

# 64. VOWS

## Summary:

1. A vow is a promise made to God to do some good thing. Over the course of the Church's history an elaborate theology and canonical practice developed around the vows of religion, traditionally poverty, chastity, and obedience. – 2. In his writings, De La Salle speaks of specific vows made by individual saints, but not of the vows of religion. – 3. In the Founder's lifetime some Brothers made vows of obedience, stability, and association to keep gratuitous schools, all ordered to the mission of the Institute. – 4. In his writings, even though many Brothers were not bound by vows, De La Salle considers them all to be consecrated by their entry into the Institute. – 5. It is disputed whether it was the Founder's intention that the Brothers should eventually take vows of poverty and chastity. – 6. The vows of the Brothers have evolved from 1725, when the Bull of Approbation introduced the vows of poverty and chastity, until 1987 when the Rule defined the vows as chastity, poverty, obedience, association for the service of the poor through education, and stability.

## 1. THE MEANING OF THE WORD

1.1. The dictionaries define the word vow in religious terms as a promise made to God or to some saint to do some specific good thing. The solemn promises made by members of religious orders are known as the "vows of religion." From the 13th century on, the vows of religion were consistently poverty, chastity and obedience, derived and motivated by the notion that these were three evangelical counsels distinct from the commandments binding on every Christian.

1.1.1. Recent biblical and theological scholarship has shown that there is little basis in the New Testament for two classes of Christians, ordinary Christians who observe only the commandments, and "perfect" Christians who practice the counsels. It is stressed today that the so-called hard sayings of Jesus are addressed as challenges to anyone who would be a Christian. Also, there is a sense in which chastity and obedience are binding on everyone, whereas poverty is a social evil that every

Christian should strive to eliminate. The tradition of "evangelical counsels" remains strong however and is used consistently in the documents of Vatican II, the 1983 Code of Canon Law, and other official Vatican documents pertaining to the religious life, and especially to the vows of religion.

1.2. The theology of vows current in the 17th century, and in the traditional theological manuals ever since, derives from the extensive treatment of the subject by Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. In this theology, to make a vow was considered an act of the virtue of religion. The matter of any vow would have to be a promise to do something that would be a greater good, objectively or for the person. Once the vow is made, it entails objective obligations that transcend the control of the subject making the vow. Vows are thought to be useful for the person, as well as for the glory of God. Since the matter of the vow has a social aspect, vows can be dispensed only by the social authority, the natural or the ecclesiastical society, affected by the vow. Only ecclesiastical authority has

the power to designate certain vows as solemn. In this theology, the three vows of religion constitute the religious state as a state of perfection. The vows can lead to the perfection of charity since they involve sacrifice for a higher good of personal control over the fundamental goods of human existence, namely possessions, sexuality, and power.

1.3. Prior to the 13th century, the vows of religion were simple vows, meaning that acts contrary to the vows do not involve invalidity, e.g. a marriage contracted by a person with a vow of chastity. After the 13th century, the vows of religion professed in religious orders were declared solemn, with serious consequences for the validity of certain ecclesiastical and civil acts, such as marriage, ordination, legitimacy of birth, inheritances, flight from the monastery etc. As a result, legal conflicts in dealing with individual cases arose between secular and ecclesiastical authorities, between bishops and the religious clergy. To address these problems, by the 17th century there had developed, side by side with a theological casuistry on the obligations of the vows, extensive jurisprudence on questions relating to the validity of monastic vows, their annulment and dispensation.

1.4. Religious vows were high on the list of targets for the Protestant reformers of the 16th century. Part of the reason was that the scriptural basis for the structure of religious life was seen to be weak. More important, perhaps, were the widespread abuses that had developed in the late middle ages, especially the forced entrance into religious life of persons underage, those who were an embarrassment to their families, or an obstacle to the rights of primogeniture. In addition, there were flagrant violations in some orders and monasteries of the letter and the spirit of the vows. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) and the subsequent tightening of Catholic discipline did much to eliminate these abuses and to engage the religious orders, both old and new, in the reform of the Church.

1.5. In the post-Tridentine period there were new challenges from within the Church to the traditional monastic approach to religious life and the vows. The founders of the new active institutes

often began, as did Ignatius and his companions, with vows primarily focused on the specific mission of the congregation. Eventually, the Jesuits adopted the traditional vows of religion, but added a specific vow to maintain the missionary dimension of the engagement. Some of the newer congregations opted for no vows at all, as did the Vincentians and the Oratorians of Philip Neri and Cardinal Bérulle. The tradition was strong enough, however, to have most of the rapidly multiplying congregations adopt the three traditional vows, often in the form of simple rather than solemn vows, with or without a specific missionary vow, and to build the theory and practice of religious life around them.

## 2. VOWS IN THE WRITINGS OF DE LA SALLE

2.1. In his catechetical writings, De La Salle summarizes the traditional teaching on the nature of a vow. Thus, a vow is a promise made to God to do some good thing, but it does not prevent doing something better, e.g. a vow to make a pilgrimage would yield to a vow to enter religious life (Da 117-118). A vow is an act of religion since thereby a person recognizes the sovereign dominion of God over the self (Da 118 B). Vows are made only to God because a vow is an act of religion by which we consecrate to the worship and service of God all the things we promise by the vow (Db 88 C). A vow made to the Blessed Virgin Mary is in fact a vow made to God in honor of Mary (Da 118 C). A solemn vow of chastity is an impediment to marriage (Da 393 A) and the basis for dispensation from a solemn engagement to marry (Da 394 C).

2.2. De La Salle's meditations provide many examples of vows, all of them evidently private vows, made by various saints, especially the vow of virginity made by Mary (MF 191.1), Saint Genevieve (MF 95.1), Saint Catherine of Siena (MF 118.1), Saint Mary Magdalene of Pazzi (MF 130.1), Iphigenia, the daughter of the King of Ethiopia (MF 167.3), and Saint Francis de Sales (MF 101.1). Significantly, De La Salle notes the missionary vows made by Ignatius and his first follo-

wers, namely, a vow to leave all their goods, to work for the salvation of souls and their own spiritual advancement, and to submit entirely to the Pope (MF 148.3). Saint Teresa of Avila made a vow to do anything she knew to be more agreeable to God (MF 177.3). The strangest reference to a vow is the story De La Salle relates about the body of Saint Severus. When that saint's casket was being moved to the cathedral of Rouen, in every place where it rested overnight, the weight of it became so heavy that it could not be moved until a vow was made to build a church on the site (MF 103.3).

2.3. Nowhere in this writing does De La Salle discuss the vows of religion as such. Although the Brothers were expected from the beginning and by Rule to share everything in common and to lead a chaste and celibate life, the Brothers did not take vows of poverty and chastity in the Founder's lifetime. Whether or not he intended that the Brothers would eventually take the vows of religion is still a matter of much dispute.

2.4. However that may be, De La Salle treats extensively of the values, the virtues, and even the fundamental obligations represented by the vows of religion. Obedience in its most demanding forms was a driving force in his own life, and the vow of obedience that the Brothers did take was a stabilizing force for the young Society. Obedience is the theme of a whole series of meditations the Founder wrote for the Sundays after Epiphany (MD 1-15). Poverty, too, was a foundational element in the origins of the Institute: in the Founder's own conversion from a life of relative ease to hear the cry of the poor and to become poor himself in order to minister to them. The conditions in which the Founder lived with his Brothers were poor indeed, a situation reflected most tellingly in the meditation for Christmas day (MF 86). The motivation for the Brothers to lead a celibate and chaste life, and the means to preserve chastity are frequent themes not only in the Rule, but in the Collection and the meditations.

### 3. THE VOWS OF THE BROTHERS IN THE FOUNDER'S LIFETIME

3.1. In the course of the first assembly of the principal Brothers of the young Society, 1686 seems to be the best date, discussion took place on the possibility of giving stability to the enterprise by taking vows. The vow of obedience was mentioned prominently and it seems that some Brothers also suggested a vow of chastity, after the Founder cautioned prudence, the Brothers finally decided to take only the vow of obedience. The biographers disagree on the duration: Blain says for three years, Maillefer and Bernard say for one. In the light of subsequent practice, Brother Maurice Hermans suggests that this first vow would have been made for three years, but annually renewed (CL 2,35). In any case, it is certain that, from a canonical point of view, this vow was a private vow and it seems equally certain that not all the Brothers but only those present at the assembly made the vow.

3.2. In the year 1691 the affairs of the Institute were in a perilous state. The Founder was recovering from a near-fatal illness, the Brother he had chosen to succeed him had died, Brothers were leaving the community and those that remained were undertrained and overworked. To provide for the physical and spiritual renewal of the veterans and for the formation of the recruits, De La Salle was able to lease property in suburban Vaugirard. To put the struggling society on a firmer footing, he asked for the collaboration of two of his most trusted Brothers. On November 21, 1691, the feast of the Presentation of Mary, De La Salle, Brother Nicolas Vuyart, and Brother Gabriel Drolin pronounced what has since been known as the "heroic vow." Addressing themselves to the Most Holy Trinity, they consecrated themselves by a vow of association and union to bring about the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools. The vow has been called heroic because in very difficult circumstances the three men vowed to oblige themselves, without being able to withdraw from the obligation, to stay together

even if only the three remained and they would have to beg for alms and live on bread alone. Again, this was a private vow, and potentially a perpetual vow, although it could be argued that the obligation ceased once the Society was established. Only a few years later the Society had enough stability for the Brothers to adopt a Rule, to elect a superior, and for some of them to make perpetual vows.

3.3. It was in 1694 at Vaugirard, at the close of what is now considered the first general chapter of the Institute, that De La Salle and twelve Brothers made perpetual vows for the first time. Assembled on Trinity Sunday in a remote part of the house, one after another, beginning with the Founder, they made perpetual vows of obedience to the body of the Society, stability, and association to conduct gratuitous schools. Without formal ecclesiastical approval, these perpetual vows were private vows from the point of view of church law, as were all the previous and subsequent vows made by the Brothers during the Founder's lifetime.

3.4. In his writings, the Founder rarely refers to the Brothers making vows. In a letter to Gabriel Drolin in 1704, he refers to the dispensation from vows requested by Brother Gabriel's blood brother, Gerard (L 15.4). More significantly, he writes in 1706 to Brother Hubert, then 23 years old and the Director at Laon, "With regard to the vows, it is not I but you who must decide on that; the decision to make them must be your own. But since you ask my opinion, I must say that I see nothing in your conduct that could be an obstacle" (L 34.3). Rather differently, he had written in 1705 to Brother Paulin, "I very much want you to take triennial vows, my very dear Brother. Be ready to do so when I come to Rouen" (L 52.4). The only other references to the vows of the Brothers occur in the Rule of 1718 in specific regulations concerning the vows and Brothers who have or have not made them.

#### 4. CONSECRATION AND VOWS AT THE ORIGINS OF THE INSTITUTE

4.1. If references to the vows of the Brothers are rare, the same is not the case with regard to consecration. As noted in the appropriate article, De La Salle considered all of the Brothers as consecrated to procure God's glory from the moment of their entrance into the Society. Their quality as consecrated persons was considered quite independently of whether they had made or ever would make vows, whether temporary or perpetual.

4.2. The fact that all Brothers were considered consecrated but not all made vows raises the question of what the vows add to the commitment of a person already consecrated. In raising the question of vows in the heroic vow of 1691, and in the discussions about perpetual vows in 1694, De La Salle seems to have considered the vows a means of providing an element of stability for an important but otherwise precarious establishment. Without either civil or ecclesiastical status of any kind, the young Society could be held together by the willingness of some of its members at least to take upon themselves before the Lord, with the implication of divine penalties for infidelity, the obligation to remain in association and obedience to assure the survival of the gratuitous Christian schools. It might be said that consecration is a fundamental but unspecified disposition before the Lord, whereas vows add the note of specificity and obligation (R 2).

#### 5. THE VOWS OF THE BROTHERS AND THE VOWS OF RELIGION

5.1. Much speculation has centered around the question of what the intention of the Founder might have been with regard to having the Brothers take the vows of religion. It could be argued that this was his intention since he borrowed freely from other practices of the religious orders at the



time and the Rule already contained chapters on poverty and chastity. De La Salle's reluctance to admit the vow of chastity in 1686 and 1694 is explained by the biographers in mostly practical terms, suggesting that in due time the Brothers might have been ready and De La Salle prepared to allow them this step. Another indication comes from the fact that, after the Founder's death, the superiors, who knew him personally and could have divined his intentions, so readily accepted the incorporation of the three vows of religion into the Bull of Approbation.

5.1.1. On the other side, there is reason to think that De La Salle wanted to preserve the originality of his creation, that there were as many differences as similarities between the other religious congregations, defined as such by the "vows of religion," and his own. De La Salle would have been aware of the complex canonical legislation and theological casuistry in the contemporary approach to the vows of religion. He would have known, too, of the preference of the Vincentians and the Oratorians to eschew the vows of religion for more creative ways to encourage commitment to spiritual growth and to the apostolate. Above all, perhaps influenced by the example of the Jesuits, it is significant that the vows taken by De La Salle and his early disciples were all geared to the mission of the Institute rather than the practice of the religious life as defined in the monastic tradition by the three vows.

## 6. THE VOWS OF THE BROTHERS FROM 1725 TO 1987

6.1. With the conferment of the Bull of Approbation in 1725, the vows of poverty and chastity were added to obedience, and the specific vows were designated as stability and teaching the poor gratuitously.<sup>1</sup> The vows of the Brothers were now officially designated as simple and public vows in an institute of pontifical right.

6.2. In the period of reorganization after the French Revolution, and the subsequent spread of the Institute there was a growing tendency in institute literature to give priority to the vows of reli-

gion, and to the evangelical counsels from which they were supposedly derived, rather than to the special vows derived from the vision of the Founder and the origins of the Institute. The result was the development in the Institute of a kind of monastic spirituality, a preference for an unhistorical and a priori definition of religious life, together with an assimilation into the Institute of the casuistry that had been elaborated by the moral theologians and canonists around the obligations of the vows. The culmination of this movement can be seen in the 1950 publication by the Institute of the *Short Treatise on the Religious State*.

6.3. With the insistence by Vatican II that religious institutes adapt and renew themselves on the basis of the Gospel, the charism of the Founder, and the signs of the times, there was a new and powerful motive to examine afresh the vision of the Founder in relation to the Gospel and contemporary needs. This was the task of the 39th General Chapter of the Institute, held in two sessions in 1966 and 1967, and designated officially as the renewal Chapter called for by the decrees of the implementation of Vatican II. In the process of revising the Rule, the Chapter affirmed the priority of religious consecration over the vows that express it. Rather than viewing them primarily as source of moral and juridical obligations, the Chapter emphasized that vows are a response on the part of the Brother to a special call from God, an expression of the self-gift of the Brother in daily community life, and a guarantee of the permanence of this self-gift within the Institute.

6.3.1. The renewal Chapter of 1967 gave particular attention to the special vows. In the minds of some, there was reason to eliminate them. With the worldwide spread of the Institute and the complex problems of financing the schools, the vow of teaching the poor gratuitously had given rise to an embarrassing series of legalistic interpretations, adaptations, and dispensations. The vow of stability was considered by some to be superfluous and to add nothing specific to the commitment implied in the other vows. As the discussion progressed, however, the Chapter became sensitive to the importance of the special vows at the origins of the Institute and the manner in which these vows ex-

pressed the originality of the Founder's creation and the unique mission of the Institute. Accordingly, it was decided, rather than eliminate these vows, to renew them and to redesignate them. The vow of teaching the poor gratuitously became a vow to serve the poor through education, the vow of stability became a vow of fidelity to the Institute to be made only at the time of perpetual profession.

6.3.2. In 1986, when the Rule had to be submitted for definitive approval by church authority, the 41st General Chapter opted to bring the designation of the special vows even closer to the vows

made by the earliest Brothers. The vow of stability was reinstated, with the articles of the Rule integrating the element of fidelity with stability. The mission vow was expanded to include the traditional and fundamental notion of association under the title of a vow of association for the educational service of the poor (1987 Rule, 24, 25).

<sup>1</sup> Although the vow formula after 1726 always referred explicitly to the fact that the vows were made "according to the Bull...", the editions of the Rule prior to 1852, and the vow formulas in use until 1927 designated the fifth vow as "teaching gratuitously". The expression "teaching the poor gratuitously" was used in the Rule after 1852 and in the vow formula of 1947.

### Complementary themes:

Chastity; Consecration; Counsels; Mission; Obedience; Poverty.

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