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Carmelite nun professes solemn vows on sunny, winter day

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The grounds of Carmel of Mary Monastery near Wahpeton were replete with signs of answered prayer on the morning of Feb. 2.

The frozen, still world had begun to come alive, most visibly through dancing sun sparkles grazing snow fields that surround the monastery buildings. Inside the monastery chapel, a vibrancy of another kind, also still and sparkling, came forth as the young, Carmelite nun prepared to profess her solemn vows; a commitment of "poverty, chastity and obedience under perpetual enclosure, until death."

Four and a half years earlier, Sister Veronica of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, O. Carm., had professed simple vows and heard Bishop Samuel Aquila say that her life as a nun would be a contradiction to the world. Now, having committed herself fully to a life dedicated to Jesus, with Mother Mary as a constant guide, she is living out that contradiction daily through a life of prayer, solitude, and community with her fellow Carmelite nuns, nine in all.

They rise at midnight for prayer and, denied a full eight hours of sleep in any given 24-hour-period, speak to one another only at special times — designated meetings and during an hour of recreation each evening. It is, in essence, a life of sacrifice, but one that seems to bring deep joy to their hearts and a perpetual smile to their faces.

Sister Veronica attests to this fact, having said that ever since that day she learned of Carmel of Mary, she has "not been able to stop smiling."

About 100 people attended the chapel Mass that provided the setting for Sister Veronica's special day, including Bishop Aquila, nine priests, two deacons and two Brothers from the Carmelite Hermitage of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Lake Elmo, Minn., who helped in the preparation and singing. Also represented were five Franciscan sisters from Hankinson, a group of 13 Catholic junior high and high school students and their teachers from Fargo, as well as several lay Carmelites and other lay people.

Despite the public presence, the Carmelite nuns themselves remained hidden behind a grille to the right of the altar during the celebration. Only Sister Veronica, dressed in a brown habit, was visible along with the priests.

Fittingly, the event coincided with the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple, a fact that Mother Joseph Marie, prioress, later called a unique culmination of Sister Veronica's vocation. "Mary offers herself, together with her Divine Son to the Heavenly Father, for his glory and for the entire Mystical Body," she said, noting Bishop Aquila's words to Sister Veronica: "God chose you to be his bride; he prepared and chose you, just as he chose his Mother, Mary."

Mother Joseph Marie also remarked that the Feast of the Presentation is a "priestly" feast, and that the Carmelite nuns are called to pray especially for priests. "I smile as I say this," she added. "Since we are cloistered we cannot participate in a Mass in a cathedral, observed and celebrated for consecrated religious men and women . . . so our good bishop comes

down to Carmel to celebrate this joyous, solemn profession with his priests and our faithful friends!”

During the Mass, as psalms were sung, sunlight reached in through a stained glass window just underneath the chapel ceiling, spreading various colors below upon the crucifix at the back wall of the altar. It seemed a reminder of the dichotomy representing religious life — both joy and suffering.

Bishop Aquila began the homily noting the hiddenness of the cloistered life and its inherent calling of attention to Christ. “It is in this relationship we discover the vocation to which we are called, and it is only in our response to that call that we will find true happiness,” he said. He added that grace comes first through obedience, a complete surrender to God and to his will, and that the desire of the human heart is obedience to the will of the Father.

Likening the prayer of consecration to the grace obtained through virginity, Bishop Aquila said that, though Sister Veronica would renounce marriage, it would happen not out of suffering but in response to love — Jesus’ beckoning to the soul. “In your total self-gift to Christ, you live in that love as he has given himself to you,” he said. “And we respond with joy and hope.”

While recognizing the call to religious life as the “beginning of a taste of heaven and earth,” Bishop Aquila said there would be struggles, a “dark night of the spirit,” but that even in that darkness, we can be assured of Christ’s presence. “In our dark nights, it is important for each of us to turn to Christ,” he said, then directed his words to Sister Veronica. “As you enter into this community, you are called to be a light to the community, the diocese and the world and to live that out day by day. You are a constant reminder to us of what it means to surrender to the Lord.”

Bishop Aquila said that watching Sister Veronica give herself to Jesus brings joy to his heart. “I recognize it is not an easy call, but when it is done in love it becomes easy,” he said. “May that love deepen each day as you live in that communion of love with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

After pronouncing her vows, the new bride of Christ received a crown of white flowers and signed her Profession document upon the altar confirming her commitment.

A luncheon followed for those in attendance, as well as a chance to briefly visit with Sister Veronica and some of the other Carmelite nuns in a special room set apart from the bustle of mealtime.

Mother Joseph Marie later said Sister Veronica’s solemn profession “is a very special joy for our community — as is the way this beautiful celebration evolved to express it.” Every vocation, she said, is formed in the heart of Trinitarian love. “Before you were formed in the womb I knew you,” she recalled of Scripture. “It is brought to birth and nourished by the mysterious action of the Holy Spirit and guarded by our Blessed Mother — particularly here in Carmel where we are dedicated to her so completely.”

Mother Joseph Marie said that each Carmelite nun can trace back through to the mediation and protection of Mary in the circumstances of her life, which have guided her surely and safely to Carmel of Mary.

“We thank Sister Veronica for her generous response,” she added. “For our bishop, priests, deacons and sisters of our diocese, for our friends and benefactors, and for Sister Veronica’s

family — we express our deepest gratitude for the many ways in which they support our life!”

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