

THE VOWS IN THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION: THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

Fr. Alwin Anbu

Introduction

In this presentation we will see how the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity play an essential role in the consecrated life. Religious life can be said to be a continuous exercise of the theological virtues. In fact, the religious by committing himself or herself to God makes an act of total dependence on God, as regards His revelation, His promises, and His love for each one. Let us see some points taken principally from St. John Paul II's *Vita Consecrata* on distinct areas wherein religious exercises the three theological virtues

The Virtue of Faith and Religious Life

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that «*By faith*, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God»¹. And again, «Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God»². Clearly then , we understand how this submission is abundantly verified in the life of the religious, who entrusts himself or herself totally into the hands of God.

Pope John Paul II notes that in the mystery of the Transfiguration, the Heavenly Father calls the disciples to listen to Christ³. This listening happens above all by faith. The Apostles, and therefore all the consecrated throughout history are to listen to Christ in pure faith. In other words, we are to turn the eyes of faith towards Our Lord Jesus Christ. Clearly this is what happens in every religious vocation, both at the beginning of the vocation and throughout its exercise. The total self-giving love of the religious is founded on faith⁴.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., n. 143.

² *Ibid.*, n. 150.

³ Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic exhortation Vita consecrata*, n. 16. Henceforth *VC*

⁴ Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic exhortation Redemptionis donum*, n. 8.

During the course of their whole lives, the religious, are called – by the virtue of faith – to participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ⁵. This point renders us many fruitful reflections: how our whole life as religious, with all its sacrifices, crosses and also true spiritual joys can and should be united to the Paschal Mystery. In this way, our life is integrated into the Paschal Mystery, and this happens by virtue of faith, that is by the conscious and willing union grounded on our faith in this Mystery.

The virtue of faith plays a key role in the fulfilment of our vows⁶. After having committed ourselves to the God who calls, we are to believe that He is constantly helping us and will help us that we may persevere in the promises – the vows – that we have made to Him. Certainly, we are also to put all the means needed in the fulfilment of the vows⁷, but we should above all place our trust in the sovereign help of God, relying on Him with total confidence. Clearly then, since we are called to live out our vows every day, we are then called to exercise our faith in God every day in this regard. Each day of our lives of as religious we are called to entrust our lives to the Unseen God, who does not fail us. The whole religious life becomes a life of pure faith.

Once we rely on God for the fulfilment of our vows, our religious life becomes a path of increasing faithfulness. Pope St. John Paul II says: «We must say that the spiritual life, understood as life in Christ or life according to the Spirit, presents itself as a path of increasing faithfulness on which the consecrated person is guided by the Spirit and configured by him to Christ»⁸. One more time, faith and faithfulness become a great spiritual adventure for the religious. Guided by the Holy Spirit, configured more and more to Christ.

⁵ Cf. VC, n. 80

⁶ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 12.

⁷ Cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 12.

⁸ VC, n. 93

One of the important moments in the exercise of faith is the vow-virtue of obedience: «Religious under the motion of the Holy Spirit, subject themselves *in faith* to their superiors who hold the place of God»⁹. It is by faith that the religious are called to see in the superior's directives the expression of the will of God. Therefore, moved by a spirit of faith along with a love for the divine will, religious submit themselves willingly and humbly to their superiors¹⁰. Certainly there is much that can be said here. But suffice it to say, it faith the moves the subject to a trustful relationship with the superior, not merely in the natural order, but above all in the supernatural order, namely in order to know and to do God's will.

Theological Hope and Religious Life

St. John Paul II places much emphasis on the fact that the religious life as a whole is a testimony of hope: It is an eschatological sign¹¹. By its very nature, the consecrated life hastens towards the renovation of all things in Christ¹².

The Church therefore places the religious as an example for all the faithful. She invites the faithful to look at the religious life as a foreshadowing of the life to come. The religious constantly remind the faithful that here we have no lasting city, that the form of this world is passing away, and that we await with eager anticipation for the world to come¹³. This truth has great implications for the life of the religious as such. In prayer, the religious are to anchor themselves on hope and long ardently for the eschatological goal revealed by God, and therefore pass through this life as pilgrims and wayfarers.

Theological Hope is the motive for professing the vow of poverty and the vow of poverty, in turn, greatly fosters hope. For by the vow of poverty, the religious proclaim that

⁹ *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 14. Italics mine.

¹⁰ Cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 14.

¹¹ Cf. *VC*, n. 26.

¹² Cf. *VC*, n. 59.

¹³ Cf. *VC*, n. 26.

God is man's greatest and real treasure¹⁴. And moreover, not possessing earthly goods, they rely solely on God as their provider both for their material needs, but above all for their eternal welfare, which is the salvation of their souls.

St. John Paul II stresses that monasticism and contemplative life are principal spheres where the virtue of hope shines brightly. For the hidden life of the monks points to an active expectation a new heaven and a new earth¹⁵. The Pope calls upon all religious to be a witness to supernatural hope, especially to those contemporaries of ours who are spiritually weary¹⁶.

The Consecrated Life, therefore, is a most powerful testimony to the truth that definitive happiness is found only in God¹⁷, and therefore of theological hope.

Theological Charity and Religious Life

The goal of religious life is also charity: the pursuit of perfect charity¹⁸. St. Thomas Aquinas notes that spiritual life consists principally in charity, as is seen from the command of the Lord, from the writing of St. Paul and St. John the Apostle. St. Thomas goes on to deduce that he who is perfect in charity is perfect in the spiritual life. Now, the vows of the consecrated life are an immense help in tending towards perfect charity¹⁹, since they give freedom to man's heart to aspire to love of God and of neighbor. Hence St. Thomas concludes that the religious life is a school of the spiritual life: it is a school and training towards perfect charity.

Drawing on this *ecclesial* tradition, St. John Paul II affirms: «Those who profess the evangelical counsels must aspire with all their strength to the perfection of charity»²⁰. This

¹⁴ Cf. VC, n. 21.

¹⁵ Cf. VC, n. 27.

¹⁶ Cf. *Redemptionis donum*, n. 16.

¹⁷ Cf. VC, n. 33.

¹⁸ Cf. VC, n. 12.

¹⁹ Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Liber de perfectione spiritualis vitae*, chap. 6

²⁰ Cf. VC, n. 93.

essential truth was re-affirmed in *Perfectae Caritatis*: «The sacred synod has already shown in the constitution on the Church that the pursuit of perfect charity through the evangelical counsels draws its origin from the [...] the Divine Master »²¹.

Charity is also the beginning of religious life. As Angel Pardilla notes: the religious are those have been touched by the love of God. Their decision of total consecration is itself a fruit of divine love²². St. John Paul II would say: «The call to the way of the evangelical counsels springs from the interior encounter with the love of Christ [...] Christ calls precisely through this love of His»²³. Touched by divine charity, the one called responds with a total love²⁴.

Therefore charity is at the beginning and at the end of religious life. Hence we must say that the middle is also charity. In fact, charity «constitutes the very substance of consecration»²⁵. Therefore our life as consecrated needs to be a continuous and ever increasing exercise of charity. And the fruit of this charity is a profound joy.

The vow of chastity is related to the exercise of charity, since chastity makes the religious to give himself to God with an undivided heart²⁶. In an environment of a hedonistic culture, the reply of «the consecrated life is above all in the *joyful living* of perfect chastity as a witness to the power of God's love»²⁷

From the whole hearted love of God, there flows out the supernatural love of neighbor, which is expressed in many forms in the consecrated life, both within the community (ad

²¹ *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 1.

²² Cf. Á. PARDILLA, *Vita consacrata per il nuovo millennio. Concordanze, fonti e linee maestre dell'esortazione apostolica Vita Consacrata*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2003, 1361.

²³ *Redemptionis donum*, n. 3

²⁴ Cf. *Redemptionis donum*, n. 8. In fact, the religious consecration is a covenant of spousal love: An exchange and an encounter of charity with charity.

²⁵ *Redemptionis donum*, n. 9.

²⁶ Cf. *VC*, n. 21. Cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 12 : «[chastity] frees the heart of man in a unique fashion (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-35) so that it may be more inflamed with love for God and for all men».

²⁷ *VC*, n. 88.

intra), and without (apostolates, missions, etc.). The Pope indicates many areas where charity and fraternal charity are exercised most fruitfully by religious.

1. The first important task of fraternal charity is «to live with those whom God has put at his or her side, accepting their positive traits along with other differences and limitations»²⁸. Fraternal Charity is based on a willingness' to serve, to accept the brothers as they are, without judging their behavior, and above all an ability to continuously forgive.

2. Another important expression of fraternal charity is care for the elderly and the sick²⁹. The elderly and sick in turn communicate a great deal of wisdom and experience to the community.

3. The fraternal charity of the religious should extend also to members of other institutes, mindful of the friendship that often existed between founders and foundresses³⁰

4. The communion of charity should extend to the Successor of Peter³¹, by showing a generous readiness to devote oneself to the Church's missionary activity. In fact, the love of the consecrated naturally flows out into a genuine love for the Church³².

5. The apostolate is an exercise of charity. Charity as service is expressed in Jesus's washing of the Apostles' feet. Consecrated life is revealed as a life of self-giving love, of practical and generous service. The love of God should be the stimulus and foundation of active charity³³. The Pope cites St. Vincent de Paul «The spirit of the Society consists in giving yourselves to God in order to love Our Lord and to serve Him in the person of the materially and spiritually poor».

²⁸ VC, n. 67.

²⁹ VC, n. 44.

³⁰ VC, n. 52.

³¹ VC, n. 47.

³² Cf. *Redemptionis donum*, n. 15

³³ VC, n. 75.

The perennial center and foundation of charity, both of love of God and love of neighbor is found in the celebration and participation of the Holy Eucharist³⁴, for this sacrament is indeed the Sacrament of Charity³⁵.

To conclude on charity, the consecrated life is a choice and an exercise of pure love, which goes beyond any utilitarian consideration:

The precious ointment poured out [by Mary] as a pure act of love, and thus transcending all “utilitarian” considerations, is a sign of unbounded generosity, as expressed in a life spent in loving and serving the Lord, in order to devote oneself to his person and his Mystical Body. From such a life “poured out” without reserve there spreads a fragrance which fills the whole house. The house of God, the Church, today no less than in the past, is adorned and enriched by the presence of the consecrated life.³⁶

Conclusion: The Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity.

Even though we have treated each of the three theological virtues separately, we also understand that all the three virtues are harmoniously united in the entire life of the religious. In fact, in the example and model of the Transfiguration, Pope John Paul II indicates them together: The disciples listen to the Father’s call to listen to Christ (faith), to place all their trust in Him (faith-hope), and to make him the center of their lives (charity)³⁷.

Perfectae Caritatis summons all religious: «Let all religious, therefore, rooted in faith and filled with love for God and neighbor, love of the cross and the hope of future glory, spread the good news of Christ throughout the whole world so that their witness may be seen by all and our Father in heaven may be glorified»³⁸.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is shown to be the perfect model for the exercise of the theological virtues: by her faithful acceptance of God’s plan, by her presence at the foot of

³⁴ Cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 15.

³⁵ Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *S.Th.*, III, q. 73, a. 3.

³⁶ Cf. *VC*, n. 105.

³⁷ Cf. *VC*, n. 16.

³⁸ *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 25.

the Cross, and by her total dedication to her Son. So the consecrated are called to turn with trust and whole hearted love towards the Mother of the Redeemer³⁹.

The Holy Eucharist is the perfect locus of the exercise of the theological virtues and thereby becomes the heart of the consecrated life⁴⁰.

And as an interesting conclusion, St. John Paul II states that the maximum act of faith, hope and charity by the religious is in fact at the moment of his or her death. The following text beautifully expresses this reality:

When the moment finally comes for uniting oneself to the supreme hour of the Lord's Passion, the consecrated person *knows* that the Father is now bringing to completion the mysterious process of formation which began many years ago. Death will then be *awaited* and prepared for as the supreme act of *love* and self-offering⁴¹.

The whole life of the religious is seen as a continuous exercise of the theological virtues, from the beginning until the end. As St. Paul would say: «I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day [of immortality] what has been entrusted to me» (2 *Tim* 1:12).

³⁹ Cf. *VC*, n. 28.

⁴⁰ Cf. *VC*, n. 95: «How can those who are called through the profession of evangelical counsels to choose Christ as the only meaning of their lives not desire to establish an ever more profound communion with him by sharing daily in the Sacrament which makes him present, in the sacrifice which actualizes the gift of his love on Golgotha, the banquet which nourishes and sustains God's pilgrim people?». Cf. *Ibid.*: «In the celebration of the mystery of the Lord's Body and Blood, the unity and charity of those who have consecrated their lives to God are strengthened and increased»

⁴¹ Cf. *VC*, n. 70.