

## **ORIGINS: BIBLICAL AND PATRISTIC SOURCES OF THE CONSECRATED LIFE**

### **Denial of the Biblical Foundation of the Counsels (and of the Religious State)<sup>1</sup>**

Many progressive theologians insist on denying the doctrine and practice of the evangelical counsels as presented in the example of Our Lord and in the preaching of the New Testament. For these theologians, accepting the evangelical counsels is equivalent to introducing two forms of morality: one that is a maximum and aristocratic for those who keep the counsels and another, minimalist and plebian, for everyone else. It is obvious that religious life is destroyed with this approach, and this is done by rejecting its revealed foundation.

#### a. Counsels reduced to Precepts (Franciscan J. M. Tillard, 1969)

Tillard argues that the New Testament does not recognize two forms of morality, one for a select few and another for the masses. If we admit that the Gospel contains the counsels (practiced by some and not by others), we will necessarily end up with a double standard of morality. Consequently, then, there is nothing in the Gospels that is merely a counsel; **everything must be a precept for everyone**. Using these premises as a foundation, Tillard affirms that there are many radical expressions or phrases in the New Testament that demand detachment from and renunciation of everything in order to follow Christ, and these refer to the duties of every Christian.<sup>2</sup> However, there are some Christians who are not content simply to have this attitude **occasionally** and the disposition for a heroic stance only when their particular situation requires it.

#### b. Denial of the State of the Religious Life (Gutiérrez Vega)

According to Gutiérrez, the diversity of Christian vocations must not be sought in impossible counsels but rather in the **different possibilities** that man has to serve the Kingdom brought about by Jesus. However, there is no difference between the different categories of Christians since lay and religious are called to fulfill the supreme precept of charity. Accordingly, Gutiérrez categorically affirms that religious life has a justification as service to the Kingdom (it is the way of life Christ assumed for Himself), but the idea that there are counsels, and that these counsels are concretely justified in Biblical texts, must be rejected.

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<sup>1</sup> BUELA, C., *Priests Forever*, I, Ch. 1, Denial of the Biblical Origin of the Evangelical Counsels, pg.47.

<sup>2</sup> For example, he interprets Mt 19:10-12 (the discussion regarding the voluntary “eunuchs”) as indicating a husband who, having separated from his wife, understands that, in light of the Gospel imperatives, he cannot re-marry. Another text Tillard manipulates is 1 Cor 7, saying that it deals with a personal reflection of Saint Paul and not with a teaching given with apostolic authority.

c. Evangelical Radicalism left to subjectivism (Dominican T. Matura, 1980)

There is only one Gospel, and the moral norm that it imposes is the same for all. Two categories of Christians, like the ones imposed by making a distinction between precept and council, is simply not of evangelical origin. According to Matura, the traditional vision of the counsels “wrongfully reduces its radicalism to three points: chastity, poverty, and obedience. . . . It then comes to forget entire sections of the radical Gospel: absolute preference for Jesus, love for one’s neighbor, community, and participative communication, etc. Furthermore, rather than just reducing its radicalism in this way, it monopolizes it in favor of one class: that of the religious.” He concludes that “religious life is unknown in the Bible.”<sup>3</sup>

For instance, poverty is presented as something clearly obligatory for all Christians. However, in front of the fact that the majority of Christians have not lived in this way, Matura says that the **concrete** form of living out these demands “has been left, as a sort of unsettling plea, to creativity and ingenuity.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently, religious life and Christian life become the same life. Matura denies that there is a specific vocation to the religious life, because this would mean introducing a more perfect vocation into Christianity, a vocation not within the reach of the majority of Christians.

However, as Fr. Buela notes, this brings with it the conclusion that the *creativity* and *ingenuity* of each person is what determines their way of fulfilling that Gospel radicalism, especially regarding the topic of poverty. Now then, this remedy to *doctrinal radicalism* can only lead to a **practical laxity**, as it leaves aside all aspects of *specific* renunciation and every limit imposed on people who wants to consecrate themselves to God: *a religious cannot be obligated to renounce anything that the rest of the faithful are not obligated to renounce either*.

Consequently, it must be said that these three biblical interpretations have as common errors:

1. A Homogeneous and uniform vision of the Christian Life, which contradicts the witness of the Church’s 2000 years of plurality within the ecclesial communion.<sup>5</sup>
2. Overemphasis on the personal decision over the Divine origin of the vocation to consecrated Life.

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<sup>3</sup> Matura, T., *El radicalismo evangélico*, 259.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, 256.

<sup>5</sup> “Communion in the Church is not uniformity, but a gift of the Spirit who is present in the variety of charisms and states of life... For every gift of the Spirit is granted in order to bear fruit for the Lord in the growth of fraternity and mission.” (*Vita Consecrata*, 4)

### 3. The unjust dialectic between the counsels and the Precepts of Charity<sup>6</sup>

#### THE EVANGELICAL FUNDAMENT OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

“The evangelical Foundation of consecrated life is to be sought in the *special* relationship which Jesus, in his earthly life, established with some of his disciples.” (VC 14a) “The idea of a Church made up only of sacred ministers and lay people does not therefore conform to the intentions of her divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament.” (VC 29c)

“There were those who questioned this foundation, considering the consecrated life as a purely human institution, born on the initiative of some Christians who wished to live more fully the ideal of the Gospel. It is true that Jesus did not directly found any of the religious communities that have gradually developed in the Church, nor did he establish particular forms of consecrated life. **But what he intended to institute is the state of consecrated life, in its general value and in its essential elements.** There is no historical proof that this state can be explained by a later human initiative, nor is it easy to consider that the consecrated life -which has played such an important role in the development of the Church's holiness and mission-, does not have its origin in the founding will of Christ. If we analyze well the Gospel testimonies, we discover that this will appears there in a very clear way.”<sup>7</sup>

The following then is an attempt to demonstrate with biblical proofs taken as historical documents the institution and the nature of the state of the religious life.

#### a. Christ's deliberate Intention to Found the religious state<sup>8</sup>

The implicit intention of this institution is found in **the fact that Jesus**, from the beginning of his public life, **calls some men to follow him**. Sometimes this call is *not necessarily expressed* in words but through the fascination of

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<sup>6</sup> Against this absurd, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: “The precepts are intended to remove whatever is incompatible with charity. The aim of the counsels is to remove whatever might hinder the development of charity, even if it is not contrary to it. The evangelical counsels manifest the living fullness of charity, which is never satisfied with not giving more... The perfection of the New Law consists essentially in the precepts of love of God and neighbor. The counsels point out the more direct ways, the readier means, and are to be practiced in keeping with the vocation of each: (God) does not want each person to keep all the counsels, but only those appropriate to the diversity of persons, times, opportunities, and strengths, as charity requires; for it is charity, as queen of all virtues, all commandments, all counsels, and, in short, of all laws and all Christian actions that gives to all of them their rank, order, time, and value.” (CCC 1973-1974)

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *General Audience at Rome*, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

Jesus' personality.<sup>9</sup> But, in general, the most characteristic expression of the call is the word: **"Follow me"** (Mt 8:22 *Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.'*; 9:9 the vocation of Mathew; 19:21; the vocation of the young rich man; Mk 2:14, 10:21; Lk 9:59; 18:22; Jn 1:43 The vocation of Philip; 21:19 The vocation to martyrdom of Peter). This word manifests **the initiative of Jesus**.

In antiquity (even among the pagans), those who wished to follow the teaching of a teacher chose the person of whom they wanted to become disciples. On the contrary, Jesus, with that word: *"Follow me"*, shows that it is He who chooses those whom he wants to have as companions and disciples. In fact, he will later say to the Apostles: *"You did not choose me, but I chose you"* (Jn 15:16). This initiative is not only born out of the free will of Christ but also **out of an intense love**: *"And he said to him, 'Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.' And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing...'"* (Mk 10;21)

*"Jesus himself, by calling some men and women to abandon everything in order to follow him, established this type of life which, under the guidance of the Spirit, would gradually develop down the centuries into the various forms of the consecrated life."* (VC, 29c)

i. The "special Vocation" of the Apostles

The different callings that the Lord addresses to different people cannot be considered to be **univocal**. There is a distinction in the different vocations that appeared in the Gospels. It is legitimate to maintain, for example, that Zacchaeus, called to the beatitude of salvation, followed Jesus (cf. Lk 19:1-10), the good shepherd (cf. Jn 10:4,14) and the light of the world (Jn 8:12) and that Joseph of Arimathea, "a good and just man" (Lk 23:50), "was a disciple of Jesus" (Jn 19:38).

But it would not be accurate to say that Zacchaeus followed Jesus or that Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple of Jesus **in the manner of the Apostles**, that is, as a member of the circle of Disciples to whom Peter referred to in his confession: *"We have left everything and followed you"* (Mt 9:27; Mk 10:28; Lk 18:28). The writings of the New Testament clearly show that, in the Apostolic Church, although all the faithful were obliged to be disciples of Jesus Christ, they were not obliged to follow him in the Apostles' way of life of **renunciation** and special **consecration**.

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<sup>9</sup> As it happened with the calling of the apostles Andrew and John the evangelist who were already disciples of John the Baptist, are fascinated and almost captivated by the one who presents himself to them as "the Lamb of God"; and they immediately follow him, without Jesus having addressed even a word to them.

To follow Jesus means *to renounce everything* in order to unite oneself to him and accompany him on the paths of his mission. **This renunciation of human goods is a fundamental element** of his radical discipleship: “*And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life*” (Mt 19:29).

“*Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*” (Mt 10:39) The renunciation, therefore, of earthly and legitimate goods constitutes the matter of the **evangelical counsels**. They are called **counsels** because Jesus leaves to those called the freedom to choose them, as it happened with the rich young man who went away sad for his many possessions.

#### ii. To form a “new Family”

The Exhortation expresses a very important biblical idea, describing the apostolic group as a “new family” (VC, 41a), inaugurated by Jesus. To spend the feast of the Passover at home was an essential Jewish custom (Ex 12:3). Zacchaeus' renouncement of half of his possessions and his style of following Jesus did not prevent him from legitimately celebrating the Passover in his own house, together with his wife and children.

The sons of Zebedee, on the other hand, did not go back to their father, nor did they celebrate the Passover in their own home, because, by virtue of their special following and consecration, they had renounced their own family to become part of a new type of family, or **a new family**, which could be described as a **religious family**. It was, in fact, the family of the followers of Jesus, that is, a family inaugurated by Jesus: a family born of a sacred and supernatural motive, a family that drew its identity exclusively from the special vocation (which was also a convocation) received, a family of persons committed to live with Jesus and like Jesus, who accepted Jesus as their guide, model and father, and who remained united around him on the night of his death, the night of the true Paschal Banquet.

#### iii. The Grace of “Intimacy”

“... the invitation by which Jesus himself, at the beginning of his public life, called them to follow him, to leave their ordinary lives behind and to enter into a close relationship to him. It is precisely this **special grace of intimacy** that, in the consecrated life, makes possible and even demands the total gift of self in the profession of the evangelical counsels. **The counsels, more than a simple *renunciation*, are a specific acceptance of the mystery of Christ, lived within the Church.**” (VC 16a)

For that reason, JP II teaches that “Jesus assures us that the renunciations demanded by the call to follow him obtain their reward, a "treasure in heaven," that is, **an abundance of spiritual goods**. He even promises eternal life in the future, and a hundredfold in this life (cf. Mt 19:29). This hundredfold refers to a higher quality of life, to a higher happiness.”<sup>10</sup> As Jesus said to His disciples, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables” (Mk 4:11).

b. Mary, Prototype and Model for the Consecrated<sup>11</sup>

Jesus also called some women to follow him. The Gospel tells us that a group of women accompanied Jesus, and that these women were numerous (cf. Lk 8:1-3; Mt 27:55; Mk 15:40-41). In fact, Jesus shows that the state of consecrated life, which consists in following him, is not necessarily linked to the priestly ministry, and that this state concerns both women and men, each in her own field and with the function assigned to her by the divine call.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, this fact is all the more evident when we consider that Divine Providence has set forth a **Woman** as the finished model of Consecrated Life.

“Mary in fact is the sublime example of perfect consecration, since she belongs completely to God and is totally devoted to him” (VC, 28) At the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel defines Mary as *gratia plena* (κεχαρυτωμένη: Lk 1:28), explicitly alluding to the sovereign and gratuitous action of grace. Mary was chosen by virtue of a singular divine love. If she is totally God's and lives for him, it is because God, first of all, took possession of her, since he wanted to make her the privileged place of his relationship with humanity in the Incarnation. Thus, **Mary reminds consecrated persons that the grace of their vocation is a gift they did not deserve**. It is God who first loved them (cf. 1 Jn 4:10, 19), with a gratuitous love, which should prompt their thanksgiving.

Mary is also **the model of the human person's acceptance of grace**. In her, grace itself produced the "yes" of the will, the free adherence, and the conscious docility of the "fiat" that led her to ever-greater holiness during her life.

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<sup>10</sup> General Audience, October 12<sup>th</sup> 1994.

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, General Audience, March 29<sup>th</sup> 1995.

<sup>12</sup> General Audience, October 12<sup>th</sup> 1994.

Above all, she is the archetype of all the religious by reason of her **Virginity**. From the beginning, there had already appeared objections about her perpetual Virginity, but tradition has always held that Mary was totally consecrated to God by the sacred bond of virginity "*ante partu, in partu, post partu*"<sup>13</sup>

Mary dedicated herself completely for many years to **the service of her Son**: she helped him to grow and prepare for his mission in the house and carpenter's shop in Nazareth. At Cana she asked him to manifest his power as Savior and obtained his first miracle. She is Model of unconditional **renunciation**, of the highest obedience and poverty for the sake of her Son's mission at the Foot of the cross; "*Woman, behold your son*" (Jn 19:26).

The entrustment of the beloved disciple to Mary is indeed **the entrustment of all the consecrated** to the maternal care of the Mother of Christ. This is what makes Mary to be inseparable from all religious communities even from the first community at Jerusalem (Acts 1:14)

## II. Primitive Forms of Consecrated Life in the First Centuries

The first form of consecrated life was indicated as St. Luke records in the book of Acts:

*"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."* (2: 44-47)

All the characteristics that belong to the consecrated life (common life, poverty and detachment, charity, prayer, etc.) are already present at the beginning of the History of the Church. But when persecutions began to cruelly scourge the Church, fervent Christians set their hearts on giving their lives for the Lord. **Martyrdom** became then the supreme expression of evangelical perfection, as the Fathers of the Church insist. However, since the grace of martyrdom is not granted to everyone and persecutions were becoming even rarer, the idea that the Christian

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<sup>13</sup> *"This is shown by the words which Mary spoke in answer to the Angel announcing to her her conception; "How," says she, "shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" Which assuredly she would not say, unless she had before vowed herself unto God as a virgin... Thus Christ by being born of a virgin, who, before she knew Who was to be born of her, had determined to continue a virgin, chose rather to approve, than to command, holy virginity. And thus, even in the female herself, in whom He took the form of a servant, He willed that virginity should be free."* (ST. AUGUSTINE, *De Sancte Virginitate*, 4)

life lived with generosity and abnegation as a *confession* of the faith, a **bloodless martyrdom**, was gaining ground. Rufinus of Aquileia expresses the common sentiment of the Churches when he writes:

*"There are two kinds of martyrdom: one of the soul, the other of the body; the one manifest, the other hidden. Manifest martyrdom takes place when the body is killed for the love of God; the hidden one, when for the love of God the vices are uprooted".*

Christians who led a more perfect and sacrificial life, more detached from the things of the world and more dedicated to the imitation of the Lord according to the pattern of Acts 2:44-47, were given various names; the most common were **virgins** for the women and **continentes** for the men. These were the terms that pointed directly to the essential note of their way of life: **celibacy**. St. Augustine speaks of this institution when He question Himself about his vocation to consecrated Life:

*"On the side to which I turned my face, and whither I feared to go, I beheld the chaste dignity of continence. She was serene and cheerful, without wantonness... her gentle hands full of numberless good examples. With her were many youths and maidens, staid widows, and venerable virgins. And she smiled at me, mocking, as if to say: `what these have done, can you not likewise do? Have these acted by their own might, and not by the power of their God? The Lord their God has given me to them... Cast thyself on Him. Fear not. He will not draw away to let you fall. Cast thyself on Him with confidence. He will receive thee, and will heal thee." (ST. AUGUSTINE, Confessions, VIII)*

Celibacy was also the characteristic that the apologists of the II century used as an argument to combat the calumnies of the pagans. Anaxagoras, for example, speaks of "men and women who go gray in virginity within our communities to unite more intimately with God".

Later the name **ascetic**<sup>14</sup> prevailed, especially in the Eastern Churches. In this way, the distinction between the two styles of life became more and more evident. In some Churches, especially in Syria, they began to speak of the "*righteous*" (ordinary Christians) and the "*perfect*" (ascetics).

All these groups were followed by those known as monks.<sup>15</sup> According to their different testimonies, they attribute the origin of their way of Life to the Anchorite prophets of the O.T. such as Elijah, or even to the example of John

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<sup>14</sup> From the Greek verb άσκειω, meaning "to exercise" or "to exercise oneself".

<sup>15</sup> As its etymology makes clear, originally meant "a man who has withdrawn from the world. From the greek μοναχός, "a hermit," a derivative of the adjective μόνος "alone".



the Baptist. However, many assert that the monasticism, especially the cenobitic life, has its roots in the same way of life of the apostolic communities. St. Jerome, for example, puts these words on the Lord's lips:

*"Do you want, O monk, to be my disciple, or rather, do you want to be a disciple of my disciples? Do what Peter did, what James and John did. They had an eye that scandalized them: their father, the boat, the net... They pluck out the eye and follow Jesus. Therefore, no one should say: I have a mother, I have a father, a brother, a son, a wife; I have other relatives dearly loved. Monks are imitators of the apostles: we cannot imitate them if we do not do what the apostles did. No monk, therefore, should say: I have a father, I have a mother. I will answer you: You have Jesus: why do you seek these things that are dead? He who has Jesus, has father, has mother, has children, has all the kindred."* (ST. JEROME, Homily 7,8)