

CONSECRATION FOR MISSION

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THE WORD BECAME flesh so that through his humanity he could enable men to share in his divinity. The whole objective of our mission – which is always and only a prolongation of his mission – is to extend and to deepen that sharing. For this reason it can be understood only in the light of salvation history; and our consecration for mission is comprehensible only in the same context.

As in the case of God's free choice of Israel, his specific call to her and the establishment of a covenant relationship, authentic human collaboration in God's salvific plan results only from God's choice: his call, and the establishment of a particular kind of personal relationship.

Israel, my servant,
Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name, you are mine.
Should you pass through the sea, I will be with you;
Or through rivers, they will not swallow you up.
Should you walk through fire, you will not be scorched
And the flames will not burn you.
For I am Yahweh, your God,
The holy One of Israel, your Saviour.¹

Israel's mission in God's plan of salvation derived from his choosing it above all other nations. For this reason God separated his people from all other peoples, and consecrated them to his exclusive service. Israel became the depository of God's plan, and received the mission to share it with the world. All nations are meant to join in the worship of the one God, to recognize him who has constantly led Israel by the hand and thereby come to associate themselves with it in his praise.

Among the chosen people God selected also specific groups and even explicitly chosen individuals, confiding to them particular mis-

¹ Isai 43, 1-3.

sions and relating to them with particular intimacy. Their missions were always linked to a personal call, based absolutely on God's initiative, on a choice made freely by him of persons who sometimes seemed quite inadequate from a human point of view. They were sent, not because of their particular gifts or virtues, but because God elected to consecrate them for his mission.

This theme of mission – its nature and purpose – became more and more clear as God freely chose his prophets from among his chosen people, sending them to fulfil the specific missions he assigned them. The individual circumstances varied greatly from case to case, but the general pattern was always the same. The persons in question were told by God to undertake a difficult, frequently a dangerous or even a quite hopeless task, humanly speaking. They were aware of their human, intellectual, social or even moral inadequacy. Yet they could not doubt the will of God. They sometimes pointed out to him how shocked they were by his choice and how great the disproportion was between their own insignificant powers and the magnitude and difficulty of the task to which they were called. But then God spoke to them:

Do not say, 'I am a child'. Go now to those to whom I send you and say whatsoever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to protect you – it is Yahweh who speaks.²

And on the strength of his word and of the fact that he had sent them, they went forth and fulfilled the task which God had assigned, for 'God's promises can never fail'.³

The mission of all these men of Israel was ultimately to prepare for the mission of the Servant of Yahweh, whom they describe as the prophet sent by God 'to bring the good news to the poor', as the 'light of nations', as the 'peacemaker', as the establisher of a new covenant, as the one who will make both things one, as he who will invite men to God forever.

Then, as we remind the Father in the preface to the fourth eucharistic prayer:

... when the fulness of time had come, you sent your only Son to be our Saviour. He was conceived through the power of the holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary, a man like us in all things but sin. To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation, to prisoners, freedom, and to those in sorrow, joy. In the fulfilment of your will he

² Jer 1, 7–8.

³ Lk 1, 37.

gave himself up to death; but by rising from the dead, he destroyed death and restored life.

Jesus Christ introduced himself to men as the 'one sent by God', as the one of whom Isaiah spoke. 'Today in your very hearing this text has come true', he told the people of Nazareth in their synagogue.⁴ God had behaved like the owner of the vineyard who, having seen his servants rejected, finally sent his Son to lay down his life as a ransom for many, as a saviour who would offer propitiation for our sins. Christ speaks of his only desire – 'to do the will of him who sent me'.⁵ This will is wholly salvific, because the God he reveals is all love, manifesting himself as Father. In fact, it was this salvific and paternal will which had moved the Father to send 'his own Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to purchase freedom for the subjects of the law, in order that we might attain the status of sons'.⁶

This relationship as sons involves a sharing of God's life. In these terms, Christ described the objective of his mission: 'that they may have life and have it more abundantly'.⁷ At the same time it was clear that he must accomplish this mission as *redeemer*, because men had lost their love relationship with the Father. By restoring it he made all things right, established justice, and brought about our justification. He is the mediator, the priest who offers himself as a victim.

Because he shared the Father's love for men, Christ was prepared to do anything for them. He was ready to empty himself, to take the form of a servant,⁸ to become one of us and thus to show us in a tangible way the Father's love. His very life is in fact a revelation of God. It is true that no man has ever seen God; and yet, 'he who sees me sees the Father'.⁹ And even though his own did not receive him, he continued to dwell among them, loving them to the end. The whole of his life and mission (which are identical) was a constant revelation, an existential witness to the loving kindness of the Father, who continues to love men even when they reject him. When the time came he was ready to lay down his life for men, giving freely what no man could take from him.

Although Christ as the Word made flesh has accomplished the mission that the Father entrusted to him, he wills to continue it through men. For this he entrusts it to his Church, to his own people,

⁴ Lk 4, 21.

⁵ Jn 6, 38.

⁶ Gal 4, 4.

⁷ Jn 10, 10.

⁸ Phil 2, 7.

⁹ Jn 14, 9.

‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful works of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’.¹⁰

Clearly the fact that the initiative, in the call to christian life, rests always with God does not obviate our personal responsibility. Men can share in Christ’s mission only when they share personally in the fruits of his love, when their own lives exemplify the justice he came to establish. Because it is Christ himself who came to accomplish all justice, it is impossible to speak in terms of union with Christ, the just One of God, the Son of the Father, without a personal and consistent commitment to his justice, to the high demands of christian moral life.

For this reason Jesus asked of his disciples that they transcend the legalistic morality of the pharisees.¹¹ The whole of the Sermon on the Mount elucidates this invitation by showing that it is necessary to go beyond justice, strictly so called, to all the exigencies of charity, of the *agape* of which the heavenly Father has offered us the perfect model. The new law finds its total expression in the precept of charity. Here also our dependence is on the Lord. True morality consists of associating ourselves consciously with his life, of observing his commandments and living in his love. It means to share his love for men, a love which he has shown us by becoming incarnate, so that he might deliver us from our misery and offer himself as a propitiation for our sins.

To share in Christ’s mission, then, means living in Christ’s love, one might say by his side. It means to receive and to accept consciously this love which is gratuitously given, allowing ourselves to be flooded with his goodness and with the life that he gives, which is his very own.

It means to associate ourselves consciously with him, to observe his commandments, as he himself kept his Father’s commandments and lived in his love. In fact, the love for our neighbour which Christ commands expresses the life of Christ within us, the life of the just One *par excellence*, who continues in us to live his love for the Father by revealing his Father’s loving concern for his children. This goodness excludes no one, and is concentrated especially on the most poor and afflicted.

This then is what becomes disciples of Christ, sons in the Son who resemble the Father because he is love. In this way, living the

¹⁰ 1 Pet 2, 9-10.

¹¹ Mt 6, 1.

life of Christ, one is ready to sacrifice all that one has.¹² One loves in deeds and not in words, for Jesus has given us the example and expects that we do as he has done. Such is the christian vocation, the call to a people, like God's call to Israel. For the Church mysteriously prolongs and extends Christ's mission, even though he has accomplished it.

As in the case of Israel, there are some among the christian people whom the Lord chooses especially to consecrate for his mission. 'He then went up to the hill-country and called the men he wanted: and they went and joined him'.¹³ Again, at the last supper, he said, 'I know whom I have chosen'.¹⁴ And still more definitely, 'I have called you friends because I have disclosed to you everything that I heard from my Father. You did not choose me: I chose you. I appointed you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that shall last'.¹⁵ As his last hour approached, in his priestly prayer, Christ turned to his Father and pleaded for those whom the Father had given him to continue his own mission:

I have glorified you on earth by completing the work which you gave me to do . . . I have made your name known to the men you gave me out of the world. They were yours, you gave them to me, and they have obeyed your command. Now they know that all your gifts have come from you . . . I pray you not to take them out of the world but to keep them from the evil one. They are strangers in the world, as I am. Consecrate them by the truth.¹⁶

What is involved for these persons is a peculiarly personal invitation from the Lord to be totally his and to be at his exclusive service. If those he chooses respond in a spirit of loving submission, if they, on their part, accept God's special covenant, God himself ratifies it. He *consecrates* them in spirit and in truth, so that they may be exclusively his: 'You are mine and mine forever'.¹⁷

The fact of this consecration establishes a specific and particular relationship between the Lord and those called. They belong radically to him. He asks the total gift of themselves so that their whole persons may be dedicated to and consecrated by him, so that this total belonging affects every expression of their lives. The essential difference between this and other modalities of the christian commitment consists in the total and free giving of self, with an undivided heart, to the person of Christ. The ancient theological tradition of the Church which associates virginal consecration with mar-

¹² Mt 10, 37-9.

¹³ Mk 3, 13.

¹⁴ Jn 13, 18.

¹⁵ Jn 15, 15-16.

¹⁶ Jn 17, 4-9; 15-17.

¹⁷ Cf Hos 2, 21.

tyrdom is based on this ideal of the giving of self out of love day after day and forever: *an oblation no less complete for having to be constantly renewed*. Just as martyrdom is the most sublime expression of love for the Lord and Master as well as for men,¹⁸ and just as this giving of self unites the martyr more intimately to the Master, so the radical giving of the self forever is an expression of perfect charity for God and for others. This self-donation to the Lord, and the consequent renunciation of the legitimate and potentially noble use of natural faculties to live exclusively for God and his kingdom, expresses an undivided and unitive love for him which necessarily means a deeper sharing in all that is his, most especially in his salvific mission.¹⁹ This is the fundamental and defining act of religious life. It manifests a disposition of heart which, when accepted by God through the ministry of the Church, the sacrament of Christ, brings about a special consecration. This consecration gives total expression to the baptismal consecration in which it is rooted. The implications of such a commitment are obviously a special relationship with Christ, an absolute belonging to him and not to oneself, a sharing in his sacrificial love, totally at his disposition, a being led by him wherever and however he wishes, according to his ways and not one's own. This new and specific covenant and the consequent relationship clearly entails a more intimate sharing in his thoughts and ways, his fate, his loves, his destiny.

Since the pascal mystery is at the heart of that destiny, and Christ's most fundamental disposition is the loving acceptance of this mysterious condition for the fulfilment of his mission, the consecrated person, to the extent that he shares in this disposition, participates in Christ's priestly mission of bringing all men to the Father. But if this participation is a privilege of unimaginable greatness, it is essential to remember that it always implies for us what it did for him: 'Unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it does, it bears fruit a hundred fold'.²⁰ St Paul warns us, as he describes our exemplar:

Let your bearing toward one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus. For the divine nature was his from the first; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself, and in obedience accepted even death — death on a cross.²¹

¹⁸ Cf 1 Jn 3, 16; Jn 15, 13.

¹⁹ Cf 1 Cor 7, 32-4.

²⁰ Jn 12, 24.

²¹ Phil 2, 5-8.

There is no religious life without the constant and radical despoilment of self. Yet this despoilment is made possible and even joyous by the affective and effective relationship, established with his disciple by the Lord, in which, like any person who truly loves, the religious counts all else as nothing in order to share this life of the beloved. The union involved here is such as to compel a person to respond to every ascertainable desire of the one loved and to share his every longing and concern.

What develops more and more strength, and gradually pervades the whole of one's life, is a deep bond of love which inevitably produces a need and desire for the company of the beloved. A person who has accepted the Lord's invitation fully has no desire so strong, no need so pressing as to cling to him with heart and soul. This contact makes more and more complete the sharing of mind and attitude. 'I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me'.²² In the words of Vatican II:

This is why the members of every religious institute will seek God above all things and him alone; and in them contemplation, by means of which they cling to him in mind and heart, will be wedded to the apostolic love which empowers them to share his redemptive work and to spread God's kingdom.²³

The religious whose response is genuine will come to share Christ's criteria for his own mission: 'Wherever we go we carry death with us in our body, the death that Jesus died, that in this body also life may reveal itself, the life that Jesus lives'.²⁴ The christian paradox will become strong in his consciousness: '... dying we still live on; disciplined by suffering, we are not done to death; in our sorrows we have always cause for joy; poor ourselves, we bring wealth to many; penniless, we own the world'.²⁵ He will realize that it is not so much the doing as the living with and in Christ that is necessary. 'I shall therefore prefer to find my joy and my pride in the very things that are my weakness; and then the power of Christ will come and rest upon me... when I am weak, then I am strong'.²⁶ 'I fill up in my flesh what is wanting'.²⁷ These convictions, nevertheless, will not render him inactive. The charity of Christ will urge him, giving him zeal and dynamism. He will know Christ as the source of all goodness, of all the revelation of the Father, which he carried

²² Gal 2, 20.

²⁵ 2 Cor 6, 10.

²³ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5.

²⁶ 2 Cor 12, 9-10.

²⁴ 2 Cor 4, 10.

²⁷ Col 1, 24.

out existentially by showing his tender regard for men. In him the amiability of God has appeared to us. 'Philip, he who sees me sees the Father'.²⁸

The existential witness of the religious

Religious are united to the Christ who witnesses to the Father's love both personally and in his mystical body. Their 'sense of Christ' will be more and more inextricably bound up with a sense of belonging to the Church. Consequently, their love for him will become a fraternal love for all his members, and for each one individually; their reverence and love for the Church's pastors will take on a special depth. The true religious will become more and more identified with the Church's saving mission and more and more absorbed in those aspects of it to which the charism of his congregation relates. This absorption will result from his total donation of himself to a person, the adorable person of our Lord, so that Christ may extend his own life, which consisted in redemptive activity for men, in the person of the one he has called. As christians, religious have shared since their baptism in his divine life; as religious they are more particularly invited to share in his redemptive life. They are consecrated for mission.

Such a conception of religious life is incompatible with a barren legalism. The life of the religious who clings to the Lord in love will be transformed by that love. His behaviour will quite naturally take forms appropriate to his love relationship. It will show what he has in his heart, that his desire is to lay down his life, bit by bit, day by day, out of love for Christ and the brethren. This total surrender has a richly ecclesial significance. The more consistently their life is built on this sacrificial love, the more possible it will become for religious to live among others with the intensity of charity which the Lord asks of them. Anchored in him, their hearts will be free to love all men. Their sacrifice of what is so deeply related to life should not close them to life and love. If they so live their vow of virginity as to concentrate their love, with his help, on Christ's person, they will come to share more and more fully his virginal but consuming love for men, attaining a charity which is as ardent as it is universal. This love will express itself in myriad ways, reflecting the multifaceted mission of Christ. When he dwelt among men, he spent himself healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the abandoned,

²⁸ Jn 14, 9.

pardoning the sinner, announcing the good news of salvation, and finally laying down his life as a ransom for men. And yet his mission was one: to make men sons of his Father. For that he died; for that he proclaimed the gospel message; for that he gave himself in manifold forms of service. In these ways he revealed, existentially, the Father's love for men, so that men would offer themselves to this love. In this way men came to believe in him as he witnessed to the Father's love, and in the Father himself. Christ's life was so credible that the world was revolutionized by it; a revolution which will be in progress until the end of time.

Our mission is a participation in his. It should be like his. To this end he calls us to share his hopes and aspirations, so that we may be totally his and so that he can live in us, continuing his salvific mission. Our form of life, then, is a radical following of Christ, a witness to him who calls and sends us, and to the Father who sent his Son. But this is possible only when the response to the call is real; when Christ becomes the centre of our life, the very life of our life and of its every expression; and when, on account of our faith in him and the hope that he gives us, we understand interiorly and existentially that the disciple is not above his master.

We can carry out Christ's mission only in terms of his own criteria. Yet this humanly ominous prospect can be accepted in serenity and joy, because his choice and consecration of us establish a relationship which is interior as well as exterior. He is the vine; we are the branches. If we live in him we shall bear fruit.²⁹ And he lives in us 'even to the consummation of the world'.³⁰ The inner force proceeds from the power of his resurrection. Hence, where the human response is complete, as with the prophets of the Old Testament, an intensity of love for the Father and for man develops which constitutes a compelling witness. Because of man's total surrender, God can act in him and his presence becomes more and more tangible. This divine love, incarnated in man, continues the mystery of the incarnation and redemption. It transcends the possibilities of merely human love and so manifests God. Once more God's loving kindness is made known to man, and Christ's revealing love for the Father appears in an accessible form. Such is the calling of those whom he has chosen that his mission may be continued. The divine life is given again through death and resurrection, through the grain of wheat which, falling into the ground, dies.³¹ For this reason the

²⁹ Cf Jn 15, 5.

³⁰ Mt 28, 20.

³¹ Cf Jn 12, 24.

consecration for mission, lived out faithfully day after day, has an apostolic value which is quite independent of the works which may or may not be effectively accomplished.

The demands of such a consecration are enormous, and quite clearly impossible if we think in terms of ourselves, or, in fact, of any human being. Even in dealing with Mary, the first missionary and the link between Christ and his followers, God made it very clear in whose power her work would be accomplished. When the angel came to communicate her mission, he said, 'Fear not . . . the Lord is with you'.³² Her 'yes' was an unconditional surrender, leading her to share his whole life and even the mystery of his cross and resurrection. She belonged totally to God and so could be consecrated for her mission. She would never see it as merely her own. Similarly, Christ warned his apostles not to be concerned about what they would say. The Lord would give the answers when they were needed, because it was his mission, not theirs. The basis for mission is always loving trust and total confidence, grounded on the sense of relationship to the Lord: 'I have chosen you. You are mine'.³³

Conclusion

The Son who was sent by the Father is one with him, belonging to him absolutely. Christ is the anointed of God, equal to him and consecrated by him. It is on account of the fact that Christ is totally consecrated to the Father that he is sent to establish the new covenant between the Father and men, to lead men back to the Father, restoring the life they had lost.

It is this fundamental disposition of Christ which makes him the high priest, the bridge-builder. While sharing the life of men in all things except sin, as Son of the Father he lives fully his filial relationship, and therefore his loving submission is not only for himself but even for the sake of his brethren who have abandoned his Father's house.

This mission of Christ, sent by the Father, continues in the world today. For this reason Christ chooses some men and women and establishes a particular personal relationship with them, a special covenant. Like any relationship or covenant, it demands a free and loving response. When this response is given in the spontaneity of love, Christ ratifies the relationship. He consecrates his loved one,

³² Lk 1, 28.

³³ Isai 43, 1.

saying, 'You are mine and mine forever'.

As explained above, this undivided and unitive love is not just an end in itself; it also generates by its very nature the same priestly love that Christ had: that is to say, a love that urges a man to lay down his life for his friends. He can send a person who is so disposed to continue his mission because, by his total belonging and the loving relationship established, the person shares Christ's outlook. Moreover, because of this relationship of unitive love, because of being possessed by the one who says, 'I am with you', the consecrated person relies completely on the Lord and not on himself. He allows himself to be moved, rather than to move. In fact he is moved by the Spirit of Christ, as Christ was moved by the Spirit of the Father. In consequence, the relationship becomes progressively stronger, and, for the one chosen, an ever more conscious being one with the Lord, a growing awareness of Christ's Spirit dwelling and growing within him; so that the whole of his life, its style and rhythm, is Christ's. He does not live in himself, but Christ lives in him.

The mission of those whom Christ thus chooses and sends becomes a share in the mission of him who is pre-eminently sent: he told us, 'The Father is with me'.³⁴ 'I do what pleases the Father'.³⁵ 'I am in the Father, and the Father is in me'.³⁶ 'The Father is greater than I'.³⁷ The fundamental conditions of discipleship have not changed since the call to Israel. To us also the Lord speaks clearly, 'So do not worry'.³⁸ 'Fear not . . . I am with you'.³⁹

³⁴ Jn 16, 34.

³⁷ Jn 14, 28.

³⁵ Jn 8, 29.

³⁸ Mt 6, 30; 6, 34; 10, 19.

³⁶ Jn 14, 10-11.

³⁹ Isai 43, 5.