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THE HISTORICAL JOURNEY OF THE RELIGIOUS VOWS

ABSTRACT

The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience have always been considered the pillars of religious life in the Church. According to canonists, only when the vows are taken publicly is it appropriate to talk of *religious state*. Moreover, until the early 20th century the vows were to be solemn. In the wake of the constitution *Conditae a Christo* (8th December 1900), the category of religious institute was attributed to all institutes of simple vows. Canon law shall later ratify this practice. *Provida Mater* (1947) recognized *secular institutes*, producing a major shift. What matters most now is not the public profession of simple or solemn vows, rather the public profession of the evangelical counsels. This is exactly what the Second Vatican Council meant by «The faithful of Christ bind themselves to the three aforesaid counsels either by vows, or by other sacred bonds, which are like vows in their purpose» (LG 44).

The new Code retains this notion of religious life, while highlighting the relevance of the *sequela Christi* (c. 573 § 1), total devotion to God, the Spirit's charismatic inspiration, the mission through charity and the profession of the evangelical counsels. The Code reasserted the doctrine of Vatican II on the vows «or other sacred bonds» (c. 573 § 2). Vatican II's conceptual impact on the new Code was so powerful that the Code went on to include the societies of apostolic life among the institutes of consecrated life, though many of them do not profess the vows or evangelical counsels. Although they are placed in a separate section, this generated some concerns, because consecrated life seems to necessarily imply the profession of the evangelical counsels.

In the light of the discontent that surfaced among the societies of apostolic life, as well as the emergence of other concerns, it is fitting to ask two questions: have the vows or sacred bonds at the basis of religious life always existed in the Church as an essential element of the discipleship of Christ, so much so that religious life would be unconceivable without them? And have the three evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience) always been the essential condition for religious consecration?

The Hellenic world saw religious life take its first steps and thrive. Though both traditions contributed to form the notion of vow applied to monastic life, the vows were known and lived differently in the Greek and Latin world.

Pre-monastic asceticism and virginity

We know that virgins and ascetics have existed in Christian communities at least since the end of the 1st century. Their existence even questioned the pagans themselves.



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Although they did not understand the Christians, they were impressed by «a sort of modesty that instills in them discretion with regards to the matrimony».

The Anchorites

The sources of Egyptian monasticism do not hold any trace of explicit vow commitment. Antony and the first hermits did not withdraw to the desert to fulfill any promise, but to fully pledge themselves to the Lord. The early stages of hermitic life were featured by a renunciation to worldly goods and a retreat to the desert. The anchorites laid the foundations for what we call today religious vows. Anthony *obeyed* God's word, a word that he listened to and *totally renounced his possessions* to withdraw in solitude and live in *perfect continence*. However, these intentions were not expressed in any vow. It is clear that the anchorites had a *firm resolve* to adopt a certain lifestyle and *persevere with it*.

The early Cenobites

The trial period was established at the time of the early cenobites, and applied to all candidates before they joined a community. In his Rule, *Pachomius* referred to the practices of his monastery. This period ended when the novice was introduced to the community, «then he will be divested of his dresses from the century and dressed with the habit of the monks». Once he wore the habit and took part in the community's sinaxis, he was considered a monk. There was no mention of promises or vows. At the same time, the monk did not wear the habit for the first time before the community, but in a separate place, though this could be considered the most solemn moment of his monastic life.

Pachomius's successors shall further explain the commitment made when entering the monastery.

We must emphasize that the contents of this *alliance* have nothing to do with the evangelical counsels, but with the commandments. That is why I do not believe that they can be considered as an «outline of the monastic profession».

Basil of Caesarea

A major step ahead in the adoption of the vows in monastic life had already been taken by Basil of Caesarea a few years before Shenute. While describing the commitment implied by entering a religious community, Basil mentioned an *agreement (synthéke)* made «in God's presence and relative to him».

The profession of virginity had to be made before the ecclesial authorities and two or three witnesses, and once it was made it could not be revoked. For Saint Basil, the core of monastic profession is chastity. However, this doesn't mean that there are no other



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commitments. he insisted on virginity, in that he drew a parallel with the virgins, whose permanent state of life and establishment he took as a model for his monks. Obedience, for example, is not only without reserve and extremely strict, but also mutual. The *Short Rule* went insofar as requiring of the monks an *explicit statement of obedience* to the Superior. With regards to poverty, every monk should give up his possessions, without necessarily offering them to the monastery.

The Western practice

The West was still a long way from embracing the shift promoted by Basil from the *propositum* to the *homología*, from the vocational decision to the explicit and public profession. The key of western religious life continues to be self-determination, that marks the beginning of monastic life. When the word *professio* appeared, it did not imply Basil's *homología*, but it intended monastic life itself (Cassian) or the date a monk joined a community (Jerome describing Saint Pachomius's monks).

Saint Benedict introduced a ceremony with a specific value for a precise purpose. The object of the profession is threefold. *Stability*, *conversatio morum* and *obedience* are reasserted. However, the main objective of the profession is apparently the *conversatio morum* alone. The monk's spiritual work (*ora et labora*), as well as his stability and obedience embody the implications of his intention to follow Christ during his lifetime (*morum*).

The fundamental elements, both vital and conceptual, had been laid out for religious life to embrace the vows: this will happen neglecting the oblativ dimension, while enhancing the most visible elements of the vows. We have already observed that saint Anselm witnessed the novelties that the *lectio* in the formula of profession entailed. In the XII century, Saint Bernard attached «the strong binding force of the *voluntum*» to the profession. This process culminated, as we know, in Thomas Aquinas, who preserved the genuinely religious identity of the total oblativ commitment within the votive conception of religious life.

The Formulas

The starting point of monastic life was the willingness to totally offer oneself to God. The desire to totally live for Him urged the first monks to renounce, to radically convert their hearts, to give up their passions and seek total purity.

The triple promise appeared for the first time in the *Rule* of the Trinitarians, at the end of the XII century (1198).

Later, Thomas Aquinas adopted the three vows as a more valid historical formula to put together the essential values of religious life. The *canonization* of the three vows in the



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Summa Theologiae (1270) gave them a perpetual and stable identity, that has been perpetuated to the present day.

Luther's criticism on the vows

According to Luther, the vows put the Christians under the law, they justify their works, usurp the Gospel that is the common heritage of all the Baptized, they are «*extra Christum et sine Christo*». Therefore, we need to abolish them. However, Luther thought very highly of religious life, especially virginity, but this should be lived without perpetual vows. The treatise *De votis* is not an appeal to anarchy, but a serene reflection, as Luther writes on the last page: «To all those who shall read my advice and after abandoning monastic life shall recover their freedom, I ask, in the name of Christ, that they first search their souls, for fear that they do this as if attracted by the novelty or only scorn and hatred towards men».

However, Luther's unilateral extremism, his verbal violence and extreme attitudes uprooted religious life from the areas where the Reformation thrived.

The confirmation of Trent

The Council of Trent did not deal with religious life specifically. However, Luther's negative judgment on the vows required some clarity. In the decree on marriage, the Council asserted the superiority of virginity: the best way to give the Church a productive religious life was for religious men and women to «faithfully respect *what belongs to the perfection of their religious profession: the vow of obedience, poverty and chastity...*». The doctrine of the triad of vows described by Thomas Aquinas as fundamental for religious life is thus reasserted, as expression of the discipleship of Christ.

After this brief overview of the most relevant moments for the formulation of the three vows, what clearly emerges is that the final result should not be absolutized. What matters most is what was present since the beginning: the full offering of oneself to the Lord as response to his call. As this offering takes three different directions that concern fundamental aspects of a human being's life, we are helped to better grasp the scope of the total vow to God, that should always be expressed in the best possible way, but cannot only be limited to the juridical formulation of the vows. It is as if the profound charismatic aspects of the vocation to a life fully consecrated to God, i.e. the aspects that best feature a specific vocation within the Church and give it its specific and unique identity, are missing from the three vows.