

GESTA DOCTRINAMQUE

Let the brothers reflect on and make known the teaching and achievements (gesta doctrinamque) of those in the family of St. Dominic who have gone before them, while not forgetting to pray for them. (LCO 16)

SERMON FOR A RELIGIOUS PROFESSION

Charles-René Billuart, O.P. (1685-1757)

Editor's note: Charles-René Billuart, O.P., was a renowned preacher in seventeenth-century France. Serving his province as a prior, regent of studies, and prior provincial, he devoted his time to theological inquiry and the work of preaching. His first book, a commentary on the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas, is a tremendous scholarly work which won him a great reputation among the theological schools of his day.

For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

— St. Paul, 2 Cor. 4

Oh, the mysteries enclosed in these words of the Apostle! Living men who are dead, and a dead man who suffers so as to make life burst forth, to live while dying, to die in order to live—what an apparent paradox! A moment of

patience, my brothers; all these mysteries are going to develop in that profession of our dear confreres. Behold, *there* are the living and the dead of whom the Apostle speaks. It is in them that death will become fruitful. There are the two victims of life that charity, stronger than death, is going to immolate at the foot of the altar to the divine majesty, but who, like the phoenix, by the ardor of the same charity, will take on a more blessed life in the very ashes of their pyre.

I will explain myself and speak without riddles. Secular philosophers recognized but a single sort of life, which consists in the union of the soul with the body, and also but a single sort of death which is opposed to it and which consists in the separation of the soul from the body. But St. Paul, illumined by purer lights, recognized in man another type of life, which consists in the movement of fallen nature, conformed to perverse inclinations. He teaches us, consequently, to fight against it with another sort of death, which consists in the privation of these disordered movements. So, my brothers, it is in the profession of the religious life that all the types of this death are encountered: death to the world, death to all the passions, death to the senses, civic death, mystical death—which entails all that the most cruel natural death has of bitterness, and even something more. But this fruitful and active death is the source of a more blessed life. It is thus correctly that these dear brothers, at the moment of their profession, say to us with the Apostle: while we are full of life, we deliver ourselves to death for Christ Jesus. Nevertheless, this death will operate in us like life in you: *Nos qui vivimus*, etc. You will see them first over a bed of pain, in agony and dying, stricken under blows redoubled by divine love, making the sacrifice of their life for Jesus. *In mortem tradimur propter Jesum*: the first subject of your reflexions. You will see them next leaving gloriously from their tomb, taking on a life a thousand times more blessed than that which they left behind: *Ergo mors operatur in nobis* (the second subject of your reflections). My discourse will be, in one part, a funeral oration for these illustrious

deceased, and, in the other part, it will serve as a panegyrique to their victory and happiness. And to you, brothers present for this profession, dispose your hearts to the different movements of joy and sorrow. Shed tears over their tomb, and applaud at the same time their triumph. And *you* my most dear brothers *profitendi*, dispose *yourselves* to die, while we pray that Mary may sustain your courage to make this sacrifice and animate my voice to encourage you. *Ave Maria*.

THE FIRST POINT

What is it, “to die”? It is to do three things, or rather to suffer three separations, namely, separation from property, separation from parents and friends, separation of the soul from the body. Death says to a soul, at the moment she leaves the body, what God said of old to the patriarch Abraham: *Egredere de terra tua et de cognatione tua et de domo patris tui* (Gen. 12). *Egredere de terra tua*, go out from your land, leave behind your possessions, your property, and your inheritance: *Egredere de cognatione tua*, leave your parents and your friends, bid them an eternal adieu, break the chains of the flesh: *Egredere de domo patris tui*, leave the house of your father, that is to say, in a mystical sense, leave the prison of this mortal body which you have received from your parents. Three separations, my dear brothers, which are found in the action which you are going to make, with as much and more bitterness than even in death. Divine love, armed with three arrows, which are the three vows that you are going to make and which will deliver three mortal blows to you, shall address to you the same words: *Egredere de terra tua et de cognatione tua et de domo patris tui*. Leave, it tells you, by the vow of poverty; go forth from your land: *Egredere de terra tua*, part from your possessions, abandon your property, leave behind your inheritance. For, what is it, to make a vow of poverty? It is to renounce all rights, all goods, all estate, all property, and even all use without the legitimate permission of superiors. Death, says Tertullian, is, to the passage from life, like a porter to whom God has given the commission

to make us leave behind all our property. Such, my brothers, is the vow of poverty at the exit of the world in order to enter into religion.

It makes us leave everything; it deprives us even of the hope of ever being able to possess anything, and, not content with exterior renouncement, it enters even into our most secret confines and obliges our heart to dispossess itself of all affection that it might have for these possessions. But, take guard, my dear brothers, it would be to make only half a vow of poverty, or—to say it better—it would be to not make one at all, indeed, it would be to mock at God and religion if, while renouncing by mouth and exteriorly the goods of the earth, you would still guard in your heart a secret attachment not only for those things that you leave behind today, but also for those things which religion will permit you to use in the future.

It would be, I say, to live neither in religion nor in evangelical poverty if, after having renounced more considerable goods in the world, you would come—in following the vow—to have excessive attachment to [any other, less considerable] things. I do not say ‘superfluous’ things, for that would go manifestly against your vow, but even necessary things that religion will accord to your usage. You would be, says St. Bernard, more miserable than worldly men themselves, since, being thus attached to trivial things, you would lose all the merit of the noble action that you are going to make today: *Miserabiliores sumus omnibus hominibus nos monachi, si pro tam exiguis tanta patimur detrimenta.*

It is necessary then, my dear brothers, to renounce not only all your possessions, but even the affection that you could have for them and the hope ever to be able to possess anything else. Is there in death a more universal dispossession? Death, it is true, dispossesses us of all our property, but at the same time she places us beyond the state of needing it; religious life takes away from us every means of satisfying our bodily needs, but leaves us always the hard necessity of fulfilling them. You are going then, my dear

brothers, to expose yourselves to suffer hunger, thirst, cold, heat; to win, thus to say, your bread by the sweat of your brow; to give up the property which heaven has been pleased to provide for you in order to enter into a poor condition, in a convent which subsists only by the charity of benefactors. You are going to put yourselves in a state of mendicancy, you who possess the power to make alms for others. You will, finally, by this poverty, render yourselves contemptible, the scum of the people, a thing abhorrent to worldly men for whom poverty is more odious even than death itself. At last, what more? You will die: *In mortem tradimur propter Jesum*.

But, in order to die, it does not suffice to leave all one's property; it is necessary yet to leave one's parents and friends, to bid them an eternal adieu. It is necessary to renounce all pleasure, all friendship; to smash, to break up all fleshly ties. It is the second separation that is done to the death. It is also, my dear brothers, that to which the divine love condemns you. This is the second mortal blow that the divine love will bring to bear on you by the vow of chastity that you are going to make: *Egredere de cognatione tua*.

To vow perpetual chastity is to deprive yourself voluntarily of all the pleasures of the senses, even those that were otherwise permitted and licit. It is, says St. Jerome, to live without the body in that same body: *In corpore vivere sine corpore*. It is to not have any further part in its disordered movements. It is to choose God for the unique spouse of one's soul and for the unique object of one's love. It is to refrain from every interaction with creatures, every bond, every friendship which does not refer itself to God. It is to put oneself in a state of being able to say with the spouse of the Canticle: *Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi*, my beloved is all to me, and I am all to Him (Song 2). A religious after his profession is no longer able, without a type of adultery and sacrilege, to share his heart among God and creature, body and spirit, among the pleasures of sense and the mortifications of the interior life. God is a jealous spouse who does not suffer any sharing: *Qui totum dedit, totum petit*, he who has given all asks for all. To make a vow of

chastity—again, a blow—is to die to oneself, to all one's senses, to the world, and to flesh; it is to attach oneself, entirely alive, to the cross with Jesus Christ: *In mortem tradimur propter Jesum, ut vita Jesu manifestetur in carne nostra mortali.*

It is to say with the Apostle: *Mihi mundus crucifixus est, et ego mundo*, the world is crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal. 6). It is to wage a continual war on one's body; it is to hate one's very self and all that is not God and [precisely] in order to please God; in a word, it is to renounce all the pleasures of a worldly life and to deliver oneself to all the rigors of the spiritual life, austere and penitent. Cross, scorn, humiliations, disciplines, the hair shirt, the cilice, solitude, silence, fasts, vigils, prayers ... behold, my dear brothers, which things ought to be, hereafter, the object of your desires and the subject of your occupations, since they are the means both sure and necessary for conserving this treasure of chastity that you are going to vow today, that you are going to bear, as the Apostle says, in fragile vessels: *Habemus thesaurum istum in vasis fictilibus*, we have this treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4).

Let us accomplish the sacrifice. Death shall not separate a man only from his property and his parents and friends, but yet also soul from body. She does not say to him only that it is necessary to quit his land and his kinsfolk: *Egredere de terra tua et de cognatione tua*. She also says to him that it is necessary to quit the house of his father, that is to say, to separate himself from the mortal body that he has received from his father and mother: *Egredere de domo patris tui*.

There, my dear brothers, is the language that divine love addresses to you by the vow of obedience. It is the command that it pronounces against you: *Egredere de domo patris tui*. It is the last mortal blow—and the most felt—that it is going to deal out to you, one which will seize your life entirely and accomplish the consummation of your sacrifice.

It is true, my brothers, that the soul of a religious after his profession should not be left still united to his body. I dare,

however, to tell you that something more terrible than the material separation of the soul from the body (which happens at death) happens here. Behold how I shall prove it.

Death, which reduces our body to a powder, does not harm the soul. On the contrary, she sets the soul free. Death draws the soul, to speak, from the earth and the grave. But religious profession does not spare even this spiritual part. Profession mortifies the flesh by poverty and chastity, and far from freeing the spirit, like death does, she submits it by the vow of obedience to a long and cruel servitude. For, my brothers, I ask you if one can still live while the spirit itself—which is the life of the body—is not able to act any more. What is more similar to death than a person who does not move except when another moves him; or when one is treated, when one is turned as another wishes, without being able either to resist or grumble? This, my dear brothers, is the state to which obedience is going to reduce you.

It is difficult to imagine anything more heroic and at the same time, more terrible, more contrary to nature than this virtue. A man promises much, it is true, when he promises to God perpetual poverty and chastity. But when he vows an eternal obedience, he agrees to everything without knowing precisely to what he is agreeing. He makes a vow to render himself a slave for all his life to the wishes—let us say it frankly, the caprices and often, indeed, all the passions—of a person who is neither infallible in his judgments nor impeccable in his conduct. Still, if one were to submit oneself only to a single person, or if you were assured, my dear brothers, that all those who will govern you during perhaps the space of sixty years will all be as reasonable, as clear, as virtuous, as beneficent as that one to whom you have the happiness to render your first obediences, it would not be difficult to subject oneself to a conduct so sweet. Servitude in this case would scarcely be less agreeable than liberty. But it is not to this one here only that you will deliver yourselves, bound hand and foot like victims. You will abandon

yourselves with the same indifference to all who will succeed him. Whether they are noble or indulgent, affable or sad, prudent or indiscrete, wrathful or temperate. Whether they love you or naturally have an aversion for your temperament—whatever takes their fancy to command—you will oblige yourselves to obey them until death, under the pain of your eternal damnation.

If this is not dying, my brothers, it is without a doubt something more contrary to nature than even death itself. Should we be astonished that a young man who thinks to make a step so difficult would be sometimes attacked and fought for a long time before being able to resolve to do it? For it is not necessary to cover over that this death is, ordinarily, preceded by a cruel agony. I invoke you as witnesses on this point, reverend Fathers; and perhaps you too, dear brothers, know it already from your own experience. Nature in these encounters makes strange efforts to smother the grace which wants to smother her. The world and pleasure present themselves with charms capable of rattling a young courage. Religion, moreover, offers to the spirit only frightful images of humiliations, abstinence, and solitude. The whole man trembles at the sight of fifty or sixty years of constraint, with the sole thought of a life pricked by thorns, distanced from every pleasure, all property, of parents and friends; a life without one's own plans, without movement other than that which she receives from an exterior principle; a life which is, rightly, a continual death and martyrdom: *Nos qui vivimus in mortem tradimur*, etc.

Ah! My dear brothers, can you resolve to drink the chalice of bitterness, the chalice full of gall and wormwood: *Potestis bibere calicem*, can you drink the chalice (Matt. 20)? Can you, tender and delicate as you are, suffer all these holy rigors? *Potestis*? Can you resolve yourselves to these harsh separations? *Potestis*? Finally, can you endure this frightful death and this continual martyrdom? *Potestis*? But what can I say? Useless demands, vain precautions ... I do injury to your courage and piety. Yes! My God,

they can do it! *Possumus*. They can do it since it is for You. They can do it since it is with Your grace and example. They can do it, my God, since this death is nothing except a passage to a more blessed life: *Mors operatur in nobis et vita in vobis*.

THE SECOND POINT

Reassure yourselves, my dear brothers; calm your worries, recall your courage, if perhaps my too dire discourse had dispersed it. Wipe away your tears, Christians gathered in this enclosure; change your sighs into cries of joy. Death is vanquished by its own weapons: *Absorpta est mors in victoria*, death is swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15). There are no greater triumphs, victories, pleasures, and happiness.

All the innocent combats that the God of peace gives you—and with which I just occupied you—shortly will be exchanged, says St. Gregory of Nyssa, with the joys of a chaste and divine marriage. This death in which you will deliver yourselves will be in you the source of a life a thousand times more blessed: *Mors operatur in nobis et vita in vobis*.

Three things make for the happiness of life: abundance of property, sweetness of pleasures, and complete liberty; three benefits which you seemingly renounce while leaving the world behind, but that you will recover a hundredfold in religious life—to a degree much more perfect.

You will renounce, it is true, by the vow of poverty all the goods of fortune and all that that you are able to claim in this age. But while offering them thus to God, it is by the same vow that you will assure them for yourselves forever. Houses are overthrown, scepters are smashed, but what one gives to God will never perish: *Tuta est haereditas quae Christo custode servatur*, safe is the inheritance that is preserved for Christ the watchman. It is a faithful deposit, says St. John Chrysostom, which will pay you back in superabundance. Moreover, you will exchange for this life of temporal goods another type of the most precious goods, which are the treasures of the grace

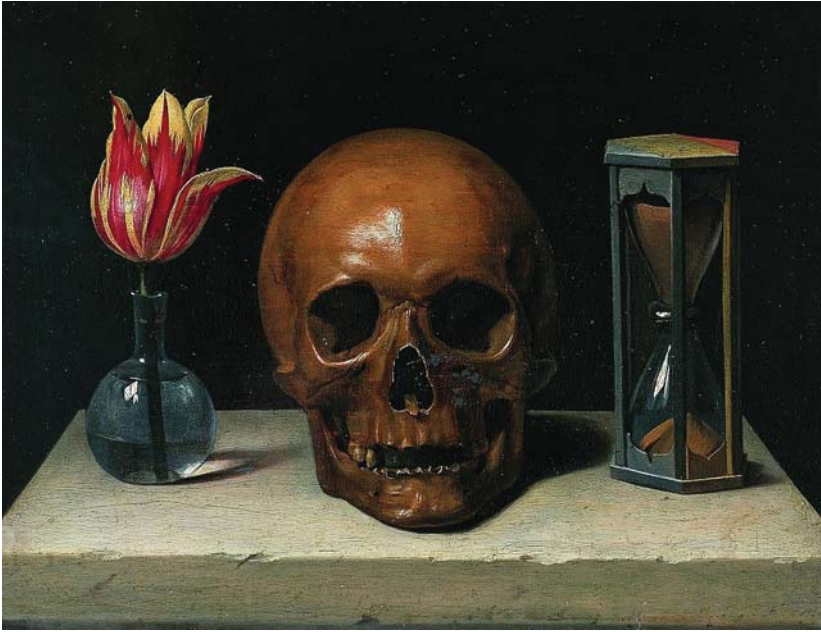
of God: the grace of predestination, the grace of vocation, the grace of justification and of perseverance: examples of virtue, salutary instructions, the efficacy of the sacraments, frequent inspirations; prevenient grace, concomitant grace, justifying grace. In a word, we can say of religion what Origen said of the terrestrial paradise: the air there is purer than in the world, grace more abundant, and God more present: *Aer purior, gratia uberior, Deus praesentior*. There, my dear brothers, are the rich treasures that you will receive for but a little amount of property, a little of the clay that you will abandon to the world. Finally, according to the promise of Jesus Christ, you will acquire not only the hundredfold but also eternal life, which ought to be the recompense of your generous action: *Qui reliquerit domum ... aut agros propter nomen meum centuplum accipiet et vitam aeternam possidebit*, everyone that has left house ... or lands for my name's sake shall receive a hundredfold and shall possess life everlasting (Matt. 19). Do not doubt, my dear brothers; there is a God who promises it to you. He is faithful in His promises, He wills all that He promises, He can do all that He wills. Blessed exchange of the creature with God; blessed death, blessed separation, lovable poverty, sweet and agreeable wound which procures for you a life so blessed, so full of immortal hopes: *O pulchrum vulnus, o felix plaga, per quam plagam vita subit aeterna* (Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Song of Songs*).

But in order to live happily, it does not suffice to possess great goods, it remains necessary to taste the sweetness of pleasures. Ah! My dear brothers, how great is your happiness in this! You renounce, it is true, by the vow of chastity the deceptive pleasures of the world and its false joys, to unite yourselves more closely to God; but, in exchange, what interior delights, perfect joys, sweet ineffable things are going to flow into your soul by this intimate union with her God, who is the source of true pleasures! The pleasures, joys, consolations, sweetness that He accords with such a profusion to those who renounce all to attach themselves to Him, such that thereby the soul is as drunk: *Inebriabuntur ab ubertate*

domus tuae, they shall be inebriated with the plenty of Thy house (Ps. 36). It is as if she [the soul] were entirely transformed in this sovereignly lovable object which fills her with delights, says St. Bernard, such that she no longer has any movement of joy and love except for Him: *Nec potest jam sentire aut sapere nisi Deum*. Yes, my dear brothers, as the prophet Hosea says, on that blessed day when I am going to make you leave Egypt in order to lead you into the desert, I will reveal myself to your heart in an ineffable manner, I will nourish you and will fill you with milk and my solid and divine consolations: *Ecce ego lactabo eam et ducam eam in solitudinem et loquar ad cor ejus, juxta diem ascensionis suae de terra Aegypti*, behold I will allure her and will lead her into the wilderness, and I will speak to her heart, according to the days of her coming up out of the land of Egypt (Hos. 2).

Wonderful promises, abundant recompenses! How can you wish more, my dear brothers? God Himself will be your joy, your pleasure, your consolation by His intimate union and His familiar communication with you. Oh pleasure, oh joy without equal, oh sweetness above all my expressions! No, exclaims St. Augustine, my tongue cannot say what my heart experiences while rejoicing in God: *Non sufficit lingua mea cordi meo*. If all hearts were to form but one heart, says St. Thomas, this heart would not be able to know how great is the pleasure which is felt in a soul that is uniting itself to God: *Si omnia corda essent unum cor, investigare non posset quantam delectationem habet anima in congratulatione Dei*. Let us leave then, my dear brothers, let us leave your heart to taste what my tongue cannot make you know. Let us speak a language more intelligible to those who hear me, and let us say that your pleasure in religion will still be the repose of a good conscience, which is, says the Sage, a continual and delicious feast: *Bona conscientia jube convivium*. This will be a lively hope of paradise, founded on the moral assurance of your predestination: *Spe gaudentes, in tribulatione patientes*, rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation (Rom. 12). There will be, finally, this fraternal charity

which is the bond of true religious communities and which creates the pleasure of religion, so that we can rightly cry like the prophet: *Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum habitare fratres in unum* (Ps. 132). Ah! How good, how agreeable that brothers should dwell and



VANITAS — PHILIPPE DE CHAMPAIGNE

be united together! *Ecce quam bonum!* How good, how agreeable that grace should affirm in you the bond that nature has already formed: *Ecce quam bonum!* Blessed encounter of nature with grace, sweet and agreeable sympathy of two hearts united by nature and charity; a union, I hope, my dear brothers, not of the body only in one same religion, one same house, but perfect union of heart, fruit of holy love which will inspire in you one sole will and the same spirit in order to serve the same Father and the same master that we all adore: *Cum fratres nuncupantur, unicae voluntatis cari-*

tate concordēs sunt, in being named brothers, they are united by the charity of a single will.

But I have strayed. Pardon me, my brothers; the pleasure that I felt myself to expose to you the true and solid pleasures of religion made me forget the bounds that I had prescribed for myself.

Let us be brief, then, and let us say that in order to live blessedly, besides the abundance of goods and the enjoyment of pleasures, complete liberty is still necessary. You will sacrifice it in appearance, my very dear brothers, by the vow of obedience. But is it by the same vow that you will put yourselves in possession of the true liberty of the children of God: *Vos in libertatem vocati estis*, you have been called unto liberty (Gal. 3). God releases from this accursed captivity of worldly men, men who have as many tyrants as they have passions which they obey. You shake off blessedly this hard slavery of judgments, customs, reflexions, the critiques of the world which make all the days of worldly men sigh: *Jugum oneris ejus et virgam humeri ejus et sceptrum exactoris ejus superasti*, the yoke of their burden and the rod of their shoulder and the sceptre of their oppressor You have overcome (Is. 9). You will enter into possession of a holy liberty to practice in an elevated manner virtue by your state, without fear of insults, of raillery or reproaches. This is far from any possibility that the vow of obedience should weaken your liberty because it will remove from you in some way the power to do evil. To the contrary, it fortifies it, because this unhappy power to sin is a defect and not a perfection of our liberty, as theology teaches.

Yes, my dear brothers, as the Holy Spirit says to you by the mouth of Sirach, these bonds, these chains, this slavery—to which you will submit yourselves today—will serve to defend you, to fortify you, and to crown you with glory: *Et erunt tibi compedes ejus in perfectionem fortitudinis et bases virtutis; et torques illius in stolam gloriæ et vinculum illius alligatura salutaris*, then shall her

fetters be a strong defence for thee and a firm foundation, and her chain a robe of glory: ... and her bands are a healthful binding (Eccl. 6).

Courage then, innocent victims. Courage, predestined souls. Accomplish the sacrifice that you have so generously begun. Ascend by a firm step to Calvary, and open your heart to the features of divine love: *Nuda pectus tuum divino amori*. Present your heart courageously to this lovable Tyrant, and receive without fear the mortal blows that He will bring upon you: *Nuda pectus tuum*. No, fear not, since this death that you will suffer for Jesus will produce in you a life a thousand times more blessed than that which you leave behind, while procuring for yourselves goods more precious, pleasures more perfect, a liberty more whole than in the world.

And you, my [other] brothers, do you think yourselves to have no part in all that I have just said? A strange thing: from the moment that one speaks of death, the cross, renouncement, separation, austerity, one imagines that this be addressed only to religious. An abuse, my brothers, an abuse. Know and remember that by baptism you died and were buried to the world with Jesus Christ: *Consepulti sumus cum Christo per baptismum*, we are buried together with him by baptism (Rom. 6). What a Christian says, a dead man says, a man crucified to the world, and to whom the world ought to be also. This example, then, my brothers, that I propose today to your eyes is not so strange to you as you may imagine. They die to the world, you ought to die to it: they separate themselves from the world, you ought to separate yourselves from it, if not from the body and goods like them, at least from the heart and affection. These are the promises, the engagements, the sacred and inviolable vows that you have made to God before heaven and earth in your baptism: *Consepulti sumus*, etc.

I return to you, my dear brothers. You burn—I see it—with a holy impatience to accomplish your sacrifice. Enkindled by the

ardor of charity, you sigh, like the Apostle, to break your chains in order to live with Jesus Christ. This death, all frightful, that I have depicted for you from the beginning of my discourse, has no longer for you but charm and attraction. The hope of a more blessed life animates you and renders you disposed. I perceive it, my dear brothers; and if, penetrating further, I enter into the secret of your heart, what ardor, what fire, what courage, what sentiments of love! Permit me, my dear brothers, for the edification of my hearers, to offer them on your behalf to the God of goodness for Whom you are going to die.

Sovereign arbiter of the life and death of men, God of mercy, lovable Savior of our souls, impelled by a true desire to please You, we come to the foot of Your altar to make to You a voluntary sacrifice of our life: *Nos qui vivimus, in mortem tradimur propter Jesum*. Yes, Lord, full of life as we are, we are going to die for Your love, for Your glory, in order to follow the holy footsteps which You have imprinted on this world. We are going to die so as no longer to live for ourselves: *Ut vita Jesu manifestetur in carne nostra mortali*. We are young, it is true, even in the springtime of youth, and yet, woe to us not to have aspired earlier to the happiness we are going to enjoy. Yes Lord, it is already too late to begin to serve You, it is too late to know You, it is too late to love You, oh goodness so ancient and so new: *Sero te amavi bonitas tam antiqua et tam nova*.

Blessed, a thousand times so blessed if, from the cradle, we have recognized that the life of the world is a frightful death and that to die, for us, is to live eternally; still more blessed if the first moment of our life had finished the course by a death as blessed as that which we are going to suffer. Ah! Lord, had we a million lives, that would yet be too little to be a sacrifice worthy of Your altar! Deign, though, lovable tyrant of our hearts, to receive that which we offer You today from all the expanse of our heart and our love, and by a continuation of Your favors, grant, O God of goodness, that our voluntary death may be in us the source of a

life more holy, more tranquil, and more blessed in this world, and that finally, it would be followed in the next life by the happiness to possess You for all eternity. This is the grace that we beg from You, and that I wish for you. *Amen.*

Translated by John Sica, O.P.

John Sica entered the Order of Preachers in 2010. He is a graduate of Providence College, where he studied philosophy.

This sermon first appeared in French as "Sermon pour une profession religieuse" in *Sermons du R. P. C.-R. Billuart*, ed. Étienne Lelièvre (Paris: Jacques Lecoffre, 1846), 2:259–74.