

Homily for Solemn Profession of Vows

Delivered by Fr. James McCurry, OFM Conv.

St. Louis Church

Clarksville, Maryland

30th July 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Colossians 3:1-4

Mark 10:24-30

[New Solemnly Professed: Friars Franck Sokpolie, Richard Rome, Timothy Blanchard]

Franck, Rich, and Tim – As you ready yourselves for your perpetual profession of Solemn Vows in a few minutes, you are intensely re-committing yourselves to the quest for holiness of life that St. Francis of Assisi passionately embraced. Our Seraphic Father’s quest for holiness proved to be so contagious that 800 years later young Catholics like yourselves have found this Franciscan vocation to be irresistible – the calling not just to be Friars Minor Conventual, but to be HOLY Friars. For Franciscans, holiness is not an abstraction. It is not a “pie in the sky” dream for unworldly “space-cadets.” Today’s second reading from St. Paul to the Colossians speaks of your desire to “*keep seeking the things that are above.*” Yet, this “seeking,” this quest for holiness means you are striving to draw so close to God that His Divine Love and Mercy radiate through you in your loving service to others – to the world.

Permit me to share with you, dear friars, in these minutes before your Solemn Profession, a lesson about holiness that St. Mother Teresa herself once taught a young Franciscan Friar. While that friar was giving some days of retreat to Mother Teresa and her sisters, Mother walked into the friar’s small study, sat down, and said to him: “*I’m getting old now, and sometimes I have to use my fingers to remind myself of important things.*” Suddenly she took hold of the friar’s fingers with her own gnarled ones, saying “*Repeat after me.*” She then taught him her “**10-finger formula for holiness.**” First on his left hand, pulling each of his fingers one at a time, Mother Teresa slowly said: “*I Will – I want – with God’s blessing – to be – holy.*” “*Now repeat,*” said she to the friar. “*Oh, Mother, I’ll never remember it,*” said he to her. “*I write down for you,*” said she. Then on a small white card of his, Mother Teresa wrote out the words and even numbered them 1,2,3,4,5. Continuing, she then took the friar’s other hand, and said, “*But it is not enough simply to want to become holy; you must show it in action. So, repeat...*” Pulling finger by finger on his right hand, Mother Teresa then quoted Jesus’s 5 words from Matthew 25:40: “*You – did – it – to – me*”. The friar replied, “*Oh, Mother, that’s easier to remember.*” Mother’s cute reply: “*Easier to say, harder to do.*” She then explained: “*Jesus said, ‘When you loved and cared for those who are hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or homeless, or sick or in prison, YOU DID IT TO ME!’*” Continuing her lesson as the good teacher, Mother Teresa said to the friar: “*Now repeat all 10 fingers.*” He did. Finally, with her strong wrinkled hands, she powerfully grasped both of his in the “Amen” position, saying: “**PUT TOGETHER – YOU WILL BE HOLY.**” Her lesson to the friar – and to all of his Franciscan confreres was simple yet profound: It is not enough simply to profess a solemn desire to be holy. We must match that desire with a lifetime of service to Jesus

as He looks out to us through the eyes of others – Jesus in the distressing disguise of needy and suffering humanity – Jesus in the hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, sick, imprisoned people whom we friars are humbly privileged to serve – the poor who teach us what the Gospel truly means.

This morning all of us here present in St. Louis Church, and viewing the Mass via live-stream, shall soon witness Friars Franck, Rich, and Timothy each kneel and fold their hands in the “Amen” position upon the Book of the Gospels. As I receive their vows, I’ll be clasping those hands tightly together – perhaps not with Mother Teresa’s strong force – but reminding these friars, nonetheless that their profession of Solemn Vows is a totally consecrated commitment to become holy through the loving service of God and neighbor – of God IN neighbor.

This perpetual life-plan of holiness is surely a daunting enterprise. Our three young lads know this, and perhaps that is why they chose for today’s Gospel reading the passage from *Mark 10:24-30*, which likens their quest to that “a camel passing through the eye of a needle.” Yet, after you hear each of these friars recite the words of his Solemn Vow formula, the Church responds to each with the hopeful assurance, “*I promise you everlasting life.*” For, as today’s Gospel proclaims for everyone to hear: “*All things are possible for God.*”

Franck, Rich, and Timothy – Like the boy Samuel in today’s first reading, each of you has heard God’s call – sometimes with the mixed signals and short-circuited communication that often occur during one’s formation years – but clearly God’s voice – always God’s voice. To God you three have simply kept repeating: “*Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.*” After today, let that same phrase become a perpetual mantra in your lives of perpetual commitment. As you put your hands to that task, your three vows will prove immeasurably helpful.

Let’s look for a moment at the three vows which Friars Franck, Rich, and Timothy are solemnly professing: poverty, chastity, and obedience. These three vows are based upon Jesus’s Gospel example, His own mode of life in this world, His three “evangelical” counsels. Mind you, they are counsels, not commandments – They are Jesus’s suggested mode of life to be freely accepted by those whom He calls. Our Franciscan Rule was the very first in Church history to include the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. For 800 years, our Franciscan fraternity has professed those three vows, and together we friars support one another in living them with integrity and holiness. That is why there are so many Franciscan Friars here today for the public celebration of Solemn Vows. We all want to express our fraternal support for Franck, Rich, and Tim in their vowed lives.

The vows are not an end in themselves; they are a means to an end. The “end” or “goal” is holiness, and holiness means the binding of oneself to the Poor Jesus, the Chaste Jesus, the Obedient Jesus. The very word “binding” in Latin is “*religio*,” and that is why we call the vowed life “religious life” – It binds us to Jesus Christ. Even though He is God, the 2nd Person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus emptied Himself of all His divine privileges in order to become man in our midst, incarnate, embracing with His Mother Mary a simple life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Franck, Rich, and Timothy are emptying themselves today, in imitation of Jesus Christ..

What does this free self-emptying of Friars Franck, Rich, and Timothy mean? It means that they are maturely choosing to simplify their lives. Their vow of poverty means a simplification of their belongings and possessions. Their vow of chastity means a simplification of their relationships. Their vow of obedience means a simplification of their decision-making. All three vows express what St. Francis meant by “non-appropriation.” These friars do not want to keep appropriating to themselves things and status, nor be possessive of people, nor cling to their own opinions. Their simplification of life frees these friars to belong to the present moment. Their poverty gives them “**unclenched hands**” to resist grasping for worldly goods, and privileges. Their chastity gives them “**undivided hearts**” to engage in fruitful, non-exclusive relationships with everyone. Their obedience gives them “**unveiled minds**” to see, hear, and receive the wisdom of others, without the self-imposed tyranny of always thinking their view is the only right one.

One of the legendary old Novice Masters in the history of the former St. Anthony Province used to draw an analogy from the animal kingdom to reinforce the serious commitment that friars make in professing their three vows. He would tell us to think of “the Hen and the Pig.” While those two barnyard animals were discussing their respective offerings for the breakfast buffet, the hen boasted about her essential involvement in the meal: “*I give eggs – That’s a great contribution!*” The pig’s rejoinder: “*But I give bacon – That’s a commitment!*” The pig gives all he has, even to the ultimate sacrifice.

Now, please do not think that I am calling Franck, Rich, and Timothy “pigs”! They are much more endearing – and besides that, they are cleaner and smell better! Yet today, they are pledging themselves to an ultimate sacrifice of life. They will prostrate themselves before the Altar of God, as the Litany of Saints is chanted – imploring heavenly intercession upon their courageous quest for holiness that radiates itself in love without limits. As the rest of us kneel in unison while heavenly help is invoked, may every single one of us present at this liturgy today pledge our prayerful support for the perpetual commitment of Friars Franck, Rich, and Timothy.

O most beloved friars and sons forever blessed – dear brothers Franck, Rich, and Tim: Great things you will promise, but greater yet have been promised you by Jesus Christ. **You do it for Him** – and all the rest of us will be His beneficiaries.