# Homily for Profession of First Vows Saturday, September 5, 2015

St. Peter’s Church/St. John Neumann Shrine; Philadelphia, PA

## 1 Samuel 3: 1-10, 19, 20

**Psalm 130**

**1 Corinthians 12: 12-14, 27**

**Luke 4: 14-22**

*The Olympic Games, Mexico, 1968. The marathon is the final event on the program. The Olympic stadium is packed and there is excitement as the first athlete, an Ethiopian runner, enters the stadium. The crowd erupts as he crosses the finish line.*

*Way back in the field is another runner, John Stephen Akwhari of Tanzania. He has been eclipsed by the other runners. After 30 kilometers his head is throbbing, his muscles are aching and he falls to the ground. He has serious leg injuries and officials want him to retire, but he refuses. With his knee bandaged Akwhari picks himself up and hobbles the remaining 12 kilometers to the finish line. An hour after the winner has finished Akwhari enters the stadium. All but a few thousand of the crowd have gone home. Akwhari moves around the track at a painstakingly slow pace, until finally he collapses over the finish line.*

*It is one of the most heroic efforts of Olympic history. Afterward, asked by a reporter why he had not dropped out, Akwhari says, “My country did not send me to start the race. They sent me to finish.”*

We gather today to celebrate the first vows of Guy, Tony and Ken. Indeed, it truly is a day of great joy as these men profess the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The days of novitiate are now over . . . for those of us who have gone through a novitiate year, indeed that is cause for rejoicing. But today is not a day to celebrate the ending of a novitiate year but for Guy, Tony and Ken it is a day to rejoice as they commit their lives to Jesus Christ the Redeemer and look forward. God has called them to a vocation within the Redemptorist family not just to start something, but also to endure and finish the race.

We gather here in this Church of St. Peter’s, at the Shrine of St. John Neumann and realize we are standing on holy ground. Every Church is holy ground, but this ground here at Fifth and Girard is indeed a special place. Saints like Katherine Drexel and John Paul II have prayed here. Saints of God that are not formally recognized by the Church have come here for healing and to encounter the Divine. The Shrine below us is the resting place of man of small statue who we remember as a tireless preacher of the Good News to the poor and abandoned. In the Provincial Archives there is a book that lists everyone who has taken vows as a Redemptorist here in the Baltimore Province. Guy, Tony and Ken . . . when your names are recorded you three will be numbers 2339. 2340, 2341.

The first name in that book, Number 1 in the Profession Book is John Neumann.

He has a place of honor not simply because he was the first to profess vows as a Redemptorist here in America but because of the way he lived his life. His life is celebrated not because there is a number 1 next to his name in a dusty book in Brooklyn but because of the way he ran the race. His tireless efforts to preach the Goods News by his words and actions are why he is a Saint. A man on fire with love for God and his people, who at the end had given so much that he sat down on a stoop a few blocks away form here after mailing a chalice to a priest on the frontier and collapsed across the finish line. We remember him not just for starting as the first Redemptorist to profess vows in American but because of the way he lived those vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. We remember him for the way he lived.

The vows St. John Neumann professed in 1842 you will be professing in a few minutes. To many in the world, what you profess today seems to be foolish. The vows seem to go against the grain of everything the world holds dear. Our world encourages us to gain wealth, to enjoy pleasure, to seek power. Yet today you will kneel before family, friends and your God to renounce those things. Like St. John Neumann you will profess that a simple life is more important than acquiring material goods. Like the thousands of Redemptorists that have professed vows before you, you will say that a life lived in community with your brothers and serving the family of God is more important than having your own family. Like the Redemptorists who join you here today and in prayer throughout the world, you will profess to live as Jesus Christ lived, who came to follow not his own will but the will of his Heavenly Father.

The year of novitiate has taught you much about the vows, the rule of the Redemptorists and the great legacy of our history. It is important to know something but more important to practice something and live it. I know the rules of golf backwards and forwards but because I don’t have enough time to play golf I will never be the next Arnold Palmer. Novitiate has taught you the vows, the rules and our history. Now, each day you need to practice and live the vows and the rule and be part of our history. Living the vows daily is more important then simply professing them today.

Faithfully practicing the vows each day will make you saintly Redemptorists.

You well know that the vows you profess are more than an act of giving something up. You give up a life of wealth, pleasure and power not in a negative fashion but so that you can truly be free for your heart’s desire . . . a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ the Redeemer. This relationship will hopefully inspire you to be like St. John Neumann and our long line of confreres in the Congregation . . . on zeal to preach the Good News to the poor and abandoned.

Today is the beginning of your lives as members of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. Indeed it is a day to be celebrated. A long cold year of life in Toronto, Canada is complete . . . that should be enough cause for celebration. Your life though as a religious is not about how you start, it is about how you live, how you preserve and how you finish. There will be days of great joy, like today, when you are certain of the love of your God and experience the fellowship of confreres, family and friends. There will be days when perhaps you have a bandaged knee, a aching head and there is no crowd to welcome you. The living of the vows takes place on good days and bad alike. *“I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.”* (2 Timothy 4:7) Today as you profess the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience I encourage you to embrace those vows completely not only today but every day for the rest of your lives.

The words of Samuel from the first reading you echo today. Your vows announce to the world that indeed the Lord has called you and you are responding: “Here I am Lord. Speak, for you servant is listening.” You will respond as members of a religious community echoing the words of

St. Paul that indeed we are one body though we have many parts. Your profession today reminds you that today and for the rest of your religious lives the Spirit of the Lord is upon you whom he has anointed to bring glad tidings to the poor.

Guy, Tony and Ken . . . today is a celebration of not only you response to God but your continued daily response to God. Today is a day of great promise and great joy. Never forget the immense zeal you have for God at this moment. May the zeal be always in your hearts and you live in community and proclaim the Good News.

Your profession today signals more than just a token level of support to the church and Good’s mission in the world. It calls for wholehearted and total life commitment. Always allow yourselves to give and never hold back.

*There is a story that was originally told by Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Once upon a time there was a fire in a small town. The fire brigade rushed to the scene, but the firemen were unable to get through to the burning building. The problem was the crowd of people who had gathered not to watch but to help put out the fire. They all knew the fire chief well – their children had climbed over his fire engines during excursions to the fire station, and the friendliness of the fire chief was legendary. So when a fire broke out the people rushed out to help their beloved fire chief.*

*Unfortunately the townsfolk were seeking to extinguish this raging inferno with water pistols! They’d all stand there, from time to time squirting their pistol into the fire while making casual conversation.*

*The fire chief couldn’t contain himself. He started screaming at the townsfolk. “What do you think you’re doing? What on earth do you think you’re going to achieve with those water pistols?!”*

*The people realized the urgency of the situation. How they wanted to help the fire chief. So they started squirting more. “Come on” they encouraged each other, “We can all do better, can’t we?” Squirt, squirt, squirt, squirt.*

*Exasperated the fire chief yells again. “Get out of here. You’re achieving nothing except hindering us from doing what needs to be done. We need firemen who are ready to give everything they’ve got to put out this fire, people willing even to lay their lives on the line. This is not the place for token contributions”*

Guy, Tony and Ken . . . congratulations and prayers as you take your first vows as Redemptorists today. I pray you are ready to give everything and even to lay down your lives on the line. It is now time for you to make not just a token contribution but to go all in and give your lives completely over to Jesus Christ the Redeemer.