

# 9. CONSECRATION

## Summary:

1. The essential element in consecration, which may take many forms, is to make something holy by setting it apart. – 2. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the fundamental consecration of Christians is effected by the sacraments. Other devotional rituals are used to give to consecration a special quality. – 3. In his catechetical writings and in his meditations, De La Salle has frequent references to ritual and sacramental consecration. – 4. In Catholic usage consecration has a particular meaning when applied to entry into a religious institute. – 5. In his writings addressed to the Brothers, De La Salle considers that the action of leaving the world constitutes them as consecrated, whether or not they have made vows. For him, the element of separation is paramount, making specific demands on the Brothers. – 6. As the practice of making vows developed in the Institute, the traditional formula gave priority to consecration over the vows intended to express it. – 7. Ever since Vatican II, there has been a better understanding of the relation between consecration and vows. It may even be possible to envision some form of ritual consecration for members of the Lasallian family who are not Brothers.

## 1. MEANING OF THE WORD

1.1. The various meanings assigned to the terms “consecration” and “being consecrated” have not undergone significant change from the seventeenth century to the present, nor the meanings altered in any significant way in translation from one language to another, at least within the languages that derive the word from its Latin root, the adjective *sacer*, *sacra*, *sacrum* or the verb *sacrare*. To consecrate in its root meaning is to make holy, to set apart in some way whatever is being consecrated, to remove the consecrated entity from routine usage or contact and to locate it in the realm of the holy, which by definition is totally “Other”.

1.2. The Christian usage of consecration comes very early in the tradition and reflects the wide applications that are observable in other religions and cultures. Although the term “sacred” or “holy” in its strict and proper sense is predicated of God alone, by extension and analogy, persons, places, and things are “consecrated” or “made

holy” by reason of a special relation to the divine. Thus there is a tradition for consecrating church buildings, utensils, and articles of clothing used in ritual; places, such as those associated with manifestations of the divine; and, especially, persons who in one way or another are said to be consecrated to God.

1.3. Consecration can be formal or informal, official or private, depending on the manner in which it is brought about, whether by personal initiative or in a ritual ceremony presided over by a competent religious functionary. Consecration can admit of varying degrees of intensity and permanence. For that reason, a distinction is sometimes made between a simple blessing and a consecration. Most often consecration connotes totality and durability. In that case, the act of consecration constitutes a person, place, or thing in what is sometimes called a consecrated state. From another point of view, however, establishment in a consecrated state does not mean that the consecration receives its full meaning in the single act, once for all. Consecration at its best includes a dynamic

element demanding not only constant renewal but action to express and authenticate the consecration in concern for others and the promotion of the glory of God.

1.4. By definition consecration is made to God alone in response to the divine initiative. For Christians, this is often expressed in terms of consecration to the person of Christ, sometimes in one of his historical states, as, for example, consecration to the Infant Jesus or to the crucified Christ. In some devotional practices, many of them popular in the 17th century, consecration is made to Mary, the Mother of God, or even to Saint Joseph. In such devotional acts, the person aims to identify with the total consecration of Mary, or Joseph, to God in Christ.

In popular usage in some languages and cultures, the transitive verb "to consecrate" loses its specific religious reference to become a metaphor for dedication or involvement, as when a person is said to consecrate a period of time to a specific task.

## 2. SACRAMENTAL CONSECRATION

2.1. In the Catholic tradition, the fundamental form that consecration takes is the result of the reception of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and holy orders. By reason of the sacramental rite, not only is the Christian made a participant in the divine life of grace, but also is endowed with an "indelible" character that constitutes that person in an ontological consecrated state as sharing in varying degrees in the priesthood of Christ.

2.2. The word consecration is also used in a very specific sense to refer to the Eucharistic action whereby the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. In the tradition of the western Church, this has been thought to occur when the priest pronounces the words of institution over the elements of bread and wine. Thus this moment in the Mass is often referred to as "the consecration", and the words themselves as "the words of consecration".

2.3. In this context, it might be noted that consecration can be linked to the notion of sacri-

fice, the two words being derived from a common root. To sacrifice something, in the etymological meaning of the word, is to make it holy (*sacrum facere*). In religious terminology, however, sacrifice has come to refer to a sacrificial act or ritual which involves in some way or other a negative element, not only of separation but even of destruction or annihilation. It could be argued that the negative connotation in the idea of sacrifice is secondary to its primary meaning that coincides with the idea of consecration, setting something apart, removing it to the realm of the holy and the "Other". Thus the primary reality in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and its re-presentation in the "sacrifice" of the Eucharist, is not so much the destruction of the victim, but the passage from death to resurrected life, a total transformation into the realm of the eternal and the holy.

## 3. RITUAL AND SACRAMENTAL CONSECRATION IN THE WRITINGS OF DE LA SALLE

3.1. The words consecration, *se consacrer*, *être consacré*, occur most frequently in the Founder's writings in his catechetical works intended for the schools and in his meditations for the use of the Brothers. In his catechisms, De La Salle uses the terms in all their traditional religious applications. Thus he explains how the Church consecrates Sundays, feast days and the holy seasons by setting them apart to honor God or some divine mystery (e.g. Dc 4 C). By contrast, the days of the carnival are described as consecrated entirely to the devil (Dc 80 C). In various rituals, the Church consecrates churches, sacred places, and persons such as deacons. The priest consecrates the bread and wine at Mass (Db 234).

3.2. De La Salle puts special emphasis on the consecration of persons in the various sacramental rituals. By baptism, Christians are consecrated just as temples are (Da 223 C). The custom of placing the baptized child on the altar is a reminder of the connection between the consecration of the child and the consecration of the host at Mass (Da 231 A). The Founder joins the idea of sacrifice to consecration when he says that in the

Mass the divine victim is offered to God and at the same time consecrated (Da 264 B). The element of separation in consecration is stressed when he remarks that a cleric, in receiving the tonsure, is separated from the world and consecrated to God (Da 374 B).

3.3. In his meditations for the feasts of the saints, De La Salle speaks of holy persons as consecrated. In the transitive use of the verb, the Founder recalls that the saints consecrate their goods, their actions, their hearts, and their entire lives to God. He then encourages the Brothers to do the same (MF 104.2). Reflexively, they consecrate themselves and so become consecrated in a permanent and ongoing sense. Certain saints, most notably the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph, are spoken of as having consecrated themselves by a vow of virginity or chastity (Dc 201). Thus for De La Salle, consecration by vow is one form, but not the only or the most typical form, that religious consecration can take.

#### 4. RELIGIOUS CONSECRATION

4.1. Analogous to sacramental consecration, and building upon it, is the consecration that takes place when a Christian determines to devote his or her life entirely to the service of God. Over the course of the Church's history religious consecration has taken many forms, most commonly by entry into a religious institute approved by the Church. All of the essential elements are present in such an action: a separation from the secular world, entire and permanent commitment to the pursuit of holiness and the glory of God. The personal consecration that begins with entry into the religious institute becomes official when it is ratified through the ritual acceptance by the competent superior, in most institutes by the profession of public vows.

4.2. The importance of consecration as an essential element in religious institutes has been re-emphasized recently in the revised Code of Canon Law. Abandoning the older categories of religious "orders" and "congregations", the Code now uses the term "Institutes of Consecrated Life". In theo-

logical terms, religious consecration is seen as a grace, the result of a divine initiative, to which the human person responds. A document issued in conjunction with the new Code and entitled *Essential Elements in Religious Life* begins with this statement:

Consecration is the basis of religious life. By insisting on this, the Church places the first emphasis on the initiative of God and the transforming relationship to him which religious life involves. Consecration is a divine action. God calls a person whom he sets apart for a particular dedication to himself. At the same time, he offers the grace to respond so that the consecration is expressed on the human side by a profound and free self-surrender. The resulting relationship is a pure gift. It is a covenant of mutual love and fidelity, of communion and mission established for God's glory, the joy of the person consecrated and the salvation of the world (# 5).

This paragraph expresses well the fine balance in consecration between the vocation, the divine action, and the human response. By definition, consecration means to make something holy. Only God can make something or someone else holy by an action that lies in the invisible and unfathomable mystery of God. When we speak of human beings "consecrating" themselves, it can only mean that in a symbolic act such persons set themselves aside totally and exclusively for the glory of God. The symbolic act is all that human beings can do to consecrate anyone or anything; the rest must be left to God.

#### 5. THE BROTHERS' CONSECRATION IN THE WRITINGS OF DE LA SALLE

5.1. In his meditations composed exclusively for the Brothers and based on the gospel readings assigned to the Sundays and feasts of the liturgical year De La Salle often reminds the Brothers that they are consecrated men. The Brothers, like the children they teach, have already been consecrated to the triune God in Baptism (MD 46.3). For De La Salle, the religious consecration of the Brother is accomplished when he leaves the world behind and enters the Institute with the intention of consecrating himself entirely to God. These meditations are addressed to all the Brothers in terms of

their consecration, whether or not they had made vows. At the time the Founder was writing, it was not required that the Brothers take vows, much less perpetual vows, in order to remain in the Institute. Yet the Founder addresses them all as consecrated men.

5.1.1. The most extensive references to the Brothers as consecrated are found in De La Salle's meditation for November 21, the feast of the Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin. He notes that "it was on this day that she consecrated herself to God that she might belong to him for life" (MF 191.1). Then he addresses the Brothers, "When you retired from the world, you consecrated yourself to God for the purpose of living a community life totally disengaged from all that the world offers for the contentment of the senses" (MF 191.1). The Founder evidently thinks of the consecration of the Brothers as something permanent and progressive when he continues, "You should look on this day as the beginning of your happiness here below... Not only for one day did you consecrate yourself to God. Since you consecrated your soul, and since your soul will live eternally, so your donation to God is everlasting" (MF 191.1).

5.2. The element in consecration that De La Salle stresses most forcefully is separation from the world. Thus he writes for the feast of Our Lady of the Snow, "We are not in a position to offer earthly goods to the Most Blessed Virgin, since we have left the world and have given up everything in order to consecrate ourselves to the service of God" (MF 151.1). He cites the example of St. Augustine to remind the Brothers that retreat and prayer are the means to disengage the self totally from the world and so to consecrate themselves totally to God (MF 161.1). De La Salle sees Michael the Archangel, who defied Satan with the cry "Who is like unto God?" as the inspiration for the Brothers to consecrate themselves to nothing less than God (MF 125.2).

5.2.1. Consecration by separation from the world also demands a distinctive style of behavior. In asking the Brothers on the last day of the calendar year to reflect on their behavior, the Founder

insists that "it is from their behavior in public that one can know how to identify persons consecrated to God" (MF 92.2). In his meditation on the cure of the ruler's daughter in Matthew 9, De La Salle focuses on the action of Jesus dismissing the wailing crowd and the flute players. The Founder compares this tumult to contacts with seculars, reading newspapers, gossips, using tobacco and the like: "All these practices are not in any way appropriate for persons who have consecrated themselves to God by separating themselves entirely from contact with the world and entering a state which commits them to leading a regular life in community" (MD 76.3). In commenting on Simeon's remark in Luke 2 that Jesus will be a sign "that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed", De La Salle reminds the Brothers that their speech betrays their hearts. Then he quotes St. Bernard's remark that for seculars, jokes and raillery remain only jokes, but "for persons consecrated to God they are in effect blasphemies" (MD 5.3).

5.3. The Founder's meditation for Septuagesima develops the point that obedience is necessary if persons consecrated to God are to make progress in living out the implications of their consecration. The gospel reading from Matthew 20 assigned for that day has the words of the parable, "Why stand you here all the day idle?" De La Salle comments, "There are many persons committed to their communities of whom we might ask the same question. Though consecrated to God and professing to work toward the perfection of their state, they remain without making progress in virtue" (MD 13.1). In reference to the "abomination of desolations" in Matthew 24, De La Salle remarks, "It is in effect an abomination when persons in a community who, because they are consecrated to his service, ought to live only for God and think only of pleasing him, neglect God or abandon him altogether for their own inclinations and passions" (MD 86.2).

5.4. Somewhat more positively, in commenting on the command in Matthew 6 to "seek first the Kingdom of God", the Founder writes, "You should live for God alone, and the life of your soul should be the life of God himself. You ought



likewise to nourish yourself with God by thinking of his holy presence as often as you can. That which constitutes the life of the saints is precisely their continual attention to God, and this also should constitute the life of those who are consecrated to him, and who seek only to accomplish his holy will, to love him, and to cause others to love him" (MD 67.1). Referring to the Kingship of Christ that was manifest on Palm Sunday, De La Salle tells the Brothers, "So that Jesus Christ can reign in our souls, you must offer the tribute of all your actions, which should be totally consecrated to him" (MD 22.1).

## 6. CONSECRATION IN THE VOW FORMULA OF THE BROTHERS

6.1. At the conclusion of the first general assembly of the Brothers on Trinity Sunday in 1686 (the most likely date), a select group of Brothers expressed their consecration for the first time by a vow. These Brothers took what under the circumstances had to be a private vow, a vow of obedience for three years, renewable annually. It is reasonable to suppose that the address of the vow on that Trinity Sunday is the same as that used in the Institute ever since: "Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, prostrate before your infinite and adorable majesty, I consecrate myself entirely to you..."

6.1.1. The structure of this vow formula is important, stressing the totality of the consecration by placing it prior to any mention of a specific vow. The first textual evidence of the formula to survive comes from the so-called "heroic vow", the foundational vow taken in 1691 by De La Salle himself and two of his most trusted Brothers, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin. After the address to the Trinity, their text reads, "we consecrate ourselves entirely to you to procure with all our ability and efforts the Society of the Christian Schools". Only then did they "make the vow of association and union to bring about and maintain the said establishment" at a time when the very existence of the young Society was threatened. The occasion was the feast of the Presentation of

Our Lady, November 21, 1691. It is easy to understand why, many years later, De La Salle would focus his meditation for this feast on the theme of consecration.

6.2. In 1694 at Vaugirard, twelve Brothers made perpetual vows for the first time. The formula has the same structure as that of the heroic vow: first the address to the triune God and the total consecration to procure God's glory; then the specific vows of stability, association to conduct gratuitous schools, and obedience. Despite subsequent changes required by church authority in the designation of the individual vows, the Lassaillian structure of the formula of vows, with its progression from total consecration to specific votal engagements, has been retained in the Institute.

## 7. CONSECRATION IN THE TRADITION OF THE INSTITUTE

7.1. The papal Bull of Approbation granted to the Institute in 1725 introduced the vows of poverty and chastity, retained obedience and stability, and transformed the vow of association to conduct gratuitous schools into a vow of teaching the poor gratuitously. In effect, this grafted the vision of De La Salle onto the pre-existent theology of the vows of religion and the requirements of Canon Law. For the next 225 years, the focus in the Institute literature and in programs of formation and renewal tended to be on the vows and their obligations, rather than on consecration itself. This in spite of the fact that up until 1917 it was possible for a Brother to remain in the Institute without vows, but consecrated in the Founder's understanding of the term.

7.2. In its call for renewal, Vatican Council II asked religious institutes to adapt and renew themselves on the basis of the Gospel, the charism of the Founder, and the signs of the times. In the watershed 39th General Chapter, the Institute of the Brothers was in a position to recapture the Founder's vision by reason of the serious studies undertaken over the previous ten years on the life of De La Salle and the origins of the Institute that had been published in the *Cahiers lasalliens*. In ad-

addressing the question of consecration and vows, the Chapter opted to reassert the primacy of consecration in relation to the vows. The document entitled *Religious Consecration* prepared by the chapter commission expresses it this way, "The total gift of self gives to the specific vows all their meaning in terms of radical consecration. This total gift is operative even before it is detailed by specific engagements and verbal formulas". For that reason, the revised *Rule and Constitutions* formally adopted by the Institute as a normative document contains an entire chapter devoted to the significance of consecration that is placed prior to the chapters relating to the individual vows. In the definitive *Rule* officially approved by church authority in 1987, the same sequence and emphasis is observed in the single chapter dealing with consecration and vows entitled, "The Consecrated Life". It is noteworthy that this expression and emphasis, traditional in the Institute from the beginning, has now been adopted as well into the official language of the Church as it approves the Brothers as an "Institute of Consecrated Life".

7.3. With the development of the idea and the reality of the Lasallian family, whereby the Brothers share their mission, their spirituality, and their community life, the question arises whether the consecration of the Brothers can in some way be shared.

7.3.1. It might seem at first glance that consecration is precisely the element that distinguishes the Brothers from those who are tied to the Lasallian family in some less formal way. In this view, the Brothers, as members of the Institute and consecrated by vow, constitute the core to which the rest of the Lasallian family is joined in various ways. At this stage of the development, that is an accurate description of the canonical and legal status of the Brothers in the wider La-

sallian family. It underscores two basic elements from the tradition: first, the definitive separation from the world to live in community (the element stressed by De La Salle); and second, the profession of the vows of religion and the special vows proper to the Institute (the basis for the canonical distinction).

7.3.2. From another point of view, however, it is possible to raise questions about the extent to which the profession of vows is essential to consecration. Neither does it seem necessary to suppose that consecration demands a perpetual and irrevocable commitment, as the practice of temporary profession makes clear. The element of separation from the world is equally problematic. Recent general chapters have stressed that the Brothers belong to the wider community of the Church (Rule 1987, 33, 52); that the Brothers' communities are open communities (Rule, 1987, 57); that their mission is shared (Rule 17) and adapted to various cultures (Rule 1987, 18). Although the lifestyle within the Brothers' community remains an important element in the vocation, the separation from the world is not as absolute and clearly defined as it was in the time of the Founder. Lay people too, especially those sharing the Lasallian spirituality and mission, can be just as distanced from the "world" in the negative sense as any one of the Brothers.

7.3.3. These considerations suggest that it is quite appropriate that Lasallian organizations develop rituals of consecration for as many of the Lasallian family who might wish to express their commitment in this way. If other aspects of the Lasallian tradition can be shared, there does not seem to be any serious reason why members of the Lasallian family should be deprived of the powerful dynamism associated with the element of consecration in that tradition.

### **Complementary Themes:**

Association; Community; Mission; Vows; World.

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