

Investiture Homily for OLA Novice Class of 2020-2021

Delivered by Fr. James McCurry, OFM Conv.

St. Joseph of Cupertino Friary

Ellicott City, Maryland

5th July 2020

[Readings for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A:

Zechariah 9:9-10

Romans 8:9,11-13

Matthew 11:25-30]

[New Novices: Friars Michael Boes, Edgar Varela, Jonathan Garcia Zenteno, Bram De Backer]

Let me begin with the story of two eremitical desert monks – the aged novice master Abba Joseph and the Young Novice. As evening drew on, they set up their tent, chanted Compline, and fell asleep. Some hours later, Abba Joseph awakened his Novice:

Abba Joseph: *“Look up at the sky... and tell me what you see?”*

Novice: *“I see millions of stars.”*

Abba Joseph: *“What does that tell you?”*

Novice:

“ASTRONOMICALLY speaking – It tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets.

“ASTROLOGICALLY speaking – I observe that Saturn is in Leo.

“HOROLOGICALLY speaking – I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three o’clock in the morning.

“THEOLOGICALLY speaking – I can see evidence that God the Lord is all-powerful, and that we are small and insignificant.

“METEOROLOGICALLY speaking – I suspect that we shall have a beautiful day tomorrow.

What does it tell you, Abba Joseph?”

Abba Joseph was silent for a moment, and then said: ***“You have learned much, but you see nothing! Someone has stolen our tent!!”***

Dear Novices, Michael, Edgar, Jonathan, and Bram – pay attention to this parable. It is all about “seeing.” As you begin today your divine adventure in Franciscan life, you are embarking on a journey of “seeking” and “seeing” – focusing on God the way St. Francis did, mindful that Jesus Christ “pitched his tent” among us (cf. Jn. 1:14), and in His tent – His Church, our Order – we friars live and move and have our being (cf. Acts. 17:28).

The key question for every novice must essentially be this: **Who is God?** Who is God for you personally? Who is God for our community of Friars? Who is God for the Church? Who is God for the world? Perhaps this question can be rephrased in a **Franciscan riddle**: If you already know the answer to the riddle, please don’t shout it out. Here goes the riddle: ***“What is greater than God? –***

The poor have it; the rich need it; and if you eat it, you'll still be hungry! I see some heads shaking. Think about it. [Pause] The answer to the riddle is: **NOTHING**. Nothing is greater than God!

Francis of Assisi came to know this fundamental truth – Nothing is greater than God. That is why he kept repeating the Franciscan motto: “My God and My All” (*Deus Meus et Omnia*). That is why he sang God’s praises and wrote in his own hand on a parchment still preserved for all to see in Assisi: “*You, O God, are good, all good, supreme good!*” The only medieval founder who left behind any body of writings, let alone in his own handwriting, Francis wrote these “Praises of God” after meeting Sultan Malek-al-Kamil at Damietta. Evidently the Sultan helped Francis deepen his answer to the basic question: *Who is God?*

Novitiate is the time when God will reveal to you who He is. Novitiate is the time when you will be helped by grace to form and cultivate a profound one-on-one personal relationship with God – a bond of faith and of charity. This bond will endure and deepen for your whole religious life. As novices you will help one another to claim this primary value of cultivating a deep rapport with God. Nothing is more important in life than this profound, immediate, direct, supernatural relationship between each friar and God. Listen again to the exhortation of St. Paul in today’s second reading: “...*you are in the Spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you. Whoever does not have the Spirit of God, does not belong to him...*”

That is the Wisdom of which Jesus speaks in today’s Gospel: “...*although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to little ones...* We friars are the “little ones” – *minores* – the *anawim*.

In a few minutes, you will be invested in the Franciscan habit – the garb worn by friars *minores*, the little ones, for 800 years. You have all been fitted properly by the good tailors who made these habits for you. Today’s Gospel speaks of a well-fitting “yoke”: ... *Take my yoke upon you... For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.*” Jesus uses a curious word for “easy.” The Greek text says “*chrestos*,” which actually translates “well-fitting.” In the carpenter’s shop of Nazareth, Joseph and the lad Jesus would have been busy making yokes for oxen. No two oxen had the same shaped neck. Each yoke of wood needed to be custom-made – bespoke yokes, just like your habits are custom-made, bespoke habits. You are indeed now heeding the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel: “*Come to me all you who labor and are burdened... Take my yoke upon you.*” Your habit is the yoke of God.

At our Basilica in Assisi, there are famous frescos by Giotto, the oldest of which were painted about 70 or 80 years after the death of Francis. The Giotto frescos over the main altar in the lower basilica right above the Poverello’s crypt-tomb are four curved panels in the shape of sails (called *vele* in Italian) because they look like the sails of a ship.. These 4 frescos depict the allegories of the three vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty, and Francis in glory. In the fresco depicting the vow of obedience, the figure of Lady Obedience sits in a cloistered hall – the place of obedience – with a yoke on her shoulders, likened to her hanging on a cross, conformed to the crucified Christ. Beneath the yoked Lady Obedience kneels a friar (perhaps a novice like those before us today in this chapel). Lady Obedience is helping the young friar to impose a yoke upon himself. Most importantly, as we contemplate this yoke image, each individual friar freely chooses to take the yoke of Christ upon himself. One last feature of this fresco that warrants mention is the index finger of Lady Obedience’s

left hand. She raises that finger to her lips in the form of a cross and a gesture of silence. The life of Franciscan obedience entails a silencing of the heart – which opens our hearts to God – once again in a profound personal relationship.

For each friar novice to wear the YOKE of God in such a way that it is well-fitting and “easily” borne, supernatural help will surely be needed. That is where the person of Our Lady, patroness and advocate of the Order, will be of invaluable help to the four of you. Your Province’s patroness – Our Lady of the Angels – will help you throughout novitiate and throughout your Franciscan lives, as surely as she helped our Father Francis. Let me refer you back for a moment to the “tent” imagery with which I began this homily.

Our Lady was the first “tent” in which Jesus Christ lived as a babe in the womb. In today’s first reading from the Old Testament, the prophet Zechariah refers speaks of the Daughter of Zion: *“Rejoice heartily, O Daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See your King shall come to you...”*. The Scripture scholars tell us that “Daughter Zion” is a collective image of Church, with Marian overtones – Mary as the image and archetype of the Church, or as St. Francis put it “the Virgin made Church.” St. Francis anchored our early fraternity at a Marian space – the Portiuncula Chapel dedicated to Our Lady of the Angels. Here the Order was born and grew; here the friars personally and collectively received Mary’s help to be the men whom God and Francis wanted them to be. The friars at the Portiuncula – their “novitiate” – experienced a Marian atmosphere where Our Lady helped them to know and love God – to answer the question: *Who is God?*

Mary is not your only helper, however, dear novices, in your quest for God. You must surely help one another to grow in Franciscan holiness. Your wearing the habit together as friar-novices in community is a sign that together you are seeking God and sharing with one another your Franciscan vision of the Most High. You so do under the careful guidance of your Novitiate formation team. In Novitiate your faith and your personal relationship with God will impact upon the way you treat one another. The Blessed Virgin – as a gentle mother – will help you to be good brothers to one another. She may even occasionally nudge you with words like these:

“Don’t be naughty towards each other!” The last thing we need is for the friars to put the cat amongst the pigeons – stirring up trouble for one another, clattering in the cloister. Please, dear novices, always speak well of one another. A good word never broke a tooth. The “Whinging Winnies” of this world wear us out, deflate one’s spirit, and evict the Spirit. Your Novice Directors are neither referees nor “Agony Aunts.” They are encouraging elder brothers – masters of the way of wisdom. So, please love them and learn from them.

We friars gathered here with you today in Ellicott City at your Investiture support you with your prayers, and we now send you forth to the Novitiate in Arroyo Grande with the blessing of God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.