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Christ: A Religious Priest? A Thomistic Approach

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Abstract

The nature and value of the religious priesthood have often been questioned, including after Vatican II. John Paul II, however, claims that the religious priest ‘reproduces in his life the fullness of the mystery of Christ’. Examining Aquinas’s understanding of Christ’s total self-sacrifice provides a model that explains how. In this article, I present a Christological and Thomistic approach to the question by identifying Christ as a religious priest, highlighting one of Aquinas’s patristic sources (St Gregory the Great) and one of his greatest spiritual interpreters of modern times (Bl Columba Marmion). Because of his grace of headship, Christ contains all the perfections found in his members. The perfection of Christ’s priestly and religious life consists in his total sacrifice of himself to the Father out of love. Christ firmly fixed his will to offer himself from the moment of the Incarnation. By vowing to follow the counsels, religious priests imitate the fixity of Christ’s will to offer himself as a total self-holocaust. This conclusion allows me to propose that Christ is the religious priest, which has several theological and pastoral implications.

Keywords: Aquinas; holocaust; Marmion; priesthood; religious life; sacrifice

The combination of the priesthood and religious life has had strong critics. Jerome told Paulinus of Nola, the enthusiastic and recently ordained ascetic, that a clerical lifestyle was irreconcilable with his monastic aspirations.¹ During the thirteenth century, secular clerics attacked mediant religious priests. According to William of Saint-Amour, Christ instituted bishops and parish priests, not a third class of monk-priests.² Bishops and priests engage in perfecting while monks are perfected.³ Combining priestly ministry and monastic life confuses their roles. Modern figures like Cardinals Manning and Mercier and Father Joseph Clifford Fenton resurrected some of these critiques.

¹Jerome, *Epistle 58.5*. Jerome’s critique reflects the tensions between monastic and clerical life that arose in desert monasticism. See Cyprian Davis and Christian Raab, ‘Monasticism and Priesthood in the Egyptian Desert’, *American Benedictine Review*, 72 (2021), 142.

²*De periculis novissimorum temporum*, prol. (Geltner, p. 53). For the Latin text along with an English translation, see *William of Saint-Amour: De periculis novissimorum temporum*, ed., trans. and introduction by G. Geltner, Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations, vol. 8 (Leuven: Peeters, 2008).

³*De periculis*, prol. (Geltner, pp. 57–59).

The Second Vatican Council and the postconciliar period continued to raise questions concerning the religious priesthood. Christian Raab notes the neglect of the vocation in magisterial documents:

Apart from a few scattered references in *Lumen Gentium* (art. 43), *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (arts. 1 and 8), *Optatum Totius* (introduction), and *Christus Dominus* (art. 28), scarcely a mention is made of their existence. In only one place (CD 34) do religious priests earn more than a single contiguous sentence of reflection, and here the Council emphasizes what religious priests have in common with diocesan clergy.⁴

This tendency to treat priesthood or religious life in isolation from each other has had a reductionist effect on the religious priesthood. As Brian Daley succinctly puts it, ‘The Council’s model for priestly ministry is clearly that of the diocesan clergy’.⁵ Priestly identity is often reduced to parochial functionality. This view could imply that religious priests are something of an anomaly if not an aberration.

To overcome this neglect, Raab undertakes an ecclesiological and Balthasarian examination of the religious priesthood because he believes it is necessary to defend the vocation from ‘within a postconciliar rather than a preconciliar framework’.⁶ As he notes, von Balthasar’s ecclesiology ‘not only does not exclude religious priests, but arguably requires them’.⁷ Current debates could also benefit from expanding the theological inquiry beyond Balthasarian frameworks.⁸ In this article, I present a Christological and Thomistic approach that complements Raab’s ecclesiological and Balthasarian one by identifying Christ as a religious priest. I highlight one of Aquinas’s patristic sources (Gregory the Great) and one of his greatest spiritual interpreters of modern times (Columba Marmion).

Raab’s remarks that ‘The story of religious priesthood begins in the fourth century’.⁹ While he correctly identifies the historical developments of the fourth century, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the story of the religious priesthood begins with Christ. In *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II described the religious priest as one who ‘reproduces in his life the fullness of the mystery of Christ’.¹⁰ The pontiff’s insight suggests that the best way to understand the religious priesthood is to examine how Christ unites the priesthood and religious life. As the Church faces recent scandals of clericalism and abuse, describing Christ as a religious priest might also seem like an

⁴Christian Raab, *Understanding the Religious Priesthood: History, Controversy, Theology* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), p. 103.

⁵Brian E. Daley, Introduction to *Understanding the Religious Priesthood*, p. xiv. For a discussion of the ‘parochialization’ of priestly ministry, see John O’Malley, ‘One Priesthood: Two Traditions’, in *A Concert of Charisms: Ordained Ministry in Religious Life*, ed. by Paul K. Hennessy (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), pp. 9–24.

⁶Raab, *Religious Priesthood*, p. 89.

⁷Raab, *Religious Priesthood*, pp. 2–3.

⁸For a presentation of conciliar and postconciliar teaching (especially *Pastores Dabo Vobis*) on the complementarity of the priesthood and religious life, using the legislative tradition of the Dominican Order as a comparison, see Basil Cole and Paul Connor, ‘Consecrated Life and the Ministerial Priesthood: Mystery of Complementary Configuration to Christ’, in *Christian Totality: Theology of the Consecrated Life* (New York: Alba House, 1997), pp. 317–58.

⁹Raab, *Religious Priesthood*, p. 19.

¹⁰John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996), p. 30.

exercise in clerical and religious pride. I argue, however, that a Thomistic identification of Christ as a religious priest actually precludes clerical pride while simultaneously affirming the great worth of the religious priesthood.

While Aquinas does not use the terms ‘religious priest’ or ‘monk priest’ often¹¹ or explicitly identify Christ as a religious priest, his articulation of both religious life and the priesthood is decidedly Christocentric, tied especially to Christ’s self-sacrifice. Aquinas was unique among his contemporaries in appropriating Gregory the Great’s description of religious life as a holocaust.¹² Paul VI similarly identified sacrifice as central to the essence of the religious priesthood. He says that ‘the union in the same person of religious consecration, which offers one totally to God, and of the priestly character, configures one in a special way to Christ who is both Priest and Victim’.¹³ Focusing on the imitation of Christ’s victimhood and offering Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, Paul VI avoids reducing the priesthood to functionalism and helps explain John Paul II’s claim about the religious priest. When given a Thomistic theological grounding, the spirituality of holocaust helps the religious priest avoid both utilitarianism and clericalism.

In this article, I begin by examining Christ’s grace of headship. As ‘the font of all grace’, Christ, ‘being the Head of all, has the perfection of all graces’.¹⁴ This means that he is not only *the priest* and ‘the fountainhead of the entire priesthood’¹⁵ but also *the religious* and source of religious life. Next, I show the connections in Christ’s priestly self-sacrifice with key features of Aquinas’s understanding of religious life. First, by examining Aquinas’s understanding of the virtue of religion, the idea of holocaust, and the role of charity, I show how Christ’s total sacrifice is both priestly and religious. Second, by examining more closely the purpose and role of the vows and counsels, I show that Christ’s life manifests the perfections at which the vows and counsels aim. At this point, I turn to the reflections of Columba Marmion, the great Benedictine abbot and Thomist, on Hebrews 10. Perfectly uniting in his person the ultimate perfections of the priesthood and religious life, Christ is both the source and the exemplar of the religious priesthood. I conclude with theological and pastoral implications.

¹¹Aquinas appears to use the term ‘religious priest’ only twice (*De perfectione spiritualis vitae* cap. 26; *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 184, a. 8, corp; hereafter *ST*). He uses the term ‘monk priest’ only five times (*IV Sent.*, d. 17 q. 3 a. 3 q. 4 arg. 1; *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem* cap. 4 (twice); *ST* II-II, q. 187, a. 1, sc.; *ST Supplementum* q. 8, a. 4, obj 1) – all of which appear in quotations. Aquinas wrote three works on religious life. The Leonine text along with French translations of these ‘polemical’ works and notes can be found in Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Le Perfection, c’est la charité. Vie Chrétienne et Vie Religieuse dans l’Église du Christ: Contre les ennemis du culte de Dieu et de l’état religieux, La perfection de la vie spirituelle, Contre l’enseignement de ceux qui détournent de l’état religieux* (Paris: Cerf, 2010). All English translations from these works are my own. Except where otherwise indicated, all English translations of the *Summa* will come from *Summa Theologiae*, vols. 13–20 in *Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by Laurence Shapcote, ed. by John Mortensen and Alarcón Enrique (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012).

¹²See Andrew Hofer, ‘Aquinas’s Use of Patristic Sources in His Theology of Religious Life’, in *Reading the Church Fathers with St. Thomas Aquinas: Historical and Systematic Perspectives*, ed. by Piotr Roszak and Jörgen Vijgen, *Bibliothèque de l’École des Hautes Études: Sciences religieuses* 189 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), p. 329. Gregory’s *Homilies on Ezekiel* is Aquinas’s most cited patristic work on religious life (pp. 329–31).

¹³Paul IV, General Audience (18 November 1966), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966), p. 1181.

¹⁴*ST* III, q. 22, a. 1, ad 3.

¹⁵*ST* III, q. 22, a. 4, corp.

1. Diversity of grace unified in Christ

In the first article of his question on Christ's priesthood, Aquinas enunciates an important principle he adverts to regularly: 'other men have certain graces distributed among them: but Christ, as being Head of all, has the perfection of all graces'.¹⁶ Aquinas employs this principle to counter the objection that, since in the Old Law lawgivers and priests were distinct, Christ should not be both the giver of the New Law and a priest. Aquinas points to an earlier article in which he showed that Christ contained all the gratuitous graces found variously distributed among the saints.¹⁷ He also invokes the principle when he discusses the various duties and states in the Church. The variety of duties and states shows the perfection of the Church. Even among natural things, he notes, 'perfection, which in God is simple and uniform, is not to be found in the created universe except in a multiform and manifold manner, so too, the fullness of grace, which is centered in Christ as head, flows forth to His members in various ways, for the perfecting of the body of the Church'.¹⁸

In addition to suggesting a non-competitive understanding of different duties and states, Aquinas's use of this principle shows how the religious priest reproduces more of the mystery of Christ. Aquinas makes a triple distinction between state, order, and office. The religious priest lives in the religious state, has the order of priesthood, and may or may not have the office of caring for souls. The secular priest lives in the secular state, has the order of priesthood, and may or may not have the office of caring for souls. Aquinas compares the goodness of state and office. The religious state surpasses the office of a parish priest 'because a religious pledges his whole life to the quest of perfection, whereas the parish priest or archdeacon does not pledge his whole life to the cure of souls', since he receives his charge for a time and a particular flock from the bishop. The comparison between the religious state and the office of the parish priest, therefore, 'is like the comparisons of the universal with the particular, and of a holocaust with a sacrifice which is less than a holocaust according to Gregory'.¹⁹

Two important conclusions follow. First, the religious priest unites the preeminence of sacerdotal orders – which he shares with secular clergy – with the preeminence of the state of perfection – which he shares with non-ordained religious. He may also receive the office of care of souls. The unification of the perfection of state and order is characteristic of Christ. Second, Aquinas appeals to the idea of holocaust, which provides an important link between Aquinas's understanding of religious life and Christ's priesthood. We turn now to that idea.

2. Holocaust: religious life and priesthood

Religion denotes a relationship with God through worship.²⁰ Every virtuous action, if done to honor God, constitutes an act of religion and a sacrifice.²¹ External sacrifices of religion signify internal reverence for God.²² The adoration (*latría*) of God involves both

¹⁶ST III, q. 22, a. 1, ad 3.

¹⁷ST III, q. 7, a. 7, ad 1.

¹⁸ST II-II, q. 183, a. 2, corp.

¹⁹ST II-II, q. 184, a. 8, corp. Cf. Gregory, *Homilies on Ezekiel* II.8.16.

²⁰ST II-II, q. 81, a. 1, corp.

²¹ST II-II, q. 81, a. 4, ad 1, ad 2.

²²ST II-II, q. 84, a. 1, corp.; q. 85, a. 2, corp.

physical and spiritual acts.²³ Aquinas divides the goods one can offer to God into three categories: goods of the soul, goods of the body, and external goods.²⁴ He builds his understanding of the religious life on sacrificing this threefold good. Religious make their whole life a living *latría* by sacrificing all they have to divine service.²⁵

Aquinas's treatment of religion also sets the stage for discussing Christ's priesthood. Since Christ had all the virtues most perfectly,²⁶ he had the virtue of religion in the highest degree. This insight explains why Aquinas treats Christ's priesthood in a section on his relationship to the Father.²⁷ Aquinas affirms that Christ is both priest and victim. He gives three reasons why humanity must offer sacrifice: to remove sin, which turns us away from God; to be preserved in grace by adhering to God; and 'that the spirit of man be perfectly united to God'. The three types of offerings in the Old Law – sin offerings, peace-offerings, and holocausts – correspond to this triple need – all of which Christ fulfills in his sacrifice of himself.²⁸ Each of these types of sacrifice, as acts of religion, directs one to God. Most importantly, Aquinas describes Christ's priestly self-sacrifice as a holocaust – 'so called because the victim was wholly burnt'.²⁹

Religious life participates in this highest type of sacrifice. In *Contra impugnantes*, Aquinas cites Gregory the Great: 'when someone vows something to God and does not vow another thing, it is a sacrifice. When he truly vows all he has, all he lives, all he loves to almighty God, it is a holocaust'.³⁰ In the *Summa*, Gregory is employed to support calling religious by the name of the virtue because they 'give themselves up entirely to the divine service, as offering a holocaust to God'.³¹ Offering something to God is necessary for all, 'but to offer oneself wholly, and one's possessions to the worship of God belongs to perfection'.³²

Some contemporary articulations of religious life have criticized Aquinas's characterization of the vocation in terms of holocaust. Michael McGuckian accuses Aquinas of a dualistic Manichaean undercurrent in his conception of the human person that depreciates the body as simply a hindrance to spiritual perfection.³³ For McGuckian, Aquinas's teachings that earthly things must be forsaken for spiritual things and that perfection consists in withdrawing from concern for them 'contradict the doctrine of creation, for "God saw all that he had made and found it very good." (Gen 1:31)'.³⁴ While McGuckian's criticisms demonstrate numerous misunderstandings of Aquinas's

²³ST II-II, q. 84, a. 2, corp.

²⁴ST II-II, q. 85, a. 3, ad 2.

²⁵ST II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad 5; cf. q. 186, a. 1, ad 2.

²⁶ST III, q. 7, a. 2, corp.; q. 7, a. 9, corp.

²⁷ST III, q. 20, prol.

²⁸ST III, q. 22, a. 2, corp.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰*Contra impugn.* cap. 1; *Homilies on Ezekiel* II.8.16. Cf. *De perfect.* cap. 12.

³¹ST II-II, q. 186, a. 1, corp. Aquinas then cites *Homilies on Ezekiel* II.8.16.

³²ST II-II, q. 186, a. 1, ad 1.

³³Michael McGuckian, *The Charismatic Structure of the Church: Priesthood and Religious Life at Vatican II and Beyond* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2021), pp. 406–21. McGuckian includes Augustine and Francis of Assisi in his critique: 'It has to be recognised that St Augustine in particular was also a carrier of Manichaean dualism' (p. 408); 'It is useful to note that Manichaeism also infected St Francis' (p. 409). These criticisms of individuals fall within a broader critique of monasticism in general: 'There seems to be a Manichaean dimension to the whole monastic movement' (p. 408).

³⁴McGuckian, *Charismatic Structure*, p. 411.

writings, this claim is, perhaps, the most surprising. One only has to read Aquinas's extensive questions on *physical* creation to realize how highly he values its goodness. In the context of the religious holocaust, however, it is worth noting that Aquinas does not speak of the religious as abandoning *evils* but *goods*. Employing an Aristotelian distinction³⁵ – rather than Platonic or Manichaean dualist principles as McGuckian alleges – Aquinas defines the human *good* as threefold, including not only the goods of the soul but also the goods of the body and external goods.³⁶ It is precisely this human *triplex bonum* – that these goods are *goods* and *human* goods – that allows one to make a pleasing sacrifice. For one does not sacrifice evil things, but good things.

Both Christ's priestly sacrifice of himself and his religious life constitute a holocaust, a total offering to divine service. Christ's priestly activity is a holocaust because he offers himself totally as the victim. The identification of priest and victim in the offering is unique to Christ's priesthood and is not found in the priesthood of the Old Law.³⁷ To be a victim does not belong to the definition of a priest, but it does to Christ's priesthood. Again, we find Christ uniting in himself those things formerly found distinct. Jonathan Kaltenbach notes that 'Thomas is showing here how Christ Himself superabundantly fulfills the *sacrifices* of the Old Law' as well as its priesthood.³⁸ He not only fulfills the priesthood of the Old Law – he is himself the perfect sacrifice prefigured in the Old Law, making his whole life religious.

Christ's sacrifice is not only an act of religion – it is, above all, an act of supreme charity. What ignited his religion was the 'fire of charity in Christ's holocaust'.³⁹ Aquinas's description gives an apt image for the relationship between the virtues of religion and charity. While not a theological virtue, religion excels the other moral virtues since it 'approaches nearer to God than the other moral virtues, insofar as its actions are directly and immediately ordered to the honor of God'.⁴⁰ Religion directs humanity to the worship of God, but it pertains 'immediately to charity that man should give himself to God, adhering to him by a union of the spirit'.⁴¹ The goal of human life is union with God. Since charity is what actually unites man with God, 'the perfection of the Christian life consists radically in charity'.⁴² Religion, however, by dedicating one to God's service, disposes to charity. Directed by charity, religion moves one to further acts of religion – including sacrifices.⁴³ Aquinas, therefore, understands religious life – as a state of perfection – as geared toward the perfection of charity, a notion continued in the tradition and reflected in the name of the Vatican II document on religious life (*Perfectae Caritatis*). All the actions and disciplines of the religious life

³⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, cap. 8, 1098b.

³⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 85, a. 3, ad 2; q. 186, a. 7, corp. Cf. q. 73, a. 3, corp.

³⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 22, a. 2, obj 2 and ad 2.

³⁸ Jonathan Kaltenbach, 'Christ the Priest in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas' (doctoral dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2017), p. 122. Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 101, a. 2, corp.; q. 101, a. 4, ad 1; q. 102, aa. 2–3. For a description of the holocaust according to the Old Law, see *ST* I-II, q. 102, a. 3, ad 8.

³⁹ *ST* III, q. 46, a. 4, ad 1.

⁴⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6, corp.

⁴¹ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 2, ad 1.

⁴² *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 1, corp.

⁴³ For the relationship between the virtues of religion and charity see Gregory Pine, 'Religious Life as a State of Perfection', *Nova et Vetera*, 19 (2021), 1193–98.

are dispositive toward the pursuit of the perfection of charity and undertaken for the sake of growth in charity.⁴⁴

Charity characterizes Christ's priestly activity. The *sed contra* authority for the article affirming that Christ is both priest and victim is Eph 5:2: 'Christ has loved us, and has delivered himself up for us, an *oblation* and a *victim* to God for an odor of sweetness'.⁴⁵ Aquinas sees the apostle emphasizing Christ's exemplary charity as the model for imitating the love of God. Saint Paul invites us to 'walk in love' (Eph 5:1) because 'a son must imitate his father'⁴⁶ and love 'is the way in which God is followed more closely'.⁴⁷ But imitating the love of the Father 'must be done according to Christ's example'.⁴⁸ Christ walked in charity by making his whole life a living sacrifice of love. Because of 'the very devotion with which out of charity he humbly endured the passion', Christ's sacrifice was meritorious.⁴⁹ His exceeding charity made his sacrifice efficacious in effecting union with God.⁵⁰ This voluntary enduring of suffering, motivated by charity, made Christ's death a true sacrifice offered as a priest.⁵¹ Christ's victimhood, therefore, unites priesthood and religious life in his person.

3. Vows and counsels: Fixing the will

Religious offer a holocaust by embracing the counsels through vows, placing themselves in the state of perfection wherein they are a holocaust.⁵² Vows bind one by perpetual obligation 'to refrain from worldly affairs, which they might lawfully use, in order more freely to give themselves to God, wherein consists the perfection of the present life'.⁵³ Full dedication to religion disposes one to charity: 'It is manifest that the human heart is carried more intensely into one thing in proportion as it is withdrawn from many others. Therefore, the soul of man is more perfectly carried into loving God the more it is removed from love of temporal things'. 'Therefore, all the counsels, which invite us to perfection', Aquinas continues, 'tend to this, that the soul of man should be turned away from his affection for temporal things, so that the mind may more freely tend to God in contemplation, loving him and fulfilling his will'.⁵⁴ By disencumbering one of love for temporal things, the counsels allow the soul to turn all its energy and affection toward God.

The perpetual obligation to these counsels by vows distinguishes the religious priest in a state of perfection from the diocesan priest who could observe the counsels without taking a vow.⁵⁵ The perfection of the Christian life consists in charity,

⁴⁴ST II-II, q. 186, a. 1.

⁴⁵ST III, q. 22, a. 2, sc. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶*Super Epistolam ad Ephesios Lectura* 5, lect. 1, no. 267. The English translation is from *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, vol. 39 in *Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by Fabian R. Larcher and Matthew Lamb, ed. by John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012).

⁴⁷*Super Eph* 5, lect. 1, no. 269.

⁴⁸*Super Eph* 5, lect. 1, no. 269.

⁴⁹ST III, q. 22, a. 4, ad 2.

⁵⁰ST III, q. 48, a. 2, corp.

⁵¹ST III, q. 48, a. 3, corp.

⁵²ST II-II, q. 186, a. 6, corp. Here Aquinas again cites *Homilies on Ezekiel* II.8.16.

⁵³ST II-II, q. 184, a. 5, corp.

⁵⁴*De perfect.* cap. 7.

⁵⁵ST II-II, q. 184, a. 6, corp.

which is a commandment for all. The counsels are means or instruments to aid growth in charity.⁵⁶ The *state* of perfection, however, refers specifically to the one who binds 'himself in perpetuity and with a certain solemnity to those things that pertain to perfection'.⁵⁷ State 'denotes a kind of position, whereby a thing is disposed with a certain immobility in a manner according with its nature'.⁵⁸ Being in the religious state gives firmness or stability in acting.

The vows are essential components of the self-holocaust that characterizes the religious state of perfection. But, Aquinas raises the objection, Christ did not take any vows.⁵⁹ Does this prevent describing Christ as a religious priest? To answer this question, we must further examine the nature of the vows and the counsels.

Aquinas's understanding of vows is central to his argument that religious life is the following of Christ. Vows are promises made to God that bind one to some particular thing.⁶⁰ The benefit of a vow is that 'by vowing we fix our wills immovably on that which it is expedient to do'.⁶¹ Vows give our wavering wills stability in doing good. This means that vows do not lessen but actually increase our freedom. Since, 'as one's liberty is not lessened by one being unable to sin, so, too, the necessity resulting from a will firmly fixed to good does not lessen the liberty, as instanced in God and the blessed'.⁶² The vows fix the will firmly to offer oneself to God's service. This fixity of the will imitates the stability of God's will and the will of the blessed in heaven.

Vows belong to the virtue of religion because they direct the thing vowed 'to the worship or service of God'.⁶³ Hence, the vows of religious life direct the whole of one's life to God's service. In fact, vows allow one to offer a sacrifice that extends into the future. Aquinas notes that a vow might not seem like a sacrifice since 'he who takes a vow does not yet offer something to God, but only promises it'.⁶⁴ Aquinas replies that the one who vows something 'gives it already in as far as he binds himself to give it'.⁶⁵ A vow allows one to temporally extend one's self-sacrifice beyond the present moment and embrace one's future. This characteristic also explains why an act done because of a vow becomes more meritorious: first, because it 'is an act of religion which is the chief of the moral virtues'; second, because the vow offers to God not only the current act but also the power to act in the future; third, 'because a vow fixes the will on the good immovably and to do anything of a will that is fixed on the good belongs to the perfection of virtue'.⁶⁶ Vows elevate action to the level of virtue, dedicate power to act in the future, and provide virtuous action with stability.

But the religious does not merely bind himself to certain helpful modes of life. By binding himself to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the religious imitates Christ. In discussing the evangelical counsels, Aquinas makes it explicit

⁵⁶ST II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.

⁵⁷ST II-II, q. 184, a. 4, corp.

⁵⁸ST II-II, q. 183, a. 1, corp.

⁵⁹ST II-II, q. 88, a. 4, obj 3.

⁶⁰ST II-II, q. 88, a. 1, corp.

⁶¹ST II-II, q. 88, a. 4, corp.

⁶²ST II-II, q. 88, a. 4, ad 1.

⁶³ST II-II, q. 88, a. 5, corp.

⁶⁴ST II-II, q. 88, a. 5, ad 2.

⁶⁵ST II-II, q. 88, a. 5, ad 2.

⁶⁶ST II-II, q. 88, a. 6, corp.

that religious life is the imitation of Christ.⁶⁷ In *Contra retrahentes*, Aquinas appeals to the model poverty of Christ on the cross.⁶⁸ Ulrich Horst argues that this emphasis on imitating Christ *through* the evangelical counsels represents a development in the theology of religious life from primarily ascetic reasons to primarily Christological ones.⁶⁹ Christ is the model and reason for living the counsels. Aquinas calls Christ the ‘founder of poverty’.⁷⁰ The perfection of religious life, then, ‘consists chiefly in the imitation of Christ’.⁷¹ Aquinas does not want to appeal merely to a saint, even the founder of an institute, as the primary model. We see the same priority reflected in *Perfectae Caritatis*: ‘Since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels, let this be held by all institutes as the highest rule’.⁷²

That Aquinas points to religious life as the imitation of Christ *crucified* is particularly telling. Vowing poverty, chastity, and obedience, the religious not only imitates Christ’s life but also Christ’s holocaust. Aquinas links the triple holocaust of the vows with Christ’s holocaust on the altar of the cross in his commentary on Psalm 19.⁷³ After describing the holocaust of the vows, Aquinas immediately adds that ‘this can be applied to the sacrifice of Christ, who offered himself totally on the altar of the Cross’.⁷⁴ Elsewhere, Aquinas matches the threefold human good with the triple renunciation of the vows.⁷⁵ By the vows, the religious offers the totality of himself to God as a holocaust in imitation of Christ.

As Kevin Grove has recently argued, the *tertia pars* shows that Christ lived the evangelical counsels. Christ ‘was not vowed to the evangelical counsels, but he became the teacher of these counsels’.⁷⁶ Grove points to the question on Christ’s manner of life (ST III, q. 40), which contains articles on Christ’s austerity – temperance in place of continence – (a. 2), his poverty (a. 3), and his obedience (a. 4). Christ’s temperance, whereby he renounces bodily pleasure, replaces but fulfills and encourages the first counsel of chastity.⁷⁷ His fasting teaches us to sacrifice the goods of the body.⁷⁸ All of Christ’s life from the manger to the cross manifests his voluntary poverty.⁷⁹

⁶⁷See *Contra impugn.* cap. 1. Aquinas points to Ps 39:18 – ‘*ego autem mendicus sum et pauper*’ – to argue that Christ is a mendicant and provides the exemplar for mendicant poverty. See also ST II-II, q. 187, a. 5, sc.

⁶⁸*Contra retrah.* cap. 15.

⁶⁹Ulrich Horst, ‘Christ, *Exemplar Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, According to Saint Thomas Aquinas’, in *Christ Among the Medieval Dominicans: Representations of Christ in the Texts and Images of the Order of Preachers*, ed. by Kent Emery, Jr and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 260.

⁷⁰ST II-II, q. 188, a. 7, corp.

⁷¹ST II-II, q. 186, a. 5, sc.

⁷²*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

⁷³See Gilles Emery, ‘La sacerdoce spirituel des fidèles chez saint Thomas d’Aquin’, *Revue Thomiste*, 99 (1999), 236.

⁷⁴*Super Psalms* 19, no. 159. This translation comes from *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 29 in *Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by Sr. Albert Marie Surmanski and Sr. Maria Veritas Marks (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2022).

⁷⁵ST II-II, q. 186, a. 7.

⁷⁶Kevin Grove, ‘Desires, Counsels, and Christ: The Christology of Aquinas’, *Jaarboek Thomas Instituut te Utrecht*, 35 (2016), 63. For the following brief summary of the counsels in Christ’s life, I follow Grove. See especially pp. 63–68.

⁷⁷ST III, q. 40, a. 2.

⁷⁸ST III, q. 40, a. 2, ad 3.

⁷⁹ST III, q. 40, a. 3.

Christ's obedience to God was most perfect (Phil 2:8) – seen in his obedience even to the precepts of the Law.⁸⁰ Aquinas also shows Christ putting the counsels into action in his conquest of temptation (ST III, q. 41).⁸¹ In so doing, Christ presents his own life of the counsels as an example for overcoming temptations.

Aquinas gives a privileged place to the counsel of obedience, a preeminence that indicates why religious embrace the counsels by vows. Obedience is preeminent because it offers one's will, includes all the other vows, and 'extends properly to those acts that are closely connected with the end of religion'.⁸² Vowing obedience subjects the will to God's will. This offering of the will to God is greater than the offering of the body or external goods.⁸³ By sacrificing the will, obedience touches the heart of religious life, the stable fixing of the will to the service of God. Christ extends the invitation to this counsel with his words 'follow me' (Matt 19:21).⁸⁴ Obedience means following Christ since, as Aquinas says, 'to obey is to follow another's will'.⁸⁵ The vow of obedience fixes the will in the following of Christ, like him offering all to God.

Christ's obedience gives this counsel a sacrificial mode. As Aquinas explains, 'in Christ obedience is commended above all according to Phil. 2:8, *He became obedient unto death*'.⁸⁶ The Philippians citation is an important text for Aquinas. He cites it as the *sed contra* when he asks whether Christ should have suffered on the cross.⁸⁷ In the next question, Aquinas asks specifically whether Christ died out of obedience. The *sed contra* again cites Phil 2:8. In the body of the article, Aquinas explains that Christ's death 'was a most acceptable sacrifice'. Since 'obedience is preferred to all sacrifices', Aquinas continues, 'it was fitting that the sacrifice of Christ's Passion and death should proceed from obedience'.⁸⁸ Christ's death on the cross manifests the perfection of obedience. Aquinas affirms this: 'Now Christ had most perfect obedience to God, according to Phil. 2:8: *Becoming obedient unto death*. And hence He taught nothing pertaining to merit which He did not fulfill more perfectly Himself'.⁸⁹ Christ's perfect holocaust of obedience teaches us that the perfection of obedience consists in total sacrifice to the will of God.

We are now in a position to see how the vows constitute a necessary component of the religious following of Christ and how these relate to Christ's own religious life. Christ calls religious to follow him 'not anyhow, but in such a way as not to turn back'.⁹⁰ The vows fix the will of the religious in following Christ's total holocaust of himself in his life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Christ did not have to take these vows because his will was already fixed in the good of the counsels. It was not fitting (*non competebat*) for Christ to take vows because 'his will was firmly fixed on the good,

⁸⁰ST III, q. 7, a. 3, ad 2; q. 40, a. 4, corp.

⁸¹Grove, 'Desires, Counsels, and Christ', pp. 68–71.

⁸²ST II-II, q. 186, a. 8, corp. Cf. q. 186, a. 5, ad 4: Obedience 'extends to the disposition of a man's whole life, and in this way it has a certain universality'.

⁸³ST II-II, q. 186, a. 8, corp.

⁸⁴ST II-II, q. 186, a. 5, sc.

⁸⁵ST II-II, q. 186, a. 8, ad 1.

⁸⁶ST II-II, q. 186, a. 5, sc.

⁸⁷ST III, q. 46, a. 4, sc.

⁸⁸ST III, q. 47, a. 2, corp.

⁸⁹ST III, q. 7, a. 3, ad 2.

⁹⁰ST II-II, q. 186, a. 6, ad 1.

since he was a *comprehensor*.⁹¹ Already enjoying the beatific vision, his will had the stability and permanence a vow imposes.⁹² This supereminent perfection of the vows existed in Christ from the moment of the Incarnation.

4. Columba Marmion and Hebrews 10

In his homily for the beatification of Columba Marmion, John Paul II, himself known to have avidly read Marmion as a young priest,⁹³ presented the abbot's teaching as a treasure for the Church in the third millennium, pointing out particularly his focus on the spiritual life of priests and religious.⁹⁴ In his theology of the priesthood, Marmion focused less on particular pastoral issues and more on the interior life. As a result, his teaching provides a healthy balance to the parochial functionary model of the priesthood.⁹⁵ While Marmion gave detailed conferences on religious life and the priesthood, he only infrequently treated the religious priest directly.⁹⁶ His reflections on the priesthood and religious life, however, can be fruitfully drawn together. Briefly examining Marmion's Thomistic interpretation of Heb 10:5–7 will shed Christological light on the religious priesthood.

Formed by the assiduous study of Aquinas,⁹⁷ Marmion found 'the master of his thought' in the Angelic Doctor.⁹⁸ He placed Aquinas 'at the top of his list of authorities, after the Bible and the Rule of St Benedict'.⁹⁹ Hebrews 10:5–7, one of Marmion's favorite Scripture passages, provided him with an evocative description of Christ's fundamental priestly attitude.¹⁰⁰ Hebrews puts Psalm 40 on the lips of Christ as he enters the world: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.... Behold, I come to do your will, O God'. Marmion turns to this passage frequently, seeing in these 'first words of Christ on coming into the world',¹⁰¹ the key to understanding Christ as the ideal of both the priest and the religious. At the Incarnation, Christ's human will fixes in the Father's intention that he offer his whole self as a holocaust. Marmion aptly describes the moment in a priestly mode: 'In one glance of the eye, he grasps the series of sacrifices, of sufferings, of immolations which will fill his life. He embraces them all'.¹⁰² This will to glorify the Father and to satisfy for sin 'remains fixed

⁹¹ST II-II, q. 88, a. 4, ad 3.

⁹²ST II-II, q. 88, a. 4, ad 1.

⁹³David L. Touns, Forward to *Union with God: Letters of Spiritual Direction by Blessed Columba Marmion*, ed. by Raymond Thibaut, trans. by Mother Mary St. Thomas (Bethesda, MD: Zaccheus Press, 2006), p. x.

⁹⁴John Paul II, 'Homily at the Beatification of Pius IX, John XXIII, Tommaso Reggio, William Chaminade and Columba Marmion' (Rome, 3 September 2000).

⁹⁵Marie-Michel Philipon, *La doctrine spirituelle de Dom Marmion* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1954), p. 243.

⁹⁶Most of Marmion's conferences on the priesthood were delivered to diocesan priests or seminarians. See Thibaut, Preface to *Le Christ, idéal du prêtre* (Denée, Belgique: Les Éditions de Maredsous, 1951), pp. 1–8.

⁹⁷Raymond Thibaut, *Dom Columba Marmion, Abbé de Maredsous (1858–1923): Un Maître de la vie Spirituelle* (Maredsous: Les Éditions De Maredsous, 1953), p. 356.

⁹⁸Philipon, *La doctrine spirituelle*, p. 20.

⁹⁹Mark Tierney, *Blessed Columba Marmion: A Short Biography* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 148.

¹⁰⁰Philipon, *La doctrine spirituelle*, p. 250.

¹⁰¹Columba Marmion, *Le Christ, idéal du prêtre*, p. 215.

¹⁰²Marmion, *Le Christ, idéal du prêtre*, p. 129.

forever in the center of his heart'.¹⁰³ Christ's priesthood begins with the hypostatic union when he freely fixes his will to offer all the sacrifices of his life as a holocaust.

Marmion also turns to this passage to describe religious profession. At the moment of the Incarnation, Christ's self-offering virtually contains all his future sacrifices. Marmion describes Christ's life as a continuation of that initial holocaust. Religious vows imitate the prolongation of Christ's hypostatic holocaust: 'The one who gives himself to God by religious profession renounces all; he comes to God with all that he has, all that he is: "Behold, I come", *Ecce venio*; and he offers all this to God, without reserving anything for himself. That is being a victim; that is offering a holocaust'.¹⁰⁴ By professing vows, the religious offers his whole future life as a living holocaust, moving forward with his will fixed upon God's will. Marmion insists, therefore, that 'there is no action, after the holy Mass, more pleasing to God than the oblation of oneself by religious profession'.¹⁰⁵ Christ similarly sets his will immovably on all the sacrifices of the counsels, above all his obedience unto death, from the instant of his Incarnation.

That willing self-offering in obedience also undergirds Christ's priesthood. Aquinas affirms that Christ's human will was obedient to the Father with 'obedience unto death. Hence it is written (Phil 2:8) that he became *obedient* to the Father *unto death*'.¹⁰⁶ Aquinas focuses on Christ's obedience immediately before considering Christ's priesthood. As Kaltenbach puts it, 'In terms of Christ's worship of the Father, His voluntary obedience to the Father's commands stands as a necessary prerequisite'.¹⁰⁷ The sacrifice that Christ offers is above all the good of his soul, the interior sacrifice of the will, which constitutes the fullest sense of sacrifice, a holocaust.¹⁰⁸ Constituted by the hypostatic union as a priest, Christ obediently fixed his will upon a life offered as a total holocaust, thus establishing himself stably in the mode of life imitated by religious vows.

5. Conclusion

The mystery of Christ, priest and victim, provides the best locus for reflecting on the nature and value of the religious priesthood. These vocations, which we often find separated historically, theologically, and magisterially, when united reproduce what is a single reality in Christ. The perpetual commitment to total self-sacrifice in the pursuit of charity by fixing the will through the counsels imitates Christ's obedient holocaust of love. From the moment of the Incarnation, Christ fixed his will upon a life of self-holocaust out of charity, thus entering the world as a religious priest.

This reflection on Christ's religious priesthood has several ecclesial ramifications. First, these insights might inform our understanding of holy orders. Theological reflection and priestly formation often treat religious priesthood as an afterthought or assume a diocesan, parochial model. Understanding Christ as a religious priest should moderate an excessive focus on the priest as a parish functionary. The model of the

¹⁰³Marmion, *Le Christ, idéal du prêtre*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁴Marmion, *Le Christ, idéal du moine* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1931), p. 147.

¹⁰⁵Marmion, *Le Christ, idéal du moine*, p. 158.

¹⁰⁶ST III, q. 20, a. 1, corp.

¹⁰⁷Kaltenbach, 'Christ the Priest', p. 101.

¹⁰⁸Kaltenbach, 'Christ the Priest', p. 123.

priesthood is Christ – not parochial function. The *Catechism* quotes Aquinas's commentary on Hebrews to affirm the uniqueness of Christ's priesthood: 'Christ alone is the true priest, but others are his ministers'.¹⁰⁹ These other ministers participate variously in Christ's priesthood. The religious priest who, according to John Paul II, 'reproduces in his life the fullness of the mystery of Christ', participates more fully in Christ's union of priest and victim, as Paul VI indicates.¹¹⁰ While all ministerial priests participate in this mystery,¹¹¹ the religious priest reproduces more fully Christ's perfect identification of priest and victim because of his imitation of Christ's total holocaust. This assertion is not to deny the sacrificial nature of the diocesan priesthood. The diocesan priest offers himself as a true sacrifice, but 'a sacrifice which is less than a holocaust',¹¹² since he does not offer every aspect of his life by vows.

Second, seeing Christ as a religious priest may help better understand the relationship between bishops and religious priests. While many bishops often feel ill-equipped or unsure how to relate to religious,¹¹³ their own episcopal share in 'the fullness of the sacrament of orders'¹¹⁴ establishes a certain natural affinity to religious priests. Recognizing how religious priests reproduce the mystery of Christ may aid them in living out their own sacerdotal life and recognizing the place of religious priests in the Church.

Third, seeing Christ as a religious priest shows that priesthood is not alien or inimical to religious life but intimately connected and enriching. Since religious life is an imitation of Christ's life, the religious priest fittingly enjoys another complementary way of imitating Christ. Because the religious priest especially reproduces Christ's obedient sacrifice of charity, this deepened identification with Christ leaves no room for pride or clericalism.

Fourth, conceiving of Christ as a religious priest may help religious priests appreciate more deeply their configuration to Christ and reproduction of the mystery of his hypostatic priestly and self-immolative holocaust as simultaneously offeror and offering. Like Christ, their whole life is dedicated to the service of God. For example, the Benedictine priest who does not exercise parochial ministry, but celebrates Mass, prays the Divine Office in his monastery, and acts under obedience, should not think of his priesthood as somehow less than that of diocesan clergy. Offering the holocaust

¹⁰⁹*Lectura super Epistolam ad hebraeos* 7, lect. 4, no. 368. This translation comes from *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Hebrews*, vol. 41 in *Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by Fabian Larcher, ed. by John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012); John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edn (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), p. 1545.

¹¹⁰VC 30; AAS 58, pp. 1178–82.

¹¹¹See Fulton Sheen, *The Priest is Not His Own* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963); Fulton Sheen, *Those Mysterious Priests* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974).

¹¹²ST II-II, q. 184, a. 8, corp. Aquinas affirms that the secular priest 'requires a greater inward holiness than that which is requisite for the religious state' because of his ministry.

¹¹³Basil Cole wrote an interesting article on the relationship between bishops and religious prompted by a prominent bishop's statement, when asked during a question-and-answer period why bishops have not done much to stem the decline in consecrated life, that most bishops 'feel incapable of doing or saying anything significant with regard to the religious life, since they do not live it themselves' ('The Bishop and Consecrated Life: A Necessary Link?', *Nova et Vetera*, 5 (2007), 495–510, at 496). Cole goes on, with the help of Aquinas, to show the intrinsic connection between religious life and the episcopate.

¹¹⁴*Christus Dominus*, 15; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 21.

of Christ and the sacrifice of praise stands at the heart of the priesthood. The combination of consecration and ordination uniquely configures him to Christ's mode of sacrifice. Like Christ, his sacerdotal and sacrificial attitude centers especially on obedience: 'For the religious priest, this capital disposition is reduced to a spirit of the most complete obedience'.¹¹⁵ Especially by his vow of obedience, the religious priest joins himself to the obedient love of Christ who offered himself as a holocaust to the Father.

¹¹⁵Marmion, *Le Christ, idéal du prêtre*, p. 216.

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