

# Following Love Poor, Chaste and Obedient: The Consecrated Life

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CATHOLIC INFORMATION SERVICE



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*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.... He has sent me...."*

Detail of the hand of the Father sending the Holy Spirit upon Jesus.  
St. John of the Fields Chapel, Polish Institute, Rome.  
Photo by Giorgio Benni. Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

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# “Come, follow me!”

(Mark 10:21)

## ***“Go, sell all that you have”***

In the 10th chapter of Saint Mark’s Gospel, a rich man runs up to Jesus, kneels before him and exclaims, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus immediately replies with a surprising question of his own: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:17-18).

It sounds as if Jesus is denying his own goodness, but in reality, he is putting the rich man on his guard. In a sense, Jesus is admonishing him: Watch out, because you are about to meet Goodness himself, and you may be in for a surprise.

After issuing this salutary warning, Jesus reminds the man of the duty to observe the “commandments” (Mark 10:19), which he then goes on to enumerate. Significantly, he mentions only six, rather than all 10. And the six he selects concern only the “second tablet” of the Law, which regulates man’s relations with his neighbor.

“Teacher,” the man then responds, “I have kept all these commandments since my youth” (Mark 10:20). One can almost hear the unspoken question that accompanies this declaration: So why am I not completely at peace? Am I still missing something? Jesus “looking upon him loved him” (Mark 10:21), and puts his finger on the problem: Yes, you

are lacking one thing (cf. Mark 10:21), but it is not something that you can merely add to what you already have. In fact, it is a gift so great that you can receive it only by giving up everything else for its sake. Hence Jesus' astonishing invitation: "Go, sell all that you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21).

Instead of reacting with joy and relief, the rich man's "countenance fell and he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Mark 10:22). Jesus had offered him what he asked for and more: fulfillment, joy, the "kingdom of heaven," *life*. He had shown this young man what, elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus would call the "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:46). Yet the young man is more attached to his things than to the Maker of all things. He has no space in himself for so surpassing a gift.

This attachment shows his forgetfulness of the chief lesson that the *Torah*, the Law of Moses, is meant to teach: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is *One!*" (Deuteronomy 6:4). The rich man goes away sorrowing because he has forgotten that Israel's only treasure is the God who is "merciful and gracious ... and abounding in steadfast love" (Exodus 34:6) – and God's incomparable glory.

The rich man, Mark tells us, was saddened "at this word." In the Old Testament, "word" can be a synonym for "commandment." Jesus, then, has confronted the rich man with a commandment that was not on his initial list of six. Which one? Surely the one that Jesus himself later calls "the first" (Mark 12:29): "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God,

the Lord is One; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). The rich man’s “No” to Jesus’ call is a refusal to confess God’s primacy over all things. It is a “No” to the love that is the chief commandment of the Law.

There is something surprising about Jesus’ invitation to the rich man. For Jesus doesn’t merely summon the man to the wholehearted love of God enjoined by Moses in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy. He also identifies this love for God with readiness to follow *him*: “Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor . . . Then come and follow *me*” (Mark 10:21, emphasis added).

Jesus confronts the rich man with much more than he had bargained for: The summons to radical poverty is the unexpected revelation of Jesus’ own identity as the Father’s “only-begotten” Son (John 1:14). It is an invitation to know the Son who is “true God from true God”<sup>1</sup> from the inside, to taste his total freedom for unclouded intimacy with the Father. What other “treasure in heaven,” what other “eternal life,” could there be outside of the Son’s eternal communion with the Father? Even before God created the world to draw it into his love, the Father unstintingly shares with the Son the whole divine nature in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus refers to this greatest of all mysteries, the Holy Trinity. Jesus himself, the Son of God incarnate, is the revelation that the “one Lord” is in fact the Three-in-One, a communion of life and love.

After addressing his disciples, who return from their mission rejoicing, Jesus prays:

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and have revealed them to babes. Yes, Father, for thus it was pleasing in your sight. All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Luke 10:21-22).

### **Another Rich Young Man**

In late 19th-century France, the Gospel story of the rich man seemed about to repeat itself – only with a young man far less concerned with inheriting eternal life.

Charles de Foucauld, a wealthy young aristocrat who had lost his parents in childhood and his faith in adolescence, was a cadet at the prestigious military academy of Saint-Cyr.<sup>2</sup> He thoroughly enjoyed his life. Or perhaps, not so unlike the young man in Mark’s Gospel, he felt an inexplicable void that he tried to fill with all the pleasurable things in the world. A classmate remembered, “If you have not seen Foucauld in his room ... sprawled leisurely ... in a commodious armchair, enjoying a tasty snack of *paté de fois gras*, washing it down with a choice champagne, then you have never seen a man really enjoying himself.”<sup>3</sup>

After graduating from the academy, Foucauld embarked on a military tour and then a dangerous geographical expedition in Algeria. There in the vast silence of the desert,



among nomads whose lifestyle differed so much from his own, the void the young soldier had tried to cover over with possessions began to make itself felt. A wordless question began to arise in him. Had he been able to articulate it, he would have uttered the same confused question the rich man put to Jesus: “What must I do...?” What is lacking? Where is fullness of life? Foucauld began to pray, “My God, if you exist, let me come to know you.”<sup>4</sup>

One autumn day in 1886, after he had returned to France, the 28-year-old Foucauld confided his struggle to a priest, who invited him to go to confession. He did. Faith came, and with it, the summons. “Go.... Sell everything.... Come,” Jesus told the young man in the Gospel upon whom he looked with love. Foucauld felt Jesus’ look fall upon him as suddenly as it had fallen upon the other rich man almost 2,000 years earlier. He knew he was being asked to respond to that love with his life.

At this point, the stories of these two rich young men part ways. Foucauld later wrote of that day, “As soon as I believed there was a God, I understood that I could not do anything other than live for him alone.”<sup>5</sup> He went, sold, and came – first to Trappist monasteries in France and Syria. After studies for the priesthood and ordination in France, he discerned a call to return to the desert. In the Sahara he would live the simple, austere life of a hermit among the nomadic Tuareg people. He wished to be an adorer in the wilderness, a brother to “the most abandoned.”<sup>6</sup>

Father Charles wanted to evangelize “not through the word but through the presence of the Blessed Sacrament

... through prayer and penance and ... fraternal and universal love.”<sup>7</sup> In his notes for the brothers he hoped would share his life but who never materialized, he wrote, “The whole of our existence ... should cry the Gospel.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1916, Father Charles was murdered by bandits. His life and solitary death were a great “cry” that the one God, merciful and gracious, is the origin and the end of every love. This solitary brother in the desert embodied the great “confession” that Pope John Paul II described as the essence of all consecrated life. Through a “profound ‘configuration’ to the mystery of Christ,” the pope wrote in the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, “the consecrated life brings about in a special way that confessio *Trinitatis* [confession of the Trinity] which is the mark of all Christian life; it acknowledges with wonder the sublime beauty of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and bears joyful witness to his loving concern for every human being.”<sup>9</sup>

Father Charles’ “confession of the Trinity” was fruitful: Not only the one religious community he had longed for, but multiple communities came into existence after his death. In 2005, Pope Benedict XVI beatified the martyr Father Charles of Jesus, a rich young man who sold all that he had to follow the Lord.

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# “Behold, I come to do your will”

(Hebrews 10:9)

## **The Splendor of Christ's Love**

St. Benedict, the 5th-century father of Western monasticism, once wrote, “*nihil amori Christi praeponere*”: “Don’t prefer anything to the love of Christ!”<sup>10</sup> With these words, he effectively summed up the main point of the Gospel story about the rich man. He certainly summed up the meaning of Father Charles’ life. Benedict was telling his monks: Christ is your Lord and God, and you should therefore love him “from your whole heart,” which also means “with your whole soul, and with your whole strength, and with your whole mind” (Luke 10:27).

In order to recognize Christ’s claim to *our* love, however, we first have to perceive the unique splendor of *his* love. In other words, we have to perceive the “sublime beauty of God” to which John Paul II referred. This triune beauty is revealed to us in the Word made flesh, who died and was raised for love of mankind.

Father Charles of Jesus, St. Benedict and countless others who left everything to follow Jesus, were moved by something they realized while contemplating the life of their Lord: God doesn’t simply love as a kind of secondary

characteristic of his divinity. The phrase, “God loves,” while certainly true, isn’t enough to describe what was revealed when the Son of God died for us on the cross, handing over his spirit to his Father. It doesn’t fully express what happened when, in the risen Jesus, the Spirit of God was poured out over “all flesh” (cf. Joel 2:28).

St. John the Evangelist, an eyewitness of the crucifixion, tells us that God doesn’t just love, he “*is love*” (1 John 4:8). Through and in Jesus’ love for the world he came to redeem – a love that went “to the end” (John 13:1) – we saw far more than one man’s love for humanity. That humble charity revealed the Father’s eternal love for the Son and the Son’s eternal love for the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. St. John makes a similar point when, in the prologue of his Gospel, he declares: “We beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14). What is this “glory” if not the radiance of the Son’s love for the Father – the love that Jesus himself eternally *is*?

### ***A Threefold Vow***

The title of this booklet contains three words that we typically associate with Jesus’ followers: poverty, chastity and obedience. But before these “evangelical counsels” are something that Jesus’ disciples *practice*, they are something that Jesus himself *is*. They are what we, like the first disciples, see when we contemplate the One who died and was raised.

When the disciples beheld Jesus their Master washing

their feet, or heard him weeping over Jerusalem, or watched him make every decision from within the depths of prayer to his Father, they saw what many others would realize after them: Jesus is the Poor One, he is the Chaste One, he is the Obedient One. We would not be wrong if we summed up these words by saying: He is the One who loves.

Yes, he is the One who loves *us*, his Father's creation. But he is this because, first of all, he is the One who loves *the Father*. In fact, poverty, chastity and obedience delineate the three-in-one pattern of the "glory" – the filial love – of the only-begotten Son. As John Paul II explained in *Vita Consecrata*:

[Jesus'] way of living in chastity, poverty and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called divine, for it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

"When the fullness of time had come, God sent out his Son" (Galatians 4:4) as our Redeemer. The Son gladly accepts this "sending" – in Latin, "*missio*" – as an opportunity to demonstrate, in time, his eternal love for the Father. He therefore binds himself to his mission with an irrevocable vow of filial love: "Behold, I come to do your will!" (Hebrews 10:9). This vow turns his very "entrance into the world" (cf. Hebrews 10:5) into an expression of steadfast commitment to our sanctification "through the offering of [his] body ... once for all" (Hebrews 10:10).

Faithful to his saving mission, Jesus “became *obedient* unto death, even death on a Cross” (Philippians 2:8). He allowed his whole life and everything in it to proceed from the hand of his Father. The same radical self-gift illumines his *virginal* – ungrasping, free, faithful and exclusive – love for his only Bride, the Church, for whom he “gave himself up” on the cross (Ephesians 5:25). It is no less evident in his poverty, the Son of God’s radical willingness to become “poor for your sake,” even dying so “that by his *poverty* you might become rich” in his place (2 Corinthians 8:9). In all of this, we see Jesus’ single vow of love, the three dimensions of the filial self-gift that expresses the Son’s love not just for us, but “for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

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# “You are a royal priesthood”

(1 Peter 2:9)

## *Kings with the King*

Poverty, chastity and obedience are like three rays emanating from the unique glory of the God-man’s love for his Father and for us. They manifest the unique lovability that makes him, and him alone, worthy of our entire devotion. They are part of the splendor by which his love “impels” all believers (2 Corinthians 5:14) to follow him and to live as he did.

Now, Christ doesn’t simply dazzle us with the beauty of his poverty, chastity and obedience. At the Transfiguration, when Peter, James and John were awestruck by a sudden vision of Jesus’ glory, he did not leave them terrified. He “touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear’ (Matthew 17:7), inviting the disciples – and us – to live poverty, chastity and obedience in his company.

By sharing in Jesus’ threefold vow of self-giving love, we learn how to be sons and daughters in the Son. And that means: kings with the King. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, “For all things are yours ... whether the world or life or death, whether what is present or what is to come. All things are yours, but you belong to Christ, while Christ

belongs to God” (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

St. Ignatius of Loyola, another rich young soldier who left everything to follow Jesus, offered a vivid illustration of Jesus’ call to participate in his royal poverty, chastity and obedience. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius compared the Lord to a king who invites his subjects to share in his mission and in the manner of life it demands. “Anyone who would come with me,” the king says, “has to be content to eat as I do, to drink and to dress like me, etc. Similarly, he has to labor with me by day and watch with me in the night ... so that afterwards he may share in my victory, just as he shared in my labors.”<sup>13</sup>

Ignatius stressed the “liberality and humanity”<sup>14</sup> of this invitation. The king doesn’t stand on his unique dignity; he wants to give others a chance to share it on a footing of equality with him. Similarly, Jesus doesn’t jealously cling to equality with God. He is the king who “empties himself” (Philippians 2:6-7) so that we can share in the Son’s dignity before the Father. He doesn’t want to appear before his Father alone; his boast is to be the “first-born of many brothers” (Romans 8:29).

Just as Ignatius’ king calls upon his subjects to join him in his noble enterprise, Christ calls upon his followers to live for the same goal that he came to achieve: “To conquer the entire world” for the “glory of my Father”<sup>15</sup> through his life, death, and resurrection. In other words, he came *to love the Father* by handing him his creation redeemed, and in this, *to love the world* by bringing it to its perfection in God. He therefore invites all Christians – indeed all men – to



bind themselves by the same missionary vow of self-gift to the Father “for the life of the world” (John 6:51). He gives them his own self-offering for the sake of his Father’s creation as their royal road to participation in his eternal identity as God’s only-begotten Son.

To live with Jesus as a son or daughter in the Son is to share his filial love for the Father, and so to join him in his total dedication to the salvation of “the whole world in its entirety.”<sup>16</sup> It is to follow him by loving God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves.

### ***The Spirit of the Counsels***

Like Ignatius, Madeleine Delbrêl, a young 20th-century French atheist who found herself suddenly “bedazzled by God,”<sup>17</sup> had a keen insight into this invitation – or commandment – contained in the Scriptures and in the life of the Lord. She observed, “God didn’t say ‘You shall believe,’ but ‘*You shall love.*’”<sup>18</sup> This was the commandment that the rich young man of the Gospel failed to recognize, and that, in different ways, Father Charles, St. Benedict, St. Ignatius, and Delbrêl herself took as the form of their lives.

Delbrêl explained that the commandment “You shall love the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 4:6) means: Your life shall cry out “love for a God preferred to everything the hands can touch and the mind can know.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it means that in him, because of him, and *with his love*, you shall love every man and woman as your neighbor. Delbrêl wrote to the young women who came to share her life of consecration to

God in the midst of their radically atheistic, communist neighbors: “It is because of God that we love the world.”<sup>20</sup>

We – that is, all Christians – fulfill Jesus’ double commandment of love in the same way he did: by a life of poverty, chastity and obedience – at least in *spirit* if not to the letter. These “counsels” give Christian love its shape and its bite. Thanks to them, love is not a vague sentiment but an act of worship, a priestly self-offering to God: “Present your bodies to God as living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your reasonable worship” (Romans 12:1). Poverty, chastity and obedience are the soul of what the Second Vatican Council called the “common priesthood of the faithful.”<sup>21</sup>

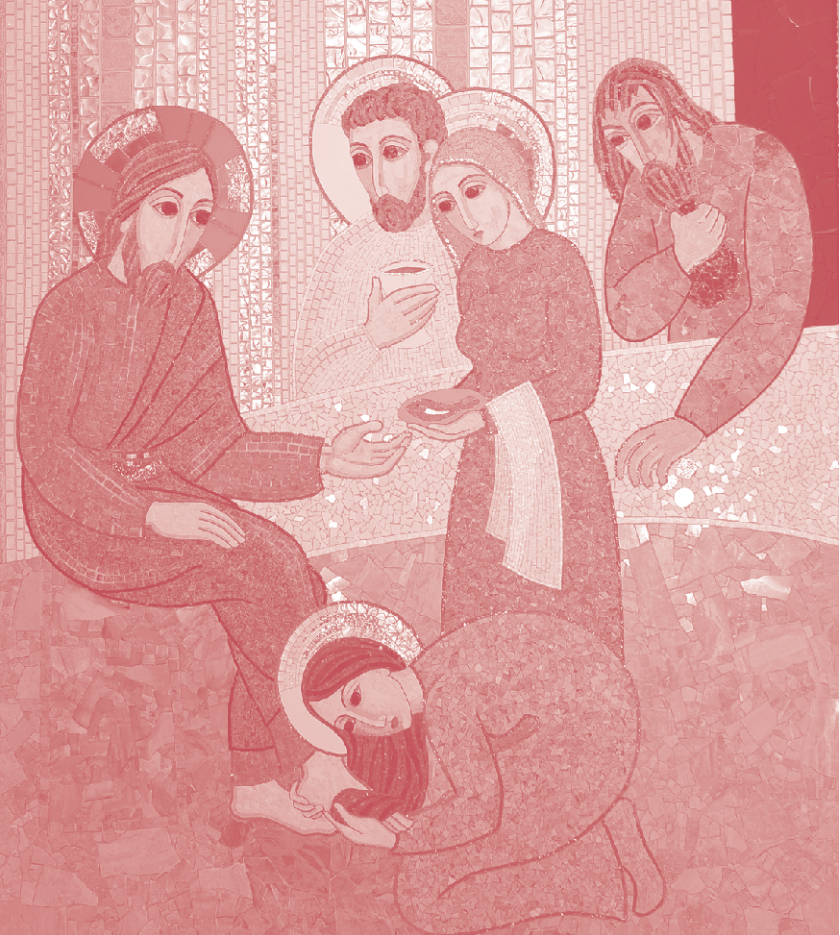
“In the Church, everyone ... is called to holiness.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, everyone is also called to allow the counsels to shape his or her life. According to St. Paul, even those “who have wives [or husbands]” should “live as though they had none” (1 Corinthians 7:29). That is, they should live out the spirit of virginity – ungrasping, free, faithful and exclusive love – in the very intimacy of their conjugal embrace. In the same spirit, every believer must be prepared to prefer the service of God to slavery to mammon (cf. Matthew 6:24) and to embrace the spirit of evangelical poverty. Finally, every Christian is called to take upon himself the “yoke” (Matthew 11:29) of Christ’s filial obedience, communing with the Lord as he prays to the Father in the Holy Spirit: “Abba, Father ... not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36).

Each of us is a member of “a royal priesthood” (1 Peter

2:9); each of us is called to offer himself to the Lord in the spirit of the counsels. This “spirit” is, finally, nothing other than the Holy Spirit, who is the love between Father and Son. He is the Spirit who, as Jesus tells us, “will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:15) – the Spirit of poverty, chastity and obedience who sanctifies us so that we may offer “acceptable worship” to the Father (Hebrews 12:28).

Fortunately, then, we don’t need to conjure up this “spirit of the counsels” on our own. At the Church’s origin, the Spirit of God already overshadowed someone who perfectly embodies what we are all called to be: a “pure virgin” (2 Corinthians 11:2) who allows the Word to bear fruit in her, clinging to the Church’s Bridegroom with a poor, chaste and obedient love. All of us who seek to allow the Spirit to form us in this love, receive a share in the Blessed Virgin Mary’s archetypal confession of the Trinity:

Mary is the one who, from the moment of her Immaculate Conception, most perfectly reflects the divine beauty. “All beautiful” is the title with which the Church invokes her.... Mary in fact is the *sublime example of perfect consecration*, since she belongs completely to God and is totally devoted to him.... Consecrated life looks to her as the sublime model of consecration to the Father, union with the Son and openness to the Spirit, in the knowledge that acceptance of the “virginal and humble life” of Christ also means imitation of Mary’s way of life.<sup>23</sup>



*“Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.” (John 12:3)*

Detail from the crypt church of the Shrine of St. Pio of Pietralcina, San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy. Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

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# “Remain in me”

(John 15:4)

## ***The One Christian State of Life***

Christian existence begins with faith and baptism, which effects a radical passage from death to life in the company of the dead and risen Lord. Indeed, we could say that the essence of Christianity itself is the “life” the rich young man asked about – the “incorruptible and unfading” fullness of life (1 Peter 1:4). Christianity is Christ, “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), apart from whom we can only “dwell in darkness . . . and in a land overshadowed by death” (Matthew 4:16).

We owe our passage from life to death to the initiative of the Father, who “snatched us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son of his love” (Colossians 1:12-13). The Greek verb that Paul uses for “transfer” (*metestêsen*) also conveys the idea of a change of “status” or “state.” Becoming Christian, Paul is telling us, means receiving a new “state of life” in Christ, a new “standing” as God’s adopted children. This is the only status that truly “counts” in his sight: “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, ‘Abba, Father.’ So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir” (Galatians 4:6-7).

In order to make us his sons and daughters, the Father gives us his only-begotten as our “place” to stand in his presence. “Father,” Jesus prays before his Passion, “I will that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, so that they may behold my glory, which you have given me in your love before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). To be a Christian is to be “gathered” (John 11:52) to the place where the Son is, the place to which John refers when he solemnly declares that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1, emphasis added).

Jesus himself initiates his disciples into the ineffable intimacy of this indwelling using the well-known parable of the vine and the branches: “Remain in me, and I in you,” he says. “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it remain in the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who remains in me and I in him bears much fruit, because separated from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5). These words echo the first few verses of John’s Gospel: “In him” – and, we might add, in him alone – is true “life” (John 1:4), for he is the One apart from whom not one thing came to be (cf. John 1:3).

Ultimately, then, we have only one option: either to “remain in” Jesus (John 15:4) or not to be truly alive at all. This is the only “state” in which we can hope to “have life and to have it in abundance” (John 10:10). Nevertheless, the one Christian state of life is fully realized in two distinct forms: marriage, on the one hand, and consecrated virgin-

ity, on the other. Each of these two states permanently shapes the entirety of a person's life around a specific way of sharing in Christ's filial self-gift. Even those who through no fault of their own do not find their way to a concrete commitment – as is common during times of war, famine, or otherwise grave social upset – remain nonetheless oriented toward one of these two states.

Most Christians remain in the Lord by giving themselves away completely in the sacrament of matrimony, while others receive a special call to renounce the good of conjugal life for the sake of direct participation in the marriage between Christ and his Church. Although each of us faces an irrevocable choice between these two states of life, the election itself crowns the same total commitment to remain in Christ through baptism into his dying and rising. True sanctity lies in a Marian readiness to let “the Creator and Lord *himself* ... dispose [the soul] for the path that will better serve him”<sup>24</sup> – whether in marriage or in consecrated virginity.

### ***“Living the Gospel Letter for Letter”: The State of the Counsels***

Just as every Christian is called to remain in Christ, every Christian is called to imitate his poverty, chastity and obedience. Even marriage demands a concrete commitment to the spirit of the counsels by a life of eucharistic self-oblation through, with and in Jesus. But how could the *spirit* of poverty, chastity and obedience remain alive for

everyone in the Church unless at least a few were called to observe the counsels to the *letter*? Could the Church claim total fidelity to Christ if none of her members was ready to follow him, like Benedict and Ignatius, Father Charles of Jesus and Madeleine Delbrêl, in *literal* poverty, chastity and obedience?

The consecrated person literally makes himself a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom (cf. Matthew 19:12), literally goes and sells all he has to follow Christ, and literally submits himself to the authority of a superior, who “sends” him in the same way that the Father sends the Son. In every age, certain people come to the realization that St. Ignatius expressed in the midst of his *Spiritual Exercises*, as the soldierly imagery suddenly falls away and there is simply this prayer addressed to the Lord: “You have given all to me....” And so I, too, have to give you all: my possessions, my bodily fruitfulness, my spiritual gifts, my capacity to dispose over the details of my life.

Why? “At every turning point in history,” Delbrêl wrote, “it seems clear that the Lord wished to give certain people the vocation of living the Gospel letter for letter, so that their flesh and their blood would become as it were a new edition of the Gospel providentially destined for the men of their age.”<sup>25</sup>

According to John Paul II, such literalness gives the consecrated life an “objective superiority” over marriage – even though the latter remains the basic call to love addressed to the human person, without which consecrated life remains incomprehensible.<sup>26</sup> Another way of putting this



teaching is to say that marriage can embody the *spirit* of the counsels and be what it truly is in God's sight, only if some are called to renounce marriage in order to embody their *letter* as well. The consecrated virgin shows the "superiority" of his way of life precisely by humbly serving the sanctity of marriage. John Paul II wrote:

The consecrated life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit. By the profession of the evangelical counsels the characteristic features of Jesus – the chaste, poor and obedient one – are made constantly "visible" in the midst of the world and the eyes of the faithful are directed toward the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realization in heaven.<sup>27</sup>

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# “The king shall desire thy beauty”

(Psalm 45:11)

## *“If you wish to be perfect...”*

“No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven” (John 3:27). These words of Jesus in John’s Gospel are particularly pertinent to the consecrated life, which is not something we can take by our own initiative, much less force our way into, but can only receive by way of a special call from the Lord himself. This is one of the lessons of the story of the Gerasene demoniac. “And as Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But he refused and said to him, ‘Go home to your own people, and tell them how much the Lord, in his mercy, has done for you’” (Mark 5:18-19).

But what, exactly, does Jesus call the consecrated person to? In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to the rich young man, “If you wish to be perfect...” (Matthew 19:21), so a traditional answer would be “the state of perfection.” This answer is a good one, provided that we understand it correctly. For it would be totally false to imagine the consecrated life as a form of spiritual body-building, which lifted one out of the pitiable ranks of second-rate or

“imperfect” Christians. The consecrated person would miss the whole point of his calling if he thought of it as a golden opportunity to hoard spiritual wealth. How could such a person claim to be a follower of the Lord, since the Son “did not deem equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:6-7)?

The consecrated person doesn't live only for himself, but neither does he live only for his neighbor. He is not called merely to give his fellow Christians an example of holy living or to remind them to seek “lasting values” because this world is passing away. Nor is he called merely for some purely human function, whether in society or in the Church. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, whose sisters certainly perform many social functions in their care for the destitute and dying, insisted on this point: “We are not social workers. We must be contemplatives in the heart of the world, for we are touching the body of Christ.”<sup>28</sup> She knew that the freedom to which the consecrated person is called (cf. Galatians 5:13) goes far beyond any limited goal.

What, then, is the chief end of the consecrated life? We already caught a glimpse of it in Father Charles' life, which exhibited the great “confession” John Paul II described as the essential feature of this state of life. The late pope again pointed us to the answer when he wrote:

The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the Holy Trinity, the source of holiness. They are in fact an expression of the love of the Son for

the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. By practicing the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person lives with particular intensity the Trinitarian and Christological dimension which marks the whole of Christian life.<sup>29</sup>

As this passage makes clear, the principal end of the consecrated life is both to contemplate and to reveal the Son's loving self-gift to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. By taking his aptly named "*final vows*," the consecrated person fulfills this revelation by giving himself away once and for all in his turn. The rest of his life then becomes an attempt to catch up with this definitive self-gift through day-to-day obedience to the rule of his community. The consecrated person's existence is no longer his own, but God's, "so that he lives out his remaining time in the flesh, not for the desires of men, but for the will of God" (1 Peter 4:2).

The consecrated person is called to reveal Jesus' love, both by loving Jesus and by loving what Jesus himself loved. As we have seen, what Jesus loved most of all was his Father and the saving work that his Father had put in his hands to accomplish (cf. John 4:34). The consecrated person is called to share Jesus' single-minded dedication to the Father's will. By living under the authority of a rule, he imitates the Lord himself, who left the "management" of his time entirely in the Father's hands in order to focus his undivided attention on his appointed task. This is another way of saying, in order the better to love both the Father and his brethren.

Jesus calls his consecrated followers to share his own total freedom for his world-redeeming mission: “As the Father sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). In responding to the Lord’s call – which is always a call to take up the cross – they become a tangible, flesh-and-blood proof that Jesus is not a mere man, but the Son of God who came to earth already totally consecrated to his redemptive mission: “But when the fullness of time came, God sent out his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, that he might redeem those under the Law and we might receive adoptive sonship” (Galatians 4:4).

There is only one Redeemer, but the Head graciously calls some of his members to devote their lives to being his hands and feet – the very ones that were nailed to the rough wood of the cross for the world’s salvation. The consecrated life is the mark of Christ’s cross-shaped love branded into the flesh of the Church. This cruciform pattern is the consecrated person’s solitary “boast” (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:29) and the only “perfection” he cares to have.

### ***“To Be Love”: Expressing the Innermost Nature of the Church***

The Church is Christ’s Body, but she is also his Bride. Her bridal identity shines forth with particular clarity in the consecrated life, as John Paul II explained in *Vita Consecrata*. “The consecrated life,” he wrote, “becomes a particularly profound expression of the Church as the Bride who, prompted by the Spirit to imitate her Spouse, stands before

him 'in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (Ephesians 5:27)."<sup>30</sup> The pontiff makes the same point in another passage, where he insists that "the Church can in no way renounce the consecrated life, for it *eloquently expresses her inmost nature as 'Bride.'*"<sup>31</sup>

If the Church is Christ's Bride, her marriage to the Bridegroom is celebrated on Calvary, where "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). This is why the consecrated life, which expresses the Church's inmost nature as Bride, comes into its own only on Golgotha. "Standing by Jesus' cross" (John 19:25), Mary represents the virginal Bride, even as she embodies the Bride's conformity to Christ in poverty, chastity and obedience. Yet she does not perform this task alone, but in fruitful union with Jesus' friend, "the disciple ... whom he loved" (John 19:25). The dying Lord says to Mary, "Woman, behold your son.' Then he says to the disciple, 'Behold your mother.' And from that hour the disciple received her into his own home" (John 19:26-27).

Insofar as it represents the inmost nature of the Bride, the consecrated life is not merely a "speciality" in the Church. The consecrated man or woman is not an "expert" in some highly technical subject, or a "professional" in some arcane field. If anything, he or she is a life-long "amateur" in the original sense of the term, which means "lover." This is because the chief end of the consecrated life is not some particular task or function, but "the one thing necessary" (Luke 10:42): the wholehearted expression of

the love that animates the entire Church and makes her “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:23). Few have grasped this truth as vividly as Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus:

*Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I realized that if the Church had a body composed of different members, it must also have the most necessary, the most noble member of all. I realized that the Church had a heart, and that this heart was burning with Love. I realized that love alone made the Church’s members act, that if Love were extinguished, the Apostles would no longer announce the Gospel, the Martyrs would refuse to shed their blood ... I realized that love included all vocations, that love was everything, that it embraced all times and all places ... in a word, that it is eternal! ... Then ... overflowing joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love ... I have finally found my vocation.... In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be Love ... and so I will be all.<sup>32</sup>*

Every form of consecrated life, whether contemplative or active, ancient or modern, exists to “be love” at the heart of the Church. It exists, in other words, in order to embody the love that Mary of Bethany showed when, “taking a pound of very costly ointment of spikenard, [she] anointed Jesus’ feet and dried his feet with her hair. Meanwhile the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment” (John 12:3). Uncalculating, unstinting self-offering in response to Christ who “loved me and gave himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20): Is there any more beautiful human act? Is there any truer acknowledgment that “the Lord is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4), and that the supreme beauty of the Trinity is the source and end of all our love?

In the 4th century, St. Augustine of Hippo wrote of the triune beauty – of the love – revealed in Jesus Christ. Many others, like Father Charles, St. Ignatius, and Mother Teresa, would contemplate this beauty after him: “Beautiful is God, the Word with God ... beautiful on earth ... beautiful in giving up his life and beautiful in taking it up again; he is beautiful on the cross, beautiful in the tomb, beautiful in heaven.”<sup>33</sup> All of these people, whether living as apostolic religious, hermits, cloistered contemplatives, missionaries or consecrated laypersons, knew that face to face with a love so beautiful, so measureless, so *divine*, they had to go, sell everything and come; they had to dedicate their whole life to confessing the glory of the triune God.

Dostoyevsky once famously said that beauty will save the world.<sup>34</sup> His words are an encouragement to consecrated people, for the beauty of their poor, chaste and obedient form of life is an indispensable reminder of the one truth on which every other depends: the primacy of God, whose love – for us and in himself (cf. 1 John 4:8) – is the very reason we exist. As John Paul II wrote:

In our world, where it often seems that the signs of God’s presence have been lost from sight, a convincing prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary. In the first place this should entail the *affirmation of the primacy of God and of eternal life*, as evidenced in the following and imitation of the chaste, poor and obedient Christ, who was completely consecrated to the glory of God and to the love of his brethren.<sup>35</sup>



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