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WHAT IS THE SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF THE “EVANGELICAL COUNSELS” TO CONSECRATED APOSTOLIC LIFE?

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Reflecting on this question requires that we first of all clarify the place of the three vows in a theology of the religious life, and then situate them in relation to the apostolic character of all religious life, so that we can finally outline how we can understand the apostolic dimension that is proper to them.

1. The three vows: their place in a theological understanding of religious life

It remains fairly common, following Thomas Aquinas¹, to define religious life by the three classic vows of poverty, chastity, obedience. However we come up against several major difficulties.

We know now that this triad did not exist at the beginning of religious life; it appeared when the latter was long-established, and already diverse². This triad does not appear as such in every religious profession. Thus it cannot define religious life.

Furthermore, such a definition rests on a distinction which is itself problematic, between “counsels” and “precepts”. This distinction, which is not a Biblical one, has led to a differentiation between a “common way” and a “way of perfection”, thus creating “classes of baptized people”, in a kind of two-speed Christianity; as if receiving the Gospel did not require the same radicalism, according to states of life...Religious life then appears as a “plus” in relation to baptism³.

Every Christian is called to the perfection of charity⁴, to place Christ at the centre of his or her existence,

¹ “The three vows of religion form the essential of all religious life” according to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 11a11ae, art.1, dif.2

² Cf. J.M.R.TILLARD: “The classical triad seems only to appear, and that tentatively, in the middle of the 12th century. (...) The formula seems to find its definitive authority in 1405 under Innocent VII. It then spread rapidly, but without being seen as essential in all formulae of profession. The Benedictine tradition remained attached to the triad: stability – *conversio morum*- obedience. The Dominican tradition continued to retain only a profession of obedience. The Eastern Orthodox do not have it at all.” (*Devant Dieu et pour le monde*) [*Before God and for the World*], Paris, Cerf, 1977, p. 121

³ The Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* tries to avoid this failing by speaking of a “special” “particular” “specific” call, but it does not fully succeed; some expressions show the “plus”, the superiority, the “objective excellence of the consecrated life”. (No.18)

⁴ This is very clear in Thomas Aquinas: “Of itself and in essence, the perfection of the Christian life consists in charity, principally in the love of God, then and secondarily in the love of the neighbour, loves to which the principal precepts of the Divine law refer. Now it is necessary to note carefully that the love of God and of neighbour do not fall under the precept following only a limited measure, the surplus being simply a counsel. (...) ‘Charity is the very end of the precept’, as St Paul says. Now when it is a question of an end, there can be no measure to be observed. (...) Perfection consists essentially in the precepts”. *Summa Theologica* 11a11ae, Q. 184, art.3, conclusion.)

saying “You alone are the Lord”. And in an ecclesiology of communion, no vocation has meaning in isolation. The baptized who have a vocation to marriage make the radical choice of Christ in receiving their partner, and then their children, if they are granted them; the “You alone” that they say to Christ cannot be effective without a “you alone” addressed to their partner. As for those who are called to the religious life, they make a radical choice of Christ without partner or children; they say “You alone” to Christ without another “you alone” and thus they enter into a way of life as brothers and sisters. The origins of religious life in monasticism remind us in fact that the choice of celibacy is a choice to unify one’s life around God, in order thus to love very broadly. The choice of celibacy and the two dimensions of a life unified by a concern for God and by a love for humanity which is not marriage, but brotherly and sisterly, are the marks of religious life.

This is the fundamental “proposition” (*propositum*) of religious life ⁵, against the background of which the three classic vows must be understood and situated. If this triad has become explicit and is maintained, it is because of its anthropological strength: it is able to show how the whole being in its basic dynamisms is the place of incarnation of the offering to God alone, without any other “you alone”, that religious life ⁶.

2. The Vows and the Apostolic Nature of Religious Life

Thus placed in their context, the three vows are neither the origin nor the heart of the apostolic dimension of the religious life. Its reason for existing and the rootedness of mission in religious life are found in this “You alone”, with all that it implies.

In fact this “You alone” without any other “you alone” is, for religious, the place where they open themselves to the love of God and their response to this love, within the movement of God towards humanity. In Christianity, in virtue of the unity between the two commandments, there is no genuine openness to the love of God which is not openness to loving the other. In the image of Christ, whose gift without reservation to the Father is gift for the life of humanity, to genuinely welcome the love of God is to allow oneself to be turned towards one’s brothers and sisters; when there is no human “you alone”, this movement received from the love of God for humanity goes, in principle, to all, to infinity.

In the image of Christ, whose identity as beloved Son is also at the same time that of the One sent by the Father, it is the relationship with God which sends every Christian into the world: receiving with the Son and in the Spirit the movement of love of the Father, we are sent. There lies the link between contemplation and mission: the former is not separate from apostolic life, whether preceding it or following it. Religious life lives that sending in its own way: differently from ministry, religious life, even the most apostolic, does not consist first of all in a mission to be carried out. Apostolic work is the work of God in the religious; the apostolic instrument of the religious is his or her person worked on by God, and a religious who can no longer

⁵ Cf the important light shed by Philippe LECRIVAIN on the initial and fundamental *propositum* of religious life, which is translated by the “vow of profession”: “to vow oneself to the Lord” does not mean “make one’s vows”. These are two different registers: one expresses the deep resolution of the person, and the other the organisation of decisions rooted in this resolution and trying to express it”. (*Une manière de vivre, les religieux aujourd’hui* Brussels, Lessius, 209, p. 42)

⁶ Enzo BIANCHI summarizes it thus: « The Gospel demands are many and cannot be reduced to three; however these three virtues (chastity, poverty and obedience) by their anthropological character, can summarize and synthesize them. The social sciences also arrive at this triad, when they indicate the three *libidines* which constitute human nature in its depth: the *libido amandi*, the *libido possidendi* and the *libido dominandi*. We develop our personality, we mature, we humanize ourselves in relation to these three points, but we can also become idolatrous, contradicting the true and living God, and bringing back a death-dealing logic into human relationships. The great spiritual tradition has thus gradually indicated chastity, poverty and obedience as the fruits of a struggle against idolatry, the fruits of a spiritual struggle, the distinctive signs of the following of the Lord; they must show it in their flesh, by their life, through their action and being: they must show that they are following the Lord, daily and concretely, both in community and individually.” (*Si tu savais le don de Dieu* [If you knew the gift of God] French transl., Brussels, Lessius, 2001, p. 74

do anything is no less apostolic.⁷

It is here that the three vows come in. They are certainly not the only elements of religious life that give it its apostolic dimension⁸ which, incidentally, does not say all that is to be said about the vows. These do not have primarily an apostolic aim, but they cannot fail to have apostolic consequences.

In fact, the vows, bearing on the real life of our flesh – its basic appetites of freedom, of possessions, of love – offer the whole of our flesh to Christ, sent into this world to become flesh. Each one speaks in its own way of a birth from above: placing oneself under obedience in order to receive one's freedom from God alone, finding fulfilment in celibate chastity, receiving in poverty all goods as coming from God and belonging in principle to all. This does not come from the movement of people left to themselves. Only a birth in God, a birth of God in us can be the origin of this.

The three vows thus show powerfully the eschatological dimension proper to religious life.⁹ It differs from marriage, which, through children, opens up the present to an earthly future; chastity in celibacy anticipates and proclaims a world made not by generation but by universal communion, the very same that is promised in the afterlife, when "God will be all in all". Obedience and poverty for the Kingdom are the renunciation of ensuring an earthly future by works or possessions. The sacrament of marriage sets the seal of eternity on earthly realities and makes them the way of common and mutual holiness for the two partners; Christian partners are thus called, based on the flesh, to turn towards the beyond. Religious life, for its part, has the vocation of proclaiming the promise and the anticipated presence of the beyond: turned towards the beyond, marked by the overabundance of God which relativizes everything that happens, religious life cannot turn away from here below where it is sent by the Spirit. Religious life is thus invited to live in the flesh what does not come from the flesh – that could be a definition of the vows – and sent into the world by a Word which comes from elsewhere – that could be a definition of mission.¹⁰ It is in that perspective that the apostolic dimension of the three classical vows can be envisaged.

3. The apostolic dimension of the vows

Discussion of the vows has for a long time been ascetic, presenting them as a "holocaust", a way of personal sanctification and a means of struggling against obstacles to the perfection of charity¹¹, and/or juridical, where the vows are understood as law and obligation¹². More recently the approach has been strongly anthropological. The tendency today is to be more attentive to contexts, with the "challenges" they

⁷ Cf. *Vita Consecrata* N° 25: "The first missionary duty of consecrated persons concerns themselves, and they fulfil it by opening their heart to the action of the Spirit of Christ".

⁸ The handing over of oneself to God, the commitment for ever by a word and fraternal life have in fact powerful apostolic consequences.

⁹ Theological reflection on religious life is rediscovering at the present time an eschatological orientation, which is fortunate and fruitful.

¹⁰ One of the impasses of the theology of St Thomas AQUINAS on this question comes precisely from a difficulty in thinking of religious life in relation to the world. If "religious engage themselves by vow to abstain from secular things, which it would be lawful for them to use, in order to attend to God more freely" (*Summa Theologica 11a11ae, Q. 184, art.5, concl.*), it becomes very difficult to think of their relationship to the world.

¹¹ It is the case with Thomas Aquinas, for whom "the religious state can be understood in a threefold aspect: 1° as an exercise by which one tends to the perfection of charity; 2° as a way of life suitable for freeing the human heart from exterior concerns; [...] 3° as a holocaust by which one offers oneself completely to God, one's person and one's goods" (*Summa Theologica, 11a11ae, Q. 186, art.7, concl.*)

¹² Already present in Thomas AQUINAS, this dimension is developed by SUAREZ and very widely thereafter. Simon-Pierre RNOOLD tries to rectify this deviation in his last book *Au risque de Jésus Christ, une relecture des voeux, Fr. Tr., Brussels, Lessius, 2007*

present, and the discussion becomes “militant”, even “counter-cultural”, emphasizing an understanding of religious life in terms of prophecy¹³: the vows “proclaim and denounce”, they represent an alternative way of life. None of these dimensions can be omitted but there is always the risk of dissociating them, of making one dominant or passing one or the other over in silence, and thus losing the coherence of the religious life. If the ascetic approach tends to overlook the Thomist horizon of charity, today the perspective commitment can have more difficulty in truly integrating the gift of God and the personal dimension of conversion. Placing the vows more modestly in the context of the theology of the religious life allows us to take the different dimensions into account and not to focus on them in terms of the apostolate. Their place, secondary and relative, allows for a variety of interpretations according to the spiritual experience of writers and depending on the context. For the subject which concerns us, beyond and underlying these interpretations, four points are to be emphasized, which seem to be necessarily present in any interpretation of the vows.

Firstly, the vows, as offering to God, link inextricably personal conversion and mission.¹⁴ If they incarnate in the whole of our being the “You alone” that we say to God, they help us to receive fully the love of God that opens up in the service of our brothers and sisters. Just as there is no gap between contemplation and action, there is none between conversion and mission.

Furthermore, the three vows work in us on capacities and difficulties in relationships. In obedience, we are before the figure of the other as older or as “parent”¹⁵; with chastity, it is the other as peer, face to face, in a relationship of partnership, that we meet; as for poverty, it presents the other as a “neighbour”, with whom to share, the other who is nothing to me except by the grace and the desire of God. What relationship does not derive from one or other of these models? The vows thus enable us to allow the love of God to reveal itself and to convert all the relationships which we live. They send us to live all relationships – and does mission exist otherwise than in relationships? – on the basis of the “You alone” which is ours.

The vows also commit us to a certain way of looking at people – at each person, the other and myself. Poverty involves looking at people as they are, without possessing any relationship – people “naked”, as they come from the hands of God and as they will return to God on the last day. Chastity in celibacy makes us consider the other simply for God or for themselves, or for another, and not in a spontaneous movement of turning back towards ourselves. Obedience places us in a position of dialogue and reveals to us human beings as beings who speak, that is to say capable of speaking and listening. Thus the three vows should lead us to be sensitive to the situations in which humanity, desired by God, is despised, and should bring us close to those of our brothers and sisters who live in these situations; they also commit us to recognize the radical beauty of humanity and to give thanks for all that respects and values it.

Finally, the three classical vows show the eschatological dimension of our vocation. They imprint in our flesh the beyond which calls to us. They can be understood in a dynamic of waiting, like the opening, at the heart of time, of a window looking towards that which will not change. This ceaselessly questions our thirst for making sure of what is at our disposal, within our reach, of our work, and of providing for our future ourselves, and they keep alive in us the desire for a world where all bread, including the bread of affection, will be shared with all. They mark every commitment with this dimension, drawing us away from what, in our way of looking at the world, and even with the best apostolic intentions or justifications, can always remain “worldly”. Through this space, they can point out the place of God in the heart of the world.

¹³ Cf. for example Jacques HAERS, *Vivre les vœux aux frontières*, Brussels, Lessius, 2006, Simon-Pierre ARNOLD, op.cit. ou Jean-Claude Lavigne, *Pour qu’il aient la vie en abondance, La vie religieuse*, Paris, Cerf, 2010

¹⁴ One of the merits of Simon-Pierre ARNOLD’s last book is that he reminds us: “Our first mission is our vocation to evangelical conversion. Our own human healing, whose workshop is the religious community and the Christian community of the people of God thus becomes the privileged sign of redeemed humanity, which we proclaim by our work” op.cit., p.90

¹⁵ To be convinced of this, it is necessary only to look at how the living of this vow brings parental relationships into play!

Love comes down from above ¹⁶ – the three vows only have meaning if they allow us constantly to ¹⁶ readjust our life by welcoming this love which sends us. They remind us that we cannot escape our diaconal function ¹⁷ but that our mission cannot be reduced to this: it is to be understood and received not from the world and its cries, but from the One who sends us with the Son and the Spirit. “Though I should give away to the poor all that I possess, and even give up my body to be burned – if I am without love, it will do me no good whatever” ¹⁸ *altro*.

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From: 2011 Theological Seminar - SYLVIE ROBERT, SA

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Further Reflections - Third day: february 10, 2011

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¹⁶ CF. Ignatius of LOYOLA Spiritual Exercises, N° 184, 237 and 338.

¹⁷ According to Enzo BIANCHI’s classification of the different forms of religious life: the monastic life” seeks to follow the Lord according to the Gospel, and that is all”, “the apostolic life in the full sense” which is consecrated to evangelisation and preaching, the “diaconal life” which seeks to respond to a need emerging in history and in society” (*op.cit.*, p.68-71)

¹⁸ 18 1 Cor. 13:3