

THE RELIGIOUS STATE

Holy Mother Church has given us a complete definition of the religious state.¹ It is a stable condition of community life approved by legitimate ecclesiastical authority, in which the faithful assume the duty of observing besides the precepts common to all men, the evangelical counsels by means of the public vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and a rule, for the purpose of tending to evangelical perfection.

Perfection is of two kinds, essential and accidental. "The essential perfection of a thing consists in its answering perfectly the end for which it is made. Accidental perfection lies in the possession of additional qualities, subserving the main purpose, and contributing beauty, adornment and finish to the whole."² Thus the accidental perfection of a watch consists in

Cfr. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* II-II, Q. 184, a. 1, ad 2. its keeping time; its essential perfection in the fineness of its parts and the beauty of its exterior workmanship. Man, as we know from revelation, was made for union with God. Hence his essential perfection consists in charity, for "he that abideth in charity, abideth in God, and God in him."³ His accidental perfection consists in the other virtues which cluster around charity, and help him to serve God easily, promptly and sweetly.⁴ This is the teaching of Scripture and of the Doctors of the Church. St. Paul says, "Charity is the bond of perfection."⁵ This is true, St. Thomas says, first because charity unites us to God, and secondly because it vivifies and binds together all the other virtues.⁶ Perfection and charity are, therefore, synonymous terms, for the greater charity a man has, the more closely is he united to God and the higher has he climbed the ladder of perfection.

"Be you therefore perfect as also your heavenly Father is perfect." Our Lord had bidden the multitudes.⁷ This was but saying in other words: "Love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart.

¹ Code of Canon Law. Canons 487-488.

² Buckler, O. P. *The Perfection of Man by Charity*, p. 62.

³ I John, IV, 16.

⁴ Buckler, O. P., p. 63.

⁵ Coloss. III, 14.

⁶ In S. Pauli Epist. ad Coloss. c. 3, lect. 3.

⁷ Matthew V, 48.

Love thy neighbor as thyself."⁸ These two commandments are the first and the greatest commandments; they comprise what is called the law of charity or the law of perfection. To this great law of charity all the other commandments are ordained. As St. Paul says, "the end of the commandment is charity";⁹ for it is the purpose of each commandment to increase charity in our hearts by giving us an opportunity of exercising our love for God or for our neighbor. Willing obedience to the first three commandments is a direct proof of our love for God; willing obedience to the last seven is not only a direct proof of our love for neighbor but an indirect proof of our love for God, for we should love our neighbor for the love of God. But the commandments are not the most perfect nor the surest means to observing the law of charity. Their purpose is merely to guide us in removing from our lives whatever is contrary to the virtue of charity,¹⁰ whatever blackens our soul with mortal sin; they tell us what we must do to obtain salvation. Any one can see that this is at least an imperfect, if not a mean, observance of a law that says, love with all thy heart and soul and strength. A holier and more certain way of observing the law of charity lies in renouncing not only that which destroys the virtue of charity but also that which hinders the act of charity. Man's energy is limited; he cannot do everything at once, and the more attention he pays to one thing the less he can pay to another. So, too, in the spiritual life; if family or other cares take up his time it will be most difficult for him to devote himself wholly to the service of God. For one, then, who wishes to obey the law of charity perfectly it is highly advantageous, if not necessary, to find better and more certain means than the commandments offer. Although these can be found in other states of life than the religious yet it is the special office and mission of the latter to provide them more abundantly.

By the sin of Adam the bond of charity uniting man to God was broken, and as the years rolled on, most men drifted farther and farther from their true haven. It was the mission of Jesus to undo the work of sin, and to reunite man to God, his first Beginning and last End. To accomplish this it was neces-

⁸ Mark XII, 28-34.

⁹ I Timothy I, 5.

¹⁰ Summa Theol. II-II, Q. 184, a. 3.

sary first of all to induce man to repent of his sins and to observe the commandments; that would insure salvation, relight the fire of charity, and, to some degree, reunite man with God. But this was only a beginning. Having come "to bring fire to earth" Jesus wished it to be enkindled. Inspired by His grace, many souls yearned for a more intimate union with God, yearned to acquire the perfection Jesus wished to see in their hearts. Feeling that the commandments were not sufficient to guide them to this destination, and willing to do more than the commandments required they came to Jesus, asking what they must do to be perfect. Jesus gave them the counsels. Thereupon thousands of souls from the Apostles¹¹ down to our own day, leaving all things and following Jesus embraced what is called the religious life.

A religious, however, not only seeks perfection, he obliges himself to seek it. Indeed it is this obligation which constitutes the religious life, which makes it the state of perfection. As St. Thomas Aquinas says, "a person is properly spoken of as being in the state of perfection, not because he has the act of perfect love, but because he perpetually obliges himself with a certain solemnity to do those things which pertain to perfection."¹² A person living in the world, however perfect he may be, is not thereby in the state of perfection, nor is he bound to further the growth of virtue in his soul except under the general obligation that all have to correspond with grace. Not so a religious, he has a special obligation to keep on advancing. This being in the state of perfection, this duty of tending to perfection, however, does not mean that a religious is perfect, nor that he is bound to reach the highest degree of perfection possible to man, nor that he must use all the means leading to perfection. Man can never become completely perfect in this world; it is only in heaven that he can always elicit perfect acts of love for God. But man can become so perfect in this life that he will renounce not only that which is contrary to charity, but all that will prevent his love from being wholly directed to God.¹³ It is to this degree that the religious must ever strive, not by every possible means, it is true, but by those determined for him in his

¹¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* II-II, Q. 88, a 4, ad 3.

¹² *Sum. Theol.* II-II, Q. 184, a. 4, c.

¹³ *Sum. Theol.* II-II, Q. 184, a. 2, c.

rule.¹⁴ A religious, therefore, in sinning against the obligations of his state in life, is a hypocrite, not because he happens still to be imperfect, not because he fails to take every conceivable means to become perfect, but when he consistently refuses to make use of the means afforded by his rule to attain perfection, when he no longer cares or strives to advance in the love of God and of neighbor.¹⁵

When people came to Jesus, seeking more perfect means to attain charity than those provided by the commandments Jesus, as we have said, gave them the counsels. Now a counsel in the theological sense embraces every call of grace to do a good work not already imposed by law or precept, the accomplishment of which, everything considered, is better than its omission. For example, to possess riches is certainly not blameworthy in itself; it is even a good thing if the owner has no undue affection for his riches and if he uses them according to the laws of justice and charity. But, unless duty demand that they be used to support a parent or some one dependent on the giver, to give them to the poor, to the missions or any pious work is evidently something better, a work not prescribed, a work of greater charity.¹⁶

In the Gospel we find many counsels,¹⁷ but three have ever had a special attraction for many souls devoted to God, three have been particularly chosen as the basis of the religious life. The counsel of poverty: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come follow me."¹⁸ The counsel of chastity: "For there are eunuchs who were born so from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven."¹⁹ He that can take it, let him take it."²⁰ The counsel of obedience: "If any man will come after me, let

¹⁴ Sum. Theol. II-II, Q. 186, a. 2, c.

¹⁵ Sum. Theol. II-II, Q. 186, a. 2, ad 1.

¹⁶ Hilaire Balmes, O. M. I. "Les Religieux a Voeux Simples, p. 6-7.

¹⁷ Matthew, V.

¹⁸ Matthew, XIX, 21.

¹⁹ "This text is not to be taken in a literal sense, but means that there are such who have taken a firm and commendable resolution of leading a single and chaste life, in order to serve God in a more perfect way than those who marry."—Douay Bible.

²⁰ Matthew, XIX, 12.

him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”²¹ Religious do not merely embrace these counsels, they bind themselves to them. Lest the weakness of human nature and some passing whim impel them to give up the endeavor to attain perfection, they confirm their will and strengthen their resolution to grow in charity by taking the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Having thus consecrated themselves to God they cannot abandon their holy state at pleasure without committing a grave sin.

These vows form the basis of the religious life, not because the mere taking of them makes a man perfect, but because they are the groundwork upon which the religious establishes his perfection. As “the school of perfection” the religious life is ordained to lead man from the secular life to the perfection of charity by a complete oblation of himself and his goods to God. This is effected by means of the three vows. The religious life leads man from the secular life by freeing him from the three principal worldly cares: from that of managing earthly possessions by the vow of poverty; from that of governing a wife and children by the vow of chastity; from that of directing his own acts by the vow of obedience. Similarly the religious life leads man to the perfection of charity by taking away all creature loves which can prevent his whole love from ascending to God: the love of earthly possessions by the vow of poverty; the love of sensible and carnal pleasures by the vow of chastity; the love of his own will by the vow of obedience. Finally, the religious makes a complete oblation, a holocaust of himself and his goods to God: of his earthly goods by the vow of poverty; of his own body by the vow of chastity; of the faculties of his soul by the vow of obedience, offering thereby his own will through which he uses all the powers and habits of his soul.²² The vows are therefore a powerful instrument for acquiring perfection, since in taking them man frees himself from cares and other hindrances to perfection, and in keeping them he makes of himself a holocaust set aflame and continually burning with the spiritual fire of love for God.

The second group of means that the religious life has for exercising its subjects in the way of perfection form what is

²¹ Matthew, XVI, 24.

²² Summa Theol. II-II, Q. 186, a. 7.

called the rule. The first purpose of the rule is to aid the religious in the observance of vows; for instance, those regulations regarding the mortification of the body, as fasts and vigils, are directly ordained to help in keeping the vow of chastity; those regarding prayer, pious reading and so on are laid down so that in whatever he does the religious may gain the merit attached to obedience.²³ The rule also contains special prescriptions concerning the work peculiar to each institute. Though not essential,²⁴ the possession of a rule is of great value to the religious life. So conclusively has experience confirmed this that Holy Mother Church will not approve a religious congregation without some set of laws, even though not severe, governing its daily life.

Finally the religious state is a stable condition of community life, approved by legitimate ecclesiastical authority. It is stable because it is a state of life. Like the married state it should not be embraced without reflection, and once freely entered into, it cannot be abandoned at pleasure without sinning against both ecclesiastical and divine law. It is a contract made with God, destined ordinarily to last through life, to be dissolved only by death.²⁵ However, for weighty reasons it can also be dissolved by the Church, for she holds in this world the place of God. The character of stability comes to the religious life from the vows, those solemn promises to observe poverty, chastity and obedience, to seek always the end of the religious life—perfection. For the greater security of the religious state these vows must be made in public, before the people or at least before official witnesses. God, to whom they are offered, receives them through the medium of the Church to whom He has delegated His powers.

The religious state receives its concrete expression in a society of men or women leading the religious life together, in a community. Perfect community life and spirit are earnestly insisted upon by the Church. And rightly so, for where perfect community life and the faithful observance of the rule have

²³ Summa Theol. II-II, Q. 186, a. 7, ad 2.

²⁴ Pruemmer, O. P. *Manuale Juris Ecclesiastici*, p. 223.

²⁵ Even though in some Congregations only temporal vows are taken they bespeak a kind of perpetuity, for, as Canon 488, No. 1, says, they are to be renewed, "*elapso tamen tempore renovanda*." There is, however, no strict obligation on the individual to renew them, should he be unwilling.

flourished there the religious life has produced much fruit for the salvation of souls. There is everything to be gained from mutual encouragement and edification when each individual looks upon the community as a good mother to whom he offers the fruit of his labors and from whom in turn he receives what is necessary for his temporal life and happiness. This mutual love and service also has a powerful influence on souls; for hearty obedience to Our Lord's command, "love one another as I have loved you"²⁶ has always elicited and will still evoke the cry of wonder that escaped from the lips of the pagans at the sight of the first Christians: "See how these Christians love one another!"

Perfection consists in the love of God, in the intimate union established between man and God by Jesus Christ through the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption. Jesus Christ loved man even unto death, and by His life and sufferings He wished to provoke man to a corresponding love for God. All men are called to perfection, but all are not bound to strive to reach its heights. Kindly considering the weakness of men and the necessities of this life God is satisfied with most men if they endeavor to prove their love for Him by a faithful observance of the commandments. But there are others whom He wishes to seek a more intimate union with Him. To those who respond to this call He points out the religious life as the more excellent way to arrive at their destination because of its greater sacrifices and more abundant opportunities to devote themselves to Himself. Therein lies the aim and beauty of the religious state; it was instituted to realize the perfection of Christianity, to make actual the mystic death to the world promised in the sacrament of Baptism, and to keep ever green the mark of holiness in the Church. History proves how well it has fulfilled its purpose and how it has been a powerful instrument in the salvation of souls; it has uplifted society and glorified the Church by the holy and self-sacrificing lives of a multitude of Saints, Martyrs, Virgins and Confessors. Is it any wonder then that the Church wishes the religious state to be honored and venerated?²⁷

²⁶ John XV, 12.

²⁷ Code of Canon Law. Canon 487.