

THE LITURGY OF CONSECRATION

By MICHAEL IVENS

IN A RECENT issue of several english newspapers there appeared a picture of a religious profession ceremony at the carmelite friary at Aylesford in Kent. It was an impressive picture with its background of gothic arches and the expanse of sunlit sanctuary throwing into relief the dark kneeling figures. But it illustrated no item of news; and apart from being a splendid photograph, the point of printing it must surely have been the intrinsic appeal of the occasion itself. The appeal is undeniable. Whether it is necessarily significant is another question. Perhaps for many people the comparatively uncommon spectacle of religious taking their vows evokes little more than a mixture of fascination and bafflement or a pleasant sense of nostalgia. What matters is that for religious and faithful alike, such ceremonies should be not only striking but also a compelling expression of the complex motivation that gives religious life its meaning and relevance.

The old ceremonies, inspiring though they may have been in their day, have long been inadequate for this purpose. They reflected a theology that cut too many corners. Their presentation of religious life as a largely private relationship with God took little account of the Church or even of the religious community, and still less of society at large. The importance of present tasks disappeared almost completely beneath the over-riding theme of contempt of the world, while the heavy emphasis on dress only served to drive home the implication that religious were people who had left the company of ordinary christians. Furthermore, the old ceremonies showed scant awareness of a distinction vital to current theology, between the contemplative and active vocations. For these and other reasons which it would be tedious to relate, the need has long been felt for a ceremony which would offer a more balanced picture of what religious life, especially apostolic religious life, is all about.

But a balanced picture is not one which simply replaces old distortions by new ones. As the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* insists, apostolic religious are apostolic in the whole of their lives, in their

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prayer, their observance and their work; for the most part they are professionally competent, well-informed, immensely busy people to whom notions like 'leaving the world', 'living for God alone' or 'awaiting the bridegroom' are hardly applicable without much qualification. Yet talking about the apostolate of the service of the Church or mankind is notoriously apt to obscure the fact that if religious life has something to do with action, it is because, more basically, it has something to do with being, that ultimately it is a consecration. And the problem is to make this clear without falling into grandiloquent irrelevance; to talk about a life which is involved in a particular society, culture and century while doing justice to the fact that religious life is involvement in the mystery of God, the reaching out towards another life, and the acceptance of values which will always be a little incomprehensible to this world. It is the purpose of the recently promulgated order of religious profession to ensure that the new consecration ceremonies achieve this essential balance.¹

Perhaps the first thing to say about the new *Ordo Professionis Religiosae* is that the texts as they stand are not intended to provide word for word the future consecration ceremonies of any congregation. They are proposed as models, which each Institute not only may but must re-shape to suit its own character and spirit.² At the same time the process of adaptation is subject to certain limits. To discuss these, of course, is a great deal easier than to offer positive suggestions on how the task of adaptation should be tackled. Nevertheless, it is vitally important to be clear what these limits are. A consecration liturgy needs to embody what is common to all religious consecration as well as doing justice to the charism of a particular group; failure to heed certain general principles could well result in just another false picture.

Certain of these principles are perfectly clear. Either they are contained in the explicit instructions at the beginning of the *Ordo* or indicated in the rubrics as the text goes along. They are concerned mainly with the distinctive features of the different types of cere-

¹ The *Ordo Professionis Religiosae* (Vatican Press, 1970) contains models for the rites of entry into the noviceship, temporary and perpetual profession, renovation of vows, as well as for the 'promise' which may now take the place of temporary profession. Three new masses are also given.

The document falls into two sections, for men and women religious respectively, and while the references given below are to one section only, in many cases identical or similar texts will be found in the corresponding place in the other.

² *Ibid.*, *Praenotanda*, p 10, para 14 (d).

mony, the degree of solemnity suitable to each, and with the distinction between those texts which may be re-formulated and those which should be regarded as fixed. Though they impose here and there striking departures from earlier practice, there is little in them to cause surprise five years after *Perfectae Caritatis*. Few today would disagree that too much in the way of solemnity would be inappropriate to the ceremony of admission to the noviceship, and that it would be worse than inappropriate to introduce elements inconsistent with the essential freedom of this stage of religious life. So in prescribing that this ceremony should be a fairly brief affair, conducted outside mass, in the presence of the community alone, the *Ordo* merely confirms a currently accepted view. Another feature of the *Ordo* which departs from earlier practice is the subsidiary place it accords to the conferring of insignia. It envisages (but does not prescribe) the giving of such things as habit, veil, ring, and a rule book, and in each case meaningful and dignified texts are proposed. Nevertheless, the point is discreetly made in various ways that this detail should not loom too large in the ceremony. The insignia are to be conferred all together at the very end of the ceremony, almost as an appendix to it.³ If additional ones are given, it must be with 'becoming sobriety'.⁴ Badges and distinctive clothing are the 'outward signs of consecration', which the religious carries away with him into everyday life; but they are not his defining characteristics. The conferring of them is not, and must not appear to be, a constitutive element of religious profession. Only one feature is likely to cause regret to an older generation: as the correct place for the profession ceremony is after the gospel and as the vow formula is the natural centrepiece of this ceremony, the instructions explicitly, though tactfully, express disapproval of the old custom of pronouncing vows immediately before communion.⁵

But the clear-cut principles such as these are not the only ones to be observed. It is not enough to advert to the instructions and to be clear which of the texts may be omitted or replaced. The process of adaptation must also take account of the whole theological synthesis which underlies the text. It supposes both a clear idea of the main themes and an appreciation of the relationship between them. It will be well, then, to discuss these in a little detail.

They may be summarized as follows. Religious life is 1) an

³ *Ibid.*, p 21, para 34 (All translations from the *Ordo* are my own).

⁴ *Ibid.*, *Praenotanda*, p 9, para 6 (g).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 10, para 15.

extension of baptismal consecration; 2) a service of the Church and mankind; 3) community life; 4) an eschatological sign.

Religious life and baptism

In the rites of both temporary and final profession 'interrogations' start with the fact that the life of the counsels is a deepening and extension of the commitment of baptism. 'Beloved brothers (sisters), water and the holy Spirit have consecrated you to God; do you wish to be united more closely to him by the new title of religious consecration'? (Temporary profession). 'Already dead to sin and consecrated to God, do you wish to be more intimately consecrated by the new title of perpetual profession'? (Final profession). There are many other references, direct and indirect, to baptism;⁶ in fact, the whole document might be described as working out the implications of the life of the counsels precisely as a mode of living out the commitment of baptism. There is therefore no trace in the *Ordo* of either of two common, if not often clearly articulated, distortions of religious life: the view that religious life is to do with the Church's efficiency rather than with its holiness, and the opposite view that would safeguard the holiness of religious life by virtually divorcing it from what the rest of human existence is supposed to be about.

As a title founded on baptism, profession belongs to the order of death and new life. It is to be understood primarily in terms of consecration, not of assignment to a task. On the other hand, it must be seen as belonging to the overall plan of salvation, as a particular way of living and showing forth the vocation of all men. In the ceremony of final profession, this is made eloquently clear in the prayer of consecration,⁷ which takes as its starting point the vocation given to man in the beginning to share in the divine nature: it goes on to trace the course of salvation history to the incarnation and the sending of the Spirit and to situate religious life as a manifestation of the Spirit at work here and now in the world, calling all men to the following of Christ. Certainly, there is no tendency to belittle the distinctive quality of religious life. Religious are designated as people who have 'left all things',⁸ who have chosen the radical renunciation of living celibate for the

⁶ Cf pp 17, 24, 28 (c), 29, 30, 34, 49, 75, 78, 114, 115.

⁷ The profoundly scriptural 'prayers of consecration' are the most striking feature of the new rite of perpetual profession. Two forms are given in each section of the *Ordo*.

⁸ P 31, para 67.

kingdom. Nevertheless, religious life is not an order of existence standing completely apart from the divine plan for the world at large, an alternative programme for the few, with its own quite distinct standards, bearing little relation to what the rest of the human race, trundling along the low road of ordinary holiness, is supposed to be doing.

Religious life, the Church and mankind

In concrete terms, this means that one cannot talk at any depth about religious life without bringing in, and indeed emphasizing, its reference to the Church and to other people. Religious or not, we were baptized into the christian community, and this community has a role to play in society at large. Religious life necessarily exhibits an ecclesial and a social aspect.

The emphasis placed on the relationship of religious life to the Church is one of the most obvious characteristics of the *Ordo*. It is worth noting, to start with, that particular importance is attached to the presence of the faithful at the ceremonies of both temporary and final profession. 'Religious profession is made in the presence of the Church . . . and witnessed by the faithful'.⁹ To facilitate the witness of the faithful, the final profession, though it will normally take place in the chapel of the religious house, may also be held in a cathedral or parish church. Religious profession, then, is no longer considered a private affair of the community, their relatives and a handful of selected friends. It concerns the Church, because religious life is a service of the Church. The evangelical counsels and the ideal of perfect charity are embraced 'for the praise and service of God and the Church'.¹⁰ And the veil (which once stood for contempt of the world) is now a sign that its wearer is dedicated to Christ the Lord and – again – 'to the service of the Church'.¹¹

To develop the connections between religious life and the Church requires some careful distinctions. First, it involves using the term 'Church' in a double sense: the hierarchical Church which approves religious life, legislates for it and gives it canonical status; and the Church as the entire people of God, as Christ's body. If religious life is subject to the Church in the first sense, it is because it is a *gift* to the Church in the second sense. Again, religious provide inestimable service to the Church by their apostolate, but only

⁹ *Ibid.*, *Praenotanda* p 8, para 6(e).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 67, para 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 63, para 34.

when apostolate gives expression to their more fundamental rôle of building up (or edifying) the Church and displaying its holiness to society at large. Each of these themes is clearly set forth in the texts. The Church appears as receiving and giving approval to the self-offering of the professed in the question which opens the 'interrogations' ('What do you seek of God and of his holy Church?'), and in the formula with which the celebrant receives the vows ('in virtue of the authority given to me and in the name of the Church').¹² Furthermore, the ceremonies include a reference to ministry which rules out a too individualistic approach to 'exemption'. 'Faithfully discharge the holy ministry entrusted to you by the Church and to be exercised in her name'.¹³ The Church recognizes the ministry of religious just as she recognizes the charism from which they stem, so that wherever religious are engaged in the work of their Institute, the Church is formally and explicitly present. Nevertheless, the meaning of religious life is rooted ultimately in the life and holiness of the Church; and it is these that are most in evidence in the texts: notably in the very fine presentation of the Church in the second form of the prayer of consecration as the place where the Spirit makes visible within creation the presence, love and purpose of the Creator. The double role of building up and giving witness to that Church is made explicit in such texts as:

By holiness of conduct and by the works of life, may they build up the people of God.¹⁴

Grant that they may manifest the new and eternal life in your Church.¹⁵

May the face of Christ shine forth in them, so that all who see them may know that he is present in your Church.¹⁶

In specific terms, showing forth the presence of Christ in the Church means loving God, and doing so in the only genuine way, which includes loving other people. This brings us to another characteristic of the *Ordo*; its refusal to dissociate, even tacitly, the working out of religious consecration and the furthering of human relationships. Religious life is a consecration both to 'the service of God and to the well-being of man'.¹⁷ The perfect charity to which it aspires is ordered 'towards God and neighbour'.¹⁸ Furthermore,

¹² *Ibid.*, p III, II.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 35, para 76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 93, para 159.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 25, para 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 33, para 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 34, para 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 71 (b).

the texts are explicit on the lengths to which concern for others must be pursued. An insertion into the second eucharistic prayer concludes with the words: 'forgetful of themselves, may religious look to the necessities of all men'. The litany includes the petition that 'God may direct the lives and work of religious to the advancement of human society'.¹⁹ And the recommended subject for the homily is the connection between personal holiness, the good of the Church and the well-being of the entire human family. The inference is clear. It is the task of religious to reflect the Church's concern not only for her own members (how often apostolate means going to the already converted!), but for the human family; not only for man's specifically religious needs, but for man as a maker of history and the builder of his own society.

Community

Allied with this insistence on the social aspect of religious life is a more pronounced stress on the place of the religious community itself. Those familiar with the traditional ignatian vow formula may be struck by one change in particular: the disappearance of the reference to the 'whole court of heaven' and its replacement by a reference to 'the brethren here present'.²⁰ There is of course no sinister significance in the suppression of that mention of the communion of saints, and presumably any Institute that so wished could restore it. The point is that vows are taken not in heaven but on earth, nor are they a consecration to 'God alone' in any sense that might reduce to a mere adjunct the flesh and blood community within which the vows become a living reality. No doubt, the community was always present to the thoughts of those who took their vows in the past, but it was not included in the form of words they pronounced. In the new version, at the very moment of his self-dedication to God, the religious is not allowed to forget – nor is any one else present – that he is not an island and that Christ is there in the here and now community drawn together in his name. The community reference is given further prominence by the recommendation that two of the professed should take their place at this moment alongside the celebrant.²¹

The *Ordo* not only shows *that* community is relevant to the life and witness of the religious; it also indicates *how* it is relevant. In general, approaches to the nature of community tend towards one

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p 78, (b).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p III, I.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 30, para 64.

of two over-simplifications. At the risk of unfair parody, these might be characterized as 1) the view that community stands primarily for rule and authority, and 2) the view that community means primarily companionship. On the first view, community serves as a convenient means of living in subjection to obedience; from the second, it follows that the purpose of community is to promote friendship. It goes without saying that the main stress of the new texts is placed on the social and fraternal function of community, on the need for ties that are more than merely juridical. At the same time – and here again the *Ordo* displays a characteristic sense of nuance – it does not consider this emphasis inconsistent with seeing observance of the rule as an integral part of what community life means. Indeed, the rule receives a place in the texts which might come to some as a surprise. The candidate for profession, having expressed his readiness to embrace the evangelical counsels, is asked the further question: ‘Are you prepared to strive towards perfect charity by following the gospels and the rule of your Institute?’²² Among the many insignia that might have been selected as examples, the rite for temporary profession includes a rule or a copy of the constitutions. In the ceremony of admission to the noviceship, the postulant asks that he may learn the rule.²³

The rule, however, is ordered to perfect charity. The postulant’s request to learn the rule is coupled with his desire to learn the more fundamental law of perfect charity. The suggested text for giving the rule runs: ‘receive the rule of this family, that by faithfully observing it, you may attain to perfect charity’.²⁴ The ultimate purpose of community life is to engender a mutual love, capable of offering to the world some reflection of ‘God’s love for all men’.²⁵ A hallmark of religious life consists in its being a genuine human community, serving as a model to society at large and as a sign of the fulness of community in the kingdom of heaven.²⁶

Religious life as an eschatological sign

If the old ceremonies certainly made it clear that the religious is a person whose treasure is in heaven, they did so at the expense of more than one element that a balanced theology of religious life and the Church can ill afford to neglect. The tendency to brush

²² *Ibid.*, p 25, para 57.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p 20, para 32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 49, para 143.

²³ *Ibid.*, p 14, para 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p 50, para 143.

aside the distinction between the contemplative and active vocations led inevitably to the impression that the witness to the kingdom given by the apostolic religious depended on his ability to maintain the appearances of a monk in a life which no monk would consider consistent with his calling. There was a tendency, too, to exalt religious life at the price of tacitly disparaging the rest of the Church. Religious are an eschatological sign because, more fundamentally, the whole people of God is one. The entire Church is the spouse of Christ and a pilgrim people, waiting the Lord's coming in joyful hope. Lay people as well as religious are sustained and motivated by the belief in an absolute and transcendent future and give witness to this belief. If religious are different, then, it is not because their lives are governed by values alien to the rest of christians, but because in them the basic hope of all christian striving assumes a particular clarity. In the case of contemplatives, this comes from withdrawing from society into a life dedicated to God alone. Apostolic religious life witnesses to the kingdom in a way which does not amount to turning away from the world.

For all religious, of course, the basis of their witness to the kingdom lies in their celibacy. In treating of this, the texts reveal two distinct, though inter-related, approaches. First there is the essential personal relationship to God, traditionally, and perhaps most aptly, expressed in the 'spouse' theme. In the consecrated celibate, whose love for God takes the form of a religious experience that actually excludes the marriage for which he is otherwise suited, the bridal character of the whole Church becomes explicit. But the spouse image, sublime though it is, has been subject to too restrictive an interpretation to provide in itself a complete account of the sign value of celibacy. Especially in the case of religious who do not confront the normal and the secular with the challenge that results from the withdrawn cloistered life-style of the contemplative, it is necessary to bring in a second function of celibacy, namely, that it produces concern to build genuine community. And this very concern is eschatological, a sign not only of present grace, but of the new order in which the beginnings that we already experience will reach their fulfilment. Those whom the Church calls Christ's spouses proclaim the good things of heaven when they 'love the Church and all men'.²⁷ The renunciation of marriage is a sign not only immediately but also mediately, through the entire life-style

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p 75, para 72.

that grows from it. Marriage is renounced so that the celibate may share all he has; it is the celibate community in the tangible everyday realities of sharing, of mutual acceptance and openness to others, that proclaims to the world the perfect community of the kingdom:

You have distributed among your sons a variety of spiritual gifts, so that while some serve you in matrimony, others renounce marriage for the kingdom of heaven, share all goods with their brethren, and love one another with such charity that, made one in heart, they show forth an image of the fellowship of heaven.²⁸

Adapting the Ordo

These are the main theological themes underlying the *Ordo*. Of course, the texts themselves are too brief to permit of much elaboration; only in the comparatively long prayers of consecration in the ceremony of final profession has it been possible to draw out and interweave a variety of different strands. Adapted versions will also need to be concise and allusive. Nevertheless, it is essential that adaptation, while shifting the emphasis to suit a particular tradition and style, should not only incorporate these themes but also mention the basic harmony that the *Ordo* establishes between them. It is easy to envisage ways in which discord or impoverishment could arise. In particular, they could result either from the recrudescence of superseded attitudes or by the failure to integrate into the general pattern insights valid in themselves. For instance, it would seem inconsistent with the general balance of the texts to give too much stress to the purely personal aspect of the 'spouse' theme, especially if the first prayer of consecration were not adopted – since it is there that the relationship of religious consecration to the bridal character of the Church as a whole is fully developed. Again, it would not reflect the authentic spirit of any apostolic Institute if either the eschatological or apostolic aspect of religious life were given a degree of preponderance that would put the other in the shade. Apostolic religious will need to beware of the imbalance which would result from talking about their life in terms more appropriate to the contemplative style. On the other hand, it would be false to the very nature of the religious apostolate to dwell at such length on the details of the ministry as to obscure the fact that this is

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p 49, para 143.

rooted in and derives its effectiveness from a deepening of the consecration of baptism.

But if there exists a danger of hasty or ill-considered adaptation, the opposite danger is no less real: that the cautious may recoil before what may appear too formidable a task. It must be admitted that the texts as they stand have a daunting air of completeness. Their taut structure, theological finesse and careful wording are qualities that might seem to defy any but the most timid attempts at modification. All the more reason to insist that the right to adapt is not a concession of which only the more venturesome or idiosyncratic congregations might be expected to take advantage. Within the prescribed limits, each Institute may – and must – adapt the text to suit its own charism. To do this, more is likely to be needed than the gingerly alteration of a few words.

In implementing the task that devolves on them, the Institutes will find assistance in a number of sources: the writings of the founder, the constitutions, and especially general chapter documents. Furthermore, many congregations will have alternative texts to hand in the experimental consecration liturgies that have already superseded the older ones. The distinctive qualities required of the end-product make it difficult to offer positive suggestions except of a general and rather obvious sort. But two may be worth making.

First, each Institute will need to re-shape the texts in such a manner that the theological and scriptural basis of their own spirituality, as currently understood, is effectively expressed, particularly when this spirituality centres on a clear focal point in the general spectrum of the faith, e.g. the holy Spirit, the sacred Heart, the eucharist. Secondly, it would seem desirable to include explicit mention of some of the specific demands of apostolic religious life. While the *Ordo* contains a text which delineates the main features of contemplative life (solitude and silence, assiduous prayer and ready penance, humble labour and holy works, dedication to God alone)²⁹ it is plainly not possible to offer a similar model for apostolic life. The general demands of that vocation are already clear in the rest of the texts: consecration, service to the Church, apostolate, the reference to the good of mankind. Anything additional will necessarily be determined by the requirements of a particular Institute. However, it would seem in keeping with the *Ordo* to introduce some

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p 26, para 58.

of the qualities called for by the vocation of this or that Institute, such as readiness to live anywhere, to serve at home or overseas, to undertake any of the works of the Institute, or to embrace a style of poverty demanding actual solidarity with under-privileged.

Religious profession means entering upon the special commitments of a particular religious family. For the individual religious, the meaning of such terms as 'consecration' and the 'life of the counsels' is necessarily coloured by a spirituality derived from a certain tradition, by the demands of a certain style of community life and by a certain range of apostolic commitment. A ceremony of consecration which failed to express this would fall short of its purpose.