

## *Professing Final Vows as a Jesuit*

*September 2nd, 2000, St. Francis Xavier Church, New York City.*

My friend and Jesuit brother, Bill McNichols from New Mexico, tells the story when he was in tertianship in Texas and a young Jesuit from Poland raised his hand and asked the tertian instructor, “Father, when do we get to experience the final WOWS?” For years, now I’ve been looking forward to these final vows.

I want to thank you all for coming to celebrate with me today as I renew my vows as a Jesuit, and for all your love and support over the past 18 years that I have been a Jesuit as I have struggled to live the Gospel, and gotten into all kinds of trouble. I couldn’t have done it without you. And I want to thank Ken and Bob and Dan and the Society of Jesus for supporting me and putting up with me, especially the West Side Jesuit Community; and my parents and family for all your loving kindness.

I remember when the Maryland provincial, Ed Glynn came to visit me in jail, and we had a 15 minute visit, and I was in an orange jump suit with the guards standing next to me, and we were speaking through the glass in a microphone, making small talk, and finally I said, “Ed, I really need to know, do you and the Society of Jesus still support me?” And he sat back in his chair, and put his hands up to frame me in a picture and said, “John, you’re right where we want ya.”

I knew then that the Jesuits were for me!

In 1984, when my fellows novices were asked to pick a text for our first vows at the Jesuit novitiate in Wernersville, Pennsylvania we unanimously chose this famous story of Jesus (Luke 4:16ff), when he goes to his hometown synagogue, reads from the prophet Isaiah about the

mission of justice and liberation, and how the congregation quickly turns hostile and tries to throw him off the cliff. So I chose this text again today.

For me, this episode sums up the story of Jesus, his mission and the trouble he got into, and I think it sums up our mission as Jesuits and Christians--to proclaim good news to the poor, liberation to the oppressed, release to prisoners, and the year of jubilee; and it sums up too the trouble that we get into as we try to live out this mission & follow Jesus on his path of justice and peace.

So for me, this profession of vows today and this renewal of the Jesuit life is a way to renew my discipleship to Jesus, my stand with Jesus and with all of you against this imperial culture of violence and war and injustice, and my journey with you in search of God's reign of peace and nonviolence and justice. Like all of you, I want to be part of Jesus' mission--to love everyone and risk my life proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the prisoners, vision to the blind, liberty to the oppressed, justice for all, and the disarmament of the world.

As I've been thinking of these vows and this Gospel this summer, I've been taking a long look back at my life as a Jesuit, from my work with the homeless and the disenfranchized, the sick and dying and those on death row, from the McKenna Center in DC and to the Sacred Heart Center in Richmond, Virginia; my visits with Ellacuria and the great Jesuits of El Salvador who were later killed in 1989, my pilgrimages to Israel, Palestine, Haiti, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, the Philippines, and most powerfully last year to Iraq; speaking out with so many of you against war and nuclear weapons, and going to prison for my plowshares action with my friends Lynn and Bruce who are here today, and with our friend Philip Berrigan, who is back in prison today along with Steve Kelly, a Jesuit friend in my community for another recent Plowshares action; I think too of the time I was teaching theology at Fordham and disrupted the Fordham senior ball which was held on the USS Intrepid the war museum and the students wanted to throw me overboard, while I was teaching theology at Fordham, and also the great tertianship year I had in Northern Ireland; and now my work with the Fellowship of Reconciliation--and my hope is somehow like all of you to make my story fit into the great story of Jesus--and despite all my many mistakes and failures, today like you, I feel more than ever a desire to follow Jesus, to become, with all of you, his companion and servant and friend.

So this Gospel story of Jesus' rousing call to work for justice and even to love our enemies has inspired me all these years since my first vows, but lately I've been helped even more by the part about the trouble Jesus gets into, and how the crowd wants to throw him off the cliff or later arrest and jail him, and I'm learning the hard lesson that the more we pursue this Gospel vision of nonviolence and justice, like Jesus, the more

trouble we will get into, so I ask you today please to continue to support me on my journey that I may live out these vows and become, with you, a faithful friend and companion of Jesus.

My hope at this beautiful Eucharist, with this great Gospel, is to go forward with all of you to help make Jesus' great mission come true, to walk with him in the years to come as he continues to fulfill Isaiah's vision to abolish war and every nuclear weapon; to end hunger and feed every child on the planet; to end the death penalty and abortion and racism and sexism and the unjust sanctions on Iraq; to create a culture of nonviolence with dignity, equality, and the fullness of life for everyone, with jobs, homes, healthcare and education for all peoples; to protect creation itself, and to welcome God's reign of nonviolence.

So with grateful love, my prayer now with these vows and at this Eucharist is to say, as our beloved Lord Jesus said and as all of you have said in your lives, "Today, the scriptures are fulfilled. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me."

\* \* \* \* \*