

RELIGIOUS LIFE

BY

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RELIGIOUS life is the genuine and wholehearted dedication of man to the love and service of God. In taking vows of religion there is implied a recognition and realisation of the infinitely great and good God, the fountain and source of all goodness, together with an appreciation of our Lord's love in dwelling among us and planning to have certain creatures associated with him for his own great ends and the vast needs of souls. Thus to dedicate our life to God in the following of Christ is not a decision man makes entirely of himself, no matter how much he may be enamoured with the ideal. 'It was not you that chose me, it was I that chose you' (Jn. 15, 16), our Lord told the apostles, thereby signifying that it is for God to choose whomsoever he will. Yet although the initial choice of invitation is from God, it is for us to accept, to acknowledge that call, that divine beckoning. When he has chosen us, we in turn must choose him and choose him alone, choose him to the exclusion of all else. God loves us, then we love him. Love is productive and creative, and in loving us God gives us life, natural and supernatural. But love is also unitive, is mutual self-giving. God gives himself to us, then we give ourselves to him. God works with us, and we with him. 'Whatever request you make of the Father in my name, I will grant' (Jn. 14, 14). The limits of our power when we work in Christ's name are unlimited. Have not the saints raised the dead to life? If we work with God, God works with us.

Yet to choose God, to give all to God, to work with God is a difficult thing. In fact it is so difficult that without his grace we could not make the choice. With his grace the task becomes possible, for can we not do all things in him who strengthens us? But being possible does not make a thing easy, and on that point we must never delude ourselves. It is hard to give up all the good things in life, to sever ourselves from them, to cut them off from us completely. At the outset it may perhaps seem more or less easy, for we are buoyed up by God's grace, and further buoyed up by our own enthusiasm which will sweep us along and carry us far. Perhaps in the beginning (and this is particularly true of the young) there may not be full realisation of the sacrifice that is being made. It is not wholly appreciated what is meant and implied in the surrender of all things of earth, of all attachment to them for the love of God.

For the things surrendered by vow are things desirable in them-

selves. It can happen sometimes, in moments of fervour or zeal, that the religious is inclined to despise the things given up. But that is entirely a wrong attitude, savouring somewhat of Manichaeism. Would we dare offer God what is worthless and useless? But in their very excellence, in the quality that attracts us to them and makes them so desirable, there is danger. The danger lies, however, not so much in them as in ourselves. It is, after all, difficult to love a human being and at the same time to be moderate in that love. It is difficult to follow one's own will and judgment in a way that is virtuous. Do we not, and frequently to our cost, mistake and approve the apparent for the real, the shadow for the substance?

Human nature is very frail, and naturally leans and gravitates towards things of earth. The possession and holding of what is renounced by vows, bind the soul, as a rule, more than ever to earth. The soul becomes engrossed and is stifled, so that unwowed our eyes are fixed upon this world rather than upon God. Thus it is the purpose of vows to cut off and free from all the dangers attached to the possession of worldly goods, goods of human love, of our own will and judgment. There is an exchange of inheritance, from the treasure that can be stolen, ruined and destroyed for the treasure that none can corrupt, that none can diminish nor take away. 'Where your treasure-house is there your heart is too' (Mtt. 6, 21), and the heart, the desires and affections are by vow in God's good keeping. By the vows man cleaves unshaken, unshakeable to God. The house of the religious is the house of God, built on rock not on shifting and treacherous sands of avarice, lust and egoism. And the vows constitute the religious the inmate of that house, for they are the means whereby the religious is built into, bonded into God. The vows are not the end attained. God is the end. The vows are the means. The things forbidden by the vows are in themselves desirable; yet by cutting himself adrift from them man takes the very best means of turning himself wholly to God. Vows are taken not for their own sake, but for the love of God. Since all love is preference, the religious is the one who prefers God and his divine love to all things else in the world.

In other words the religious is he who dedicates his life to the service and love of God. Technically he is now the servant, the *servitor*, the slave of God, abandoning rights natural to him for the sake of God's service. The religious is he who has dared with the daring that springs from a magnanimity not foolhardiness, with the courage that comes from love not fear, to lay hold of God, to plight himself eternally to God. By vows man is established in the religious state. Now a state always implies freedom or bondage;

there is also implied reference to a bond of obligation. Thus the state of the Christian life is that whereby men are united by one common profession of faith, under one head, and are ordained to heaven by fitting means. Thus in the state of Christian life we find a certain stability, the stability of the Church, of baptism, stability due to the unchangeableness of faith, together with the aids to perseverance. Hence it is that a state is a condition of life conatural to man, with fixity or permanence.

Now of states that are contrary and opposite you will find in one an obligation that is absent in the other. Thus there is the state of sin, which implies an obligation to sin, for one sin makes for another sin, and man cannot of himself rise from sin. The opposite to the state of sin is the state of justice, wherein man is no longer bounded by sin, and free from sin can render to God and his fellow men their due. A state, therefore, always connotes freedom or bondage. Freedom or bondage implies that the person of a man belongs to himself or another (*sui juris vel alieni*), and this not in a changeable but in a permanent way. Permanent, be it repeated, because freedom is natural to man, and thus a difficult thing to throw off, which gives it its fixity. Hence we maintain that the Religious State is one of bondage, of divine bondage, of subjection from a permanent cause, God himself. In this manner is it distinguished from the Lay State, which is one of freedom from such bondage. A layman is not linked to God as is the religious. It is St Thomas who describes the religious as '*illi qui se totaliter mancipant divino servitio*' (II-II 186, 1), those, namely, who wholly handcuff or shackle themselves to the serving of God.

But the secular, even if he is free on the one hand, is in another manner bound. If he is a cleric, he is in a state of bondage, for he is dedicated to God's ministry. If he be a layman he is free from that bond only to be tied to another, e.g. to matrimony, for wedlock is a state of bondage rooted in a permanent cause, viz. the mutual contract which is indissoluble. But of all states, of all forms of bondage, the religious life is the happiest, is paradoxically the freest. The freest because religious life is not the losing but rather the finding of freedom, is the state of liberty *par excellence*. Thus St Thomas (II-II 84, 4 ad 1): 'Even as one's liberty is not lessened because one is unable to sin, so, too, the necessity resulting from a will firmly fixed to good does not lessen liberty, as is clear in God and the saints. Such is the necessity implied by a vow, bearing a certain resemblance to the permanence of the blessed. Hence Augustine says, "Happy the necessity that compels us to do the better things"'. The religious is indeed the one '*qui optimam*

partem elegit', who has chosen not just the good, nor the better, but the best. *Et non auferetur ab ea*: and none can separate him from it, nought can come between the soul and God.

Surely that is the end of all our striving. Permanence and stability, worthy characteristics as they are, are not the end of religious life, but the means or rather the necessary conditions for the attainment of the end. The purpose, the reason why of religious vocation is that man might be oned with God. Union with God is the ideal, the target and end of religious life. Now a thing is said to be perfect insofar as it attains its special end, and the special or proper end is the last perfection of a thing. The special end of anything is that for which it is made or created. As regards man, his perfection is to be united to God. To be in reality and truth united to God, this is purpose of his creation. In the measure of his union with God, man fulfils his purpose whilst on earth. When he is united to God in heaven, man attains his ultimate end or perfection.

Perfection, however, is twofold essential and accidental. Essential perfection consists principally in loving God, and secondarily in loving our fellow men; both of which fall under the divine precept relating to charity. And how is this essential perfection to be distinguished from accidental perfection? In this wise, that the love of God which is necessary to essential perfection is such as to exclude all that is contrary to the habit of charity. In other words we are essentially perfect when we are not in mortal sin, for it is only mortal sin that expels charity from the soul. 'The lowest degree of divine love is to love nothing more than God, or contrary to God, or equally with God' (II-II 184, 4 ad 2). Thus essential perfection consists in keeping the commandments; by rebelling against those laws man rejects God's love.

Yet even though man be essentially perfect, it does not follow he is wholly perfect. A newly born babe is essentially man, yet it would be foolish to imagine he had reached the full stature of manhood, the full development and perfection of his nature. This is the example St Thomas chooses, when he states: 'Just as man has a certain perfection of his nature as soon as he is born, which perfection belongs to the very essence of his species, while there is another perfection which he acquires by growth, so again there is a perfection of charity which belongs to the very essence of charity, namely that man love God above all things, and love nothing contrary to God; whilst there is another perfection of charity even in this life, whereto man attains by a kind of spiritual growth, for instance when he refrains even from lawful things, in order more freely to give himself to the service of God' (II-II 184, 3 ad 3).

In fact the surrender of these lawful things constitutes man in accidental perfection, and such is attained by those who follow our Lord by way of the counsels. For accidental perfection implies the removal not of what is contrary to the habit of the love of God (i.e. mortal sin), but the removal of what is contrary to acts of the love of God, and which things in themselves are not opposed to the habit of love of God. Such hindrances are marriage, the occupation with worldly business, being our own masters, and such like. This then is what distinguishes the Christian life from the religious life: that the Christian life obliges to the essence of charity, which is attained through the keeping of the precepts; the religious life obliges not only to the essence but to the perfection of charity.

But can anyone be perfect in this life? The perfect, we said, is that to which nothing is wanting. As regards charity we see there can be a threefold perfection (II-II 24, 8): (i) wholly both on the part of the lover and that which is loved, in as much as the object loved is lovable. But it is God whom we love, and since he is lovable without measure, infinitely lovable, it is impossible for us finite creatures to love him to this degree. (ii) So to love wholly on the part of the lover that all power of love actually tends to God, '*quando quis diligit tantum quantum potes . . . sic quod totum cor hominis actualiter semper feratur in Deum*'. Only in heaven can we satisfy the longings of our hearts to this extent. (iii) Not wholly and absolutely on the part of the lover, nor wholly and absolutely on the part of him who is loved; but insofar as all things are excluded which prevent the movement of love towards God. And this stage is made possible in our present life.

It is rendered even more possible when not only what is contrary to charity, viz. mortal sin, is excluded, but in addition everything that hinders the soul from being wholly directed and centred in God. 'Accordingly', summarises St Thomas (II-II 184, 4), 'strictly speaking, one is said to be in a state of perfection, not through having the act of perfect love, but through binding oneself in perpetuity and with a certain solemnity to those things that pertain to perfection'. Does that mean that only religious can be perfect, that perfection is not to be sought nor can be found outside the cloister? On the contrary, 'nothing hinders some from being perfect without being in the state of perfection, and some in the state of perfection without being perfect' (*loc. cit.*). The obligation arising from his being in a state of perfection binds the religious to strive for perfection. God in his infinite loving kindness does not ask man to do or attempt that which exceeds the bounds of possibility. That no religious is bound to be perfect, though he is obliged to strive

for perfection is due to the weakness of human nature. Despite having surrendered, and willingly, certain and good things for the greater love of God, owing to weakness man cannot help sometimes hankering after these very same things.

The end of the Christian life as such is the same as that of the religious, *viz.* perfect union with God through love. The means offered to reach that perfection are the precepts, which give the essence, and the counsels which give the perfection of the essence. Although absolutely speaking a man living in the world, who is married, endowed with worldly possessions and is his own master, can attain the perfection of charity, nevertheless this ideal becomes more feasible when life is governed by and centred in the counsels. For the layman there are so many hindrances, so many distractions, so many preoccupations which, while not contrary to the love of God, are definitely handicaps to progress in that love. The religious, on the other hand, by taking vows frees himself from these snares. At a single stroke he cuts off all these impediments, so that there should remain nothing to prevent his direct progress towards God.

Religious life is a holocaust, a great sacrifice for God's love of the things towards which human nature has so great an attraction. Even so, more is asked and required, compared to which the leaving of possessions, of home and family is a simple and easy affair. 'Perhaps it is not burdensome for a man to give up what he has, but it is extremely difficult to abandon himself. To hand over what one has is a trifle, but to surrender what one is is very great'¹ Yet is it this abandonment of himself that is the goal to which a religious strives. His life is one of continual penance and suffering, self-denial and self-abasement; and it is so lived not because penance and suffering are in themselves desirable, but because through these means he can attain to that greater love of God which God demands.

Commenting on Ps. 32 St Augustine says (Ennar. 2, 16): 'Lift up your hearts then to him: do not give way to despair: do not say, "Oh, that is beyond me" . . . if you want God you can have him. For even before you wanted him, he drew nigh to you; and when you turned your back on him, he beckoned you; and though when at length you did turn to him he terrified you, yet when in your terror you confessed your sins he filled you with consolation. He who has given you everything. . . . He is keeping in reserve for you something which he does not give save to you. What is it that he is reserving for you? Himself!'

¹ *Fortasse laboriosum non est homini relinquere sua, sed valde laboriosum est relinquere semetipsum. Minus quippe est abnegare quod habet, valde autem multum est abnegare quod est.* St Gregory (cf. Roman Breviary, Comm. MM., less. viii).