



Final Profession of Sheldon Burke CRS

Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

**Saturday 21 November 2020
St Jerome's Church, Spearwood Parish**

It is a very beautiful thing that we have gathered in this church dedicated to Saint Jerome Emiliani, the founder of the Somascan Congregation, for the celebration of the solemn religious profession of Brother Sheldon Burke. We do so on the Feast of the Presentation of Mary: it is a feast which speaks to us of dedication, of consecration, of a total gift of oneself to God in love and humble service. This is exactly what we will witness in a few moments as Brother Sheldon pronounces his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience for life.

The Gospel reading for today's Mass, chosen especially by Brother Sheldon, also speaks to us of a total gift of oneself to God in love and humble service. Just as Mary, according to the tradition which gives rise to today's Feast, was presented by her family to God in the Temple, so this morning Brother Sheldon presents himself, with the prayers and support of his parents, his family, his religious community and his many friends, to the God whose voice Sheldon has heard calling him along the journey of his life.

By giving us the privilege of sharing this moment with him Brother Sheldon is also inviting us to listen to the voice of God calling us along the journey of our lives. That we have accepted Brother Sheldon's invitation is already a sign that we have been open to the Lord's voice. But we know, as Sheldon knows, that it is not always easy to hear the Lord's voice, to grasp what God is actually asking of us, and most especially to find the courage to say "yes". The life story of each one of us will contain moments of fidelity and infidelity, of courage and of cowardice, of boldness and of timidity, of openness to God and of forgetfulness of God.

It is true, of course, that in important ways the story of Mary's life is rather different. Today we celebrate the Feast of the Presentation of Mary and in a few weeks' time we will celebrate the Feast of Mary's Immaculate Conception. In view of the enormous task which God would entrust to Mary she was kept free, from the very moment of her conception, from original sin which we have all inherited from our first parents. Mary would be called to reverse the initial rejection of God at the beginning of the story of humanity and replace the "no" of Adam and Eve with her own generous, complete and free "yes". Just as that original "no" of our first parents was born of a freedom yet untouched by sin so Mary's "yes" needed to be born of a freedom untouched by sin - and Mary gave that "yes", in our name and on our behalf, to the wonderful gift of salvation.



What this morning's gospel tells us, however, is that even Mary's "yes" was not easy for her, just as Brother Sheldon's "yes" has not been easy for him and just as our efforts to say "yes" to God have also at times been very challenging. As we reflect on what we might call Mary's journey of faith, from the first moment of the angel Gabriel's appearance to the final departure of the angel, I believe we can discover something of our own journey of faith. We can also find courage and hope that in spite of our challenges and limitations we, too, can respond to God with generosity and fidelity.

Saint Luke's Gospel tells us that Mary was greatly troubled when the angel appeared to her and greeted her. We do not know the precise circumstances of this appearance, but we do know that it troubled Mary and gave rise to fear in her heart. There would have been moments of fear and uncertainty for Sheldon, I am sure, as the idea that God was calling him to this unique life of total and public consecration in the Church began to rise in his heart. *What does this growing sense of vocation mean? How am I meant to respond? What am I supposed to do with all this?*

In Mary's case the angel seeks to re-assure her. *"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. You will conceive and bear a son and you must name him Jesus."* Rather than calming her fears these words only bring confusion to Mary. *"How can this be?"* she asks. *"I am not yet married. It is not possible for me to bear a child. I don't understand what I am hearing."* I am sure that along his journey to this moment in this church Brother Sheldon, too, has had moments of confusion and uncertainty. *"Do I really belong here? Have I understood God's call correctly? Do I have what it takes to be a member of this religious family?"*

Not everyone is visited by an angel in the way that Mary was. But each one of us is visited daily by the Lord as he seeks to make known to us what it is he is asking of us and who it is he is calling us to become. Sometimes, when we realise what God is asking of us, we can become unsure and frightened. As things clarify themselves we can become confused because we doubt whether we have what it takes to respond to what God seems to be asking of us. In this sense Mary's journey of faith is also our journey of faith and Brother Sheldon's journey of faith.

But, of course, Mary's journey does not end in confusion or uncertainty because Mary listens, and believes, and takes into her heart the words the angel says to her as he leads her to understand the true nature of God's call. *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,"* the angel says to Mary, *"and the power of the Most High God will cover you with its shadow"*. With these words everything falls into place. Mary comes to understand that the Lord is not asking her to do or be something purely through her own efforts or gifts or talents. On the contrary, God is reassuring her that all she needs to do is to entrust herself to the power and presence of God's Spirit at work in her life. Through the words of the angel Mary is being called to make trusting faith in God the absolute centre of her life. She is being called to let go of her fear and simply trust in the Lord. It is because she hears and believes those words that Mary finds rising in her heart



her readiness to say yes. *“Here I am,”* she says, *“the servant of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me.”*

Brother Sheldon, the words spoken to Mary so long ago are spoken to you today. They are, in fact, words which were spoken to you on the day of your baptism. It was then that the Holy Spirit came upon you and the power of the Most High God covered you with its shadow. It is that presence and that power of God at work in your life which has led you here this morning. Religious consecration is a renewing and a profound deepening of your baptismal consecration. Today, in the presence of your religious community, of your family, and of your friends, you claim once again the grace of your baptism and you commit yourself publicly, solemnly, and for ever to make the living of your baptismal consecration, according to the spirit and charism of your holy founder Saint Jerome Emiliani, the one and only goal of your life. Today you claim Christ as the precious treasure for which you are prepared to abandon everything else. Today, like Mary, you commit yourself to living by trusting faith in God, abandoning your own dreams and plans and allowing the Lord to be the Good Shepherd in whose footsteps you will follow no matter where they might lead you.

You know better than me what it means to commit yourself to the vowed life in a religious community which seeks to live by the spirit of Saint Jerome Emiliani. You have already been living this way for a number of years and now you confirm your determination to do so, with the help of God’s grace and the prayers of Mary, for the rest of your life. Perhaps, then, it is with the words of your holy founder that I should conclude these reflections:

Our goal is God, the source of all good. As we say in our prayer, we are to place our trust in God and in no one else. He is asking you to grow continually in your confidence in Him alone and not in others. For God, as I said before, does not work in those who refuse to place all their confidence and hope in Him alone. But he does impart the fullness of His love upon those who possess a deep faith and hope.