

EUCHARIST WITH PROFESSION OF FIRST VOWS
of Novices Carlos Rodriguez, Javier Aguilar, Jimmy White, Jack Tierney
August 1, 2015 - Saint Thomas of Villanova Church, Villanova, PA

Fr. Michael Di Gregorio, O.S.A., Prior Provincial

Throughout the few hours of this afternoon, we've been celebrating what the whole Church has been commemorating these past 8 months, and will continue to observe until next February - namely, the gift of consecrated life. Today, we Augustinians wanted to respond to the invitation of Pope Francis and so have opened our house, in a manner of speaking, and we're delighted that many of you have responded. Most of you know us already - perhaps too well, in fact! You come from our parishes and our schools, some of you are our relatives; others co-workers; affiliates of the Order, Augustinian Seculars or Augustinian Friends. You know us by the works we do or by the relationships we have formed with you. Today, in the places you've visited and the things you've seen and heard here on campus, perhaps you've come to know us a little better, for the history and traditions that are ours, and for the things we profess and strive to live.

What crowns the day is our gathering now to celebrate together the Eucharist - which, as we friars pray every day in all of our communities - is the sign of our unity as Church, and the bond of our fraternity as Augustinians. Within this context, we are happy and enthused to celebrate the decision of these four men in white, who have spent this past year studying intensely, and living concretely, the Augustinian way of life, and who have decided to profess vows of poverty, chastity and obedience according to the Rule and Constitutions of our Order.

I am very happy that our Vicar General, Fr. Joseph Farrell, is here to lead us in this Eucharist, as a sign of our unity, and a reminder of the ties that bind us with brothers and sisters in the Order throughout the world. I'm very pleased that we gather also in this first profession ceremony for the very first time as the Federation of Augustinians of North America, represented by the three priors provincial, Fr. Bernie Scianna of the Province of Our Mother of Good Counsel in the Midwest, Fr. Kevin Mullins of the Province of St. Augustine in California, together with me and with friars from each of our provinces.

Quisiera dar una calurosa bienvenida a todos, y en especial, a las familias de nuestros novicios, en particular a los parientes, familiares y amigos de nuestro hermano Carlos, que han venido desde Puerto Rico, y a la madre, a los hermanos y amigos de nuestro hermano Javier que, gracias a los medios de comunicación, participan en esta celebracion desde su pais de Honduras. Gracias por su participacion! Bienvenidos todos!

I don't think we could have done better in choosing readings for today's celebration than the Church has done, in offering those we have just heard. This

is what some people are now accustomed to call a God-incidence.

Both last weekend and today we read from the Gospel according to John about the great event of Jesus' feeding of the multitude - the expression of his compassion toward the thousands who had come to see him, attracted by the signs he was performing on behalf of the sick. This is what Jesus does, because this is who Jesus is: the bread of life! Saint John tells us at the beginning of this passage that the people came looking for Jesus - and on this particular occasion they came in the thousands!

What we do here today celebrates the fact that people are still looking for Jesus. That is what the decision of these four men who are about to profess the vows of Augustinian religious life essentially proclaims. They were inspired several years ago to undertake the journey that has led to this day, because they are Christians who wanted to become more committed Christians, more faithful disciples of the Lord, more fully engaged in the pursuit of the God whom they realized has always been pursuing them. They could have done this in any number of ways, but finally they had to choose one way - as all of us do. And each of them will tell a unique story of how God led them to us, and has helped them to discern that with us they could, indeed, be good Christians, that because of the very many positive aspirations, ideals, hopes, dreams, efforts, qualities, virtues that we share, and despite the imperfections, weaknesses, foibles, failings and limitations that are also ours, it would be possible to follow Christ faithfully, to come to know him more deeply, to serve him generously together with us as Augustinians.

Augustinian religious life, after all, is the context in which we friars seek to be faithful to our Christian vocation. When one of our friars, one of the foremost scholars and students of St. Augustine and his Rule, was asked once what was special about the Augustinian way of life, he said "the special thing about being an Augustinian is that there is nothing special"! - a very disheartening thing for many of us who had given our life to this, to hear, until he explained that Augustine's intention in forming our life was to get to the heart of being a disciple of Christ, adding nothing to the central meaning and purpose of the Gospel, which is to love God and to love neighbor, to be a good, faithful Christian. The thought of 'nothing special' then became inspiring and uplifting. The objective of the life that you now choose is no different from the one chosen at your baptism, the one you yourselves have affirmed many times since then: to love God and to love neighbor.

But how do we Augustinians love? And how do we grow in love, and how do we live so as never to tire of loving?

In Augustinian religious life, we are invited to love just as we are, with all of the human and spiritual gifts that God has given to us; we are called to love not from a distance, detached and disconnected, that is, not only with our good intentions, but with all of our being, with heart and feeling; to love as Jesus loved, with

compassion, that is expressed in generosity and service; to love by going the extra mile, by giving the cup of cold water, by turning the other cheek, by making ourselves available and vulnerable, being good listeners; we are called to love tangibly and palpably.

Moreover, we love as Augustine loved, with passion, in our talking and laughing and enjoying others' company; not only with our minds, but, as he himself says "by way of countenance, tongue, eyes and a thousand pleasing gestures," which are "like fuel to set our minds ablaze and to make but one out of many" (Conf IV, 8); we love with respect and admiration, in gestures of care and, when needed, of forgiveness and remorse. We're called to love without measure, just as we experience God's love for us.

And how do we grow in love? For that's the invitation extended to you today, to find in our company the means to growth, the path, as Blessed Simon Fidati says, that leads from the good to the better, through the necessary challenge and opportunity of ongoing conversion. St. Thomas of Villanova reminds us that Augustine gave us the heart as our standard, precisely so that we might devote all of our intelligence and effort to perfecting the heart, to expanding the heart's capacity. And Augustine gave us the means, in words of the Rule we know very well, and to which we must return over and over again: we grow in love by honoring God in one another, whose temples we have become; by doing nothing for our own benefit, but for the common good of all; by avoiding quarrels altogether, and when they do occur, by putting an end to them as quickly as possible; by repairing injuries by apology, and by forgiving without wrangling. In these and a thousand other ways, we give and we grow.

Finally, how do we live so as not to tire of making the effort at loving? The vows you are about to profess, and the daily common elements that constitute the rhythm of religious life are the very means to nourish us and empower us. Our sharing of life together - at prayer, at table, in studies, in ministry, in leisure and conversation - are the means by which we warm ourselves over and over again at one another's fire, learn from, and are inspired by those around us, and so grow in awareness of the gift each brother is for us. We must cultivate with intention and frequency, appreciation for what we receive from one another, and the opportunity to live with a spirit of great generosity.

I assure you that your eagerness to walk this path as friars, is already encouragement to those of us who have been about this for some time, and incentive to those who are about to come after you.

Carlos and Javier, Jimmy and Jack, I invite you to look ahead to the consecrated life which you embrace by the vows you are about to make, as a great adventure. It's the adventure of a relationship with God and with us that you have already been living, but which you now commit publicly to pursue with even greater intensity, and, I know, with great joy. Keep in mind the words of Saint Paul that

we heard a few minutes ago, urging you to put away the old self of what may have been, and to be renewed in spirit, putting on the new self made according to the ways of God in holiness and truth. Put on that new self every day; give thanks for the call every day; say your 'yes' again, every day.