

Conference on Consecrated Life

2. Religious Life: sequela Christi and Trinitarian dimension

D. Consecration

Introduction

The subject I am about to discuss is that of consecration. As we have partly seen, consecration is intimately related to the nature of the religious vocation, as a constitutive element¹ of it, and therefore its correct understanding and assumption is of principal and fundamental importance. Hence, in this presentation, to shed some light on the dynamic and perfective itinerary which the consecrated life implies, I will try to focus my attention on what consecration entails. For this purpose, I will make use of the sources already cited, in our constitution and directories, but above all I will emphasize the contribution of the magisterium of St. John Paul II for its particular impact on the promotion of consecrated life. The method I am going to use will be simply descriptive of the various essential aspects of consecration.

I. Questions about the term: what does it mean to consecrate?

a. In the theological sense

To consecrate means to make a reality sacred, i.e., to separate something from common and profane use - from the order of what is regular and daily, and introduce it into a separate order, that of divine things². Hence, the term and meaning of the word consecration is of crucial importance for a better understanding of the nature of consecrated life. Indeed, this concept, we can say, is essential to a clear understanding of religious life. This is what our Directory on Consecrated Life teaches in number 6 which, in turn, endorses the words of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes in its document on the essential elements of the Church's teaching on religious life which I quote: "Consecration is the basis of religious life. *In affirming this, the Church wants to put God's initiative and the transforming relationship with*

¹ Cf. Vita Consecrata, 13. St. John Paul II, in fact, points it out as one of the three dimensions of consecrated life (consecration, communion and mission).

² Cf. Directories of Consecrated Life, 8.

Him that religious life implies in the first place. Consecration is a divine action. God calls a person and sets them apart to dedicate them to himself in a particular way. At the same time, he gives the grace to respond in such a way that consecration expresses itself in a profound and free gift of self³. In this quotation, we can already have a glimpse of the lines of study and deepening to understand what consecration consists of and, at the same time, we can infer the value of an adequate understanding of the nature of consecration for religious life, since it is like a master key that introduces us to the perfective dynamism of the elements that are contained in consecration and of what its very nature implies by its principal relationship to the divine being⁴.

b. In the philosophical sense

First, we have to say that consecration is an accident, more precisely it is a relation. The relationship can be called a reason of order that we find in nature or in the realm of knowledge. A reason of order that exists between two parts⁵, in this case between God and the religious. Now, since consecration is in close relation or dependence with the mind of the one who conceives or destines it as such, then we would have to establish beforehand a relation of direct proportional analogy saying that the greater the perfection of the intellect that consecrates, then the greater the perfection that the consecrated nature must obtain or receive. In the case of God, as we well know, this relation cannot be real, since He is not the subject of accidents, that is, nothing can be added to the divine substance, therefore, it is of reason, it will only be real in the creature, the subject of accidents, that is, in the religious. Moreover, God, as a supreme and most perfect intelligent being, by consecrating a nature, which in this case is a human nature (the religious), by means of the religious vocation, destines him to a perfection that is also superior and perfective⁶, which will be achieved in him to the extent of his free correspondence to this call by means of the faithful fulfilment of the evangelical counsels⁷.

³ Essential elements in the church's teaching on religious life, Sacred Congregation for religious and secular institutes, 5.

⁴ We will return later to this definition in order to give it a further useful application for our religious life, using all the elements that we will be studying about the meaning of the term consecrate.

⁵ We are talking about two parts, but there may be more depending on the order in which they are established.

⁶ Like any accident, the relationship also admits a plus and a minus, that is to say, an increase or decrease that will be determined by the free correspondence of the religious in living his religious vocation better and better.

⁷ Towards the end of this paper, we will look in more depth at what this relationship implies and generates in the religious.

c. In the popular sense

The word consecration or consecrate comes from consecrare, consacrare, consecratio, consacratio, which in turn derive from sacer, sacred, and which mean to make sacred a thing, a person, or a building, that is to say, to destine them or to dedicate them to a sacred use or meaning. As we can see, to consecrate, in its popular meaning, starts from a conception of something or someone as special, in accordance with the purposes of its nature and with the intention of the subject who conceives it. And so, it is common to hear many examples of this among human beings themselves, such as considering family time to be sacred, it means, is to separate, to dedicate that time to family life as something special, intangible, unique, etc.

II. Consecration as dedication to God

Cardinal De Paolis in his book "Consecrated Life in the Church"⁸, underlines the special character of the proper and appropriate meaning of the term consecration. I bring here more or less the Cardinal's text with some personal additions: Consecration, being a special vocation through which God calls some of the faithful to belong to him in the form of life chosen by his Son Jesus Christ, presupposes an encounter with God himself. The text of the canon⁹ underlines this: "they give themselves totally to God as to his supreme love". Hence there is no true consecration unless it ends in God: God's call necessarily has as its first movement his approach to man in order to communicate to him something of himself, his life, his friendship. Mission is the second movement: God calls and then sends. The profession of the evangelical counsels has a religious meaning because it is a personal encounter of friendship with God. Consecration, therefore, in its true sense is only in relation to God¹⁰. This point is of the utmost importance for a correct understanding of the nature of religious life and thus for a better way of living it. In fact, today this aspect, which is central and fundamental to the vocation to the consecrated life, is very easily blurred. For the consecration that God makes of the religious is primarily a dedication to him, and so it is very regrettable to see how many religious orders and other members of the Church understand consecration as a dedication to others (secular life), and not as a dedication to God

⁸ DE PAOLIS, V., *La vida consagrada en la Iglesia*, BAC, Madrid, 2010.

⁹ Here the Author is commenting on canon 573 §1 of the Code of Canon Law.

¹⁰ So much for the text of Card. De Paolis.

in its essence, and only in virtue of this dedication to God will the religious go on mission, reflecting his consecration to God through the faithful observance of the evangelical counsels lived in the heart of a religious family and according to his or her own charism.

Cardinal De Paolis concludes this point by distinguishing that when the word consecration is used to indicate other forms of dedication, which are aimed at things or persons, its meaning is metaphorical, derivative and often improper.

III. Consecration to a stable way of life characterized by the practice of the evangelical counsels

From a theological point of view, this dedication which is realized through the evangelical counsels as a stable, permanent, and totalizing way of life, constitutes the essential elements of consecration¹¹. It is therefore extremely important to emphasize that it is a stable way of life characterized by the practice of the evangelical counsels, i.e. a way of life of total belonging to God, of a commitment which, going beyond the line of precept, is included in the full availability to God in order to belong totally to Him. In the history of the Church, this totality can be expressed both in the evangelical commitment of consecrated chastity and in that of poverty and obedience, but in a way in which they reciprocally include each other, in such a way that the person has nothing to dispose of and entrusts life totally and completely to God, as an act of total love as a total response.

It should be noted that the consecrated life does not properly consist in the profession of the evangelical counsels but is caused and expressed by and in the profession of the evangelical counsels¹². It is God who consecrates. As consecration consists in total belonging to God, then the profession of the evangelical counsels signifies, expresses, and causes consecration insofar as it actually leads the person to total belonging to God in the form of life proper to our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹¹ Which are also indicated by the Legislator in the same canon.

¹² Far from all pharisaical formalism, the profession of the evangelical counsels does not give the religious, by magic, what he should in fact do by the faithful observance of this particular following of our Lord.

IV. Consecration configures us to Christ's way of life under the action of the Holy Spirit

Now, this form of life is modelled, or we may say replicated, in a concrete person. It is also the way of life proper to our Lord Jesus Christ, his Mother and his disciples. It consists, therefore, in following Christ¹³ more closely, who lived poor, chaste and obedient, thus expressing his total dependence and belonging to the Father. In this following the deepest meaning of consecration can also be found. Indeed, if we were to ask ourselves what the deepest reason for Christ's way (style) of life is, we must go back to the mystery of his person in the bosom of the Trinity¹⁴. As we well know, the person of Jesus, the eternal Word of God, is always directed to God¹⁵. In the mystery of the Trinity, he is distinguished from the Father as the Son, eternally generated by him. Entering the world, he presents himself as the only begotten Son, totally at the service of the Father: even his human form of life shows this filial reality. He is totally and always dependent on the Father: that is why he is poor, obedient and celibate. Therefore, the profession of the evangelical counsels, being embedded in the form of life of Jesus, finds its meaning, like the life of Jesus, in the filial dimension. Consecrated life as the following of Christ is therefore the filial form of life of Jesus, the only begotten Son of the Father, and introduces the consecrated person into the very mystery of the Trinity. And the One who makes us sons in the Son is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit¹⁶, in fact, poured into our hearts, is the Spirit of Jesus and makes us turn to the Father, recognizing Him as the Father of Jesus, and therefore our Father. Therefore, the same Spirit that moved Jesus moves his disciple, placing himself into the dialogue of love of the eternal Trinity¹⁷.

V. Consecration and sacramental life

It is precisely this aspect that introduces us to the relationship between consecration and the sacraments.

¹³ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 18.

¹⁴ With this point we come to insert our reflection with the title of the present exposition, namely, religious life as sequela Christi and its Trinitarian dimension.

¹⁵ Jn 1, 1.

¹⁶ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 19.

¹⁷ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 20 -22.

The liturgical connotation of the term "consecrate" is very enriching. Indeed, thanks to the virtue of religion in its threefold meaning taught by St Thomas Aquinas¹⁸, we are allowed to link our actions to God, establishing a relationship with him. And it is precisely in this dimension that we will find new aspects of the nature of consecration that will allow us to understand and deepen the nature of religious life.

In this regard, the exhortation *Vita Consecrata* closely links religious consecration with the consecration received in the sacrament of baptism, saying: "In the tradition of the Church, religious profession is considered as a singular and fruitful deepening of baptismal consecration in that, through it, the intimate union with Christ, already inaugurated in Baptism, is developed in the gift of a configuration more fully expressed and realized through the profession of the evangelical counsels"¹⁹. In the same sense, St. John Paul II teaches that religious life establishes a special bond with the Triune God in Jesus Christ, a rootedness in Christ of greater depth and strength. This new bond grows on the foundation of the original bond contained in the sacrament of Baptism²⁰.

More concretely, at this point in the exposition, we may ask ourselves, what does this new relationship with God add or give to the religious?²¹ Or, in other words, what makes it different from the relationship with God conferred by the sacrament of Baptism?²²

On the one hand, according to Card. De Paolis in his aforementioned work, through religious consecration God adds or gives to the consecrated person his life and his friendship, according to the Gospel of John: *"I no longer call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made*

¹⁸ Cf. S. Th., II – II, 81, 1.

¹⁹ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 30. This quotation also comes from our directories of consecrated life in number 16.

²⁰ While both baptismal consecration and consecration by profession of the evangelical counsels lead to the same end, namely the perfection of charity, the fullness of holiness, this second consecration, however, adds a positive significance in the way of honoring God, in the building up of the Church and the salvation of the world.

²¹ At this point, we return to the issue that was left open when considering the term consecrate in its philosophical meaning as an accident, more concretely, as the accident relation and its implication in our case.

²² For example, in the case of priestly ordination, we know that the sacrament adds or imprints on the candidate the priestly character in the form of a habit, hence the question is valid in trying to find out what God's consecration of the religious puts in our nature.

known to you"²³. In fact, the religious in his correspondence to the divine call that destines him to a particular following of Jesus, makes this relationship with God new in the three meanings that the virtue of religion establishes and which are referred to by St. Thomas in the text cited above, as religion comes from rereading (relegit), since it is up to the religious to reflect assiduously on the word of God, keeping it in his heart and in his actions after the example of Mary²⁴, Mother of the Incarnate Word, it comes from re-electing (reeligere), that is, freely choosing God again in the radical following of Jesus, or, finally, it comes from re-binding (religare), since by the profession of the vows, the religious unites or binds himself to God in a special and full way, that is, according to the style and way of life of Jesus Christ.

Hence, we speak of a new consecration, the novelty of which is precisely "the consecration and gift of the human person to God, beloved above all things"²⁵. Therefore, this new consecration, which implies religious profession with respect to baptism and implies being dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus, is new because it implies dying anew with Christ, new through conscience and choice, new through love and vocation, new through unceasing conversion. In short, religious consecration constitutes, on the sacramental basis of Baptism, a new life for God in Jesus Christ lived in all its radicality²⁶.

On the other hand, for the same reasons mentioned above, the tradition of the Church has always conceived religious profession as a second baptism, producing in the soul of the religious the same salutary effects, namely, "total remission of the guilt and punishment due for previous sins". Moreover, it imprints on them the character of belonging exclusively to God, as Royo Marín²⁷ teaches, following St. Thomas Aquinas: "The soul of the one who has just made his perpetual profession is as clean and purified as if he had just received a second sacramental baptism"²⁸.

²³ Jn 15, 15.

²⁴ Cf. Vita Consecrata, 28.

²⁵ Directories of Consecrated Life, 18.

²⁶ Cf. Directories of Consecrated Life, 20.

²⁷ ROYO MARÍN, La Vida religiosa, BAC, Madrid 1968, 182ff: in effect, the decision voluntarily taken by the one who makes his religious profession (perpetual) to carry out the demands of baptism to their ultimate perfection, constitutes an act of perfect charity which produces in his soul the same purifying effect as the sacrament of baptism, that is, the total remission of guilt and the punishment due for sins.

²⁸ Cf. S. Th., II – II, 189, 3, ad 3: "Rationabiliter autem dici potest quod etiam per ingressum religionis aliquis consequatur remissionem omnium peccatorum".

The same author adds that this ratification which religious profession implies not only produces in the soul of the one who makes it the same effects as baptism, but also constitutes him in a state of perfection²⁹, something which the simple reception of baptism does not produce. And this is so remarkable that St. John Paul the Great affirmed that in the light of the Second Vatican Council it has been realized that "the profession of the evangelical counsels belongs indisputably to the life and holiness of the Church"³⁰.

It is also clear that religious consecration has a Eucharistic connotation in that it has a sacrificial, holocaustic character³¹. That is to say, the vows well lived by the religious transport him in some way to the Eucharistic paten where the Immaculate Lamb is offered for our sins. Indeed, dying anew for our sins in the reality of the sacrament renews the sacrifice of the Son of God, in which the religious finds his source and means of more perfect union with the mystery of the Holy Trinity and with the nature of his mission in intimate concordance with the mission of the poor, chaste and obedient Jesus unto death on the cross.

VI. Conclusion

From all that has been developed above, and taking up the definition of consecration that we brought out at the beginning of this exposition, it follows that consecration in its deepest meaning is an initiative of God by which He dedicates the religious to an intimate relationship with the Most Holy Trinity in the particular following of Jesus Christ through the profession of the evangelical counsels under the action of the Holy Spirit, Who transforms the religious by the action of grace to lead a form of life more and more similar to that of the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the profound nature of consecration which resides in the filial reality of the form of life of Jesus in which religious are called to participate through the faithful fulfilment of the evangelical counsels which are like signs³² precisely of our consecration and, at the same time, signs which announce the ultimate and definitive reality, the heavenly glory, because by their

²⁹ This subject will be the subject of further study, so I do not dwell on it, but it is nevertheless very interesting and encouraging for our religious life to know that we can obtain the salutary effects of baptism, and thus grow in perfection and grace, each time we renew our perpetual vows with the same disposition. Cf. ROYO MARÍN, *La Vida religiosa*, 183.

³⁰ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 29.

³¹ "For this reason, the religious must constantly take care to unite his sacrifice and holocaust to the oblation and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, from whom he receives all his value and all his sanctifying efficacy". Cf. ROYO MARÍN, *La Vida religiosa*, 183.

³² Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 26.

state of life they proclaim that God is the whole of their existence, and they already live in the reality towards which the whole Church is moving. Therefore, this consecration makes the religious exist only for God, to adore, bless, pray, love and serve Him, as the principle and foundation of St. Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises states. Their whole life will therefore be dedicated to divine worship, as a sacrifice pleasing to God, thus imitating the Incarnate Word more closely.

Finally, if we as the Religious Family of the Incarnate Word want to give the Church that supernatural energy, that prophetic manifestation of our consecration, we must be united to Christ the Prophet, Christ the Priest and Christ the King. To be united to Christ the Prophet means to be faithful to the doctrine of divine revelation and to preach it in its entirety without fear. To be united to Christ the Priest means to give oneself as a sacrifice of holocaust, in which absolutely nothing is left, everything is burnt as an oblation to God. To be united to Christ the King means to work in the midst of human society so that the whole human reality is permeated by Christ and guided by the principles of the Gospel. And the more deeply rooted the religious is in Christ the Messiah, the greater the spiritual and supernatural energy that this Religious Family will bring into the Universal Church. And it is precisely the religious profession that makes and confers on the consecrated person the depth and strength of this rootedness in Christ: "Altitudinis et vigoris huius insertionis momentum facit ipsa professio religiosa"³³ .

³³ Cf. St. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptionis Donum*, 7a.