

# SACRED BONDS IN THE CONSECRATED LIFE

By GERMAIN LESAGE

FOR MANY centuries, theologians have taught us that there is only one way of being co-opted into the religious state of life — the vow. Now, however, *Lumen Gentium*, in its chapter on religious, declares that they bind themselves to the practice of the evangelical counsels not simply by vows, but by ‘other sacred bonds similar in nature to vows’ (44). And the same text goes on to say that the consecration deriving from religious profession 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 the bonds’ (*ibid.*). The declaration is an open invitation to historians, theologians and canonists to investigate the doctrinal and traditional foundations of the form and object of the obligation involved in the profession of the counsels, in these cases where the sacred bond is not the vow. In other words the Council has judged it appropriate to consider the reasons according to which the evangelical counsels proper to the consecrated life can be practised in a variety of ways, and also how people can dedicate themselves in various ways with a permanence that is also supernatural.

From the various post-conciliar documents and the general lines of revision set out in the draft Canon Law, we learn that the consecrated life can be of four kinds: the religious community, the society of the common life, the secular institute and the eremitical life. The purpose of this paper is, on the basis of these four types, to inquire how, at various times and according to the variety of theological opinion, the christian faithful who ‘are more intimately consecrated to the divine service’,<sup>1</sup> have bound themselves or can still do so today in a supernatural and permanent way to that state of life which, known in the past as the ‘religious life’, is now to be designated ‘the consecrated life’.

It is important to notice that the word ‘profession’ does not denote any supernatural quality, but simply the fact that one has bound oneself

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

to the practice of the counsels. The term, too, is generic; *votum* is borrowed from classical latin in its sense of a public declaration of intent or decision. This profession of the evangelical counsels can be expressed in various forms, relative to the quality of the public declaration of intent, or to the nature of the sacred bond confirming the intention. Historically speaking, the bond has taken three successive forms: the intention or determination (*propositum*); the promise; the vow.<sup>2</sup>

### *The intention*

The latin word *propositum* is rendered in English by 'desire, intention, determination, resolve'. In our context, it describes the constant spirit of the faithful Christian who determines to follow Christ in practising the evangelical counsels and in dedicating his or her whole life to this self-offering. This resolve or offering, when made publicly, is the same as profession. It initiates a new relation with the Lord of service and fidelity; historically, it has usually been associated with consecration, in the looser sense of that word.<sup>3</sup> From the first decades of the Church's existence, there were virgins and 'ascetics' who dedicated themselves to a virginal and poor state of life, in the presence of the local christian community, by manifesting this 'intention'. The declaration of a firm and permanent resolve, though initially implicit, soon assumed a definitive form: the taking of the virgin's veil, or the sackcloth of the penitent, or by the 'flight to the desert'.

The origins of this early ascetical life are thought to consist in 'a desire of the religious consciousness to draw near to God or to attain to actual union with him'. Though this more intense kind of evangelical perfection does not seem to have led to any public differentiation in the local church, it soon brought with it, in the case of virgins, a certain status which was celebrated, at least by the third century, in a rite of consecration: a state whose purpose seems to have been to protect the virgin, in the eyes of the faithful, from the temptation to renegue on her resolve. In those early days, asceticism rapidly took the form of the eremitical life; but there appears to have been no more definite method of dedication than the firm intention to follow Christ in chastity and in the poverty indicated by it, and in a

<sup>2</sup> Cf E. Bergh S.J., 'Eléments et nature de la profession religieuse', in *Ephemerides theologiae lovanienses*, 14 (1937), p 6.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Xaverius Ochoa C.M.F., 'Professio, consecratio et vota religiosa ante et post Concilium Vaticanum secundum', in *Commentarium pro religiosis et missionariis*, 57 (1976), pp 209, 202.

spirit of docility with regard to the 'abbas', or spiritual master. Neither among hermits nor anchorites is there evidence of any public formulation of confirming this resolve to follow Christ. The sole intention was to apply oneself to the radical choice of evangelical perfection in that general rule which had already received the title 'apostolic life'.<sup>4</sup>

Once the cenobitic and eremitical forms of life had taken on a more definite structure, an explicit way of dedicating oneself to a common life and the practice of the counsels was formulated. The disciples of Pachomius, for example, were accustomed to promise to God chastity or the monastic life, proclaiming their intention of being Christ's disciples. Thus by the fourth century, the *propositum* had a definite formulation, at least as regards chastity, poverty, and common life, or *koinōnia* as it was called. This form of profession was considered irrevocable, and the monk who left his community was considered an apostate: and this under Roman Law.

### *The Promise*

St Pachomius's monks, by this mode of profession, indicated their resolve to practise the evangelical counsels of chastity and poverty, with an additional promise of obedience towards those who exercised authority in the *koinōnia*. Here we have a solemn promise both of the professed and the community: between the accepted and those accepting. A certain Theodore, Pachomius's disciple, records for us the elements of this monastic reception: they promise to God to walk in the way of his law; they renounce their material goods in order to follow this call; they are the sons of the holy call to *koinōnia*; they share in the sacred precepts with which God has inspired Pachomius.<sup>5</sup>

There was a similar rite of profession under St Basil the Great. The candidate was questioned about his resolve, and he had to make his replies verbally and in the presence of witnesses. He received a religious habit, and his head was shaved. With St Benedict, the form of reception was both juridical and ritual. It took place in the presence of the community, with the hands of the candidate between those of

<sup>4</sup> Cf J, Le Roy O.S.B., 'Le cénobitisme chez Cassien', in *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, 43 (1967), p 133.

<sup>5</sup> Cf 'Theodore, catéchèse', in *Oeuvres de S. Pachôme et de ses disciples*, tom 24 (Louvain, 1956), p 50.

the Abbot; its expression was a verbal promise, made under oath and confirmed in writing. It contained three elements: a petition to be accepted as a monk; a promise expressing the intention of dedicating oneself; and the reception itself. Thus there was a covenant made between the professed and his monastic community. This benedictine rite persisted through the centuries to the extent that, in the high middle ages, practically every form of monastic life rested on the promise, with an accompanying oath. However, Fructuosus Bacarensis introduced into the rite of profession a bilateral covenant or contract, in virtue of which the monks entered into a union with the Abbot, God's representative. There were various formulae of this entering into the service of God and of the Abbot, the promise being made 'to God and to you'. Obedience thus became the primary object of profession, which in course of time was considered the specific religious virtue. Meanwhile, the profession retained its previous value, as the resolve, the *propositum* or self-offering: which was now made through the mediation of the Abbot, so that the co-option into religious life took place through the covenant with the monastic community and the gift offered to God. The contractual element in the profession, which was symbolized in the 'clothing', was ratified in the laws of Justinian, in virtue of which profane acts against monastic discipline were held invalid. Thus the status of monastic life became recognized by the civil courts.

Theologically speaking, the promise ceased to have the first place in the co-option into religious life at the end of the twelfth century, when the practice of making vows became more general. Then, after four centuries, a new kind of state made its appearance: the 'pious association' of priests for the apostolate of the missions or of religious education. Such, for example, were the Oratorians of St Philip Neri, established in 1575 by Gregory XIII. These were the Societies of Common Life, which were similar in spirit to religious orders, but in which the practice of the evangelical counsels was in no way dependent on the profession of any public vow. This form of consecrated life persisted through three centuries and was finally recognized in the 1918 Codification of the Law, under the title, 'Societies of men or women living in common without vows'.

A further development took place in 1947, with the promulgation of Pius XI's Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, which introduced a new form of apostolic consecration, the Secular Institute. Here, the members would publicly bind themselves by a covenant, or by a promise of fidelity, described in various ways but each implying the

practise of the evangelical counsels without confirmation by public vow. Finally, in the draft revision of common law for religious, the eremitical state has been given recognition, with its three essential elements: the profession of the counsels, the observance of a rule of life, and dependence on the competent authority.<sup>6</sup>

### *The vow*

The difference between the vow and the determination or self-offering or the promise or contract, lies in the fact that the first is made directly to God, and can be described as 'a willing decision to do or to forgo something, which involves a promise to God'.<sup>7</sup> Its substance can perhaps be found in the origins of the cenobitical life. Pachomius exhorted his disciples to bear in mind that they had promised God to lead the monastic life, keeping intact their virginity. According to St Basil, the monk presented himself in God's presence and promised to deliver himself over in a covenant; he gave himself to God; and if he withdrew, then he was withdrawing himself from God and from the offering made to him. St Augustine describes monks as those who offer their lives with the utmost deliberation and in all harmony: a gift of thanks and gratitude.<sup>8</sup> He numbers amongst the vows, besides conjugal chastity, virginity and hospitality, to distribute all one's goods to the poor, and to enter into a common life, which is the company of the saints. And anyone leaving the monastery after entry committed a crime, because he had vowed himself to the community.<sup>9</sup> However, he makes no mention of a formula or ceremony for the making of vows.<sup>10</sup> It follows then that during those times the word 'to vow' simply meant to offer God a gift, in the sense of oblation, resolve, determination.

In the 'Rule of the Master', the rite of profession makes a more explicit appearance, and would seem to contain a constitutive element: 'I wish to serve God through the discipline of the rule read to me in your monastery'; and when the abbot replied, 'Is this your good pleasure?', the future disciple declared, 'It is first God's and then mine'. Then the Abbot was to say: 'See then, brother, it is not to me

<sup>6</sup> Cf *Supplement to The Way*, 33 (Spring 1978), draft-canon 92, p 90.

<sup>7</sup> Ochoa, *loc. cit.*, p 209.

<sup>8</sup> *De Moribus Ecclesiae catholicae* ch 31; PL 32, 1338.

<sup>9</sup> *Enarr. in Ps. LXXV*, 15; PL 34, 967-68.

<sup>10</sup> Cf A. Vermeersch S.J., 'Le Concept de la vie religieuse dans S. Augustin', in *Gregorianum*, 11 (1930), p 107.

that you promise anything, but to God, to this house of prayer and this holy altar'.<sup>11</sup> St Benedict in his profession ceremony did not reckon as essential this explicit promise to God. It was only in the eighth century that a vow was made in the strict sense. Canon 8 of the Roman Council (A.D. 826) notices that monks and nuns offer themselves willingly to God by vow: that their promise was made in the presence of human witnesses, but that it was taken up by God. Hence its transgression was a crime in conscience. Here we have the first canonical expression of the vow, as a sign of handing oneself over to the monastic life.

The taking of the three vows in profession makes its first explicit appearance in the twelfth century, with St Otho, abbot of St Geneviève in Paris. It is also found in the early days of the Order of St Francis, and has persisted into modern times.<sup>12</sup> During the middle ages, the person entering monastic life did so by making a solemn vow, whose nature and consequences were categorized by the theologians and canonists; whilst the civil law confirmed the bond, and declared null and void any act opposed to it.

Gregory XIII introduced a very important innovation in his declaration that the simple vows of the temporarily professed in the Society of Jesus constituted them religious. Then in 1900, Leo XIII's Apostolic Constitution, *Conditae a Christo*, established the simple vow in congregations as constitutive of the religious state in the canonical sense, on a par with solemn vows.

This rapid historical excursus shows us that the sacred bond, by which Christ's faithful are co-opted into the state of life whose essential practice is the evangelical counsels, has followed a general threefold form: the resolve (*propositum*); the promise or contract (*pactum*); the vow, either solemn or simple.

#### DOCTRINE

From the first beginnings of Christianity, the counsel of consecrating oneself to God appears to have been the right setting for the life of the virgin and the ascetic. The source of the lively desire which kindled the hearts of the select band of Christ's faithful lies in that

<sup>11</sup> *La Règle du Maître II*, ed A. de Vogué (Paris, 1964), p 373.

<sup>12</sup> Ochoa, *loc. cit.*, p 214.

invitation to evangelical perfection to which they respond with sincerity, and even heroically, by offering themselves to God in a life structured on the practice of one or other of the counsels proposed to the disciples. From this early practice there gradually developed in the heart of the Church a state of life which in the course of time gave rise to an institution which had certain recognizable qualities, and also to a rite of consecration or monastic profession. The virgin and the monk, like the monastery-buildings themselves, were consecrated to God: that is, they were separated off from worldly use; whilst the person who thus consecrated himself to God, had no other activity than his worship and generosity; and the monastery itself was never given over to any secular usage.

Thus the constitutive elements of the consecrated life became identified, and were ultimately canonically approved: its purpose, its authenticity, its specific characteristics, its permanence.

#### *Its purpose*

From the beginning, it became customary to distinguish out from Christ's faithful some who would seek a life-pattern closer to that of Christ as proclaimed in the Gospel. St Cyprian described a community of virgins as the most beautiful part of Christ's flock; whilst Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen each had their own vocabulary to describe the ascetical or virginal life. This life of 'flight from the world' was originally eremitical, then cenobitic. From the middle of the third century, a penitential discipline with specific sanctions was applied to sexual infidelity. About the year 300, the Council of Elvira passed a law to deal with the breaking of the virginal promise. After a short time, the institution of the cenobitic life gave an especially definite character to the state of life embraced by those Christians who decided to give themselves entirely to Christ. Thus the purpose of the consecrated life was expressed by a triple characteristic: (1) the example of the gospel, (2) apostolic profession and (3) eschatological witness.

1. In terms of the gospel, the first monks endeavoured to follow Christ's example after the manner of the apostles by adopting a firm structure and style based on the example of the virgins and the ascetics. An external promise was added to the internal resolve, so that the way of life became visible in the Church. So Pachomius reminded his monks that they were the light of the world. The monastic life, then, was understood to be a way of personal perfection and search for holiness, and a state of life where purpose consisted

precisely in the quest: to the extent that the theologians and canonists of the thirteenth century trenchantly criticized the right of religious to exercise the apostolate. However, Aquinas was quick to point out that the purpose of religion was intended to foster not only the love of God, but of the neighbour as well.<sup>13</sup>

In more recent times, Ignatius Loyola imbued his Society with an ecclesial spirit. It was the evangelical life which in his view was fully apostolic, and must be energized by the counsels in the strict sense. Poverty was adapted to action; obedience was a promise to God, but for the service of the Church through a vow which bound the members to the Pope; whilst consecrated celibacy was a gift which freed a person for the service of God and his fellow-men.

Vatican II conceived religious life as a consecration to mission. The decree *Perfectae Caritatis* made a special point of developing the ecclesiological aspect of the religious state.<sup>14</sup> This state of consecration, like that of clerics and lay-folk, is wholly ecclesial in that it is constituted a particular class of Christ's faithful, but having its roots in the spiritual or charismatic aspect of the Church. Thus the Constitution on the Church rounds off the conciliar teaching:

through the practice of the three evangelical counsels, religious hand themselves over to God their supreme love, in such a way that they are marked out for his glory and service by a new and special title. They devote themselves in this way to the following of the poor and virginal Christ, who redeemed and sanctified humankind through his obedience even to the death of the Cross (*Lumen Gentium*, 44).

2. Asceticism has always had its place wherever the Church came into being; for christian ascetics are everywhere led by one and the same character and spirit, of a chastity and poverty which builds up the Church. So they follow a permanent style of life, whose twofold purpose is to labour for their own sanctification towards a closer union with God: a work of edification leading man to know God, through an apostolic zeal which extends itself to apostolic action, as well as the example of a holy life. The fruitfulness of the ascetical life consists in its fermenting the whole mass of Christians; and this first took place spontaneously at the individual level, without any organizing or centralizing. And whenever such asceticism was seen

<sup>13</sup> *Summa Theologica* II-IIae, q. 188, a. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Cf G. Huyghe, 'Vie religieuse et apostolat: l'unité de la vie chez l'apôtre', in *L'Adaptation et la rénovation de la vie religieuse* [decret *Perfectae Caritatis*] (Paris, 1967), p 187.



to be radical and total, it was greatly admired outside as well as inside christian society. This was especially true of communities of christian virgins.<sup>15</sup>

The same spirit which was observed among the hermits and anchoresses extended itself to the monks of the fourth century. Their way of life was governed from within by the exigencies of common life, and externally by the watchful care exercised by the local church, which soon gave the cenobitic life a legal structure. The monasteries which began to spring up in the fifth century, though their members did not become priests, assisted the local clergy both in their worship and apostolic action.

The medieval scholastics, as they began to investigate the theological nature and juridical effects of monastic vows, discovered in religious profession a kind of total sacrifice or holocaust. St Thomas taught that religious acquired that name because they totally bound themselves to the divine service. The religious state was therefore considered 'a state of perfection' because those who entered upon it tried to live in the fullest union with God.<sup>16</sup> The Second Vatican Council made this long-standing view its own when it declared that 'religious hand themselves over entirely to God, their supreme love'.

3. The explanation of the zeal of the early Church for virginity and continence may perhaps be that the expectation of the Parousia made the perpetuation of the human race appear superfluous; it was believed that the world's end was near. At the beginning of the cenobitic life instituted by Pachomius, we find the abbot Theodosius exhorting his monks: 'we have fortified ourselves with the bulwark of salvation, the love of the divine law and our call to *koinōnia*; and thus we make our way on earth according to the pattern of the heavenly life. We are imitating the angelic life, so that all who see our good works may glorify God and recognize us as Christ's disciples'.<sup>17</sup> According to Augustine, God's existence is proclaimed through the religious life, since man hands his life over to him: 'You give yourself to him through whom you exist'. In the monastic state a person strives, through the humble submission taught him by Christ, to unite himself more closely to God in love: a kind of life in which he puts himself wholly at the disposal of the one God, and detaches himself from all worldly hindrance or ambition.

<sup>15</sup> Cf L. Duchesne, *Histoire ancienne de l'Eglise*, tom III (Paris, 1911), pp 36-37.

<sup>16</sup> Cf Aquinas, *ibid.*, q. 186, a. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Cf Oeuvres de S. Pachôme . . . 'Théodore, Catéchèse', *loc cit.*, p 53.

*Perfectae Caritatis*, too, at the instance of several conciliar fathers, stresses the same eschatological aspect. Equally *Lumen Gentium* insists that the religious state sets free its adherents from worldly cares, and 'reveals more clearly to all believers the heavenly goods which are already present in this age, witnessing to the new and eternal life won for us by Christ's redemption, and anticipating our future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly Kingdom' (44). The goal, then, of the consecrated life is the following of Christ, which is the eschatological service of the Church: the following, that is, of the whole Christ under a radically new title expressed by the social and ecclesial practice of the evangelical counsels. This intimate clinging to Christ carries with it the advancement of Christ's own salvific mission in its heavenly dimension. The task of the consecrated person resides in his or her radical detachment from all things, in order to teach humankind that the good things of this world are transitory, and that we are awaiting eagerly the coming of God's kingdom. It is for this that we are already adorned with eternal blessings, in a way that helps us to see all temporalities *sub specie eternitatis* — in the light of eternal glory.

#### *Its authenticity*

The nature of the bond by which religious are fastened to their proper state of life can be understood only when the nature of the authority on which the bond depends is rightly perceived; and naturally enough, it was a long time before the right sort of investigation began. It is equally evident that those who took up the ascetical life in early times were accustomed to some kind of dependence on the local bishops, on councils, and later on the papal authority. Nor did any doubts arise on this matter after the institution of the cenobitic life. Gradually, however, as monastic life developed and the structures became more definite, the hierarchical authority began to express itself according to the different demands of time and place. Monks never asked themselves about the source of the abbot's authority, but there was a general feeling that it did not derive from the will of the monks themselves, but was somehow prior to this, and transcended it. They themselves stuck to their solidly established institution, and, with the appropriate instruction, were ready to obey its rules. There was at least an implicit admission that the power of the rightfully appointed superior was fastened to that of the Church itself. The many exemptions granted to monasteries during the middle ages, which later appear in the same form in the common law of 'regulars', may

have prompted the canonists to investigate the authority of superiors, and likewise the obedience of subjects.

Thus we arrive at the idea of special powers similar to those of the father of a family, the spiritual master and the director of apostolic work. This dominative power, as it came to be called, was granted to superiors, chapters of religious communities and societies of common life by the Code of 1918 (Canons 510, 685). The commentators were not slow in giving their attention to these texts. They first point out that these Canons take for granted the ecclesial character of the state of perfection, which is legislated for as a public institution of the Church. They bring to our notice that there is a twofold authority attaching to the office of Superiors: jurisdiction, which is clearly ecclesiastical in origin; and domestic, whose source, according to some authors, can be the vow of obedience taken at profession. Fr Vermeersch argued that both the domestic and dominative powers derived from the social character of the office, which in turn depended on the Church's approbation. By profession, the religious entered into this sphere of authority and promised to accord it due reverence.<sup>18</sup> It followed from this that the dominative power residing in the superiors of religious communities was legitimate only when it was acknowledged by ecclesiastical authority — either by the Holy See or the Ordinary of the place.<sup>19</sup> Further research led to the emergence of a new and important element: religious authority held a mid-point between ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the full sense, and dominative power adhering to a private authority. According to this view, the power of superiors took on a public character, and shared in the power of jurisdiction covered by the Canon law.<sup>20</sup> Pius XII made the point even clearer, when he said:

Regarding this aspect of our office, whether in the normal way through the Code of Canon Law we delegate to you a part of our supreme jurisdiction, or whether we give substance to that power of yours which is called 'dominative' by our approbation of your Rules and Institutes, we take you as sharers in our supreme office. Hence it is of great importance to us that you exercise your authority according to our mind and that of the Church.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cf G. Knott C.S.S.R., *De potestate dominativa in religione* (Bruges, 1945), pp 216-17.

<sup>19</sup> Cf P. Bastien O.S.B., *Directoire canonique à l'usage des congrégations à vœux simples* (Bruges, 1923), pp 246-47.

<sup>20</sup> Cf A. Larraona C.M.F., 'De potestate dominativa publica in iure canonico', in *Actus Congressus iuridici internationalis*, vol IV (Rome, 1937), pp 148, 161.

<sup>21</sup> Allocution to Superiors General, 11 February 1958, in A.A.S., 50 (1958), p 154.

These sentiments were confirmed by the Council in its declaration that it belonged to the Hierarchy to watch over the practice of the evangelical counsels, wisely to moderate its legislation, to receive its rules and to give them its authentic approbation (*Lumen Gentium*, 45).

According to current teaching and law, the authority of the different forms of the consecrated life may be described as a public power directed to a supernatural end. This cannot take its origin from religious tradition, but from that plenitude of power which is conferred by Christ on his Church, in view of its end. The object of religious power, then, is to afford religious the help they need to achieve the end proper to the Church. The plenitude of power belongs to the Pope; and from it all power in the Church, including that of religious, must descend.

#### *Its specific characteristics*

It would seem that Canon Law, before the nineteenth century, had not legislated for the consecrated life. The canons and decretals, as well as the commentators, concentrated rather on the juridical effects of profession rather than on its object or nature. With the single exception, perhaps, of Suarez, they dealt only with celibacy, the right of ownership, and jurisdiction; whilst the theologians and spiritual writers concerned themselves with the personal aspects of religious perfection. Nonetheless, there is an essential canonical dimension in the practice of the evangelical counsels: (1) the special characteristic of consecration, that is, of the personal or moral act; and (2) of profession — the public or juridical act.

1. Expressions such as 'consecration', 'the consecrated life', 'consecrated' are found in the writings of the Fathers of the first christian era, with the meaning, 'the full gift of self offered to God'. We shall examine (a) the notion of consecration itself, (b) its object, (c) the various forms of consecration.

(a) When we speak of consecrated life, we are not concerned with the ceremony in which the professed making his vow receives from the minister, acting in God's name, a spiritual consecration or blessing.<sup>22</sup> 'Consecration, in its union with the practice of the counsels, is a reality of the moral order which is rooted in a certain disposition of life and action. It may be described as an act through which objects or actions directly offered to God are his alone'.<sup>23</sup> It embraces the

<sup>22</sup> Cf *Summa Theologica* II-IIae, q. 88, a. 8, ad 1.

<sup>23</sup> Cf J. de Finance S.J., 'Consécration', in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, tom II, col 1576.

notions of the offering (*propositum*) and intention, through which the whole life of the one making profession becomes God's alone. So Pachomius describes monastic consecration to his disciples:

'You have chosen God as your fulcrum; you have become his beloved; you have decided to walk according to his commands. May God himself bless you; may your springs become rivers, and your rivers the sea . . .'. (This dedication and consecration, like the divine benediction which accompanies it, is irrevocable): ' . . . it cannot be that the one who has dedicated himself can turn back to worldly activity'.<sup>24</sup>

(b) According to St Thomas, the consecration inherent in this binding of oneself to the evangelical counsels leads to freedom from those worldly matters linked to the possession of material goods or to marriage, which so influence the whole of life.<sup>25</sup> In current church discipline, with the exception of the eremitical state, the consecrated life takes on no other form except those institutions publicly approved by the Church. Thus it always carries with it some form of obedience, which can be offered only to those who are truly authorized by God or the Church to receive it. These are the Superiors who govern according to the norms specified by the Church, either in the common law or in rules or constitutions. Again Aquinas states: 'Subjects are not governed by their superiors in all matters, but only in what is laid down'.<sup>26</sup> This qualification refers to 'the way of life' expressed by rule. The specific bond of the consecrated life concerns what is constituted by the rule.

(c) According to the current law of the Church, this consecration of the 'consecrated life' can take on four different forms, according to the various modes of ecclesial dedication: religious community, society of the common life, secular institute, eremitical life. The religious community's purpose is to build up God's people through the public practice of the evangelical counsels and common life, by the powerful witness it gives to the things of heaven, and by its example of common life. The society of common life (also called an 'apostolic brotherhood or sisterhood') seeks to give example to God's people by its public practice of life in common, by witnessing to familial love and by its apostolic zeal, which depends on the evangelical counsels. The secular institute (or apostolic society) strives, through its

<sup>24</sup> *Oeuvres de S. Pachôme (Catéchèse)*, loc cit., pp 23-24, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Loc cit., q. 186, a. 2, ad 3.

<sup>26</sup> Loc. cit., q. 104, a. 5, ad 2 and 3.

practice of spiritual union, to give an example to God's people in the earthly pilgrimage by its apostolic dedication exercised in the world, and by its own special practice of the evangelical counsels. Finally the eremitical state, in its modern form, involves, besides the practice of the counsels, the profession of living according to a rule, with a dependence on some ecclesial superior.

2. When consecration is viewed as the intention to put the counsels into practice, it has its effect through the act of profession, from which the consecration derives its ecclesial and canonical quality. We will first describe (a) the notion of consecration; and (b) the function of profession of the consecrated life.

(a) In general terms, profession is an act by which a person makes a public assertion or confession. In the strict sense in which we are using it, it is an act by which a person is constituted as belonging to the state of consecrated life. According to Suarez, this act ordinarily takes place by making some vow to God; more frequently, however, a gift, a handing-over, or a contract must be added to it; whilst sometimes it may be constituted by some other means of contracting an obligation, without a vow. According to Fr Bergh, it is a signal and public act of the virtue of religion, which effects a public juridical state in the Church and co-opts the person into a particular society.<sup>27</sup>

(b) Profession has principally a double function: it consecrates the professed to God and co-opts him or her into a certain ecclesial state of life. According to the teaching of the theologians, and in particular, St Thomas, 'profession is no mere juridical formality with purely human effects; nor is it simply a symbol or sacrament. For by its means the professed is signed, sealed, and delivered over to the permanent service of God, and is removed from all worldly availability'.<sup>28</sup> Profession, since it is a consecration to God, is equally co-option into an Institute recognized by the Church: one which has received a mandate for a special kind of service from the Church. So it is that the consecration of life and the co-option of the member constitute one action. Profession, then, involves the following constitutive elements: it is first a supernatural action which is linked to the virtue or religion; it is also an accession to a new juridical status in the Church; and it co-opts the professed into an Institute publicly recognized by the Church's authority.

<sup>27</sup> Bergh, *loc cit.*, p 29.

<sup>28</sup> Cf Jean Leclercq O.S.B., 'Génèse et évolution de la vie consacrée', in *Revue diocésaine de Tournai*, 22 (1967), pp 178-79.

*Its permanence*

It is the function of the 'sacred bond' in the profession of the counsels to safeguard the fidelity of the promise made at profession. We must then take a glimpse at (1) the nature of this sacred bond, and (2) its forms.

1. The sacred bond, which is established by profession and by means of which the professed is linked to his consecration, can be described as a special submission to God. It must have a sacred character, so that every care must be taken that a contract be made with God, either directly through the very 'being' of the bond, or indirectly through the mediation of those who have a mandate from him, to whom the obligation is undertaken. The specific bond of the consecrated life is thus joined to certain objects defined in the rule or constitutions. This bond takes various forms: a public or private vow, either of which can be made in the internal or external forum; a promise made to the Institute in question, which therefore depends on a legal or contractual justice; an intention which must be affirmed aloud and with solemnity: the pledging of one's word which binds in conscience. The consecration currently obtaining in many Institutes involves this kind of intention.

In order that these various modes of co-option into a state of life in which the counsels are practised may be truly sacred, they must have both an authoritative and a supernatural quality; and if they are to be authentic, a secure and efficacious character. In the last analysis, only God's authority can achieve the sacred nature of the promise. However, this divine power is assigned here below to the ecclesiastical hierarchy; and it is this authority which confers a public authenticity, first on the Institute of the consecrated life, when it is founded by that authority; secondly, on the constitutions, by its implicit or explicit approval of them; thirdly, on the co-option or profession, as the Church receives or accepts it through the mediation of the superior or the one in charge. It is from the Church, not from the professed person, that the superior receives authority over the professed, an authority extending to the living of the counsels, since the superior is publicly responsible for an Institute of the Church. The one consecrated, duly bound to the Institute through this ecclesial action, is similarly bound to obey its superiors, as far as this is determined by the Church either in common law or the particular law of the Institute.

The supernatural or sacred character of the bond accepted by the professed is of divine origin, since in so far as a life is consecrated, it

wholly belongs to God. Its end is to be found in the divine love, and its means are wholly religious, whether directly, as deriving from the vow or oath, or indirectly in some other form of dedication: for even if this is not itself supernatural, it is at least inserted in the religious and ritual reality which is the consecrated life. The security of the sacred bond flows from the obligation it imposes on the conscience; and thus the faithful observance of the counsels draws an even greater assurance through the vow. For God himself is involved through the immense power implied in the bond. It is a community-promise which draws to itself our neighbour by the power of God's justice; and the assurance received in the personal promise heightens the awareness of the professed by the power of the divine fidelity.

The efficaciousness of the bond of the consecrated life consists in the adherence to God's will, which is as perfect and long-lasting as it can possibly be. It is not a clinging which emanates from the obligation binding upon the conscience as such, but through the means which are revealed for achieving the purposes of the profession and consecration. These educative means, the spiritual exercises proper to each Institute, do not, however, depend from the nature of the bond, whether this be vow, promise, or resolve (*propositum*).

2. The current law demands for perpetual religious profession the taking of vows. However, for the temporary commitment of religious, and for those forms of dedication which are customary in societies of the common life and in secular Institutes, the law admits of (a) the intention (*propositum*), (b) the community-promise, and (c) the vow or oath.

(a) The profession of the first monks seems to have consisted in a simple resolve, publicly manifested, to live chastely and poorly in a community of *koinōnia*. Thus the form of consecration customary in some secular Institutes is similar to such a personal resolve or the pledging of one's word. Thus the *propositum* can indicate a sacred bond, in that it rests upon the power of truth.<sup>29</sup> It can be described as a public manifestation, made before God's people, of the resolve to follow permanently the counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. It draws its inspiration from a divine and a brotherly love, and is an action tending towards perfection and the eschatological service of the people of God. Subjectively it is a deliberate resolve of fidelity, and

<sup>29</sup> This is still a matter of controversy. Cf *Summa Theologica* II-IIae, q. 109, a. 3; and A. Gutierrez C.M.F., 'Instituta saecularia ut status recognitus perfectionis', in *Acta et Documenta congressus generalis de statibus perfectionis*, II (Rome, 1952), p. 242.



is more than a private or a public matter; objectively, it is the consecration of earthly things for the divine use; formally, it is a theological obligation, and therefore sacred, of the virtue of charity, as well as a moral obligation, equally supernatural and sacred, of the same virtue.

(b) The promise, by which a person declares that he will put into practice the evangelical counsels, is a dedication which covers at once the present and the future. Gratian considers such a commitment, with its community-covenant and confirmed by a written document, to constitute the formal entry into the consecrated life.<sup>30</sup> Today's law, however, at least according to the commentators on the Code, presumes that profession has the value of a contract. The promise is further defined as a public declaration of intent to be co-opted into an Institute approved by the Church, to lead the common life according to the evangelical counsels. It is a covenant between two parties, by which the candidate and the Institute enter into a mutual obligation. It draws its specific inspiration from justice, or from the desire of contributing to the well-being of the Institute and the Church. Subjectively, the promise is understood as a commitment in the present and for the future; objectively, it is a public action; formally, it is an ecclesial obligation and a sacred one, deriving from the divine justice.

(c) The vow tends towards the permanent confirmation of the will. By its means the person can offer to God his life in its entirety. In the consecrated life, the fixed determination to follow Christ is strengthened by the vow. The oath, which is on a par with the vow, is an act of the virtue of religion which involves God himself. But while the vow looks towards the fidelity offered to God, the oath depends on the reverence owed to him; and just as fidelity is superior to reverence, so the vow is more binding than the oath.<sup>31</sup> The vow, as a commitment made to God, cannot of itself constitute profession to the consecrated life; it must carry with it the deliverance of oneself to the community — which again derives from the virtue of justice.

The Instruction *Renovationis Causam* allows the temporary profession of religious to be confirmed by means differing from the vow, but indicates that a serious reason is required for such a procedure.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> 'Decretum Gratiani, "Dictum"', in *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, vol IV (Causa XVII, q. 1, ch iv), tom I, col 813.

<sup>31</sup> Cf *Summa Theologica*, loc. cit., q. 88, a. 4; q. 186, a. 6, ad 2; ad 1; q. 89, a. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Cf *Supplement to The Way*, 7 (June 1969), pp 37-43, 84-88.

We may conclude from this that the vow, which involves reverence towards God, is a commitment made to him to observe chastity, poverty and obedience, in a public and social setting. In addition then to the simple resolve and promise, the vow involves a specific bond with God himself. Subjectively, it is a new and stable relationship with God himself; objectively, it tends towards an unalterable dedication to the following of Christ; formally it is like an oath, a divine and sacred obligation deriving from the virtue of religion.

#### CONCLUSION

The consecrated life, as described in the texts of the last Council, and as it seems to be described in the first draft of the revised Canon Law, essentially consists in the practice of the three counsels; or perhaps better, according to the teaching of Aquinas, in the practice of chastity and poverty regulated in some form of common life by obedience. This practice of the counsels involves as its constitutive element either an apostolic totality or an eschatological inspiration. In this sense, it carries with it, besides the following of Christ and salvation in him, the fulfilment in the Church of a special mission: this in its turn means a response to a call, which comes from God and is publicly recognized by the Church, to offer to God's people a particular service. What we find, then, in the state of consecrated life are the following elements: a certain end — the offering of oneself to God and the Church; authenticity — which means responsibility to God and the Church; specific characteristics — the implementation of some special service to God and the Church; and finally consistency — in the bond by which the person is in a continual state of obligation to God and to the Church.

The sacred bond in which the state of consecration consists has manifested itself through the course of the centuries under the threefold form of the resolve (*propositum*), the promise and the vow. Whatever its form, the bond must have the necessary supernatural quality, as well as the characteristics of authority, security and efficaciousness. Each one of these elements can be found under different forms in the various Institutes of the consecrated life, depending on the various charisms of their founders or foundresses, and confirmed by the Church as an authentic mission on behalf of God's people.

*Editor's note.* The last three articles in this issue, by the canonists Frs A. de Bonhome, J. Galot and G. Le Sage, have been translated and abridged, for the purposes of this Supplement, from their papers given at the Congress commemorating the first centenary of the inauguration of the Canon Law Faculty of the Gregorian University, Rome (February 1977). They appeared in *Periodica* — the Gregorian's Review of moral, canonical and liturgical questions, published in Latin — in the autumn issue of 1978. The original titles were: A. de Bonhome: 'Estne consecratio per consilia nova consecratio? Sententiae et argumenta';

Jean Galot: 'De obligationibus per consecrationem assumptis et de valore voti';

G. Lesage: 'Evolutio et momentum vinculi sacri in professione vitae consecratae'.

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