

The Essence of the Consecrated Life¹

A Divine Call

When Christ came in the fullness of time, He raised the natural institution of marriage to the state of a sacrament and in so doing the married state became an instrumental cause of sanctifying grace. Yet one quite naturally is drawn to the married state. The call itself to married life remains a natural vocation, despite the fact that the reality itself as a sacrament is supernatural. A call to become a religious, on the other hand, is not a natural tendency as it is with marriage. In a religious vocation the initiative is taken by God. It is first and foremost a gift given by God to the person, and then man is free to respond to the gift. Jesus Himself was more than once approached by persons who, while desiring to follow Him, were not divinely called.² Throughout the Fathers we have seen that the monk or virgin "was called" by God and that the state was not presumed upon on one's own.³

"Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."⁴ The religious is called to leave everything and to follow Jesus more closely. In doing so one is set on a way that is "narrow" and "straight" and many of the potential obstacles toward reaching the perfection of love are removed. But this vocation is not just a way of life; it is a call to be conformed more closely to Christ, both interiorly and exteriorly. It is He Who calls the religious and it is He Whom the religious imitates and begins to resemble. The religious life is about a radical *sequela Christi*. All are called to follow Christ by virtue of baptism. Yet the religious disciple is called to imitate Christ, not only interiorly as is the case for all baptized Christians, but also exteriorly, following closely Jesus' own lifestyle. The religious is to become like the Master Who is poor, chaste and obedient. In being conformed unto the likeness of Christ, Christ remains, as it were, visibly present in His human form in a particular way in the religious. Through the consecration of religious profession and in imitation of the historical life of Jesus the religious reminds all in the Church of Jesus' own life and consecration.

Because the religious vocation has its origin in Christ and has as its end the perfection of charity through imitating and conforming oneself to Christ, the "divine institution" of religious life becomes theologically evident. Certainly the early Fathers that we have studied saw this clearly. The historical institutionalization of the religious life *per se* at a later date does not negate the fact that the state finds its origin in the life of Christ. This is not to say that Christ instituted the religious life during his earthly sojourn. The religious state has its origin in the life of Christ in two senses. First, the religious state has the life of Christ as its pattern. It is His lifestyle which is to be imitated and continued throughout the centuries of the Church by all

¹The following is an adaptation of chapter 3 of Michael Champagne, *Religious Life and its Sacramental Characteristics: An Historical Study and Theological Analysis* (Rome: Angelicum, 1995), 70-80.

²It is enough to recall the "would-be disciples" of Luke 9:57-62 (cf. also Mt. 8:18ff). Also recall the cured Gerasene demoniac who wanted to follow Jesus but was sent back by Jesus to his family (Mark 5:18-20). On the divine call see also *PC* 5, *LG* 44, and *IL* 47.

³The important element here is the divine call. That is to say that no one has the right to be a religious. He or she must be called. This divine call has both an internal element of grace working in the soul and the external call of the Church. On this double aspect see Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), 439.

⁴Mark 10:21.

religious. In a second sense, Christ is the origin of the religious state in the sense that it was willed by Him to exist. Although this is not yet manifest as an institution in the New Testament, certainly His will is manifest in the calling of many to sell their belongings, give them to the poor, and then follow Him. Understanding Christ to be the source, model and end of the religious life could allow one to argue that the consecrated life is not just a structure within the Church, created by the Church, but rather that it belongs to the Church's very essence, having its origin in Christ Himself.⁵

Assumption of the Evangelical Counsels

The divine vocation to the religious life is one which exacts a total gift of self from the one called. The Church on earth needs some members who bear the form of Christ - poor, chaste and obedient - in their lives. The religious is not asked "to reject Satan and His pomps" or to renounce sinful practices. These are presumed as prerequisite. Such a profession is required of the baptized. The religious renounces things legitimate to the baptized in order to make a complete offering of oneself with Jesus to the Father. Early in the Church's history this complete offering of self was seen as a holocaust. While sacrifices are pleasing to God, the most pleasing is the holocaust - the offering of all one's material goods through the vow of poverty, one's whole body through the vow of chastity, and one's entire will by means of the vow of obedience.⁶ In so doing the religious makes a *total* offering to God which is definitive and complete. One no longer offers to God only the fruits but in a single offering he gives God the entire tree.⁷

The counsels are to be assumed by vow since this offering is definitive and because it is being offered to God. By means of the religious vows all what one is and possesses is given over in worship to God. All of the religious' future acts as well are bound under the virtue of religion and thus come offered to God. What is more, in the profession of the evangelical counsels the religious unites himself with the poor, chaste and obedient Christ in His act of sacrifice to the Father. Thus the religious not only exteriorly conforms to the life-style of Jesus, but through his offering, participates in Jesus' priestly activity.

Divine Consecration

Every gift implies a receiver. In fact, one cannot say that he has given something unless the one for whom the gift is intended receives the offering. God asks for something from someone. The person responds by means of grace and makes the offering to Him. This offering then awaits its reception. It is such with the religious vocation. The religious vows necessitate a

⁵This was a question which was asked at the Synod on the Consecrated Life held at Rome in October 1994. See *IL* 42. In support of our statement above see as well *LG* 42 and *PC* 1. Also see the article *Alcuni Punti in Vista del Sinodo dei Vescovi sulla Vita Consacrata* by Gianfranco Ghirlanda, S.I., in *Punti Fondamentali sulla Vita Consacrata* (Roma: Edizione Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1994), 72-73. The Synod Fathers seem to support this position. In chapter 2 of the *Nuntius* they write: "La Vita Consacrata in quanto tale è permanente, non può mancare mai nella Chiesa. Le forme istituzionali, invece, possono essere transitorie e non sono garantite di perennità" (*Sinodo '94 sulla vita consacrata e la sua missione nella Chiesa e nel Mondo: Messaggio Finale* (Milano: Paoline, 1994), 14.

⁶See our treatment of St. Thomas on the *status religionis* in chapter 2 above.

⁷St. Thomas refers to this text of Ambrose. In his *De Similitudinibus* St. Ambrose compares the monk to a tree: "Alter autem adeo dominum amat ut, ad eum veniens, arborem ipsam ei offerat. Domine, inquit, arborem habeo, quamdam, bonum valde fructum ferentem, quae quia vestrae congruit dignitati, malo eam vestri esse iuris quam me. Eam igitur offero vobis, ut amodo vobis fructificet soli," (*PL* 159, 655).

reception on the part of God which is done by means of the Church. It is only in this way that one has the certainty that his offering has been accepted and willed by God.

When a religious professes public vows of poverty, chastity and obedience the Church not only stands for God in receiving these vows, but through the Church's acceptance God receives the gift and takes the person as His own privileged possession. The religious has prepared his holocaust for God just as Elijah had prepared the offering on Mount Carmel. Now God acts and consecrates the person, as He sent fire from heaven to consume the holocaust offered by Elijah.⁸ The vows of the religious do not constitute simply a juridical and moral obligation to God but rather bring about a real consecration in the person.

A Consecrated Person

Something that is consecrated is "made sacred" and hence removed from the common use. It becomes designated or ordained toward something special and sacred. When God consecrates a person, the person is "made sacred" and is peculiarly set aside for God. In this way the religious is removed from the state of the baptized lay people and given a new status in the Church.⁹ The new public state of the religious is determined by being consecrated. No longer does God look upon one who is consecrated as He would on the other baptized. What God sees is the reality - that of a person belonging entirely to Him. Thus the Church likewise understands and relates to the person differently as a consequence of the new identity wrought by the consecration. The rights and duties of the person consecrated change as well to concur with the new state of life entered upon in the Church.

God takes possession of the person in a way different from the possession wrought in the sacrament of baptism. In baptism one becomes a Christian and thus enters into a fraternal relationship with the Son. In the religious consecration, a new consecration is effected which builds upon the first. Now the relationship that is entered upon is one likened to that between spouses.¹⁰ The religious becomes "one in spirit" with Christ. A real union with Christ results which can be compared with the indissoluble union in the sacrament of matrimony. But the consecration resulting from religious profession is a more stable union than that of marriage, as we have seen to be manifest in the teaching of the Fathers. In the case of marriage, the death of a spouse destroys the indissoluble union between spouses and the remaining partner is free to remarry. Yet the Spouse of the religious is Immortal and cannot die, thus implying that the bond will remain forever. The religious who has been consecrated may be dispensed of his canonical requirement to fulfill certain obligations but once he has been consecrated he cannot be "un-consecrated" much in the same way that a priest can be dispensed of his canonical obligations but yet can never revert to the lay state.

⁸Cf. 1 Kings 18:30-40.

⁹Of course, not being ordained, the person remains "lay", yet the religious is no longer *simply* a baptized person.

¹⁰This theme of spousal union in religious profession is present throughout the Fathers, more often used to speak of female virgins, yet used for male and females alike. The spousal love that exists between Christ and His Church is part of the life of every religious, male and female. On this theme see *Redemptionis Donum* 8 & 10. Certainly the aspect of being spouse to Christ has a particular sentiment and meaning for the woman religious. On this theme see Pope John Paul II's catechesis on religious life at the General Audience on Wednesday, March 15, 1995. The English text can be found in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, March 22, 1995.

Deputation to Divine Worship

It is quite clear from the teaching of both Pseudo-Dionysius and St. Thomas that the monk or religious receives a deputation to divine worship. This is evident in the call to leave all and make a holocaust of one's life as an offering to God. The deputation is not merely a juridical one enforced by Church discipline but is integral to the consecration which occurs simultaneously with the profession of religious vows.

Religious consecration is a new consecration building upon the sacramental foundation of baptism.¹¹ By baptism one receives a participation in Jesus' priesthood and thus the baptized person is able to participate in divine worship, especially as it is expressed in the Holy Eucharist, the sacraments and the Church's prayer. It is by means of the baptismal character that one is also able to "offer spiritual sacrifices" to God.¹² But in religious profession the person receives a new *potentia* which he previously did not have. The person is ushered into a new state because of this power. This *potentia* is passive in nature and allows one the capacity to participate more fully and perfectly in divine worship. In fact, the religious is deputed to offer his whole life unto God as a "spiritual sacrifice".

According to the Fathers the consecrated soul is "marked" in a special way for God.¹³ Similar to the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and holy orders there is a "marking off" of the person while at the same time the donation of a *potentia* to participate more fully in worship, which is properly speaking a fuller participation in Jesus' priestly activity. Since religious profession is not a sacrament we do not speak of it as conferring a spiritual character but it seems that the change and *potentia* which is given in the religious consecration is actually a deepening of the person's baptismal character. We can say that what was already received at baptism is "stirred up" and deepened in a lasting and permanent manner to the end that the soul is permanently "marked" by the religious consecration.

From this deepening of the baptismal character which results in a special *potentia* for divine worship, it follows that the religious is privileged and obliged to a greater participation in the Eucharistic mystery. Already we saw how Pseudo-Dionysius taught this about the consecration of monks in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.¹⁴ Thus the religious no longer has the same capacity and obligation to participate in the Eucharist as he had as a baptized person just prior to his profession. He now enters into a new and different state in the Church and his participation in divine worship will also be different.

Since the Eucharistic liturgy is the "summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed" and "the font from which all power flows",¹⁵ the religious has as his primary obligation

¹¹Cf. *RD* 7 on this point. Also see *PC* 5, *LG* 44 and *IL* 41.

¹²Cf. Romans 12:1.

¹³Cf. *RD* 15 on this point.

¹⁴See our treatment of Pseudo-Dionysius in chapter 1 above.

¹⁵Cf. *SC* 10. Unless otherwise noted, English translations of the Documents of Vatican II are from the edition of Austin

participation in the liturgy. It is here that one's religious vocation receives its fullest expression. Yet, by virtue of the new consecration, the religious continues Jesus' priestly activity of offering "hymns of praise" and "spiritual sacrifices" to the Father in all of his actions. The privileged place of the Liturgy of the Hours is obvious as the religious prays with the Son those "hymns of praise" to the heavenly Father. Yet all of the actions of the religious come under the virtue of religion and hence the religious more than any other is capable of and obliged to continual prayer and adoration. In such a way the effects of the sacrifice of the Mass are continued and prolonged throughout the day. In fact St. Theodore of Studium uses Eucharistic terminology when speaking of the monk's manual labor. He tells his monks that they sanctify themselves through their work and their work goes up as an offering (προσφορά) and a sacrifice (φυσία) to God.¹⁶

The religious consecrated to God is changed at a level deep in the powers of his soul.¹⁷ He will never be the same as he was prior to his profession. Once he has professed his vows his participation in the Eucharist and his offerings in worship of the Father are radically different and will remain so throughout his life.

Sanctifying Grace

It is commonplace today to speak of "grace of state". The term is loosely applied to almost any occupation. Insofar as one intends the actual graces needed to follow one's vocation to holiness in the various situations which one confronts throughout the day, the phrase is legitimate. Yet, something much more is given in the sacraments. We have seen how the sacraments not only signify but actually cause sanctifying grace. A real sanctification occurs in the sacraments. In addition to grace and the virtues, each sacrament gives additional graces which are particular to the given sacrament and provide the necessary help of grace to live out the obligations of the sacrament. This is not true in other ritual actions of the Church which we term sacramentals.

In religious profession we have a ritual action which is more akin to the sacraments than the sacramentals. In religious profession a real sanctification occurs in the soul and grace is received, providing the person being professed does not place any obstacle to its reception. This teaching is clear in both the Fathers that we have studied as well as in St. Thomas.¹⁸

It is by the action of the Holy Spirit that one is consecrated or "made sacred". The change or deepening of the baptismal character is the work of God Himself Who grants to the soul a greater participation in His Life. Yet this does not happen automatically. It presumes the presence of divine charity in the person being consecrated. If one is in a state of mortal sin and has no participation in divine Life at the moment of religious profession, he would not receive an

Flannery, O.P., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1975).

¹⁶See the excellent treatment of this in the article by Julien Leroy, *La Reforme Studite* in *Il Monachesimo Orientale*, 195-196. Footnote 113 on page 196 lists several references to St. Theodore where he uses such eucharistic terminology to speak of manual labor.

¹⁷Based on our argument that the baptismal character is deepened at religious profession and since we have already seen that character is seated in the intellectual power of the soul, it follows that the consecration wrought by religious profession likewise is in the intellectual power.

¹⁸See the texts of St. Thomas cited in chapter 2 above, *IV Sent.* ds 2, qu I, ar II, ra 9 and *IV Sent.* ds 38, qu 1, ar V, ad 2.

increase in sanctifying grace.¹⁹ Yet it seems that even a person in mortal sin, who with full intention offers himself by professing the evangelical counsels, would receive the *potentia* and consecration even without the sanctification. This is possible since the consecration builds upon the baptismal character which is yet present in the soul even in the state of mortal sin. It would be reasonable to hold that after sacramental confession the religious would not only receive the return of sanctifying grace in the soul but the sanctification proper to his state of being religious as well.²⁰

Finally, there are given also the particular graces which are especially needed by religious to live out their vocation. God does not call anyone to a state without at the same time conferring the necessary grace. Thus by virtue of one's religious consecration grace is given to overcome the difficulties and in order to remain faithful in the lifelong commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience. In receiving the religious vows and consecrating the person for Himself, God is faithful in providing what is supernaturally needed to live out the religious life.

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¹⁹This is clear in St. Thomas: "...gratia datur, nisi sit impedimentum ex parte suscipientis," (*IV Sent.* ds 38, qu 1, ar V, ad 2).

²⁰This is the case with marriage. A sacrament is conferred between two baptized persons if both have the right intention even if one member is in the state of mortal sin. There is however not the sacramental grace of marriage active in the one member until reviviscence occurs at the time of sacramental confession.