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THE  
PRACTICE  
OF THE  
VOWS

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THE PRACTICE  
OF THE VOWS

## PART I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Chapter I

#### *THE RELIGIOUS STATE*

THE RELIGIOUS STATE is one of the most brilliant manifestations of the life of the Trinity, one of the surest ways of imitating Jesus Christ and one of the most authentic and richest forms of Christian spirituality.

It is a stable way of life, in which the faithful, grouped under a rule approved by the Church, not content with keeping the Commandments, strive by the practice of the Evangelical Counsels of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, to attain the ideal traced by the Saviour. "Be you therefore perfect as also your *Heavenly Father is Perfect.*"

Devised by the sovereign Wisdom, from all eternity, proposed by the Master to His disciples, it is one of the exquisite fruits of the Redemption: a vigorous and immortal offshoot growing at the very foot of the Tree of the Cross, watered and nourished by the Blood of Jesus.

The religious state is not a human discovery. Considered, not in the multiplicity and variety of its accidental forms, but in its immutable substance, there can be no doubt as to its divine origin. The Saints, who, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, have raised through the centuries so many Orders and Congregations, have merely carried into effect, while defining and adapting it, the fundamental idea of our Lord, that they are the contractors of a work of which Christ was the architect. The Gospels, indeed, do not merely give us a few vague outlines of this way of life, but in definite terms,

reveal its essential and characteristic features, i.e., poverty, chastity and obedience. A young man questions Jesus: "Good Master, what good shall I do that I may have life everlasting? . . . But if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments—all these have I kept from my youth, what is yet wanting to me?—If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven." So much for poverty.

Now for chastity. "For there are eunuchs,—who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He that can take, let him take it." For it is not granted to all to appreciate and carry out this ideal of purity. It is the privilege of an élite. Saint Paul echoes this teaching of the Master by proclaiming the eminent dignity of virginity. "Now concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord; but I give counsel as having obtained mercy of the Lord, to be faithful."

As for obedience, is it not expressed in the words, "Come follow me"? To follow Jesus is to imitate Him, especially in His total, universal obedience. His whole life was an ecstasy of love in submission to His Father, a fiat of conformity with and surrender to the Divine Will. Obedience was the food of His soul and the quintessence of His whole religion.

A life of poverty, chastity and obedience; let us repeat that this is a nobler ideal, but an optional one offered by Our Lord Himself to generous souls, athirst for sanctity.

Christianity will always be considered a living paradox; folly to some, discouragement to others; while for we believers, it is profound truth and divine reality. And as the religious state is the extension and perfection of Christian life, so it too, takes on the aspect of a paradox; one must sacrifice one's soul in order to save it, one must lose all to gain all. Above all, here poverty becomes enrichment, abjection exaltation, virginity motherhood, servitude liberation, martyrdom bliss, and death life. "For you are dead, and your life is hid, with Christ, in God." With Christ I hang upon the

Cross, and yet I am alive; or rather not I, it is Christ that lives in me.

These contrasts are at first sight extravagant but in truth they are splendid and fruitful, giving to monastic holiness the appearance of a medallion of Christ embossed on the one side, engraved on the other, with this inscription, "Poverty, chastity and obedience."

A holocaust of love in honor of God, which becomes for the soul, a prodigious source of life, such are the obverse and reverse of the religious state.

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What does the seeker hope to find in religion? Could it be—in addition to peace—the secret of an intensified apostolate, a higher perfection and the assurance of salvation? Excellent motives, doubtless, but tainted with spiritual egotism and somewhat lacking in breadth and disinterestedness. Through ignorance or faulty perspective, those things are placed in the foreground, which should be in the background. One's own personal interests are given first place, and the desire for God's glory comes second, and it would seem that one has entered the religious state for oneself first and foremost and for God only as an afterthought. This state of mind could to a certain degree be laid at the door of more than one contemporary writer, too anxious to extol the personal advantages of the religious state.

The old writers—ascetics and theologians—would appear to have grasped better than we, the deeper, and—to use a fashionable expression—"theocentric" meaning of the religious life. Straight away and, as it were, by instinct, they gave God His place—the first. If one leaves the world, it is indeed less for one's own pleasure and interests—sacred though they be—than for the honor of God.

In the prologue to his Rule, Saint Benedict calls the monastery a "school of the Lord's service" and the monk, a soldier enrolled under the flag of Christ, the King. "Service!"

Word pregnant with meaning. By vocation, the religious is a "servant." The servant of God, like Jesus come down on earth, has entered the monastery, not to be served, but to serve. To serve God, adore Him, bless Him, thank Him, pray to Him, such are the fundamental obligation and the essential object of the religious life. Whence comes the expression, so right and full of meaning, so rich in practical consequences, but in danger of becoming, for the world at least, nothing but a banal and empty formula: "To enter the service of God."

Dom Chautard, one day, recalled this truth to Clemenceau, whom he had approached on behalf of the Trappists: "You must realize Sir, that while we may be pioneers, farm-workers, and cheese-makers, we are first and foremost the worshipers of God. Our Abbeys are not what too often they are credited with being, societies for agricultural development or distilleries; an abbey is the 'Home of God.'"

The word "religious," moreover, clearly indicates this. "Those are called religious, who consecrate themselves entirely to the service of God."<sup>1</sup> This name "religious" is not a freak term or a simple catchword; it is a trademark, clearly expressing the nature and functions of him who bears it.

If every Christian, by reason of his baptism, is already in essence a religious being, he becomes so doubly and pre-eminently by his entry into religion. As the living personification of the virtue of religion—the first of all the moral virtues—the religious exists from God alone, and lives only for the worship of God. That is his *raison d'être* and the very basis of his vocation.

Now, in Catholicism, one act of worship contains and epitomizes the whole of religion, an act which gives supreme glory to the Trinity, and procures the redemption of humanity: the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Church, which was born on the Cross, continues to live on the Altar.

Is it surprising, then, to find sacrifice at the very heart of

<sup>1</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas.

the religious state? What is a religious? A host. The religious life? A mystic Mass. The greatest service that one can render to God, the greatest honor that one can pay Him, is to follow Jesus' example, and immolate oneself to Him. Of all sacrifices—after the Mass and martyrdom—this is the most perfect, the most pleasing to God, the most fruitful for time and eternity. Indeed, we find in the religious state all the elements that constitute a sacrifice: oblation, consecration, immolation and consummation of a victim. The oblation is the prelude to the sacrifice. At Mass, the priest begins by offering on the paten and in the chalice, the bread and wine. And notice the respect and veneration that the Church displays, in anticipation, for what is soon to become the Body and Blood of Christ: she places it upon the altar, blesses and incenses it. As religious, we are first and foremost this oblation. At our profession, in a gesture of adoration and love, we gave ourselves to God wholly and for ever. In the Benedictine ceremonial, the novice says three times the forty-sixth verse of Psalm CXVIII. "Uphold me, O Lord, according to Thy Word and I shall live and let me not be confounded in my expectation." The gift of oneself is what the Lord expects and exacts of those who hope to enter officially into His service. The religious state is a holocaust, which consists in the first place, in the total gift of oneself to God.

Thus, at the outset of the religious life, and serving as its introduction and foundation, we find a magnanimous act of renouncement and generosity; the total and irrevocable offering of my personality, my being, my powers and my activity. Having received all things from the Creator, I return all things to Him. Definitely, I have surrendered to God the radical ownership of all that I am, and all that I have; I belong no longer to myself but to Him: *Totus tuus sum!* I have disappropriated myself of myself, to become, in the full force of the term—the inalienable property of God.

His are my body and soul, to be a host of expiation.

His are my spiritual and physical faculties; my intellect to

believe, adore, pray, and praise, my heart to love, my will to serve; my senses and all the members of my body to become in chastity and through mortification "instruments of justice unto God . . ."

There is also the offering of all internal or external activity, physical, intellectual, moral and social; the devoted servant works for his Master alone. As God owns the trees, so he owns the fruits. Thoughts, desires, acts of the will, affections, prayers, works, sufferings, occupations of every kind, even repose, are so many acts of religion, for all that is done for the honor of God and in His service belongs to religion.

All is given and sacrificed, so much so that the smallest reserve would tend to be a sacrilegious theft. I am a religious for always, as I am man; in everything and everywhere, I act as a religious, in the same way that I act as man. What an incomparable life, dedicated to the Trinity, even in its most insignificant details, and full of the Glory of God! With and like Jesus, the perfect religious can say at each instant "I honor my Father." And at the hour of his death, summing up his whole life, "Father I have glorified thee, on earth."

For God's sake, we have left all, relinquished all. Yet there still remains the need—if this surrender is to be perfect—that it should be irrevocable. When one enlists in the service of God, it is not for a day, but forever, and without any afterthought of a possible withdrawal. One has given oneself, lock, stock and barrel. In this way, and though it has not the sacramental character—the religious state participates in the everlasting fixity of the priesthood. Whoever enters into religion binds himself to God by perpetual vows. It is our belief that one can never insist too much upon this total gift and absolute belonging to God, the Introit and Offertory of all religious life. Dedicated to God, we no longer belong to ourselves.

Who are the religious, who have fully performed this fundamental act? With the enthusiasm of youth one gave oneself to God, unreservedly and forever, at least so one said,

and in truth one was sincere. Was one deeply in earnest? That nun was so, who in the evening of the day she made her vows, went back to her cell and wrote in her blood: "Sister Margaret Mary dead to the world. All from God and nothing from me; all for God and nothing for me."

The offering and consecration are entire. This gift of self has a sacred and divine character which is not to be found—to the same degree at least—in other offerings. On waking, at his morning prayer or meditation, the Christian can raise his soul to God and offer Him, along with his heart, his works, his sufferings and his whole life. But this offering, though it be supernatural, has not the same weight as a religious profession. Here the offering is accompanied by a vow which it is a sacrilege to break. The gift becomes a consecration. "Religious profession is a sacred contract, because it is a contract by vow. Now the vow in its substance pertains to the supernatural and even to the divine right . . . I conclude that our contract in religion is of an order superior to all worldly contracts, and consequently, that its breaking constitutes a wrong, different in kind, and graver in quality than all other wrongs. I conclude that with regard to the observance of what we have vowed, we can no longer be unfaithful to Jesus Christ, without that infidelity partaking of the nature of a sacrilege. Why? Because in consequence of the vow, we are specially consecrated to Jesus Christ. This consequence is terrible and would lead me to quote to all those who are honored by bearing this mark of consecration, these words of Saint Augustine 'O faithful soul, remember that you are no longer your own, and that when I exhort you to fulfill the promises you have made to your God, I do it, not so much to invite you to the height of sanctity, as to preserve you from a frightful iniquity.'"<sup>2</sup>

"So it is for the religious. Whatever may be in other respects the form of his religious life, the spirit of his rule and the particular object of his institution, what ranks above all

<sup>2</sup> Bourdaloue. Sixth Sermon on the religious state.

else, what forms the foundation, and gives life to all else, is the fact that he is a religious, i.e., consecrated to God by an authentic act."<sup>3</sup> Does not the Roman Pontifical speak of the "benediction and consecration of virgins"?

After the offering of the bread and wine, the priest consecrates them "This is my Body—this is the Chalice of my Blood." Prodigious words which bring down upon the Altar Christ, the Victim.

"I vow Poverty, Chastity and Obedience." Is not this formula, too, an act of consecration? Such are the creative words which transform the Christian into the Religious, making of him a spiritual victim and a consecrated host.

By giving himself, the religious consecrates himself to the service of God: and God in His turn, ratifies and confirms the consecration to all eternity. It has been rightly said that profession is at once the work of man, and that of God.<sup>4</sup> Taking as it were into his hands this soul which offers itself to Him, God blesses it, and this blessing is more than a mere word; it is an act, a work of sanctification, a consecration. One might well reflect on the fine prayers of the Pontifical on the Benediction and Consecration of Virgins. "Do not wonder that whereas a simple priest can give you the religious habit, your profession, or at least, the imposition of the veil which is its public symbol, remains a pontifical act, i.e., one ordinarily reserved for the bishops. The bishop alone is the perfected priest: therefore, he alone can perform perfected works. The priest prepares: he baptizes, blesses; the bishop perfects; he confirms, ordains, and consecrates. You are, then, consecrated; and all in you is consecrated; your eyes, lips, ears, hands, feet, knees, your whole body; your mind, heart, will, powers, life, strength and time."<sup>5</sup>

And as a temple, an altar or a chalice, by virtue of its consecration, is exclusively reserved for divine worship, so the

<sup>3</sup> Mgr. Gay. *Rel. Life and Vows*.

<sup>4</sup> Dom Marmion. *Christ the Ideal of the Monk*.

<sup>5</sup> Mgr. Gay, *op. cit.*

religious consecrated to God now exists for Him alone, to adore Him, bless Him, pray to Him, love Him and serve Him. Doubtless, if one judges it by many external aspects, his life remains human; he eats, sleeps, rests, speaks, does manual labor, teaches, nurses the sick; but under all these appearances lies hidden—as Christ is hidden under the sacramental species,—a life which is profound and divine. A religious in all things, everywhere and always, lives religiously for the Father. "In Heaven, the continual occupation is the praise of God; so it is in religion, for all that is accomplished in this state pertains to the praise of God. You praise God when you do your work; you praise God when you take your food and drink; you praise God in your rest and sleep."<sup>6</sup>

But this complete "distrain" of God upon the consecrated soul necessarily implies the idea of separation. "Because Jesus is the great Consecrated, He is also the great Separated."<sup>7</sup> So it is with the Christian who enters religion: he becomes an exclusive property, a private domain, an enclosed garden to which the Godhead alone has right of access. The profession has caused a rift and opened a gulf between the soul and all that is not God or does not lead to God. Chosen out of many, withdrawn from the common herd, the religious must live apart, if not in actual solitude, at least in spiritual isolation, alone with Him who is Alone. So as to unite himself with the Creator, he has renounced the created.

The first renouncement that he must make is that of sin, and this must be total and definitive. By his vocation, the religious is an official candidate for sanctity. Now nothing so impedes the perfect union with God as sin, when it does not completely destroy it.

How could the consecrated soul, who is a living hymn of praise to the Trinity, dare to prove unfaithful, and to dishonor its Father, its Friend, its Heavenly Spouse, and ignominiously to outrage all His Infinite Perfections? and if it be

<sup>6</sup> Saint Alphonsus. *The True Spouse*.

<sup>7</sup> Mgr. Gay, *op. cit.*



true that the religious is a holocaust, has not God made it clear that He will accept only those sacrifices which are holy and unblemished?

This purity of conscience must be protected by withdrawal from the world which all about us "is seated in wickedness."<sup>8</sup> The habit, enclosure and grill are both the reality and the symbol of this separation; the religious, physically set apart, spiritually must be cut off even more.

He must live apart from the world, from its foolish pleasures, its pomps and vanities, its frivolity and its business; above all he must eschew its outlook, its desires and its morals. Nothing is more opposed to the religious spirit than the spirit of the world; that world which was anathematized by Jesus Christ because of its scandals. How fitting, then, is the expression used of those entering religion, "To leave the world." God has called me to the religious state, so that I may live separated from the world, crucified to the world, and absolutely dead to the world.

It would be unfair to attribute this courageous flight to a motive of egotism, or an attack of misanthropy. Those who renounce the world do not act from barrenness of heart, disgust for society, lack of energy in face of the hardships and struggles of life. They have been drawn to solitude, firstly, by a wish to safeguard themselves from the pernicious influences of their environment, secondly, by the desire to rise above themselves to climb towards the heights, to the conquest of God.

Moreover, they will return to this world which they have renounced, but cannot forget, because they have not the right to remain indifferent to the fate of those millions of men who are their brethren in Christ. The religious is not a parasite, but an apostle. He will return to the world in order to minister to all kinds of physical suffering and moral afflictions; he will return through prayer, sacrifice, exhortation and devotion; he will return like a torch advancing through

<sup>8</sup> I Epistle of Saint John V, 19.

the night to scatter the darkness; like salt penetrating the meat and saving it from corruption. Religious in every kind of habit, or without any habit, are to be found everywhere, dedicated to every kind of apostolate, creators and main-springs of a countless multitude of works of charity; yet, while they mingle with the crowd, they are none the less apart. They live in the world, but are not of it.

The soul is offered and consecrated; it has still to be immolated, for there can be no holocaust without a victim. And is not this, the most austere and splendid aspect of the religious life, its very heart and center?

By his vocation, the religious is a sacrificial being, a host. "My daughters, why do you think God has brought you into the world, unless it is that you may be holocausts, lifelong oblations to His Divine Majesty and victims daily consumed in the flames of His sacred love."<sup>9</sup> On the eve of their profession, Saint Francis of Sales caused his spiritual daughters to meditate upon "The flaying of the victim."

The aim of the religious state is to make as faithful a reproduction as possible of Christ in His circumstances and His life. Now, just as Jesus was formed and developed from the very substance of Mary, from her flesh and blood, so in every religious soul must He be born and grow at the expense of the ego and by the sacrifice of self. The more we die to ourselves, the more Christ will live in us. "He must increase and I must decrease."

The Poor Clares of Bordeaux Talence had written above the gate of their convent "Here, we learn to die." In certain Orders, the ceremonial of profession prescribes that the pall be extended over the prostrated religious—an eloquent symbol of the death awaiting them. In the Benedictine ceremonial, profession is closely bound up with the sacrifice of the Mass, and the novice places on the altar, with his own hand, the text of his promises, as if to unite his own immolation with that of Christ. On All Saints' Day, Saint Gertrude

<sup>9</sup> Saint Francis of Sales.

saw the religious among the immense legion of martyrs.

But what is this immolation and in what does this spiritual death consist?

It must first be stated that the total oblation, absolute renunciation and universal surrender of our being into the Hands of God, already constitutes in itself a sort of destruction and annihilation. To belong to oneself no longer, in all things no longer to act of one's own volition, no longer to live for oneself, but solely for God; at every moment to be in a position to say "I am no longer of any account"—is not this a form of death? "A sacrifice . . . which from the day of profession to the last day of his life, strictly binds the religious to maintain himself perpetually in the state of a victim. Now, what is this state? Few understand it fully, and still fewer are willing to subject themselves to it and to embrace it in all its perfection. For to be a victim, I mean a victim of God, and to be one by profession, one must no longer belong to oneself, no longer dispose of oneself, have no longer any rights over oneself, and no longer aspire to such rights; one must be solely in the hands of God, depend entirely on God, act only according to the commands of God and His adorable Will, through whatever mouthpiece, and in whatever manner, He manifests them to us; one must be in a condition of death, and like a dead body allow oneself to be controlled and disposed of, as it pleases God and those superior powers to whom God has subjected us; and so that every day, we may say with the Apostle, and in the same spirit as he, 'For thy sake . . . we are put to death all day long. We are accounted sheep for the slaughter.'"

Does not this spiritual death consist in the destruction of one's own nature and the effort to kill the "old man," the man of sin, to raise over his corpse the new man, Christ Jesus? The flowering of the celestial man on the ruins of terrestrial man; such is the program of every religious life.

"Every day we must carry on this painful labor of self-demolition, which leads to that great and magnificent con-

struction mentioned by Saint Paul, which we must raise to the skies."<sup>10</sup>

Another form of immolation is the rooting-up, by the faithful keeping of vows, of the three great human concupiscences. How could one practice poverty, chastity and obedience all one's life, with a scrupulousness amounting at times to heroism, without a great spirit of self-denial and sacrifice? The vows are the three nails which rivet us to the Cross. How true are the words of the Imitation: "Verily the life of a good monk is a cross."

The strict, scrupulous and preserving observance of the Rules and Constitutions too, with the practice of those passive virtues called humility, penance, mortification and silence, must also constitute a slow and painful agony. A religious life which is woven of a multitude of daily renunciations, can therefore equal and sometimes surpass, martyrdom.

Thus when he is confronted with a sacrifice, whatever may be its form or its source, the true religious never appears surprised, still less at a loss. Is not suffering his vocation and is he not a victim? However often he finds the cross on his way, even though it be undeserved and crushing, he embraces it with gratitude and love: "O bona Crux!" I am never so much a religious as when, following ever more closely in the tracks of Jesus Crucified, I become with Him and like Him a victim offered to the glory of God. "I found the religious life just what I expected and sacrifice was never a matter of surprise."<sup>11</sup>

Sacrifice, however, is unimaginable without love. Love is its beginning, its middle and its end, its crowning and its consummation. Actually, why should one sacrifice oneself except because one loves, because one wants to love still more, and because it is for the heart of a victim that God has the greatest regard? In olden days, a holocaust was destroyed by fire. The religious is a spiritual victim, and is consumed

<sup>10</sup> Pere Brisson, Founder of the Oblates of Saint Francis of Sales.

<sup>11</sup> Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, Autobiography.

by the flames of love. His offering and immolation only have power to glorify, sanctify and redeem, inasmuch as they are inspired and accompanied by charity. Self-sacrifice can be madness or wisdom, suicide or martyrdom, cowardice or heroism; all depends on the motive that inspires the act.

Christ "loved me, and delivered himself for me." Without Jesus' love for His Father and men, the Passion becomes an enigma or a scandal. Thanks to His love, all is explained and justified. Christ made the Sacrifice so that the world might be convinced of His great love for His Father.

The religious sacrifice, which is nothing but a response to the Saviour's, finds its source in charity. There is no greater proof of love than to yield up one's life. The religious gives this proof every day; he is a victim of love immolated on the altar of the heart. One leaves the world, and renounces all human affections with one sole aim, viz., to devote oneself forever, body and soul, to perfect charity. The religious life, considered either in its interior elements or its exterior activity, is, in fact, nothing but a work of profound and overflowing love. In Christian life, love is the great commandment and the fulfillment of the law; in the religious life it is so, to a far greater degree, for here it is the epitome of the rules, and the very object of the vows.

More than all else, the heart must enter the service of God, must be given, devoted and sacrificed "in an odor of sweetness" because the greatest glory, for the Most High, is but the radiance of charity. Who holds the heart of man, holds all, but who fails to own it, owns nothing.

"At last I have found my vocation, it is love!"<sup>12</sup> Is it not the vocation of every religious soul, called to a holiness of which charity is at once the essence, the measure and the crown?

The sacrifice must also be consummated by God, and this consummation can only be achieved through love. Man crushes the ear of wheat, and kills animals, so that he may

<sup>12</sup> Saint Thérèse of Lisieux.

consume them, nourish himself with bread and meat and transform them into a superior existence, in his own life; so the soul immolated by God and for God, in the sacrifice of his profession, must be consumed by God, drawn into God, united to God, and be, as it were, deified; a consummation which can only be brought about by love and in love. After all, the religious state is but "the perfection of charity in the perfection of sacrifice." Nevertheless, this sacrifice will only be perfect at the hour of death. In the life of the religious, nothing greater can be imagined than his last breath. Lying on his death bed, he attains his true stature. Many a time, at meditation or at Mass, he has renewed his vows and his sacrifice. He renews them once more at these last moments, offering himself to God as a total, everlasting oblation, accepting with complete resignation, in a spirit of piety for the glory of God and the salvation of the world, the death which he is facing, more than ever a victim of love, able to say in union with Christ, his "Consummatum est. It is all over, my sacrifice is consummated."

Shortly before her death, a saintly nun, Mère Marie Thérèse, turning to the nun who watched by her, said "Oh! how glad I am to be able to complete my sacrifice here."

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Religion is the first duty of humanity towards its Creator, but for man, it is also a source of individual and social benefits. The same rule applies to the religious state; God is glorified and the soul enriched. Mystic marriage, spiritual royalty and priesthood—such are its wonderful prerogatives.

Tradition and the theologians are happy to give to the religious the title of "Spouse of Christ." Saint Paul does not scruple to say to his disciples: "I have espoused you to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ."

When rejecting all princely, even royal solicitations, the Virgins of the first centuries simply used the pretext of conjugal fidelity. They were spouses of Christ, what more could

they desire? Was not that enough for their happiness and glory?

When Saint Agnes was urged to accept the hand of the son of the prefect of Rome, she replied: "You offer me a spouse? I have found a better one." How many illustrious virgins renounced royal marriages, in order to become the spouses of Jesus Christ. Joan Infanta of Portugal, refused the hand of Louis XI, King of France; Blessed Agnes of Prague, that of the Emperor Frederick II; Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of the King of Hungary, that of Henry, Archduke of Austria.

There is not a ceremonial of clothing or profession that does not allude to this mystic marriage, and it is symbolized by the ring worn by nuns. "I unite you to Jesus Christ, that He may keep you without spot. Receive then as His spouse the ring of fidelity, if you serve Him faithfully, you shall be crowned for eternity." It is a fact that in the religious state are to be found all the essential elements of Christian marriage, though on a higher plane—a sacred and indissoluble contract, which commits two persons to each other, body and soul, so that their mutual love, blossoming in a life they share, may be perpetuated by the creation of a family. From its origins, the religious state is divinely instituted and the taking of the vows, by its very nature, is an eminently holy action. In one respect, the bonds that bind the soul to Christ are more indissoluble than those which bind earthly spouses, for death, instead of sundering them, makes them eternal. In this way, the religious vocation partakes of the everlastingness of the priesthood. Like the priest, the spouse of Christ remains His spouse forever.

In a generous impulse of pure love, one has given oneself unreservedly to the Spouse, who, in turn has given Himself. "My beloved is mine and I am his." This mutual surrender leads not to carnal union, but to spiritual fusion and a kind of identification "for the contract of this holy marriage is truly spiritual, and I underestimate it, in calling it a con-

tract; it is a true embrace and, as it were, a mutual possession, since the constant unity of will makes the two souls one."

Thenceforward, there exists between Christ and His Spouse an intimacy of which the Christian home is but a shadowy image. A life in which everything is shared: labors, joys, sufferings, prayers. The whole day long, the soul thinks of Jesus, contemplates, adores and blesses Him, above all, loves Him, telling Him over and over again, in a thousand different ways, that He is her all, that she lives for Him alone. The Veronica of His wounded Heart, she consoles Him for the slights and insults of sinful humanity. Busy about the duties of her occupation and the observance of her rule, without letting them distract her, like the bee to the flower, she ever returns to her Beloved. He has become the faithful companion of her journey; she turns to Him in distress; seeks His aid in temptation, leans on Him in time of danger. Her life has become a permanent and perfect union with the Spouse.

Again, her love will not be sterile, for the spouse looks to motherhood. When she became the spouse of Christ, she adopted his Family. All those souls redeemed by the Blood of Jesus are her spiritual sons and daughters, and uniting herself with the Redeemer, she collaborates in their salvation by her prayers, sacrifices, works, her devotedness and her universal zeal, saying with Saint Paul: "My little children, of whom I am in labor again, until Christ be formed in you!" This is an admirable motherhood which recalls that of the Virgin-Mother. Are we not all familiar with the charming words said by Saint Thérèse of Lisieux to one of her novices: "Is that the way one hurries when one has children to feed and when one has to earn their bread?" To be the spouse of Christ is a great honor, a great joy; a privileged state that bears much fruit. But it calls for great purity, great fidelity, great love and great devotedness. When Celine, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux's sister and Monsieur Martin's fourth daughter, told her father of her decision to enter Carmel, he

joyfully replied: "Come, let us go together before the Blessed Sacrament, and thank the Lord for the graces which He has granted our family, and for the honor he does me, in choosing His spouses from my household. Yes, God does me great honor in asking for my children. If I owned anything better, I should hasten to offer it to Him."

A second prerogative of the religious state, which is the logical consequence of the first, is its character of royalty. How many women, sharing the dignity of their Spouse, have been ennobled by this mystic marriage! The humblest lay sister becomes a princess, and before her rank, all human majesty is eclipsed, or, at the very least, must give way. She has indeed the splendor, the pre-eminence, the independence and the wealth of royalty.

She is the living symbol of that paramount virtue and one of the official ambassadors of the Kingdom called religion. After the priest, there is none greater than the religious. If it be true that to serve God is to reign, sovereign indeed is a life consecrated exclusively to the service of the Most High.

She is a queen, by the sublimity of her sacrifice, the splendor of her virtues; these are the faultless gems of an immortal crown.

She is a queen by the radiance of her virginity, the grandeur of her poverty and the heroism of her obedience.

She is a queen, by the special place she has in the Church and the mystical Body of Christ, of which she is a chosen member. She has cast off herself and put on Jesus Christ, King of Kings and thus she reflects the dazzling effulgence of the Mind and Heart of Jesus.

She is a queen above all, by her absolute self-mastery. There are no slaves in the cloister, in spite of what is said; whereas they are to be found everywhere in the world, slaves of sin, of their passions, of human respect, of the freaks of fashion: and these are surely the most ignominious forms of slavery. The religious has been freed of these for good.

She has triumphed over sin, dominated her passions, and escaped from the world.

The last royal prerogative belonging to the religious state is that of wealth. To those who follow the path traced by the evangelical counsels, Jesus promises a hundredfold upon earth, and in addition, or rather as reward, eternal life.

The hundredfold is the initial favor of absolute purification. At profession, as at a second baptism, the religious recovers moral virginity and the innocence of a child. She becomes again "the new man, who according to God, is created in justice and holiness of truth."

The hundredfold includes all those countless precious graces of preservation, light, strength, purity, fervor, love and perseverance; graces of environment, encouragement, edification and apostolate. It is a holy land flowing with milk and honey, where joy and peace reign, "where life is purer, falls less frequent, the return to God more prompt, the path smoother, the bestowal of grace more abundant; where peace is deeper, death sweeter; where Purgatory is briefer and Heaven more glorious." Briefly, the religious vocation is a call from God to eminent sanctity and one of the surest signs of predestination.

This is doubtless the cause of the instinctive respect paid even by unbelievers to religious. Vaguely, they feel that here is a person set apart, a superior being, before whom it is right to bow and stand aside. Louis Veuillot wrote to his daughter, a nun, "I assure you that it is a happy and agreeable thought that one is the father of a nun; one is at once humbled and filled with pride. What a great lady this child of a Lulu has become! What splendor! What majesty! She will be one of the special retinue of the Lamb—and at the same time, she is my daughter, and I have supplied a few of her immense and immortal adornments!"

The religious state is an imitation of, even a participation in, the priesthood itself. By his baptism and his incorporation with Jesus-Priest, every Christian already belongs to

the sacerdotal tribe. "You are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people." How much more so the religious, who, in union with Christ, has offered himself on the day of his profession, as a voluntary, loving and permanent victim to the glory of God, for the salvation of mankind. In its deepest significance, religious life is a spiritual holocaust and the consecrated soul is, like our Lord, at once the priest and the victim.

"The religious, by making profession, fulfills in his own person the role of sacrificer and priest; and this because he binds himself, dedicates himself, gives himself, in short, immolates and sacrifices himself. God is present at this sacrifice to approve it; the minister appointed by the Church attends, to accept it, the faithful take part to bear witness and confirm it; but the religious alone makes it, and none can make it for him."<sup>13</sup> And it is because he makes it of his own free will that his sacrifice assumes a unique character of truth, fecundity, sanctity, stability and permanence.

This is all the more so, because in this holocaust, the victim is no common one. "The religious himself, in the profession of his vows, fulfills the office of host and victim, for in his sacrifice, he offers nothing but himself, and all that is his. And in offering himself, he makes to God an offering which is most precious, most honorable and most universal."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Bourdaloue. *De L'état religieux*.

<sup>14</sup> Bourdaloue, *op. cit.*

## Chapter II

### VOCATION

THE RELIGIOUS STATE can be the portion only of an elite: that is to say, of chosen souls. A special vocation is required of those who aspire to walk this narrow and uphill path. One cannot become a religious, just by wanting.

We are now going to study the existence and nature of this vocation; its indications and the moral obligation to follow it.

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In the etymological sense of the word, vocation means "call." The religious vocation, therefore, might be merely a call to leave the world, to enter a religious Order, and there to consecrate oneself for life to the service of God.

In fact this call, when it concerns the priesthood or the religious state, is twofold—a call of grace and a call of Authority; the latter being merely the official verification and, as it were, the authentic confirmation of the former. The first comes directly from God, the second from God's representatives. Together, they make up a true vocation in every sense of the term.

Considered under its ascetical and mystical aspect—for there is nearly always, in the history of a soul, a share of mystery—the vocation is the echo of a divine choice. From all eternity, God has determined a state of life for man created by Him; marriage, celibacy, ministry, or religion. It is the duty of each one to keep watch for the message.

The spiritual and physical world is composed of a countless number of beings, each of which has its nature, its place, its function and its end. The daisy blooms in the meadows,

the bluebell in the woods, and the edelweiss near the snowy summits of the mountains. One flower is grown for its beauty, another for its scent, yet another for its healing properties. In the sky we see an amazing variety of wonders; sun, planets, satellites, stars lying thick as dust. Heaven too, has its hierarchy rising from the Angels to the Seraphim, through the Thrones, Powers, Dominations and Cherubim.

Diversity within unity is found again in the Church. While all baptized souls have a common origin and an identical destiny, none the less, each has its own particular perfection, its special place and its part to play. Pilgrims of eternity, all are making their way to the Father's House, but not along the same road. Every Christian has his special vocation.

This vocation is the natural issue of the act of creation. When He drew us out of nothingness, God traced our life's progress in advance, and it is up to us to carry it out to the best of our ability. He is the Absolute Lord of our being, His is the right to use us, according to the designs of His Providence, for the glory of His Name.

How indeed, could man possibly be entitled to organize his existence to suit himself, according to the whims of his own will and the fantasy of his passions? The Creator has in no wise relinquished His sovereign rights, and He intends to govern His people, mildly, it is true, but none the less strongly, determining for each of His subjects his rank, his position and his work. For a Christian, perfect and loving conformity with the divine plans constitutes the fundamental law and the sole labor of his sanctification: to be where God wants him to be, and to do always what God wants him to do.

What will become of this newborn babe? Will he found another family? Will he become a religious, a priest? None knows, save God who has chosen; and of all possible choices, His is the best, inspired as it is by infinite knowledge, wisdom and goodness.

The vocation is the masterpiece of Providence. God knows His creature through and through, with its qualities and de-

fects, its aspirations and leanings, its aptitudes and failings, and He knows to what use it can be put in the workshop of the world. He knows what we are, better than we do ourselves; He has weighed our physical, intellectual and moral assets, and measured our potentiality of output. The nobleman in the parable did not commit the same number of talents to each of his servants. Taking into account our worth and our ability, God, like a good captain, determines for each his occupation and his task.

This is both sensible and wise. If Providence has care of the sparrow, the lily of the field, and the hair of our heads, how can man, the child of Providence, be abandoned? With greater solicitude than that of a mother bending over the cradle of her babe, the Heavenly Father looks after us, our temporal and eternal destiny, our labors, sufferings and needs. Nothing escapes Him. Not content with showing us our destination and our road, He becomes the faithful companion of our pilgrimage; He is the sun that shines on us, the spring that refreshes us, the bread that nourishes, the arm on which we lean, the smile that cheers our hearts, the grace in a thousand different forms which preserves, forgives, purifies, sanctifies and, at the end, saves.

Happy the man who puts his trust in Providence, and follows its guidance blindly, lovingly, step by step, without evasion or encroachment. Our vocation is the invention of a love that is infinite and eternal. It is a free gift, above price, and comes directly from the heart of God.

However, in certain cases, this choice requires a necessary complement, i.e., the recognition and ratification of legitimate authority.

The religious life and the ministry constitute, in the Church, a public and official state of life, upon which none has the right to enter of his own volition, even though he be personally aware of his vocation. The Bishop and religious Superiors have both the right and the duty to examine candidates, to establish the validity of their aspirations, and final-



ly, to grant or refuse admission. This explains the existence of seminaries, novitiates and scholasticates.

It must be repeated that in its origin the vocation is essentially a call from God, but in order to obviate dangerous illusions, selfish ambition and future scandals, this call needs to be verified and controlled. No enlistment in the army of the priesthood or religion is valid, unless it be countersigned by the commanding officers; none mounts the steps of the altar, nor crosses the threshold of the convent, save by official invitation.



No one can enter religion, unless he be called by God. Furthermore, in order to answer this call, he must hear it.

One mistake, on this essential point, can entail grave, sometimes irreparable results; a life that is out of joint, barren if not evil, an eternity that is jeopardized. "The perfection of Christian life is not to rush into a cloister, but to do the will of God; that is our food, according to Our Lord. 'My meat is to do the will of Him who sent me.'"

How can one discover, with certainty, what is this divine Will?

There is nothing simpler or more complicated, more luminous or more obscure, more painful or sweeter, more natural or more astounding than the birth of a vocation. Each one has its own history.

Some appear to have known their undeviating path from the earliest years, and thanks to an extraordinary concomitance of providential circumstances. At the age of six or seven, they were already saying, very seriously: "Mummy, I'm going to be a priest; Daddy, I'm going to be a nun." Their course is like a river flowing from its source to the ocean between flowery banks, through a broad plain, slowly and majestically, without encountering a single obstacle; like a beautiful length of silk or velvet, unrolling without a crease, with its varied and magnificent designs.

Others on the contrary, hesitate for a long time, feel their way, turn back, like travelers lost by night in a trackless moorland, seeking a signpost. At last, day dawns; suddenly the path appears, leading straight toward the sunlit horizon.

Again, a religious vocation may be revealed at the time of some trial, loss, frustration, set-back or illness. The flesh or the heart is bruised; the soul is freed from the futile preoccupations of earth, and suffering, the herald of God, has brought an imperative summons, "Come, follow me." How many, on the battlefield or in the prison camp, have found the way to the Seminary or the cloister! Disgusted with a mad or criminal world, the soul hastens to find a solitude, where it may devote itself exclusively to those things that are eternal.

Sometimes even, a miracle causes and accompanies the sudden birth of a vocation. Some lightning grace breaks a life in half, overwhelms a soul, wrenches it away from a life of profligacy, and finally, sets it towards a career of apostolate and sanctity. How many hardened sinners have become perfect religious and incomparable apostles, such as Père de Foucauld, to take but one example!

In any case, whatever may be its origin and its evolution, the vocation is too grave a matter to be taken lightly, and before coming to any decision, it is imperative that every precaution be taken against error.

It would be most imprudent to set out upon a road that might prove to be a blind alley, or peter out in a quagmire; to take upon oneself today, obligations which tomorrow will prove to be an intolerable burden.

It would appear that in the matter of early vocations insufficient discretion has been exercised, particularly at the present time. By a method of intensive recruitment, quantity may be insured, but rarely quality, and this is prejudicial, both to the souls that have been misled, and to the Orders that are cluttered up with mediocre and worthless subjects. A sweet little face, a choir-boy's piety, the wishes of a Chris-



tian family, a transitory burst of enthusiasm, a "yes" extracted by pressure from a timid nature, obviously do not constitute sufficient signs of a call to the religious state. "Let Superiors beware of bringing adolescents into their Orders hastily, and in too great numbers, remaining for that very reason unsure of their vocation, and not knowing whether these postulants chose this life of eminent sanctity under the sole inspiration of the Holy Ghost."<sup>1</sup>

Parents, directors and recruiters are responsible only for discovering true vocations, cultivating them and bringing them to a successful issue, without ever presuming to invent them, still less, to impose them. In the long run, it is up to the candidate to convince himself personally of the reality of the divine call, and to respond with complete freedom; to this end, let him pray, ask advice and reflect.

It is rare for a vocation to prove sure from the very first. More often it is revealed to the soul slowly and progressively, like the rising sun. The plans of God are mysterious and in the choice of a state of life, error is always possible, if not frequent. Indeed so many diverse elements, of varying weight, can influence a decision, one way or another; thoughtless enthusiasm, human outlook, dangerous attractions, exaggerated fears, preconceived ideas, interested canvassing, diabolical illusions. In order to disperse the mist of this uncertainty, a rare combination of intellectual qualities and moral dispositions is required: common sense, judgment, prudence, a spirit of faith, honesty in the investigation, and, beforehand, a holy neutrality of mind as to what may be the will of God. It is evident that in the solution of a problem, at once so grave and so difficult, the intervention of grace must be sought and obtained by fervent and assiduous prayer.

If ever supernatural light would appear to be necessary, it is indeed in this case, when a temporal and eternal destiny is at stake. God alone knows thoroughly His own designs

<sup>1</sup> Brief of Pius X to the General of the Dominicans, 4th August, 1913.

upon a soul, and no one is in a better position than He to reveal it.

Prudence demands (and surely the choice of a state of life closely concerns the first of the cardinal virtues) that one should not trust exclusively one's own judgment, and that one should seek around one for additional light. Two guarantees are better than one. Furthermore, one should be careful only to apply to a learned, judicious, supernatural and disinterested adviser. To trust blindly to the first comer may well have disastrous consequences. Not everybody is equally well qualified to direct a soul on its way. There are priests, and pious ones at that, who are steeped in strange prejudices, primarily concerned with reinforcing Catholic Action, with intensifying the Apostolate of Good Works, with safeguarding the recruitment to the secular clergy, and who deliberately dissuade souls from entering religious Institutes, especially the contemplative Orders, which they find guilty of being no longer up-to-date.

Of all advisers, the surest, as a general rule, is the spiritual director. He knows the soul he directs thoroughly; sometimes he has personal experience of religious life; he is, moreover, perfectly disinterested; therefore, in settling this question, he has exceptional competence and authority. In following the decisions of the representative of God, the soul has every chance of not going astray.

In case of doubt, is it wise to take parental advice? As a rule, it seems "children must consult their parents on the state of life that they wish to choose—and they cannot be absolved of rashness, imprudence and want of respect toward their parents, if they presume to choose a state and way of life, without consulting their parents, who are normally more prudent than they are, being older, wiser and more experienced."<sup>2</sup>

But in these days, when so many Christians, no longer understand either the greatness of the religious state, or the

<sup>2</sup> Conference d'Angers.

obligation of responding to God's call, and oppose their children's vocations in every way, it might well be rash to have recourse, in making a decision, to judgments so obviously erroneous and biased. In this matter, how many parents are bad counselors! How many out of selfishness, have "killed their child!" St. Francis of Sales says: "Generally speaking, he must keep his vocation secret from everybody except his spiritual Father. It is especially necessary to keep the vocation secret from parents . . . God, says a grave author, Porrecta, when He calls one to a perfect life wishes one to forget one's father, saying: 'Audi, filia, et vide, et inclina aurem tuam et obliviscere populum tuum et domum patris tui.' By this, he adds, the Lord certainly admonishes us that he, who is called, ought by no means to allow the counsel of parents to intervene . . . Whence Saint Thomas absolutely advises those who are called to religion to abstain from deliberating on their vocation with their relatives. 'For the relatives of the flesh are, in the affair, not our friends, but our enemies, according to the word of Our Lord: A man's enemies are those of his household.'"

To sum up, one should confide in one's parents, only in so far as they can bring light and support.

Finally, there remains the psychological study of inclination, aptitude and intention. Whether natural or supernatural, inclination alone is not the infallible sign of a vocation. It would be wrong, however, to ignore it; in default of proof, it often provides valuable indications. It is an occurrence so common as not to be extraordinary for a soul, called by God, to feel for the religious life repugnance, aversion, even revolt. Might this not be caused by the instinctive reaction of nature to the idea of sacrifice, or the subtle suggestion of the Evil One? It is a simple temptation, which must be overcome.

More usually, a vague attraction or affinity is felt; a sort of pre-established harmony, causing a relaxing and unfolding of the soul at each contact with the religious life. While

the agitation and tumult of the world jars and upsets, the peace of the cloister brings calm and delight. This symptom is often enough accompanied by supernatural inclination. At a First Communion, a mission, a retreat, a profession or an ordination, Our Lord's words to the rich young man have been heard deep in the heart. The invitation has been renewed again and again, gentle but insistent, and the soul, amazed at first, finally responds with gladness. Little by little, under the influence of grace, a deep and pious inclination toward the religious state is formed, along with the ardent desire to consecrate oneself to God therein. It is for the director to verify the origin, nature and validity of this attraction.

Without either under—or over—estimating the importance of inclination in the discovery of a vocation, the most vital factor is the study of the general dispositions,<sup>3</sup> that are requisite for one entering religion, and the special aptitudes demanded by different Institutes. Before setting out on the conquest of an ideal, it is surely wise to ask oneself if—considering one's spiritual strength—this ideal is not a mirage and its conquest a dream. Who would undertake to build a palace when he has barely the materials for a shack? Am I made for the religious state? Have I all the qualities I need, if I am to fulfill its obligations worthily? This is a question of the first importance. On the answer depends the direction of a whole life. St. Francis de Sales says, "For it is certain that when God calls a person to a vocation, He is obliged thereby, according to His Divine Providence, to supply him with all the aids necessary for the perfecting of himself in his vocation." The entry into the religious state demands, therefore, a certain fund of qualities and dispositions, the absence of which would be evident proof that there is no vocation. No one can form a serious judgment as to the ex-

<sup>3</sup> We do not mean here the conditions exacted by law for admission to the Novitiate and Profession, which are more the province of canonical vocation.

istence and quality of this fund, unless he knows at least in broad outline, the religious state, its spirit, its duties, its virtues and its demands.

To this general survey, must be added a closer knowledge of the Order, to which one is attracted. Each Order has its own Rule, its characteristic spirit, its apostolic works. It is the duty of the aspirant to ascertain whether he can adapt himself to the mold. Those are few and far between, whose natures are rich enough, and whose temperaments are supple enough, to adapt themselves successfully to every form of religious life, and to wear equally well the habit of a Capuchin or the cassock of a Jesuit, the veil of a Carmelite, or the coif of a Sister of Charity. An excellent foot soldier does not necessarily make a good cavalryman. The religious army, too, has its different weapons, which are in no way interchangeable; one must study them, then make the best choice in accordance with one's physical, intellectual and moral aptitudes.<sup>4</sup> Without being robust, is one's health good enough to stand up to the fatigues of the apostolate and the burden of austerities? A serious, chronic illness or incurable infirmities are incompatible with a life of regular observance, and prove indisputably, that there is no vocation.

"With your letter I received another. I do not know whether it is from a novice or a pupil. She tells me that she cannot partake of oil or vegetables, nor wear woolen garments, nor go to the Office at night, and she asks my advice about her vocation. I have answered her that since she cannot keep the Rule, it is a certain sign that she has no vocation for your monastery. I added that if she desired to be a religious, she would be in danger of losing her soul, and that the religious cannot receive her without committing a grievous fault. It is one thing when infirmity attacks a person that is already

<sup>4</sup> This twofold study of the religious state and the Order, begun in the world, is continued and completed during the novitiate and the period of the temporary vows; an experimental knowledge that nothing can equal or replace.

a professed religious, and another, when this occurs before a person has bound herself by vows."<sup>5</sup>

A number of Orders, dedicated to teaching, preaching, or social work, require of their subjects, for the success of their ministry and the fecundity of their apostolate, a certain degree of scientific and professional culture. A person who has very little hope, or none at all, of acquiring a minimum of intellectual equipment, must go and knock at another door. For it is clearly indicated that this particular door must remain closed to them. "Sometimes it has been put forward as justification for adopting a subject of limited intelligence that he is so pious! That is not enough, and one who had great experience of religious life has said of such 'The angel falls, the beast remains.' And remains forever."<sup>6</sup>

Another obstacle which should also bar the way to many a candidate, and against which superiors and directors are not sufficiently on their guard, is lack of sense and judgment. This is an irremediable defect, of itself able gravely to endanger personal sanctity, to give rise to a multitude of difficulties in the Community, and to render sterile, partially, if not totally, a whole life of apostolate. May God preserve the Congregations from these unbalanced minds!

Finally, before entering the service of Christ in one of His chosen bands, one must make a survey of the moral assets at one's disposal; temperament, character, virtues. Not that a candidate should be required to possess a degree of perfection that he can only attain later and progressively, but at least, he must give serious guarantees of fervor and perseverance.

Characters that are irresponsive, hypocritical, uncontrollable, unsociable; temperaments inclined to neurasthenia, flabby or sensual; wills that are spineless, capricious or stubborn; souls that are without ideals, material, eaten-up with egoism, that offer little hope of amendment, are, in general, unsuit-

<sup>5</sup> Saint Alphonsus. *Ascetical works*.

<sup>6</sup> Father Desens, in a report of the diocesan congress of Paris, 1910.

able for the religious life. Such are barren lands, from which it is vain to hope for a rich harvest. Above all, it is essential to repulse those who are known to have inherited vicious tendencies, particularly concerning chastity and temperance. These passions, which may be dormant in youth, have, later, sudden and terrible awakenings. Poverty, chastity, obedience, humility, self-denial, love of the Cross; these are virtues essential to the religious state. Shall I be able, with God's help, to practice them generously and with perseverance? If the sincere examination of one's aptitudes has led to a firm and favorable conclusion, there is excellent proof of a vocation. In case of doubt, there is no harm in making an experiment, and in letting the novitiate, with added light, provide the definite reply. On the other hand, it would be the height of imprudence to admit to the perpetual vows, those candidates whose vocation has for years been mediocre and unsure.

By its nature and object, the religious life is essentially supernatural; therefore, one should not enter it with an eye to human advantage, such as "solitude, quiet, freedom from the troubles caused by relatives, from strife and other disagreeable matters, and from the cares consequent on being obliged to think of one's lodging, food and clothing," but from higher and disinterested motives, such as the glory of God, love of Jesus Christ, one's personal sanctification, and zeal for souls. The religious state is not a sinecure, a disguise for a comfortable life, in which one may, without worry or danger, work out one's salvation. Are not the words of the Gospel, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross," addressed particularly to priests and religious?

Before departing to the convent, then, it is quite unnecessary to have recourse to "ten or a dozen doctors to see if the inspiration was good or bad, if it was to be followed or no." If there be established aptitudes, a right intention, a call from those authorized, and no moral or canonical impediment, the

existence of a true vocation can be diagnosed with every assurance.

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Once the vocation is recognized, it becomes a duty and a right to respond. The right is primordial; no entreaty or menace can prevail against it, for it is founded on the sovereignty of God, and on the liberty of every man to choose and make his own life.

If fidelity to the vocation were merely a right, it would be lawful to reject it, but it is, besides, a moral obligation of conscience. It is a duty of obedience to God, whose providential designs must be respected; a duty of charity to ourselves, for our gravest interests are at stake; a duty of zeal toward a multitude of souls, whose salvation depends, to a greater or lesser degree, on our correspondence with grace. To Our Lord's "Veni, sequere me," let us respond with a spontaneous, prompt and generous "Ecce ego."

God loves a cheerful giver, and to enter His service reluctantly would take from the beauty of the gesture and the value of the gift. Most perfect is the sacrifice which is accomplished with a smile on the lips and a lifting of the heart. If there is in life one action which should not be botched, but performed freely and generously, surely it is this initial action, which is the foundation of and prelude to the total and irrevocable oblation of the soul. Let us not wait to be pushed or dragged on this royal road; let our departure be a noble one. Let there be no regrets, no hesitation, above all, no retreat. The old proverb can well be quoted here "Do not put off till tomorrow what you can do today." Where can one be happier or safer, than where one is meant to be? Moreover, it is neither polite nor prudent to try God's patience and to play fast and loose with His grace. The ticket is bought, the luggage registered and the train in the station; why stay on the platform? Find out what is the first train to leave, and board it.

How many vocations have been endangered or lost through unwarranted delay! "The voice of God must be obeyed without delay. Thus, as soon as the Lord calls a person to a more perfect state, if he does not wish to jeopardize his eternal salvation, he must obey immediately. Otherwise, he will hear Jesus Christ address to him the same reproach that He made to the young man who, when invited by Our Lord to follow Him, asked His permission to go first and put his affairs in order and dispose of his goods. Jesus replied to him that 'no man putting his hand to the plow, and looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God.'"<sup>7</sup>

Do obstacles that are independent of the will, enforce some delay? Then precautions must be taken in order to safeguard the gift of God; one must keep away from the world and from occasions of sin, frequent the Sacraments, make constant use of prayer and meditation, and show perfect obedience to one's spiritual director. Sometimes, the struggle proves arduous and long; one must not take fright, but carry on valiantly, until one overcomes. There is the struggle with ourselves: instinctive repugnance, fear of responsibility, cowardice in face of sacrifice. There is the struggle with the devil; intent on leading souls astray. Lost vocations are counted among his most resounding victories. We must beware of his snares, illusions and obsessions. There is the struggle with the world: its revels may blind us, its pleasures draw us, and its loves makes us captive.

There may also be the struggle with our family; through egoism, ignorance, or lack of faith, they may oppose us with a violence that often amounts to open persecution. It is true that parents have the right of making sure that a vocation is valid; but once it is recognized as such, opposition by every means, fair or foul, would be a criminal abuse of authority, for which they must account at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. God has greater rights over their children than they! More than one saint has suffered this terrible trial, and has

<sup>7</sup> Luke IX, 62. Saint Alphonsus, *op. cit.*

only triumphed over flesh and blood through prayer, meditation, and even flight. "Do not think that I came to send peace upon the earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's enemies shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me, and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me."<sup>8</sup>

Fidelity to one's vocation is, then, a duty; but what is exactly the moral quality of this obligation?

While it is not a commandment or a formal order, the call to the religious life is, at the very least, a gracious invitation and an urgent counsel. Consequently, there is, in itself, no grave sin in closing one's ears and hardening one's heart to the voice of God. We say "in itself" as a matter of principle; but in practice, wilful or motiveless resistance to this immense grace implies the greatest imprudence, which is capable of warping one's whole life, of gravely endangering one's salvation, and, for that very reason, is closely allied to mortal sin.

"In principle, the vocation to the religious state is primarily a matter of generosity. Yet, in practice, it would certainly be a sin to resist a divine command, formally and clearly manifested, for example, by a personal, certain, and indubitable revelation. It would be a grave sin if, while considering one's damnation assured by remaining in the world, because of one's weakness and the danger one runs, one were nevertheless to persist in refusing to enter the religious state to which one believes one is called. Every believer is obviously bound to take the necessary steps to insure his eternal salvation. How many people there may be, for whom a clearly-defined vocation and the well-founded fear of their own weakness in face of the dangers of the world, constitute an absolute duty to enter the religious life! In individual cases, however, it is difficult to establish this obligation with certainty.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew X, 34-37.

At least, the theologians agree in saying, that it is the height of imprudence to resist the divine call, and although the perfection which is the object of religious life, is outside the province of precept, they do not consider that those are innocent of mortal sin, who, while only too aware of their weakness and doubtful of working out their salvation in the world, yet have not the courage to flee from its dangers and tempests into the harbor of religion.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Père Choupin.

## Chapter III

### NOVITIATE

THE RELIGIOUS STATE is holy ground on which no one has the right to tread, and still less to dwell, unless he be provided with the appropriate permit or pass. Every candidate must appear before the authorities and agree to undergo a period of probation, which is the novitiate.

This is a wise institution, which allows the applicant to examine once again the validity of his vocation, to weigh beforehand the gravity of his future obligations, and to learn progressively his new life. On the other hand, the Order can study the candidate at leisure, form an estimate of his physical, intellectual and moral qualities, and thus make sure that he is suitable. After a year, candidates and superiors may—for the profession is a bilateral contract—bind themselves reciprocally, with full knowledge of the facts.

In order to insure that the novitiate is both serious and efficacious, the Church has carefully defined its nature and object, fixed its length, and specified the conditions of admission, without counting the special arrangements of different Congregations.<sup>1</sup>

It is not the province of this book, to mention and comment

<sup>1</sup> Here we give the main prescriptions of Canon Law:

(a) The obligation of a postulancy lasting for six months in all institutes of women in which there are perpetual vows, and in case of the lay members in institutes of men. In institutes with temporary vows the necessity and duration of the postulancy is regulated by the respective Constitutions.

(b) The conditions of admission concerning either the validity or licitness of the novitiate and profession:

I. Conditions of validity: Admission to the novitiate is invalid in the case of: persons who have lapsed from the Catholic faith into a non-Catholic sect; persons who have not attained the required