

September 24, 2004

Solemn Profession: September 18, 2004

Readings: Sirach 4:1-10 Romans 12:9-21 John 15:9-12

by Fr. John Felice, OFM

My brothers and sisters, it is with great joy that we come together as a family to celebrate the solemn profession of our brother Jerry Paciello. By the grace of God and his loving will Jerry has completed his time of Initial Formation and has chosen to commit himself fully to our way of life by the profession of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

This ancient ritual, almost 800 Years old in our Franciscan tradition, has been re-enacted generation after generation in almost every culture on earth. At heart, it is a profound act of faith in a loving and personal savior who has called us to brotherhood. every generation is complex. Every generation faces challenges and difficulties. There are always wars and rumors of war.

There is always social upheaval, and inexplicable poverty, and indifference to human suffering, and moral decay. But in every generation some step forward and make this remarkable act of faith. By Your profession as a Franciscan you witness to the reality of a living god in our midst. You embrace our way of life as a lesser brother in this world at home among the least of the lord's brothers and sisters. We are privileged to be witnesses to this humble and trusting profession.

The readings Jerry chose for our liturgy today give some direction to his understanding of this solemn commitment. The first reading from the Hebrew writings is taken from the book of Sirach. Sirach is part of the wisdom literature of the old testament. It was written less than 200 years before the birth of Christ at a time of great cultural challenge for Israel.

The author was a much traveled and well educated man who, later in life, settled down in Jerusalem to teach the young of that city. Greek philosophy and culture dominated the day luring many away from the ancient traditions of Israel. Sirach tries to show that the faith of their fathers was far richer than any mere human philosophy.

Our reading today is close to the heart and spirit of St. Francis. It is a plea for justice for the least in the culture of that day - the poor, the widow and the orphan. In reaching out to those most in need you will be acting as a son of the most high, and in so doing he will be more tender to you than a mother. Against the sophisticated and clever, the philosophic nicety and the so called good life is the one who sees the bond of our common human family. St. Francis' insistence on brotherhood was not simply a romantic ideal but a fundamental understanding of how god sees us.

Our gospel today gives the basis for that vision. The reading comes from chapter 15 in St. John. This passage begins with the beautiful image of the vine and the branches. In St. John the

fundamental relationship between the father and the son is love. Here Jesus uses that image to describe his relationship with us. I am the vine, you are the branches. Remain in me and I will remain in you and our life together will bear much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. But there is one last

step that a disciple must take, to complete this vision. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. It is the only commandment we will find in St. John's gospel. And it comes at a great price. Jesus goes on to say that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friend. Today he calls you friend. The price will be no less high.

You make this solemn commitment to our way of life in a challenging and difficult time both in the Church and the Order. The recent scandals in the church, diminishing vocations, and the aging of priests and religious, call for change and new directions for us all. Our way of life has not escaped these realities. Our province is striving to adapt to these challenges. The development of St. Francis Church at 31 st street is only one step. the same efforts are taking place at St. Anthony shrine in Boston.

We are withdrawing from some of our parochial commitments and will continue to do so as our numbers decline. Our schools are being asked to ground our presence in the witness of our fraternity as our first contribution to the campus community. But because we are a fraternity in mission we must look to new challenges such as our recent commitment to an urban ministry center in Tampa and an expanded presence in our mission in Lima, Peru. In every ministry we are called to deepen our solidarity with the poor looking for new ways to be a brother in service to the least among us.

Many of us here today took our vows in a church of order and stability. You are taking your vows in a time of great transition and change. Your generation is called to help craft and shape our way of life and our fraternal service for the 21st century. These times are full of risks and there are no easy templates to follow. But the basics of Our life remain: A genuine affection for the fraternity and a simplicity of heart even in the midst of great complexity.

This is the background of the vows you take today. Poverty - the openness of your hands in trust and service. Chastity - the openness of your heart to all you meet. Obedience - the openness of your mind to the voice of God all around you. These vows are the glue that holds our fraternity together and it is the fraternity that makes your promises here today at all possible.

So it is time for you to come forward. In the midst of your brothers, with your family and friends, I welcome you, I congratulate you, and I humbly thank you. This courageous act, especially today, gives us all renewed hope in this way of life we strive to live each day. You are the last friar whose vows I shall receive in my time as Provincial. Your journey to this moment has been a long one with twists and turns you could not have imagined. Trust me, there will be more surprises to come. This is part of life with the living God. My prayer for you today is that as the years go by, whatever they may bring, may you remain filled with as much joy and hope and enthusiasm and trust as you have in your heart today.