

The religious life

State of perfection

Religious life -as we will see - constitutes a state of perfection in the theological sense of the word. It is necessary, therefore, to examine first of all the intimate nature of the states of perfection, pointing out their essential elements.

The state in general

In a broad sense, the state is understood as any constant and stable condition or form of life, and thus theologians speak of the state of pure nature (which would be that of the human race if God had not raised it to the supernatural order), of the state of innocence (that of Adam and Eve in paradise, before original sin), of fallen nature (that of humanity after Adam's sin), of redeemed nature (that of humanity redeemed by Christ), of the beatific state (that of the angels and the blessed in heaven), of the state of damnation (proper to the demons and the damned in hell), and so forth.

For the condition or way of life to constitute a true state, a certain stability is required; an absolute stability: when the state is in itself immutable, as in the matrimonial, priestly or religious state, or, at least, a relative stability: when change of life is possible, although difficult, as in the celibate state, or the secular state.

In a stricter sense, the state is understood as a stable condition of life that comes from an obligation or an absence of obligation. In this sense we distinguish the state of the free man from the state of the slave, the state of marriage from the celibate state, the clerical state from the lay state, the regular state from the secular state, and so on. What characterizes the state of life, in this strict sense, is that the cause of this state must be not only a permanent cause, but also an obligation or absence of obligation. For example, the conjugal state consists essentially of the permanent obligations that come from marriage, obligations from which the celibate is exempt. The clerical state and the religious state are constituted by a series of special obligations that do not affect the laity or seculars.

Two, then, are the essential conditions required for a state of life to exist in the strict sense: stability or permanence and a bond or obligation that leads to immobility in the mind of man and in his way of living. This bond, in relation to the state of perfection, must be moral (e.g., by means of vows), not physical, which is proper to slaves or prisoners, because the nature of the subject (man), the nature of the end to

be attained (perfect charity) and the nature of the means to be employed (works of counsel) demand it.

From these simple notions it is clear that state or way of life is not the same as profession or trade. The profession of doctor, lawyer, worker, etc., does not come from a habitual obligation that affects the person who exercises it, but rather from the occupations or activities that he carries out. The profession can be changed repeatedly while the same state of life remains intact.

Diversity of States in the Church

St. Thomas beautifully proves that it is very convenient that there should be in the Church diversity of states and offices for the perfection of the Church herself, to better serve her different needs and for her greater dignity and beauty. Here are his own words:

For three reasons diverse states and offices are necessary in the Church:

(a) For the perfection of the Church herself: Just as in the natural order the perfection which is found in God in a simple and uniform way cannot be realized in creatures except in a varied and multiform way, so also the fullness of grace, which is unified in Christ as in the Head, is distributed diversely in his members so that the body of the Church may be perfect. Therefore the Apostle says: "He has appointed some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints" (Eph 4:11-12).

b) To better attend to the different needs of the Church: For it is necessary that different persons be employed for different actions, if everything is to go well and without confusion. Therefore the Apostle says: "Just as in one body we have many members and all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ" (Rom 12:4-5).

c) For the dignity and beauty of the Church, which consists in order: This is why we read in the book of Kings: "When the queen of Sheba saw the wisdom of Solomon, the rooms of his servants and the order of his offices, she was beside herself" (3 Kings 10:4-5). And St. Paul writes: "In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay" (2 Tim 2:20).

The distinction of states and duties is not an obstacle to the unity of the Church, for this results from the unity of faith, charity, and mutual service, according to the saying of the Apostle (Ephesians 4:16): "From whom the whole body being

compacted," namely by faith, "and fitly joined together," namely by charity, "by what every joint supplieth," namely by one man serving another.

Just as nature does not employ many means where one suffices, so neither does it confine itself to one where many are required, according to the saying of the Apostle (1 Corinthians 12:17), "If the whole body were the eye, where would be the hearing?" Hence there was need in the Church, which is Christ's body, for the members to be differentiated by various duties, states, and grades.

Just as in the natural body the various members are held together in unity by the power of the quickening spirit, and are dissociated from one another as soon as that spirit departs, so too in the Church's body the peace of the various members is preserved by the power of the Holy Spirit, Who quickens the body of the Church, as stated in John 6:64. Hence the Apostle says (Ephesians 4:3): "Careful to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Now a man departs from this unity of spirit when he seeks his own; just as in an earthly kingdom peace ceases when the citizens seek each man his own. Besides, the peace both of mind and of an earthly commonwealth is the better preserved by a distinction of duties and states, since thereby the greater number have a share in public actions. Wherefore the Apostle says (1 Corinthians 12:2)4,25) that "God hath tempered [the body] together that there might be no schism in the body, but the members might be mutually careful one for another."

Applying the notions we have given above in relation to the states of life, it is easy to give a definition of the states of perfection in general: "states of Christian life whose members bind themselves in a permanent and stable way, by means of certain means, to acquire Christian perfection or to exercise it for the good of others".

According to this, the fundamental elements that make up the state of perfection are two: stability and the obligation to strive for Christian perfection, if it is a state to acquire it, such as the religious state, or to exercise it for the good of others, if it is the episcopal state.

a) Stability must be, at least, intentional; that is, there must exist in the will the purpose of remaining for life in the state of perfection. Therefore, it must be born of a cause that is permanent or very difficult to change, which is the vow, oath or promise issued with complete freedom. This is what constitutes the formal and specific element that distinguishes the state of perfection from other states of life. The Angelic Doctor says: ""The perfection that proceeds from a vow changes the condition and the state, just as freedom and servitude constitute two different states of life. For when someone vows to keep perfect continence, he loses the freedom to take a wife, while

he who keeps continence without a vow does not lose that freedom. Therefore, his condition or state does not change, as does that of the one who vows continence. But it must be kept in mind that one can lose one's freedom in a total or only partial way. For if a man binds himself before God or before men to do something special and for a certain time, he does not lose his freedom totally, but only in that thing and for that time to which he has bound himself. But if he submits himself totally to the authority of anyone, so that he retains nothing of his own freedom, he has totally changed his condition, becoming the slave of his master. Thus, if someone offers to God a vow to do a particular thing (e.g., a pilgrimage, fasting, etc.), he does not thereby change his condition or state. But if he binds himself by vow to dedicate his whole life to the acquisition of Christian perfection, he has totally changed his condition and has thereby entered a state of perfection.”¹

Note, however, that "Christian perfection" is not the same as "state of perfection". The former consists essentially in the perfection of charity, and thus anyone who has attained perfection in the love of God and neighbor, whether or not he is in an official state of perfection, is and can be called perfect. For there to be a "state of perfection," on the other hand, it is essentially required to have embraced with a certain solemnity a stable way of life tending toward Christian perfection, with the obligation to maintain it until death. Such a person is in the "state of perfection" even if he has not in fact attained the perfection of charity. For this reason, it can happen that someone is perfect without having embraced a "state of perfection" and others are not perfect despite being juridically in such a state. This is why it is possible for someone to be perfect without having embraced a "state of perfection" and for others not to be perfect in spite of being juridically in such a state.

The obligation to tend to perfection (religious) or to exercise it for the good of others (bishops) is an obligation that is contracted before God with complete freedom; but once contracted, it binds or ties for life the one who contracts it in order to his own state.

In the state of perfection to be acquired, the fundamental element is constituted by total consecration to God, that is, by the free acceptance of a stable obligation to tend to Christian perfection through the practice of the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. In the of perfection to be exercised, it consists in the lifelong consecration of the bishop to the service of the flock entrusted to him by God.

¹ Cf. *De perfectione vitae spiritualis* c.15.

There are four juridically recognized states of perfection: one for the exercise of perfection already acquired (episcopal state) and three to tend to perfection until it is fully acquired (religious, societies of common life and secular institutes).

St. Thomas' teachings

Here we will examine it only in its main fundamental lines, summarizing step by step the magnificent exposition of St. Thomas in the Summa Theologica.

What the religious state consists of (Summa Theologiae, II-II, Question 1893)

The religious state constitutes a true and proper state of perfection, by which religious give themselves totally to the divine service and offer themselves to God by a kind of holocaust. For this reason they are called religious par excellence. And since any act of virtue that is ordered to the service and honor of God becomes an act of religion, each and every good act performed by religious acquires the excellence proper to the virtue of religion. It is not required, however, that every religious be perfect at a given moment, but rather that he tend and strive earnestly toward perfection. The proper end of the religious state is to arrive at the perfection of charity.

The religious is obliged to tend to the perfection of charity. But he is not obliged to practice all the exercises that could lead him to it, but only those that are strictly determined by the rule he has professed. However, he must not disregard the other counsels, and he must be ready to practice them if the opportunity arises for it.

The first foundation for acquiring the perfection of charity is voluntary poverty -as the Lord said to the young man in the Gospel (Mt 19:21)- because it is indispensable to withdraw one's appetite from all worldly things, according to St. Augustine: "He loves you less, Lord, who loves something with you than he does not love for you" (Confessions 10:29). It is harder to deprive oneself of riches already possessed than to renounce attaining them: the first is to tear off one's own limb; the second is to reject foreign things.

Nor is it an obstacle that the episcopal state is more perfect than the religious state and yet does not require the renunciation of material goods. For the episcopal state is ordered not to acquire perfection, but to exercise the perfection already acquired, governing others and supplying them with spiritual and even material things by means of almsgiving and other works of the active life. And for this they need to possess material goods.

Perfect chastity is also required, since it is necessary to renounce everything that impedes man's total dedication to the divine service. And it is manifest that the delights of the flesh and the care of the family constitute a great obstacle to exclusive devotion to the love and service of God. However, it should not be concluded that marriage is incompatible with Christian perfection, but only that married people encounter greater obstacles to perfection.

Perfect obedience is necessary in the religious state. And this voluntary submission in no way diminishes merit or compromises freedom, since there is nothing so meritorious or free as when a man voluntarily submits himself to obey another for love of God.

It is necessary that the poverty, chastity and obedience practiced in the religious state be sanctioned by a vow, since to constitute a true state of perfection requires a special obligation to dedicate oneself to things pertaining to perfection, and this special obligation is contracted before God by means of the vow.

The religious state consists essentially of the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. And this for a triple reason: a) By reason of the end to which it is ordered, which is the perfection of charity. b) By the all-embracing quietness of whatever may disturb the mind, namely: the administration of external things (poverty), the care of the family (chastity) and the whims and caprices of one's own will (obedience). c) By the perfect holocaust that is offered to God with the religious state.

A religious sins mortally if he breaks the vows which he is bound to fulfill by virtue of his profession. The transgression of other religious observances is not a grave sin, unless he breaks them out of contempt for the law or against the formal precept of the superior or the rule itself. There is contempt when the will refuses to submit to what is commanded by the law and, precisely because of this rebellion, voluntarily breaks it.

A religious who commits a sin sins more gravely than a lay person who commits the same sin on three occasions: (a) If that sin is contrary to the religious vows (he breaks two laws: the general one that obliges every Christian and the special one coming from the vow). b) If he sins out of contempt, which brings with it a greater ingratitude towards the divine goodness that chose him for the state of perfection. c) If by his sin he is an occasion of scandal to others.

But if the religious does not sin against his vows, nor sins out of contempt, nor with scandal to others, but only out of weakness or ignorance, he sins less than the

layman in the same kind of sin; for the sin of the religious, if it is light, is absorbed as it were by the multitude of good works that he practices, and if it is light, it is absorbed as it were by the multitude of good works that he practices, and, if it is serious, it is more easily removed, either by the intention, which he ordinarily has rectified towards God, or by the environment and example of other religious.

The entrance into religious life (Summa Theologiae, II-II, Question 189)

There is no objection to the entrance into religion of beginners and imperfect persons, not yet exercised in the virtues. The religious state is precisely a school of perfection, so that those who do not yet possess it may acquire it, or that those already exercised in the works of virtue may perfect themselves more and more in the works of virtue.

It is a praiseworthy thing - considering all the circumstances required for it - to oblige oneself by vow to enter religion, because the vow is an excellent act of religion and confirms the will in the good. He who has bound himself by vow to enter religion must fulfill it in the manner in which he wished to bind himself. And so, he who has obliged himself to enter at absolutely must do so as soon as possible, that is, as soon as the legitimate impediments cease; and if he has bound himself to enter at a fixed date or under a certain condition, he must do so when the fixed date arrives, or when the condition is fulfilled.

It is very probable that the religious profession confers on the one who makes it the total remission of the punishment due for his sins, since the total surrender to the divine service exceeds every kind of satisfaction for sins, just as the holocaust exceeds all other sacrifices. In this sense we read in the Lives of the Fathers that entrance into religion produces the same effect as baptism.

If he who vowed to enter religion intended by it to bind himself to remain in it perpetually, he has to fulfill it in this way; but if he made it with the intention of testing whether or not it was convenient for him to remain in it perpetually, he can leave it whenever he wishes if he judges it convenient; and if he did it without any thought of persevering or not, he seems bound to the entry in the common juridical form, that is, to experience during the probationary year whether he can or not to persevere in it perpetually.

There is no objection to children being educated in monasteries in order that they may later embrace the religious state, but if they were bound to it by vow before the full use of reason, they are not bound by such a vow; if they made the vow with

the full use of reason, but before puberty, their parents can revoke that vow; but if they made it after puberty, it cannot be annulled by their parents.

It is not lawful for children to enter into religion if their parents are in need of their help, so that without them they could not be provided for in their just needs; but if they are not in need of it, their parents cannot annul it.

But if they do not find themselves in such need, children may enter religion even against the command of their parents; for, after puberty, man is free to decide his future, especially as regards the choice of state and divine service.

Priests with a cure of souls can lawfully enter religion, since they are not obliged to perpetually rule the parish, and the excellence of the total and perpetual dedication to God by religious vows is superior to any other obligation.

It is not praiseworthy to transfer from one religious order to another, unless by necessity or great usefulness; but it could be praiseworthy if greater perfection were intended by it, or if the order itself is relaxed, or if its observances are superior to one's own strength.

It is lawful and very meritorious to induce others to enter religion, provided that all violence, simony, or deceit be avoided.

It does not require long deliberations to enter into religion, for it is an excellent good, which carries with it, moreover, a time of probation before finally embracing it. But advice can be sought from those who can give it impartially on the impediments that may exist on the part of health and other obligations, as well as to choose the religious order in which it is convenient to enter.

As St. John Paul II said, *"In this consecration, it is not human commitment that has priority. **The initiative comes from Christ, who asks for a covenant of free consent when He is followed. It is He who, taking possession of the human person, 'consecrates' it.**"* May Mary help us deepen into our religious consecration.