

# THE VOWS: CONSECRATION AND SIGN

By EDWARD YARNOLD

RELIGIOUS LIFE A STATE OF PERFECTION

THE DIVINE MASTER AND EXEMPLAR of all perfection, the Lord Jesus, preached sanctity of life, of which he is the author and finisher, to each and every one of his disciples of every condition: Be therefore perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'.<sup>1</sup> All christians are called to love God with their whole heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love one another as fully as Christ loves them. This unlimited charity is traditionally called perfection.

But if all christians are thus called to perfection, what is the peculiar aspect of religious life which justifies us in distinguishing it from the lay state by calling it the state of perfection? This is an important question; up till recently, little emphasis was put upon the layman's vocation to sanctity. The impression could even be given that Catholics believed in a double standard: perfection, holiness, unlimited charity required of religious; unambitious fidelity to the commandments on the part of laymen. Now, the layman's vocation to holiness is a commonplace. Consequently a young man or woman, considering entering religious life, is bound to ask why he or she should enter an order if the call to utter generosity with God can be heeded by lay people as well. It is important that we should be able to state precisely what the difference between the lay and religious vocation is. We cannot simply state that the aspirant after perfection will choose religious life.

The Council documents provide material for an answer. Firstly

Christ's faithful bind themselves to the practice of the evangelical counsels by vows or by sacred bonds similar in nature to vows. By such bonds they deliver themselves entirely into the hands of God their supreme love, in such a way that they are marked out for his glory and service by a *new and special title*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 40. On the meaning of the text (Mt 5, 48), see THE WAY, Oct. 1965.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 44. Italics ours.

By his baptismal promises every layman is committed to serve God faithfully in the holy Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup>

What is the new title by which religious are bound? The text from *Lumen Gentium* quoted above seems to imply that the new title results in a more total obligation to God, *totaliter mancipatur*. It goes on to suggest that this new element of obligation consists in the permanence of the vows: 'This consecration will be the more perfect in proportion as the indissoluble union of Christ with his bride the Church is re-presented *in the strength and permanence of their bonds*'.<sup>2</sup>

Now the question at once arises: Why does permanence imply greater generosity? Is there not in fact greater scope for generosity in impermanence? A layman is not bound to a dedicated framework of life, as the religious is, and therefore has to renew his generosity with God every time he chooses to renounce his opportunity for self-centred action. The religious has cut himself off once-for-all from many of the possibilities for such self-centred action: his vow of chastity leaves him with no wife, his vow of poverty leaves him with no cheque-book, his vow of obedience leaves him without mastery over his own career. He has renounced not only potential obstacles to total love of God, but also opportunities for generosity with God. Is there not more freedom and generosity in retaining the power of making the self-dedication with every choice, than in putting oneself in a position in which the option is no longer presented to us? It is of course true that the religious is called upon for constant generosity in honouring his vows: but the repeated choice has less frequently to be made. The religious has not to decide whether to allow selfishness to enter into his use of his money. He is less likely to be faced with the weight of responsibility for others that a mother or father constantly shoulder. Does not the layman's situation of constant opportunity of making a fresh choice of total self-dedication to God offer more scope for generosity?

The answer seems to be that a permanent, once-for-all, gift of oneself, even though it left one with less freedom in God's service, would still have a value which outweighed the loss of freedom; simply because it does commit one for life. To accept a religious vocation is to sign a blank cheque, to commit oneself in advance to a possible range of demands which is greater than any commit-

<sup>1</sup> 'Religious consecration is deeply rooted in baptismal consecration'. *Perfectae Caritatis* 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 44. Italics ours.

ment that a layman may bind himself to by a single choice. This total self-surrender of a religious should motivate the rest of his life, and make it impossible for him to relax into a comfortable, complacent routine. An analogy may be found in marriage. It could be argued that a man would show more freedom and generosity in his love for his wife if he were not bound to her for life, but were free to choose every morning at breakfast whether to leave her or to stay with her for another day. But on the contrary we feel instinctively that greater love and trust is shown by committing oneself to another for life. This definitive acceptance of another can add a depth to one's love that would be absent in a temporary partnership that needed constant renewal.

Secondly, the religious gains freedom from obstacles to the service of God.

His desire is that his baptismal grace might bear fruit more abundantly; and so by professing the evangelical counsels in the Church he purposes to free himself of the ties which might hold him back from the fervour of charity and the perfection of God's worship.<sup>1</sup>

The counsels . . . have a large part to play in the cleansing of interior motives by achieving spiritual freedom and constantly stirring a man to fervent charity.<sup>2</sup>

This statement should not be thought to imply that religious are out of this world in the sense that they have no secular concerns. It is certainly the Church's tradition that religious may concern themselves in corporal as well as spiritual works of mercy, in scholarship, even profane scholarship, as well as in prayer and penance. Nor should it be thought that the secular occupation is merely a *parergon*, a time-filler, a glorified hobby, what has been called basket-weaving, recalling how the hermits used to spend the next day unweaving the baskets they had made the day before<sup>3</sup>. The religious scientist or teacher or nurse should be as dedicated to his task as his lay counterpart. The science and the teaching and the nursing is an integral part of religious vocation. The grace of their vocation is to find God in their work, in proportion to their dedication to their work, not in spite of their work.

But here a difficulty arises. If religious are as committed to their

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Courtney Murray, J. S.J., *We Hold These Truths* (London, 1961), pp 175 ff.

work as the layman, how can they be said to be liberated from obstacles? The answer perhaps lies in the fact of original sin. If man's nature were not fallen, our human aspirations would lead us peacefully straight to God. But because of the fall, even our noblest aspirations and interests can get between ourselves and God. Adam's sin has left us with a lack of harmony in our instincts and desires, so that they can clash with our desire of God. Therefore, as a corrective, the religious, by his vows, curtails his natural drives in order to obtain mastery over them, and so restore the harmony between them and God. The recovery of this harmony is the hundredfold in this world which our Lord promised to those who left all for him. This recovery of harmony through renunciation belongs to the fallen world. There was no need for vows in the garden of Eden.

In addition there is the apostolic value of the vows:

The more fervent their union with Christ in this gift of self which involves the whole of their living, the richer the Church's life and the more vital and fruitful her apostolate.<sup>1</sup> Let no one think that this consecration makes religious aliens in the world of mankind or drones in the secular city. For even if it sometimes happens that they are not in direct contact with their contemporaries, they keep company with them at a deeper level – in the depths of Christ's heart. They are their fellow-workers in the Spirit, their task being to take constant care of the foundations of the secular city – that it may be built on the Lord and keep in true alignment with him: otherwise the builders will have laboured in vain.<sup>2</sup>

Why else does religious consecration give a person a greater apostolic potential?

The aim of apostolic work is to help others to love God more, that is, to increase the Christ-life, grace, in others. But grace is increased in others only by one who has it himself; the apostolate is a communication of life; love of God is caught, not taught; this is the meaning of the parable of the leaven. The once-for-all self-dedication of the religious is a self-opening to the working of grace that has no equivalent outside the religious life.

Religious life also has the apostolic value of witness.

<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 46.

The consequence is that the profession of the evangelical counsels shines out as a sign, which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to perform the duties of their christian vocation with real diligence.<sup>1</sup>

The Council goes on to explain the elements of religious life which make it a public stimulus to the christian life of all the Church.

First, religious life proclaims the fact that we have here no abiding city, but seek the city to come; that the life that our Redeemer won for us is a new life. This the religious proclaims by renouncing human values: the value of possessions he renounces by the vow of poverty, the value of sexual powers by the vow of chastity, the value of absolute freedom he renounces by the vow of obedience. It is not that these values are proclaimed to be false. On the contrary, they are rejected as good things. But religious reject them in order to demonstrate the insufficiency of human values. The duty of the laity is to proclaim the right use of creatures; the duty of religious is to witness to the insufficiency of humanism in a fallen world. This remains the duty of the religious even if his apostolic duties involve him in secular activity. However, the religious may not proclaim the insufficiency of human values by arbitrary maiming of his potentialities, by castrating himself, for example, as Origen did. Self-mutilation is wrong. The life of super-human values which a religious embraces must be one approved by the Church as a valid means of human fulfilment. But this fulfilment may not be recognizable by purely human reason. The life of the vows can be appreciated only by one who is motivated by charity, sees with the eye of faith, and with hope trusts the faithful God to bring his character to a supernatural balance and maturity. The Council apparently realized that modern man needs assurance on this point:

Finally, all must clearly understand that the profession of the evangelical counsels, though involving the renunciation of values which are certainly amongst the most precious, is so far from being a hindrance to the true development of the human personality as positively to ensure the highest expression of it.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, religious life imitates more closely the form of life that the Son of God chose in his obedience to his Father's will, and so proclaims it perpetually in the Church.<sup>3</sup> It is not a question of

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

slavishly trying to reproduce the details of Christ's life; for why should we stop at being poor, celibate and obedient? Why should we not all be carpenters and practising jews and itinerant preachers too? We imitate Christ in chastity, poverty and obedience because the Church has recognized that these virtues are essential to our Lord's obedient self-offering. His kingdom is not of this world; his characteristic attitude is a rejection of purely human values. All grace is a share in his life. But this share is expressed most clearly and characteristically by those who share our Lord's fundamental virtues of chastity, poverty and obedience.

Thirdly, religious life 'reveals to all mankind the extent and power of Christ's rule, and the infinite force of the holy Spirit marvellously at work in the Church'.<sup>1</sup> All virtuous life is a revelation of the power of grace; but the more the life rises above merely human values, the plainer this revelation will be. But of course religious life must appear as something super-human, and not as something sub-human; it must arouse admiration, not feelings of repulsion.

Even contemplative orders, of course, have an apostolic function, but they should not yield to the temptation to seek external apostolic activity.

The light of their holiness with its abundant blessings sheds a lustre on God's people, who are moved by their example, and find increase from the fruits of their hidden apostolate. So they stand, a glory for the Church and a source of heavenly graces.<sup>2</sup>

It is notable with what frequency both the Constitution on the Church and the Decree on religious renewal refer to the place of religious institutes in the Church. A religious is never allowed to think of himself as an individual seeking his personal perfection, or even as a member of a religious order seeking its own sanctity and that of its members. Continually in the two documents a religious is reminded of his context in the Church. Since the Church is the sign and instrument of union with God<sup>3</sup> a religious receives his vocation from the Church. His vocation is rooted in the christian's baptismal vocation; the particular emphasis of the ideal of his order must be approved by the Church. Conversely, the religious is constantly reminded of his duties to the Church, that is, of his apostolic function.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 1

THE VOW OF CHASTITY<sup>1</sup>

One cannot add a cubit to one's stature by taking thought. No more may one presume to take the vow of chastity unless one is temperamentally capable of keeping it. Chastity is 'a precious gift of grace' – *eximium donum gratiae*. The word *gratiae* was added to the original text, emphasizing the point that chastity is not simply a question of natural aptitude: it is a supernatural grace. But as grace builds on nature, 'candidates ought not to go forward to the profession of chastity, nor be admitted to it, except after a really adequate probation and after they have attained the necessary psychological and emotional maturity'.

Religious take the vow of chastity because 'it sets free a man's affections in a special way, so that he may be the more set on fire with love for God and for all men'. The Decree then quotes 1 Corinthians.<sup>2</sup> The married person is 'divided'; St Paul sees a conflict between his obligations to his spouse and his commitment to God. Yet, just as we saw that the religious must be as committed to his job as his lay counterpart, so too the religious must be as loving a person as the layman. Our love of neighbour is not something different from our love of God: the second great commandment is like the first. We love our fellow men for their own sake, but this does not mean that we do not love them for God's sake; the two sakes coincide.

But then the difficulty again arises: if the religious retains and supernaturalizes his human affections, why is he not divided like the married man? The answer perhaps is that at the basis of the affective life of a lay person is a unique kind of love, love for wife or husband. This marital love colours all the other personal relations of a married man or woman. The peculiar characteristics of this married love, its exclusiveness, its possessiveness (the married person expects, and has the right to expect, to receive as well as to give) and its depth, mean that it is peculiarly capable of impeding fallen human nature in its search for God. This is not, of course, to say that sex and marriage is for this reason less good; but the vividness of married love and the constancy and urgency of the claims of family ties, make sanctity in marriage always a matter of heroic virtue. Nor does this, in turn, mean choosing an easier way. It is rather that, in the knowledge of his own limitations, the religious humbly chooses the state of life in which he sees that his urge to

<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 7, 32–35.

total generosity towards God is more likely to be fulfilled. Of course the motive is not negative, the desire to give up, but positive, the desire to be more capable of loving God. The result is that his love for his fellow men grows too: 'he is set on fire the more with love for God and for all men'.

In speaking of every christian's vocation to holiness, the Constitution on the Church comments on the particular way of holiness that is followed by those who observe the counsel of chastity:

This perfect continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven has always been held in highest honour by the Church, as the sign and incentive of charity.<sup>1</sup>

Chastity not only proclaims one's desire to love God and neighbour more, but is a stimulus to greater love. The paragraph continues 'and a special source of spiritual fertility in the world'. Our Decree makes the same point: 'it is . . . also the most effective means by which religious can dedicate themselves with joyful heart to the service of God and the works of the apostolate'. The religious is a more effective apostle because of his vow of chastity. This is unfashionable teaching. It is said, for example, that priests would be more effective if they were married: they would understand the problems of married people, and, it is said, they would be more mature and balanced individuals themselves. There is some truth in this plea. A celibate may not be the best person to give marriage guidance; he can easily allow his celibacy to be, not an enriching expansion of love, but a crabbed bachelorhood. But the religious chooses chastity in order to grow in love of God; basically it is on love of God that the effectiveness of apostolate depends.

So it is that religious, in the sight of Christ's faithful, evoke the image of that wonderful marriage made by God, to be shown forth fully in the future age, by which the Church already possesses Christ as her only spouse.<sup>2</sup>

Now St Paul regards marriage as the sign of the union between Christ and the Church: 'husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church'.<sup>3</sup> Husband and wife, being two in one flesh, are an image of the unity existing between Christ and his Church, and the sacrifice of himself that Christ made for his Church. The Decree makes the point that the dedication of the religious to the service

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Eph 5, 25 ff



of God and the needs of the Church is also an image of the Church's union with Christ in this life, which will appear in its fulness in the life to come.

There is another way in which religious chastity is the 'special sign of eternal happiness'. In heaven, human love does not cease, but is perfected. Human love ceases to be an obstacle to our love of God. But love in heaven has not the exclusiveness of married love: 'In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage'.<sup>1</sup> All grace is an advance instalment of the beatific vision. The religious, by his chastity, is given an advance instalment of the love that is proper to heaven, all-embracing love for all men in Christ.

#### THE VOW OF POVERTY<sup>2</sup>

Poverty is not an end in itself, but 'is for the following of Christ'. It must therefore be an expression of charity towards Christ and our neighbour. It is an attempt to let Christ's life of grace grow in us in one of his basic attitudes.

Although modern man is not readily attracted to obedience and chastity, poverty is 'greatly esteemed in our day'. Our poverty is something which unites us with the common man: 'each one should feel, in his own work, bound by the common law of labour'. That is, religious poverty consists partly in hard work. The reproach that religious are lazy should never be well-founded. As religious are themselves poor, they should love the poor 'with Christ's own affection'. This surely implies that a religious should feel a bond of unity with beggars.

But in fact it is often hard for a religious to feel genuinely poor, and to be able to feel that he can carry any conviction when he tells a beggar that he is a poor man too. But religious should be poor 'effectively and affectively... They should strive to bear a collective witness in respect of poverty'. It is not enough for a religious to be exact in asking for permissions. He remains with the responsibility of contributing to his community's collective public witness of poverty. Religious must not only be poor, but must be seen to be poor.

This can be peculiarly difficult in modern conditions. A modern religious who is engaged in the external apostolate is taking part in a specialized activity, and needs all the equipment that can con-

<sup>1</sup> Mt 22, 30. Cf Durrwell, F. X., *In the Redeeming Christ* (London, 1965), pp 214-233.

<sup>2</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 13.

tribute to his efficiency. He also needs to be well-fed and in good health. But the material aids to efficiency inevitably obscure the clarity with which he can be seen to be poor.

The general image of a poor man is not that of a person who is well-housed, well-fed, and with expensive equipment at his disposal. There can therefore be a conflict between the claims of apostolic efficiency and manifest poverty. This conflict was probably scarcely present when the order was founded, or at most less marked. An order may well have to choose whether it will sacrifice efficiency or public poverty. Many orders will feel that their institute regards the former as more important than the latter. They have the right to make the choice. But the Council thinks that public witness to poverty is so important that if necessary they (not necessarily all religious institutes) should modify their constitutions in order to express it: 'Voluntary poverty . . . needs to be fostered with care by religious, and, if need be, expressed in new ways'.

Modern man, with his high valuation of liberty and self-development, can find the asking of permissions repulsive. The formality seems petty and childish to many, and seems to deprive a person of the responsibility he needs in order to grow into a mature human being. Although faith and hope urge us to trust that the way of perfection put forward to us by Christ through his Church will promote and not stunt our personal development, we may still remember that changed conditions, including a changed *Zeitgeist*, can make details of a rule obsolete. Is the duty to ask frequent permissions still a valuable means to an individual's growth in holiness, and is it an effective public proclamation of poverty? At least this much can be said, that such irksome regulations do in fact make us share the condition of many of the poor. Many live in institutions, even in prisons. They have to ask for what they need. They cannot afford the luxury of the responsibility of administering their own property. This humiliating consequence of our vow of poverty links us with them.

#### THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE<sup>1</sup>

In the Decree the purpose of the vow of obedience is stated thus:

By their profession of obedience, religious offer to God as a sacrifice a complete dedication of their own will. This offering fastens them more permanently and securely to God's saving will.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

At first sight this emphasis on the sacrificial aspect of obedience seems to imply that its value lies in the renunciation of our freedom. But this is evidently not the meaning of the document. Self-sacrifice is clearly meant to have a positive value, the putting of oneself at God's disposal. A change in the words of the draft-schema makes this clear. Originally, a phrase had been used that seems to be advocating the negative view of obedience: 'a holocaust of their own will, freely offered to God'. In the final text the possibly misleading word holocaust is removed, so that the positive value is stressed: '...offer to God as a sacrifice the complete dedication of their own will'.

But in what sense is the subject by obedience 'fastened more permanently and securely to God's saving will'? The phrase is not meant to imply that the superior has a private line to the holy Spirit, and so knows better than the subject what God's saving will is. We need to distinguish two aspects of God's will: his permissive will and his direct will. God cannot will directly any evil or error, as he is the source of goodness and truth; but because he respects man's freedom, he does not intervene to prevent us from committing sins or making mistakes. This non-intervention on God's part can be called his permissive will. When superiors through human error give an unwise order, they fail to find God's direct will, which is that they should make the wise choice. But as God does not prevent their mistakes, their unwise order can be said to be according to God's permissive will. But it is his direct will that the subject, after making due representations, should obey. Subjects have the duty to help superiors to find God's direct will and 'Superiors will listen willingly to their brethren'.

But if the superior does not heed the subject's representations, the subject must obey. Although obedience to an unwise order may cause a particular work to suffer, God is faithful; the subject can be confident that the love of God he shows by his obedience will have an apostolic value that outweighs the loss caused by obedience to the unwise order.

Religious follow the example of Jesus Christ, who came to do the will of his Father, and taking the form of a slave, learned obedience in the school of suffering: moved by the holy Spirit, they subject themselves in faith to their superiors, God's representatives.

This is an unusual account of obedience. It is traditionally said that superiors stand in the place of our Lord, and this is certainly

true: Christ is the head of the mystical body, whose authority bears upon us through the Church's hierarchy; religious superiors are the intermediaries between us and Christ. But the Decree reminds us that Christ is not only the source of authority, but the model of obedience. He was obedient to his Father. The subject's obedience is a sharing of Christ's obedience to his Father, just as all grace is a share in his sonship.

The religious vocation, as has been said above, must be seen in its context in the Church. Our obedience is therefore obedience to the Church, for the superior has the right to give orders only in accordance with the constitutions of his institute, which must have received the Church's approval. Besides, obedience puts the religious at the disposal of the Church: 'Thus they are bound more closely to the service of the Church'.

Obedience should not stunt the growth of the subjects. 'They... strive to reach that maturity which is proportioned to the completed growth of Christ'. This of course is true of all the vows, which are taken in order to allow Christ's life to grow in us. But because obedience involves submission to another's judgement, it can seem to be something which cramps development, quenching the intelligence and other natural talents of the subject. To remove this impression the Decree reminds us that subjects are called upon to devote

the powers of their understanding and will, their gifts of nature and of grace, to the carrying out of commands . . . Religious obedience, then, far from lowering the dignity of the human person, brings it to maturity, ennobling it with the freedom of the sons of God.

Hence it would be a mistake for superiors to give such precise orders that they leave nothing to the subject's initiative. Religious training should be such that subjects become capable of receiving more and more responsibility and trust. They should surely not be less capable of accepting responsibility than their contemporaries in the world. At least this is true of directly apostolic orders. Enclosed orders possess less opportunity for and need of training their members in responsibility, except of course their basic responsibility for their vocation, which is a responsibility to the other members of their community and order, and to the Church as a whole.

Finally, superiors should not normally need to invoke their authority:

in governing they will treat those who are subject to them with due respect for the human person and as children of God, anxious to lead them to a submission that is freely made.

They should govern 'in the spirit of service . . . in a way that will express the love God has for them'. They should consult their subjects 'though without detriment to their right in authority to decide and to command what is to be done'. The final responsibility remains with superiors; government should be firm as well as humane.

#### CONCLUSION<sup>1</sup>

We began by asking how religious vocation differs from the call of every christian, of the whole of God's people, to holiness. The final answer lies, as the Constitution on the Church implies, in Christ, the source and exemplar of all holiness. This holiness of Christ, as our Decree teaches, appears in its clearest fashion in a form of life which is structured after Christ's love, his poverty and his obedience. In his glorified humanity the affections of flesh and blood are transformed by the power of the resurrection. Nor is the created world rejected by him; rather it takes on a new value, a new dimension by his *kenosis*, his impoverishment of self. And human freedom finds its true fulfilment in his sonship.

Finally, Christ became man to sanctify the world by his holiness. Our world has lost the sense of the dignity, the sanctity-potential enshrined in human love; created things are seen not as the manifestation of God's love, but as the plaything, the instrument of its own pleasure; nor can man find freedom, because he has made an idol of himself. It is by manifesting more clearly the three aspects of their consecration to God that religious will adapt themselves to the spiritual needs of our time.

---

<sup>1</sup> This conclusion is an editorial addition.