

RELIGIOUS PROFESSION OF THE LITTLE SISTERS OF THE POOR
SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
ST. JEANNE JUGAN RESIDENCE, WASHINGTON, DC
DECEMBER 8, 2016

I am very happy to be with you on this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the patronal feast day of the United States. It is a special day here as three sisters will make their profession of vows. I thank Sister Maria Grace for her kind invitation and Sister Loraine Marie Clare, Mother Provincial, for her presence today. Certainly, the Little Sisters live their vow of hospitality in making me – and all of us – feel so welcome! As the personal representative of the Holy Father in this country, I wish to express the Holy Father's spiritual closeness to all of you, especially to those making their profession.

Today, the Church gives thanks to God, not only for these sisters, but especially for the gift of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, the Mother of His Son, whom He has given to us as a true Mother. Today we honor and venerate her as one who was "*full of grace*", full of the grace and love of God; as the "*Dwelling Place of God among men*" (Rev 21, 3); and, as the "*Ark of the New Covenant*", who carried within her womb the One who is the definitive covenant of God with men: Our Lord Jesus Christ. The Immaculate Virgin always points us to Him, saying: "*Do whatever He tells you.*" (cf. John 2:5)

And what does God say to us? In the second reading, taken from the Letter to the Ephesians, we are told to be "*holy and without blemish*" in the sight of God. He tells us that we must behave as true children of the Father, *for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in His Beloved Son*" (Eph 1:6)

To be holy and without blemish, irreproachable in the sight of God – what does this mean? It is a call to be fruitful - to bear fruit that will last, which is possible in the measure with which we decide to be with Jesus, to love Him, to follow Him, to obey Him, and to announce Him. If we want to be holy and blameless, we must begin to see things as Mary saw them. In this way, we will learn to grow in the "obedience of faith" and to persevere in it in the face of difficulties, challenges, and suffering. We will be holy and blameless to the extent that we attempt to remain with and like Mary, united faithfully to her Son, carrying our cross and being available and humble so that with her we might say, "*I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.*"

To be available and humble! How much we need these virtues today in a society and culture that claims to not need God, that tries to erase God, that denies Him. Today, it is that pride that blinds many so that they do not understand that beyond their outdated desires and hopes, needs and demands, interests and preferences, God is God. We need to let God be God in our personal life, community life, family life, and social life. This is what Mary did. She allowed God to be God and surrendered to Him and so glorified God. St. Jeanne Jugan said, "If you keep the spirit of humility and simplicity, never seeking the world's esteem, then God will be glorified and you will obtain the conversion of souls."

Availability and humility are counter-cultural today, but are more necessary than ever in giving witness to Christ in our world and in following Him. To follow Christ is not easy! It is difficult for the believer and for consecrated persons. To follow Christ demands a lot: to go against the false values that our world proposes; to continually put others before ourselves; to give up our own interests to concern ourselves with those of Christ. To follow Him means being with Him, even at the point of suffering and the Cross. What does he promise those follow Him? Tiredness. Suffering. Persecution. The Cross. *But also* the Resurrection and Life.

How do we follow Him and attain life? The Gospel reveals that first condition for following Him is to encounter Him personally and intimately. Mary knew Him personally and intimately, and so, she was actively ready to say *Yes* to the Life – the fullness of life – that God offered. She was actively ready to do God's will and was humble before Him. She was holy and blameless – Immaculate – in His sight. Knowing Him and loving Him, the Virgin could not ignore her vocation, which came through the message of an angel. She said: *Yes – Let it be done to me!*

The call to be holy and blameless is a call for each of us, as the Second Vatican Council stated: "All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity." (LG, 40) "Fullness" and "perfection" in the religious life are

reflected through the living of the evangelical counsels and through a radical following of the Lord, through a free and generous response of the one chosen, and, above all, through the action of the Holy Spirit.

St. John Paul II said: "Like the whole of Christian life, the call to consecrated life is closely linked to the working of the Holy Spirit. In every age the Spirit enables new men and women to recognize the appeal of such a demanding choice. ... It is the Spirit who awakens the desire to respond fully; it is he who guides the growth of this desire, helping it to mature into a positive response and sustaining it as it is faithfully translated into action; it is he who shapes and molds the hearts of those who are called, configuring them to Christ, the chaste, poor and obedient One, and prompting them to make his mission their own." (*Vita consecrata*, 19)

My dear sisters, with good reason, we could say that it is the Holy Spirit who has brought you here today, because, without his inspiration, the radical consecration to the Father and the following of the Son would not be possible. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who "floods the hearts" of consecrated persons so that "they live more and more for Christ and for His body which is the Church." (cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, 1)

To speak of consecration to the Lord is to speak of the active presence of the Holy Spirit; it is to speak of love. It is the love of Him who chooses, who calls, and who sends and the love of the chosen person who embraces the call. The communion of hearts and dialogue of love between the Heart of God and the human heart can only be satisfied by God Himself as St. Augustine says: "We are created for you, and only in you can my soul be at rest." All vocations respond to this existential necessity; the difference is in how and how quickly one reaches the experience of communion which satisfied the depths of one's being.

The consecrated life is without a doubt a "state of perfection"; however, this doesn't mean that once one undertakes the vocation, one simply reaches perfection without doing anything or without obligations. The reason the consecrated life exists is for holiness and because, sharing in the life of Christ, the person is more and more configured to Him, everything in the whole program of one's life, including service of the poor - must necessarily lead to holiness.

Holiness? Is it possible to reach holiness in this day and age? Without a doubt! To be saint does not mean living in another epoch or era, or even necessarily carrying out extraordinary actions or works or possessing exceptional charisms. To be holy it is necessary first to decide to be a saint, persevering in seeking *to be* with Jesus, *to listen* to Jesus, and *to follow* Jesus, even in the midst of interior or exterior difficulties, in this time and place.

The consecrated person, always aware that the true sanctifier is the divine Spirit, can and must be a holy dwelling of Christ. She must advance uninterruptedly in the process of identification with Him, focusing and taking care to reproduce in oneself "the form of life, which He, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world to do the will of the Father" (*Lumen Gentium*, 44): the life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The consecrated person, imitating the poverty of Christ confesses that He is the greatest treasure of the heart. Embracing virginity, she makes her love the love of Christ, a love that is pure, universal, and able to give life. Adhering, with the sacrifice of one's own freedom, to the mystery of the obedience of Christ, who came to do the will of his Father, she is conformed to Him in a complete manner. Recall the words of your foundress: "To be a good Little Sister of the Poor, one must love God and the poor a great deal, and forget oneself."

Certainly, holiness demands constant effort. However, more than the work of man, holiness is above all the work and the gift of love from God. In our life, everything is a gift of his love. It was for love, an infinite love, that Christ gave Himself completely, calling us to engage in a personal and deep relationship with Him. The more and more we enter into this relationship, the more deeply we will enter into the mystery of Divine Holiness and will discover how much we are loved by Him with a love that compels us to truly love our brothers and sisters.

This holiness and this love are a gift from God, which he chooses now to share with you sisters, but which he first chose to give to the Immaculate Virgin, whom he prepared as a "worthy dwelling" for His Son and who, by his gift was "preserved from every stain of sin." We give thanks to God for each of you today and we ask the Immaculate Virgin to sustain you so that you too may be "holy and without blemish in his sight", giving witness to the Holiness of the God who is Love.