



## **Solemn Profession of Sr Marie Chrissie of the Trinity OCD**

### **Homily**

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

**Saturday 20 January, 2024  
Carmelite Monastery, Nedlands**

When I was a little boy growing up in Melbourne and attending the local Catholic primary school, I remember being taught that a sacrament was a visible sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace. I was also taught that there were seven of these sacraments. I am not going to list them off now, not because I have forgotten them, but because I am sure that all of us here in the chapel today know very well what they are.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church published many years later in 1994, and almost 30 years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, expands on this a little bit by adding that these visible signs are liturgical rites by which the sacraments signify, and make present, the grace proper to each of them.

In the intervening period between my primary school years and the publication of the Catechism, the Second Vatican Council took a major step forward by widening the use of the term *sacrament* and applying it to the Church itself. “The Church”, said Vatican 11 in the document *Lumen Gentium*, “is, in Christ, in the nature of a sacrament: that is, a sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among all people”.

This wider understanding of sacrament is very significant because firstly it identifies the seven sacraments as expressions of the sacramental nature of the Church. They are not just seven rituals the Church performs: they are signs and instruments of the Church’s deepest nature as it comes to life in people’s stories. Each of the seven sacraments says something very significant about why the Church has been given to us by the Lord. It is to be the place of encounter with him in the truest and deepest way possible.

When we begin to reflect on this the question immediately comes to mind, or at least to my mind, as to whether religious life, too, even though it is not one of the seven sacraments, might also be a very significant expression of the Church’s deepest identity. And if indeed we can say this, then it follows that we can also ask just what it is that each expression, each form, of religious life has to say to the Church about her identity. For us this morning, and for Sr Marie Chrissie in particular,



it is about the Carmelite charism as it is lived out in the many Carmelite convents scattered throughout the world, and as it is lived out here in Nedlands, that we ask this question. What is the special call, and the special gift, which the Carmelite sisters have been given, and which is lived out faithfully here in Nedlands, that the Lord wishes to offer us all?

In our Catholic tradition, reaching right back to the early centuries of the Church's, existence, religious life has always focused on two things. The first is the profession of the three vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. The second, for most religious orders and congregations, is the call to live this way of life within a community.

These three vows of chastity, of poverty, and of obedience, are often referred to as the evangelical or gospel counsels. This means, firstly, that they come to us from the teaching and example of Jesus. It also means, of course, that they are not expected from every Christian, at least in the sense that not everyone is called to life in a religious order or congregation. In recent times, however, a new insight has begun to develop in the Church's understanding of the religious life, and now we would be more inclined to speak of chastity, poverty, and obedience as evangelical or gospel imperatives, rather than counsels. They are meant for everyone, although the way we live them out will vary from person to person.

This morning's gospel can help us to understand this. The beatitudes of today's gospel were addressed by Jesus to everybody, not just to a small group called to a special way of life. "Happy, or blessed, are the poor in spirit", says Jesus, in this way pointing out to anyone who wants to be his disciple that we all must be poor in a spiritual sense, making sure that material possessions and the accumulation of wealth are not in any sense at the heart of our lives. "Blessed are the pure of heart", says Jesus, reminding us that because of our baptism we are all called to enter into relationships with others, no matter who they are, in ways that recognise and are respectful of their dignity. And "blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of right", says Jesus, reminding us that obedience to our Heavenly Father's will, and fidelity to him, will often be costly for us, just as it was for Jesus himself.

To live in poverty of spirit, conducting all our relationships with sensitivity, care and respect for each other, and always seeking to discover the will of God and put it into practice: this is the vocation of every Christian. But because we are all fragile and weak, and can easily push God to one side and then find ourselves wandering away from him, God calls some people, as today he calls Sister Marie Chrissie, to accept the challenge and the privilege of living in such a way within a religious community, in this way becoming a constant and powerful reminder to us all that the values to which she has committed her whole life are values which the Lord is calling the rest of us, in our own particular situations, to place at the heart of our lives too. Today, with her solemn profession, Sr Marie Chrissie confirms her desire to be for all of us a kind of sacrament - a visible



and powerful sign - of something which lies at the very heart of the identity of the Church as a community of disciples of Jesus: that every single one of us is called to commit ourselves to the way of Jesus - the way of poverty and simplicity, the way of respectful and life affirming relationships with others, and the way of obedience to all that God asks of us each day of our life.

For Sister Marie Chrissy, and for the community of sisters to whom she fully and finally commits herself today, there is another important dimension of their lives together, which also has a sacramental meaning for us. The Sisters here live a simple and largely hidden life, protected by their enclosure and by the traditions which come to them from Saint Teresa of Avila. Their days are dedicated to silence, to humble work, to the needs of the community, and to an attitude of unceasing prayer which throughout the day breaks into common prayer and song as they celebrate the Eucharist and pray the Prayer of the Church together. But while the sisters live their lives largely within these walls, they are not isolated from the difficulties, struggles and challenges which are part of all our lives. I am sure many of you here have often asked the sisters for their prayers. It is a special blessing for us in our archdiocese to have this sanctuary of prayer in our midst. But as well as praying for us - often, we feel, when we no longer know how to pray for ourselves - the sisters, through their way of life, remind us that we are all called to a relationship of friendship and love with the Lord. We must allow the sisters, then, to be a reminder to us that we, like them, must be people of prayer. The style of our prayer and the place of prayer in our daily lives may be very different to that of Sister Marie Chrissy and the other sisters here at Nedlands, yet we must nevertheless let them be the "living sacraments", the visible signs and powerful reminders, that the Lord is waiting for us, too, to turn to him in prayer .

We know that Sr Marie Chrissy, together with her sisters to whom she will now be bound in a new and unbreakable way through her total gift of herself to the Lord, will continue to pray for us. Let us remember to also pray for her, that God, who has begun this good work in Sr Marie Chrissy, will bring it to fulfilment.