

## **Homily for Simple Profession of Vows**

*Delivered by Fr. James McCurry, OFM Conv.*

*Shrine of St. Anthony*

*Ellicott City, Maryland*

*29<sup>th</sup> July 2021*

*Isaiah 61:9-11*

*Acts 2:42-47*

*John 12:24-26*

***[Newly Professed: Friars Michael Boes, Edgar Varela, Jonathan Garcia Zenteno, Sebastian De Backer]***

Michael, Edgar, Jonathan, and Sebastian – As you conclude your Novitiate year and are ready to profess your Simple Vows in a few minutes, I must say that no Novitiate class could possibly have had a more timely year to become immersed in our Franciscan charism. The year 2021 is the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Francis of Assisi’s composing the *Earlier Rule*, spelling out for the first time in writing the ideals upon which our Franciscan way of life would be based. While you were in the Novitiate, last October, three new documents were issued in commemoration of the Rule of 1221 – a 6-page letter from our Minister General, Fr. Carlos Trovarelli; a letter from all three Ministers General of the First Order, inaugurating a year-long observance of the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary; and Pope Francis’s encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, with its title and leitmotif taken from the *Admonitions* of St. Francis on the theme of fraternity and social friendships. Each of these arresting documents warranted your assiduous study during Novitiate. All three documents offer keen new insights into the quintessential Franciscan virtue of “*fraternitas*” – fraternity, brotherhood.

“Fraternity” stands unique as the defining charism of our Order – the noun “*fratres*” modified with inimitable distinction by the adjective “*minores*.” Not until Francis in 1221 wrote the *Earlier Rule* (dubbed *Regula non Bullata* – “The Rule without Papal Seal”), had any of the coenobitical religious Orders in the Church made “fraternity” its singular badge of identity. St. Francis’s call to universal brotherhood has assumed in the divided world of 2020-21 a greater urgency than ever. Society’s current divisions and conflicts have been cast into ever sharpening relief by the effects of the pandemic lockdowns. A thoughtful read of the three cited documents fills our hearts with new hope that – with the grace of God and supernatural charity – “brothers all” we truly can be! – *Fratres omnes; Fratelli tutti!!*

Fr. Carlos Trovarelli’s letter links the safeguarding of authentic fraternity to the deepening of individual and collective minority – Franciscan littleness or humility. Our Minister General writes: “*For the Poverello [St. Francis], fraternity was directly proportional to minority, and inversely proportional to dominion or power.*” St. Francis wanted his friars to be a fraternity of minority.

St. Francis lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when a prevailing class warfare between the haves and the have nots – the majors and the minors – the *majores* and *minores* – was tearing society apart.

Francis's personal life of *minoritas* – his humble littleness – living poorly, chastely, obediently – attracted followers. Francis's simplicity led to a growing community of minors – brothers wanting to live with Francis a common life of *minoritas*. Thus, a fraternity of minority was born – our Franciscan brotherhood in which the ideal of “*fraternitas*” would serve as God's remedy to social conflicts, an antidote to the struggles for privilege, violence, and war.

The Minister General's hermeneutic of the *Earlier Rule* and the *Later Rule* [1223] is that they propose fraternity as a “*life plan*” grounded in a Gospel ecclesiology of “*without power.*” Today's Gospel passage from St. John, chosen by our 4 novices to be professed, accents this ecclesial viewpoint. We friars are the small grains of wheat who grow together in one common field producing much fruit. In a challenge befitting the 120<sup>th</sup> successor of St. Francis, Fr. Carlos explained: “*We have no other power than that of being neighbors to the humble; to the persecuted; the simple, the tormented; the sick; the excluded; the pious; the believers; the young; the old; immigrants; those who are dispossessed; all of our brothers and sisters – even the difficult or problematic ones...*” Our Minister General's formula for creating such a spirit of “without-power fraternity”: always “*giving freely of oneself – beyond the quantifiable*”!

I mentioned that our Novices also studied a second new document, “*To Live and Follow,*” addressed to all the Friars of the First Order by the Ministers General of the Conventual, Observant, and Capuchin jurisdictions. The 3 Generals heralded a year-long contemplation of the *Earlier Rule* as St. Francis's “masterpiece.” They highlighted the fact that St. Francis himself was not the sole author of that text. The fraternity of early friars and Francis were co-authors! “*Certainly, it is Francis who makes the heart of the [Earlier] Rule beat, who injects the lifeblood of the Spirit into its compositional tissue. However, it would be better to say that it is a ‘general rule’; a work conceived and written down in dialogue with the friars....*”

The 3 Generals characterize the *Earlier Rule* Of 1221 as an “existential” expression of the essential Francis: “*The Earlier Rule sinks its fingers into the bread dough of existence... Its greatest concern is taking care of life, in all its forms. It cares about the journey of life!... St. Francis exhorts us in a thousand ways to be mindful of leading meaningful lives...*” In the *Earlier Rule*, however, the litmus test for meaningfulness of Franciscan life emerges clearly as the criterion of authentic fraternity.

The three Ministers General mince no words in accentuating bona fide fraternity: “*Just as there is an ‘anti-Christ’... so there is an ‘anti-Francis’.* Is it the attention we pay to the quality of our fraternal life that makes the difference? Of course, it is not the fraternal life by itself that makes the difference, but the care we take to live it... nothing is as ‘anti-Franciscan’ (or even anti-Christian) as a lifestyle that takes root outside of our devotion to the bonds of fraternity, the life and soul of which must be protected! Francis seems intent on giving us a healthy horror of any form of indifference towards the other...” This is pure, undistilled Franciscanism! The Franciscan ideal of “fraternity” presented to the world of 1221, and re-presents to the world of 2021, the same picture of Church that we see in the Acts of the Apostles, as proclaimed in today's second reading: The community devoting themselves to one another in littleness and the bond of unity.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2020, our novices were fixated upon the unique journey of Pope Francis to Assisi, where he actually signed the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* on the altar at the Tomb of St. Francis. His long and wide-ranging text about the universal communion of all humanity begins with his quoting the *Admonitions* (6:1) of our Seraphic Father:

*“FRATELLI TUTTI. With these words, Saint Francis of Assisi addressed his brothers and sisters and proposed to them a way of life marked by the flavor of the Gospel. Of the counsels Francis offered, I would like to select the one in which he calls for a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance, and declares blessed all those who love their brother ‘as much when he is far away from him as when he is with him’. In his simple and direct way, Saint Francis expressed the essence of a fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives. This saint of fraternal love, simplicity and joy, who inspired me to write the Encyclical Laudato Si’, prompts me once more to devote this new Encyclical to fraternity and social friendship. Francis felt himself a brother to the sun, the sea and the wind, yet he knew that he was even closer to those of his own flesh. Wherever he went, he sowed seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, the least of his brothers and sisters.”*

The whole text of the encyclical is informed by Pope Francis’ acknowledgement that St. Francis’s charism of promoting unity amongst diverse humanity is cogently applicable to modern times. The Holy Father links the theme of justice to that of Franciscan fraternity in minority. In the text, he highlights how St. Francis was wrapped in the mantle of justice, which we heard Isaiah laud in today’s first reading.

Now, Michael, Edgar, Jonathan, and Sebastian: Permit me to conclude this homiletic reflection and lead you toward your first profession of vows by citing Pope Francis’s prophetic challenge: “[St.] Francis did not wage a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; he simply spread the love of God. He understood that “God is love and those who abide in love abide in God” (1 Jn 4:16). In this way, he became a father to all and inspired the vision of a fraternal society... In the world of that time, bristling with watchtowers and defensive walls, cities were a theatre of brutal wars between powerful families, even as poverty was spreading through the countryside. Yet there Francis was able to welcome true peace into his heart and free himself of the desire to wield power over others. He became one of the poor and sought to live in harmony with all.

Dear Brothers, about to be professed: May you do likewise!