

THE OBLIGATIONS OF CONSECRATION

By JEAN GALOT

CONSECRATION implies obligations. The draft-law on Institutes of Perfection speaks of 'a life consecrated by means of the evangelical counsels', and follows the conciliar declaration (*Lumen Gentium*, 44):

Christ's faithful bind themselves to the practice of the evangelical counsels by vows or 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 by a new and special title.

Since we are currently involved in reflection on traditional values, it is worth considering the formulation of this consecration's obligations, lest there be no more than that simple instinctive repetition of profession which was so often the case in the past.

Essential obligations in the consecrated life

In its teaching on religious life, *Lumen Gentium* treats of the obligations attaching 'to the chastity, poverty and obedience offered to God, as founded on the words and example of the Lord, and approved by the Apostles, Fathers, doctors and pastors of the Church' (43). The traditional three vows did not find formal expression until the twelfth century. Before then, there was a diversity in the formulation of obligations. In the communities following the rule of St Benedict, for example, the material of the obligation was stability, the change in the manner of life, and obedience. Our question then is that if the formulation of three vows which express the consecration is relatively recent, should it be considered as adequately representing the obligations of the consecrated life? Certainly, consecration implies the three evangelical counsels, but they do not necessarily express its totality.

In fact, *Perfectae Caritatis* indicates the necessity of formulating other obligations. Speaking of the elements proper to the consecrated life,

the decree emphasizes chastity, poverty, obedience and common life. In addition, in its first considerations of the essence of consecration, it recommends to all members of Institutes the contemplation which clings to God alone, and the apostolic love which dedicates itself to the work of salvation.

The schema of the new canon law, under the section entitled 'The obligations of Institutes and their members', makes special mention of the obligations of contemplation or prayer and of fraternal love. Further, the obligation of serving the Church is emphasized — 'it is their duty to live for God alone and for his Kingdom' and 'to co-operate . . . for the building up of the body of Christ'.¹ It follows, then, that in addition to the three vows, we must add the following obligations:

to common life or to fraternal love in the Institute; to prayer; to the service of the Church and to its apostolic commitment. These three obligations are of the utmost importance: brotherly love in community brings in its wake many consequences for the life of consecration, and demands special emphasis. In non-religious Institutes of the consecrated life this obligation is of special import:

to persevering prayer in union with Christ and apostolic action; to the service of the Church, which according to the love inherent in the Institute receives a specificity in the field of apostolic activity: an essential obligation which gives direction to the whole of consecrated life.

Though these obligations are incumbent on all Christians, they have a particular urgency in the consecrated life. More particularly:

brotherly love in the community or Institute; prayer which is specified in terms of extended times and stable forms in the Institute; total availability in the service of the Church, and commitment to the apostolic works which resonate with the charismatic impulse of the Institute.

The object of the vow of chastity

To give precision to the object of any obligation is always a problem; this is especially true of the vow of chastity, which suggests that it extends to the 'fulness of chastity', or 'perfect chastity' as it is often

¹ Title VI, draft-cansons 72-73, 74, 68, 70. Cf *Supplement to The Way*, 33 (Spring 1978), pp 74-77.

called. The expression was challenged by some of the conciliar fathers, on the ground that it gave the impression that chastity was reserved to religion, or that the chastity of layfolk was imperfect. To distinguish the chastity of religious, *Lumen Gentium* qualified it as that 'dedicated to God' (43). In the schema of the new common law we read: 'the profession of chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven implies the observance of celibacy and of perfect continence'.² Hence the question: is its object single or double — celibacy and/or perfect continence? The traditional opinion on the vow of chastity has always held to a 'double sin': against the virtue, the general law of chastity, and also against the vow. The latter thus appears as duplicating any violation of the sixth commandment, with the notorious psychological anxiety as the penalty. However, it must be stressed that the object of the vow cannot be the general law which binds every Christian, since any obligation arising from the vow is freely undertaken. The object of the vow can therefore only concern itself with the renunciation of marriage. This is precisely what Christ extols in the gospel when he speaks of those who 'make eunuchs of themselves for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven'.³ There is no question here of this way of life being an extension of the sixth and ninth commandments; it refers to a special option, whose value resides, not in a more perfect observance of any law, but in the commitment of oneself to the Kingdom of God.

It follows then that the obligation deriving from the vow is celibacy: that is, the renunciation of the sexual love proper to marriage. There is thus no theological foundation for the theory of a 'double sin'. The vow has nothing to do with chastity in its entirety. And if a religious sins against the general law (for example by 'solitary abuse'), it is not a sin against the vow. One cannot overstress the importance of *never* conceiving of or presenting the vow of chastity as an application of the sixth and ninth commandments.

The object of the vow of obedience

The difficulty here is often stated as follows: the vow is rarely invoked, since its proper object is in the competent superior's command 'in the name of obedience', which is concerned only with matters of extreme urgency. However, we must notice that this view is over-legalistic, and that its main concern is with a 'grave sin against the vow'. On the other hand, it should be said that the vow is

² Draft-canon 94: *ibid.*, p 92.

³ Mt 19, 32.

habitually exercised in the lives of those who live in community under the guidance of a superior. The obligation in its essence is in no sense the source of violations normally categorized as imperfections, venial sins, grave sins. It is rather a matter of attitude: the disposition required for accepting the direction of the superior in the life of the community or of the Institute, with all the consequences this entails in the life of the individual. Such an attitude is rooted in a spirit of faith, which recognizes in the superior's direction the manifestation of Christ's will. Here is the obedience of the judgment, which is not concerned with accepting the superior's opinion as always just and easy to opt for. Rather the subject judges, from the point of view of faith, that the command of the superior carries with it the indication of the divine will. Clearly, this in no way implies the renunciation of one's own powers of judgment, since this faculty belongs to a person's undeniable rights, and must be exercised. However, obedience of the judgment implies the perception of a higher intention involved in the human command: God's own.

Perpetual profession and temporary vows

We must now consider the perpetual nature of consecration: perpetual because total. Hence its obligations are equally permanent. In the gospel, Christ's call is definite enough. When he says, 'Come, follow me', he is asking for the dedication of oneself across the whole of one's life-span, without any holding back. Thus the perpetual consecration for which Christ asks is the justification for assuming perpetual obligations — a view which has recently been contested. There are some who hold that a perpetual obligation is neither possible nor desirable, because this would mean to see into the future, or anticipate external events or one's interior personal development. However, Christ has his answer for this difficulty: his call is to perpetual gift of self; and thus he communicates his own power of maintaining permanent fidelity.

It follows, then, that the profession of evangelical consecration is of its nature perpetual. But *Lumen Gentium* underlines the difference between this profession and bonds which are not permanent, when it says: 'The consecration will be the more perfect in proportion as the indissoluble union of Christ and his bride the Church is re-presented in the strength and permanence of their bonds' (44). In the first schema of this text, the intention was to establish the superiority of the vow over the simple promise, the perpetual over the temporary bond, and, according to some views, of the public over the private

vow. But in the final redaction of the conciliar text, only the superiority of the perpetual bond found mention, at least according to the report of the Commission. The question of the public vow was left aside: 'In temporary vows the sacrifice is not total'.⁴ Hence the meaning of the text, 'by stronger and more permanent bonds', is that Christ is more clearly re-presented in his indissoluble union with his bride the Church by perpetual profession, which is the re-presentation of indissoluble marriage between Christ and his Church.

What, then, of temporary bonds? *Renovationis Causam* introduced a new element. It offered the possibility of a different kind of bond from the temporary vow. In some Institutes, the 'promise' has taken the place of temporary vows; which emphasizes better the unique character of perpetual profession. But what precisely is the meaning of this promise? There are different views. Some maintain that it is nothing more than a terminological difference: the promise is made to God, and the object of it is the same — the evangelical counsels. But if this were so, would the change in the law be justified?

The promise can be understood in a different way: that is, not as a bond made immediately to God, but rather as an obligation towards the Institute. The promise made to the Institute has for its purpose a sharing in the life of the community, along with all its obligations for a specified time, in preparation for perpetual profession. The promise therefore presupposes a determination on the part of the candidate to penetrate through the Institution's externals to its spirit, and to be helped by the community in the pilgrimage to a total self-giving.

The vow's value.

One ought to ask what the vow's value is, what it really adds to the consecration. Is there any point in taking on specific obligations, when the act of consecration is one by which God consecrates the person he calls, whilst the person opens out under the influence of the divine consecrating action. Surely there is no need for vows in order to fulfil such a consecration.⁵ However, the Council also laid stress on human activity in this context: the Christian takes the obligations of the evangelical counsels upon himself. The divine action, far from depriving the human person of a free co-operation, demands it. When Christ calls, his desire is to evoke a free response. The obligation

⁴ Cf *Acta Synodalia Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol II, para I, p 279.

⁵ *Lumen Gentium* would seem to support such a view.

expressed by the vow or its like is integral to the dignity and capabilities of the person, who freely responds to the call. It cannot be reduced to a juridical formalism; on the contrary, it manifests an authentic gift of the self. Such is the nature of the consecrated life: a profound revelation of personal liberty, where there is no mutilation of the personality — only a deeper and wider exercise of responsibility. This personal activity, of course, takes place in the community, since the vow is received by the Superior. In religious consecration, the vow is public, in order that the consecration might be an ecclesial act; it is made in the presence of the community, which witnesses to this authoritative action received in the name of the Church. It is also a covenantal action, integral to the relationship of God with his human creatures.⁶

⁶ Cf *infra*, p 96.