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 Profession of Final Vows on the Feast of Peter Claver
 Isaiah 58:6-10
 Luke 4:16-22a

The readings we've just heard proclaimed, and the saint whose life the Church celebrates on this feast day, together speak to us of a God who passionately desires that all people experience freedom, wholeness, and fullness of life as God's beloved children. Isaiah gave voice to God's desire that the oppressed might be set free, that the hungry would be fed, that the homeless and the naked might be sheltered and clothed, and that no one would turn their back on their brother or sister in need. Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth drew on Isaiah's words to express his understanding of the sort of life to which God had called him. Through God's Spirit at work in his heart, Jesus came to know himself as one sent to embody God's desire to bring all people to freedom and fullness of life as God's beloved children. He understood himself as called to live a life in which his words, and more importantly his deeds, would bring the good news of God's saving love to all those whom he met. Jesus in the synagogue announced the mission to which he had been called: to proclaim freedom and healing to all those experiencing any kind of oppression or slavery.

In his life as a companion of Jesus, St. Peter Claver shared in that mission of Jesus in a powerfully literal way. On April 3, 1622, Peter Claver knelt before the Eucharist in the chapel of the Jesuit college in Cartagena, Colombia, to make his solemn profession of final vows in the Society of Jesus. At the conclusion of his handwritten vow formula, he used his signature to announce his mission; his signature read, "Peter Claver, slave of the slaves forever."¹ Peter was sent from his native Spain to colonial Columbia with the mission of ministering to the thousands of enslaved Africans brought each year to labor in the mines and plantations in Spanish America.

¹ See Angel Valtierra, S.J., *Peter Claver: Saint of the Slaves* 70-72 (1960).

He was to spend his life tirelessly laboring to give flesh to God's saving love in the unspeakably horrible conditions in which the newly arrived slaves found themselves when they were herded off the ships in chains and held in yards at the docks in Cartagena.

In one of his letters, Peter said that he and his companions forced their way through the crowds to get to the slaves. They tried to treat their wounds, wash their faces and bodies with wine, give them some sort of clothing, and share with them something to eat and drink. His conversations with them took place through these loving deeds, these acts of basic human kindness, rather than through words. Peter explained that, "for people in their situation . . . , any other form of address would have been pointless."²

Peter Claver was not in a position to end the slave trade, and he could not free from their physical chains the enslaved men and women to whom he ministered. He understood his mission as one of preparing them for baptism and the freedom of life as God's children and members of the body of Christ. In the midst of the darkness, oppression, and injustice of the slave system, we might understand Peter's deeds of loving care as what one of his biographers called "an effort to instill in the slaves a sense of their human dignity and their preciousness in the eyes of God."³ In Isaiah's words, the people to whom he ministered were his own, his own brothers and sisters, on whom he could not turn his back. Peter's loving acts of basic human kindness in themselves "represented a subtle subversion of the principles of the slave trade."⁴ Peter Claver bound himself to be slave of the slaves forever as his free response to God's desire for co-workers laboring to shape a world of freedom and wholeness and fullness of life; Peter

² St. Peter Claver, Letter to his Superior (May 31, 1627), in the Supplement to the Divine Office for the Society of Jesus, Office of Readings for the Feast of St. Peter Claver.

³ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* 392 (1997)

⁴ *Id.*

desired to help shape a world where all might live in the freedom that flows from experiencing themselves as God's beloved children, precious in God's eyes.

The Complementary Norms to the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus say this about the vows of Jesuits: "our religious vows, while binding us, also set us free: free, by our vow of poverty, to share the life of the poor and to use whatever resources we have, not for our own security and comfort, but for service; free, by our vow of chastity, to be 'men for others,' in friendship and communion with all, but especially with those who share our mission of service; and free, by our vow of obedience, to respond to the call of Christ as made known to us by him whom the Spirit has placed over the Church, and to follow the lead of all our superiors."⁵

Through my nineteen years of life as a Jesuit, I know that I have grown, and continue daily to grow, in my experience of the freedom and wholeness and fullness of life that God desires for me and for each one of us. I come to this day for the profession of my final vows filled with tremendous gratitude. I am deeply grateful for the gift of this vocation and for the call to final vows, and I am consoled by the Spirit's gift of an ever-deepening sense that I was made for this life of companionship with Jesus. My experience of God's love and the gift of faith have their earliest and deepest roots in the love of my parents and family. Those gifts have been nurtured over the years by dear friends, by beloved Jesuit companions, and by the people with whom it has been my privilege to have shared my life in all the places to which my Jesuit vocation has sent me. In the words of the Formula of the Institute, I do experience life in the Society of Jesus as a "pathway to God for me,"⁶ and it is the desire of my heart to enter the Society definitively today and to spend my life in it forever. The vows call me to share my life more wholeheartedly with Jesus in all things, and it is my desire that my relationship with Jesus

⁵ Complementary Norms #143 §2.

⁶ See Formula of the Institute, *Exposit Debitum* (1550), §3, quoted in General Congregation 35, Decree 4, Obedience in the Life of the Society of Jesus #16 (2008).

and my companionship with him in his work of giving flesh to God's life-giving love in the world, will more and more be the defining characteristics of who I am and of who people experience me to be.

I know that it is not possible for me to be faithful to all these desires on my own or by myself. I will need to grow daily in my trust in God's loving care and presence and action in all things. And I will be grateful for the prayers, support, example, and encouragement of all of you here present who have loved me well through all the different experiences that have brought me to this day.

Jesuits know well the story of Peter Claver's remarkable friendship with Alphonsus Rodriguez. Alphonsus was a Jesuit brother, who served for 47 years as the doorkeeper at the Jesuit college on the island of Majorca, where Peter was sent for studies as a young Jesuit in formation. Alphonsus said that he encountered God in each person for whom he opened the door, and he has been described as one who "performed his [daily work] with such infinite love that the act of opening the door became a sacramental gesture." During the three years Peter Claver spent on Majorca, he and Alphonsus shared daily conversations, conversations that helped Peter to discern the shape of his vocation. I'm sure those conversations taught Peter something about the Source of the love with which Alphonsus opened the college door. Those conversations no doubt informed the love that made a sacramental gesture out of each of Peter's deeds of feeding, consoling, and bathing the enslaved people he encountered. And I am sure that those conversations with Alphonsus sustained and encouraged Peter in his many years of ministry after the day of his profession of final vows. I've been told that the verb "to converse" can mean both "to speak together," and "to share a life together." I will need to rely daily upon such conversations of shared life with my Jesuit brothers, and with my family and friends, to

sustain and encourage me as I endeavor to live faithfully the vows that I profess today. Above all, I know that I will need to rely daily on the life-giving conversation of shared life with Jesus. Such conversations up to this day have always nurtured in me God's gifts of freedom, wholeness, and fullness of life. I will give thanks to God for such conversations in all the days that are to come.