area where we are all in need of allowing the Lord to break us is in our selfishness, by which we hold on to our plans, our ideas, our will. By allowing ourselves to be broken through the people and circumstances that arise in your life, the Lord is able to work more fully in and through you for the good of His Church.

Finally, Jesus gave the bread. Jesus does not simply give His Apostles physical bread to nourish their hunger. He gives them His very life to satisfy all of their desires. The following day, Jesus gave Himself totally on the Cross. With His hands spread out, they reveal that they are empty, showing that He has given *everything* out of love for them, and indeed for all mankind. The Eucharist that you receive each day is the fruit of that love, and in your receiving this great gift, Jesus’s words, “Do this in memory of me,” is a command not just to re-present the Last Supper in the Mass, but to live that total gift of self, made possible because of His gift in the Eucharist.

I am aware that each day, your community has the practice of praying with your arms extended, imitating your crucified Lord. In those

moments, you can beg the Lord for the grace to surrender more and more, to be given, as He was given, for the life of the world.

Dear Sisters, in just a few moments, the Lord will once again take you for Himself, choosing you, electing you to be drawn deeper into the love of His Sacred Heart. May you be filled with gratitude for the many ways in which He has blessed you, leading you to this place, and with trust in His merciful love, surrender yourself to the many blessings He still has in store for you. When you feel broken by the weight of your imperfections or the demands related to community life, trust that the Father knows what He is about and how, in His Providence, these places of brokenness will become places of blessing not just for you, but for others.

Finally, pray that through the grace of the Eucharist you will receive today and every day, you will be more willing to be given in imitation of the One who has given everything. May your hearts be the sanctuary where His love resides more fully, to the point of overflowing, so that through you, His merciful love will be made visible.

*Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary*

*Pure and holy, tried and true*

*With thanksgiving, I'll be a living*

*Sanctuary for You.<sup>2</sup>*

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §95.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Thompson and Randy Scruggs, "Sanctuary" (Full Armor Publishing Company, 1982).