

THE TRUE BASIS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE¹

By

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A certain uneasiness is felt, at the present day, on the subject of religious life. I am not referring to the criticism of unbelievers, but to the doubts, more or less openly expressed, even in the most religious circles, as to its actual value and its methods.

Young Catholic men and women continue to be profoundly attracted to it and vocations among them are numerous; but the temperaments and even the virtues of today find difficulty in adapting themselves to a system of life which was accepted unquestioningly by former generations.

The most immediate and most general problem is that of health. The great Orders, and the austere cloistered Orders in particular, are somewhat anxious. Their Rule, which represented a minimum nearly always overstepped by generous souls, tends to become a maximum only attained with difficulty by the boldest or the most robust.

Those who have an inside view of these things; those who have the training of young religious, are even more troubled to see that certain methods of formation, apparently essential to the system of religious life, have become less efficacious and are no longer inspiring to a great number of their most ardent recruits. Obedience, humility, perpetual constraint, mortification, the interior tension of the effort to overcome self, tend to an atmosphere which weighs like lead on some natures, in themselves generous and called by Christ to the highest union with God. This is, perhaps, the cause of that psychic fatigue to which modern temperaments are so liable and which is created or aggravated by too much constraint.

So we are between two extremes, either of which is equally fatal to religious life. Should we remain blindly faithful to what we have inherited, to classical methods, to the letter and detail of tradition, or should we, on the contrary, relax and remove the cross from religious life? The first method tends to annihilation of certain natures, the second to the annihilation of the perfect life. In both cases religious life is in danger of foundering, and too often a kind of compromise between narrowness and relaxation is characteristic of not a few modern religious of both sexes.

Faced by these problems, more and more souls are wondering if it would not be possible to lead the perfect life outside the framework of religious life. The Holy Spirit is too clearly behind

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these ideas for the theologian totally to disregard them, but for all that the Holy Spirit has never deserted the religious life. Indeed, the great Orders seem to have more power than ever in attracting young men and women. Possibly the very attempt to lead the perfect life outside the framework of religious life may of itself, on account of the difficulties encountered, bring about a return to the religious life.

It is heartrending for those who have the charge of forming the present-day generation of religious to receive these young souls, so ardently desirous of evangelical perfection and more than ever attracted by the great ideals of St Dominic, of St Francis, of St Teresa, and then not to know how to help them effectually to realize their ideals.

This is the broad outline of the problem we have to face, and as it is too wide to fit into the compass of a single article, I will confine myself to showing what is the essence of the religious life, the true nature of the vows and observances, and from this to show what is the spirit animating this system of life, which is undertaken for a certain definite end, which end must always be kept in view. . . .

The doctrine I am going to propound is a traditional one and I will try to interpret it in an equally traditional manner. It is that of St Thomas, who made a very profound synthesis of that monastic tradition of the Fathers of the Desert, of St Benedict, of St Gregory, which was all powerful and flourishing in his time.

It is the knowledge of the essence of things which enables us to see them as they are without being deluded by accidental or changing forms. What then is the essence of religious life and what its spirit? This is the question we wish to answer here, and I feel sure that a traditional and theologically sound reply will clear away many of our fears, and, at the same time, many unacceptable relaxations.

1. *The Essence of Religious Life.*

Why do we enter the religious state? Solely to arrive at the perfection of charity. The first article of that treatise on religious life contains the principle which informs even the least of its conclusions, that the perfection of a Christian consists in charity, the love of God and his neighbour. The essence of Christianity lies there and nowhere else, and man must be made perfect by charity. It was to teach us this and to set us an example that God became Man. Every other law has been abolished, or, at least, only has sense and vigour in so far as it is motivated by charity.

From this it is easy to understand how love and perfection have come to mean the same thing in the supernatural order, "because it is charity which unites us to God, the ultimate end of the human soul." (II-II, 184, 1.) By charity we are already on the way to our last end, and by growing gradually in love we are growing closer to him who is Perfection itself, and are climbing

to the highest peak possible to man, which is to resemble God and to possess him.

Perfection, then, consists in a disposition of heart, as St Thérèse of Lisieux says; it is a state of soul, a simple but complete orientation, a love essentially interior and independent of any special way of life or activity. "Neither this nor that," says St John of the Cross, "but only love."

Perfection does not consist in the accumulation of good works, and the religious who thinks that it does is making a fundamental mistake and wasting his time. However, it is true that love does seek to express itself in actions, and it is through them that it emerges from the purely platonic state, which is naturally repugnant to it. To do nothing is hard for one who loves. These actions derive their value from the interior virtue, which inspires them, and this virtue itself only perfects man through charity, which alone unites him to God.

Love is not perfect, continues St Thomas, nor, consequently, is the Christian, unless it is always in act. The perfect man is he who is entirely absorbed in loving God, and this state is only attained by the Blessed in heaven.

Although this state is not attainable in our present life, yet it is most important to speak of it here, because our perfection on earth consists in a constant striving towards this ideal of an all-absorbing love of God. This is why the state of perfection of the Christian on earth consists in directing his whole love towards God and doing every action for him, in loving him virtually always and being ready, at any moment, to give expression to an intense act of love.

In one of his superb articles on the question of the effects of love, St Thomas asks himself: "Is love the cause of all the actions of one who loves?" and answers that it is, if it be a total and exclusive love.

All Christians are bound, at least, to put God first in their hearts, to prefer him above all and to offer him everything. But the Christian who wishes to be perfect must love all things only in God and must not be hindered by any secondary love from passing directly to the act of divine love. Needless to say, the state of perfect charity which rests on the possession of all the virtues, and is made permanent only by the habitual activity of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, is not the state of beginners, but it is for them also an ideal to be striven after, although unattainable on this earth.

But what is possible here and now, if not to beginners, at least to those who have made some progress, is to form a very determined resolution to reach this state and to make a serious effort to organize their lives to this end. According to St Thomas, this consists in the elimination of everything which would hinder the soul from loving God wholly and entirely. "We must uproot from

the will not only what is opposed to charity, but also whatever prevents it from striving after God with all its might and main," or, as he says elsewhere, "all that prevents charity from expressing itself frequently in acts." And to speak more strongly: *Minus te amat qui tecum aliquid amat quod non propter te amat* (St Augustine). I love thee less, O my God, when together with thee, I love anything that is not loved because of thee.

Let us add to this negative aspect of a life of tending towards perfection, the positive aspect, which consists in spending ourselves wholeheartedly in acts and works of divine love.

So far we have been dealing with general principles which are not confined within the limits of the religious state.

Any ordinary Christian can tend to the perfection of charity, and he is then subject to this law, one which is independent of any special disposition or voluntary vow, which forbids his attachment to anything which would hinder him from loving God actually and with his whole heart; this entails a denudation essentially affective. For every Christian the Augustinian formula holds good: *Nutrimētum caritatis est diminutio cupiditatis, perfectio, nulla cupiditas*. "The food of charity is the decrease of cupidity; to be entirely devoid of covetousness is perfection."

Now this is where the religious comes into the picture, because in order to reach an affective denudation he imposes on himself an effective denudation. From the mere fact of possessing worldly goods the soul is drawn to love them and, therefore, the religious deprives himself of those things which he might love too much, at least, those which can be given up here below without making life, and even virtue, impossible. What then are these good things which the religious voluntarily forgoes? St Thomas expresses them clearly as worldly possessions, the satisfaction of carnal desires, especially those which involve the affections of the heart, independence of the will and the free exercise of outward activity.

To be detached from worldly goods and even from the spirit of possessiveness, from all carnal affection and the desire of enjoying it, from all preferences, and if not, perhaps, from personal opinions, at least from the liberty of acting according to them; this is what the religious hopes to attain by means of the great denudations, which are carried out under a determined legal status, in a fixed and definite manner by entering an organized community and following its rule. The man who wishes to do this must, of necessity, live a kind of life apart, but he need not go into the desert to get away from normal society. His intention to be perfect is public; he does not profess perfection, but he does profess to tend towards it. He is in a school of perfection and will in time become a master to others. He must practise those exterior virtues proper to his state, remembering that the world is very critical of religious and judges mostly by outward appearances.

But there is the great danger here of attaching too much impor-

tance to exterior conduct, for although this is important up to a point, yet the religious must be careful not to let "the leaven of the Pharisees," against which Our Lord warned the Apostles, slip in here. Above all, he must beware of making his particular form of religious life an end to itself; it is not an end but essentially a means to an end. Neither does his perfection lie in the practice of those virtues proper to his state, but in the end towards which those virtues are directed, namely, to loving God as much as possible on earth, to be wholly intent on the things of love. Any religious spirit not based on this principle would be particularly repellent to the present generation, and, most certainly, would not be the true spirituality of the religious life.

2. *The effects of this doctrine on the spirituality of Religious Life.*

It would take us outside the scope of this article to draw all the possible conclusions from this principle; we will, therefore, only consider here the three relating immediately to our subject.

1. A religious must before all and in all things tend to the perfection of charity.
2. He must do this by means of the vows, but must be careful to practise these according to their real spirit, which aims at bringing about an affective detachment from all things.
3. He must not rest content with the routine practice of the vows and his Rule, but must make charity the direct motive of all his acts and take every opportunity of practising the Evangelical Counsels and of following the inspirations of the Holy Ghost.

1. The desire for perfection must be kept constantly in the forefront of religious life, since it is this which inspires the vows, these, in themselves, being simply a means to attaining the perfection of charity. It is then of capital importance that the religious should keep ever before him, as a dominating motive, this desire to reach the perfection of love; in other words, to keep his whole heart for God, to love him always and as much as possible. . . . It is true we do not vow to tend towards perfection, but only to take definite means to this end, without which we would be in danger of losing this tendency.

Religious life does not consist only in the vows, but in something deeper which underlies these and which can exist without them, namely, this desire to reach perfect charity: *Si vis esse perfectus.*

2. It is very clear that it would be impossible to realize this desire without the fervent and wholehearted practice of the specific means offered by the religious life, but we must be on our guard against thinking that these means will produce their effect automatically. The first condition of success is never to lose sight of their end. What is the use of detaching yourself from your

earthly possessions, if you attach yourself to earthly possessions held in common, if you dig yourself into your convent and your routine, if you retain—not perhaps for your personal advantage, but for that of the community—anxiety or desire for the good things of this world? What is the good of renouncing the love which would build a home if you are egoistically self-centred or if you entangle your heart in affections which, even if they are not carnal, are not yet wholly divine? What is the good of giving up your liberty if you cling to your self-will, your obstinacy, your practical lack of submission to God's good pleasure, your touchiness and your constant cowardly failure in self-denial and in doing the opposite of what you like?

The practice of his vows does not dispense a religious from the personal effort demanded of every candidate for perfection, nor from the essentially *affective* denudation for which the religious state simply offers favourable conditions. *Effective* denudation can never be brought to bear except on a very small portion of the things which make a screen between God and ourselves. We have to go deeper. "After having abandoned the world, you discover that you have to abandon self." (*Imitation*).

3. On the same principle, the virtues to which religious must essentially apply themselves are charity and all those flowing from it; what are called "the virtues of religion" will not do instead of these. Their aim is to lead us to charity by the detachment they bring about, and we might say that they are, in a special way, the virtues of those who are advancing in the spiritual life. But to confine ourselves to these alone, under the pretext that they are "the duties of our state," would be to miss their point; of themselves they will not suffice to give us the love of God, unless we also strive to make acts of love under the guidance of the Holy Spirit whenever occasion offers.

Someone actually wrote lately that the religious, by his vows, specializes in the practice of certain virtues, whereas the priest specializes in charity! It seems impossible that anyone should hold such distorted views of religious life. It is only with a view to putting the love of God in place of the things he leaves that a man has the right to give up his rights, his responsibilities and his earthly happiness. Besides, in entering religion he frees himself not only from joys, but also from earthly cares and opportunities of virtues, and not only from cares but also from the natural loves and joys of life. If God does not become the object of the life and love of religious, then the whole purpose of their lives is appallingly frustrated. Stunted men and stunted women, though not without some merit, yet uninspired and uninspiring, without true worth, their souls ugly and misshapen. A religious who is not chiefly motivated by charity and the Holy Spirit within him, who does not try to transform all his actions into one great

act of love, will never succeed in becoming a perfect man, and it is a pity he ever ceased to be an ordinary man!

On the other hand, we must take care not to underrate fidelity to the duties proper to the religious state. To say that the practice of the vows is only a means is not, in any way, to belittle its necessity. Quite the contrary; the perfection of religious is inseparably bound up with the faithful practice of their vows and the virtues proper to their state. Even after they have reached the highest level of sanctity, those virtues, after having helped them to attain perfect love, become later the proper effects flowing from that love. All the same, great care must be taken that the means do not become an obstacle to the end, and this can easily happen if an absolute value is attached to them in themselves, which is sometimes done by unenlightened souls, who make of the meticulous observance of their rules, customs and even usages a kind of fetish, completely forgetting their proper end. This brings about a sort of inordinate attachment to such observances, which, though in themselves hard to nature, yet afford the soul a natural support, giving it a comfortable feeling of satisfaction.

Of little use would it be to give up the good things of this world, through fear of being hindered on the way to perfection by their all-too-persuasive power of attraction, if we then make an obstacle between ourselves and God of the very means we have taken to lift ourselves up to him. St Augustine speaks of this pride, which, slipping in even among the renunciations of a religious, entangles him and is, in fact, a much worse vice than would have been the free enjoyment of all worldly goods. Pride is the very worst enemy of all good works, but even without pride, these do more harm than good if one forgets their link with charity.

(To be Concluded)

NOTE: The issues raised at the beginning of this article are of such moment that, after its conclusion, the matter will be open to discussion. Readers are invited to send in their views either in the form of an article (if considered to be of sufficient importance) or as notes to be incorporated by the Editor in the results of the inquiry.