De Sales’ Vision of Ecclesial and Consecrated Life

A chief contribution of St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) to the church was to remind people that the call to holiness is addressed not only to religious and clerics, but to everyone. (To deny this, he said, is a heresy.)\(^1\) Vatican Council II’S document “The Church in the Modern World” has given added impetus to this basic truth. It is so widely accepted today that it seems to detract from the worth of the religious life.\(^2\) Is it any wonder, then, that people, especially the young, are asking themselves, “If all are called to sanctity and the council urges laypeople to seek it in and through ordinary life, why bother to become a religious?”

In recent decades we have seen a marvelous development in the theology of marriage, and many have acquired a deeper understanding of the Christian meaning of conjugal love and fidelity, especially as a sign

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of Christ's sacrificial love for the church. If the sacrament of matrimony has such dignity and nobility, why renounce it in favor of the religious life?

Charitable works of many kinds are no longer performed almost exclusively by religious. The state and private individuals have practically taken over these activities. Highly qualified, competent, and dedicated laypeople are spending their lives for the poor, the destitute, the mentally ill, the castoffs of society. As a result, many people ask themselves, "Why enter the religious life if I can perform these apostolic works as a dedicated layperson?" Moreover, some argue that laypeople, since they are actually engaged in worldly affairs, are in a much better position to suffuse these activities with the love of Christ.

In addition to all of this, a number of religious congregations, not adapting to the times, seem to have lost their raison d'être. Nowadays few young people seem challenged and inspired by them, especially in the more industrialized countries of Europe and North America.

Given these developments, can we conceive of the church without the religious or consecrated life? Is the religious life as a form of holiness the victim of an evolution in the church? Is it going to disappear, giving way to newer forms of holy living? In other words, has the religious life served its purpose, and is it now to be discarded like an old shoe?

The church does not think so. Vatican II, however, asks us to deepen our understanding of the religious state in the life of the church. We cannot do this by examining hierarchical and juridical structures, for they do not reveal the necessity of the religious life. We must go back to the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, to understand what place Christ had in mind for religious life when he founded the church.
The Church and Religious/Consecrated Life

The first two chapters of John's Gospel are revealing in this regard. The call of the first disciples is placed immediately after the hymn in praise of the incarnation and the witness of John the Baptist. Christ first calls his disciples and then accompanies them to a wedding feast at Cana. It seems that everything takes place to tell us that, when Christ began to establish his church, he set up two states—that of Christian marriage, inaugurated at Cana, and the consecrated life, inaugurated by the call of the disciples. John mentions the time, about four in the afternoon, when two of John's disciples decided to stay with Jesus that day—perhaps implying that the Sabbath was at hand; in any case, the detail gives a special significance to their staying with him. Their answer to "Come and see" marks the first time that disciples gathered around Jesus. But, as Mark points out, disciples did not gather exclusively for the mission of preaching, but to stay close to Jesus as companions and to go out preaching at his command: "He appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach" (Mk 3:14).

The characteristics elements of this following of Christ are these: (1) complete submission to him, (2) renunciation of material goods, (3) life in common with him, and (4) a close and intimate association with his work of redemption—his apostolic mission. In these we can see the pattern of religious life: "union with Christ through obedience, chastity, poverty, common life, and dedication to the apostolate."

The religious life encompasses more than the three traditional evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. They derive their value, importance, and significance from complete, immediate, and exclusive attachment to Jesus. One might object that the three
vows include this attachment: they take it for granted. This is true, but it is poor pedagogy to let what is primary be only implicit in what is explicitly expressed. If we reduce the religious life to the three vows, we will have difficulty making it relevant to the church's life and work today. Other elements deserve equal emphasis: total dedication to Christ, community life, and dedication to the apostolate. From the very beginnings of the church, Jesus' followers have been characterized by their preferential love of him, by their community life, and by their apostolic zeal. "The Savior wanted the consecrated life of his disciples and of his women followers to form the cornerstone of his church, the very first stone."

By a careful and prayerful examination of Scripture, we will be able to see that the religious life is a natural way of living the gospel to the full. One sign of the church in its fullness, St. Francis de Sales pointed out, is the presence of religious orders and congregations. "The true church ought to shine in the perfection of the Christian life; not so that everybody in the church is bound to follow it; it is enough that it be found in some notable members and parts, in order that nothing may be written or counseled in vain and that the church may make use of all the parts of Holy Scripture." In the saint's view, a full and complete vision of the church can be had only when there are people in it living con-
secred lives. This visibility is necessary for the believ-
ability of the church, even in today's world.

The tendency in the past was to stress the verti-
cal aspect of Christianity, personal union with Christ—
"Jesus and I" or "me and God." This obscured somewhat
the ecclesial and communal aspects of Catholic life and
religious life and the community's (horizontal) role in
life and in evangelization. To understand better the
place of consecrated life in the church today, we have
to see it in the light of covenant theology.

Religious Life and Covenant Theology

God's plan of salvation is expressed as a covenant
between God and human beings. In describing the
nature of the church, Francis de Sales comments, "It is
for a good reason that the Christian people are called a
church or a convocation, because the first privilege that
God bestows on man to put him in the state of grace is
to call him to the church." Our very first privilege is to
be joined to the covenant community of the church. It
is no wonder, then, that Francis tells us that by baptism,
which inserts us into the community of the church, we
become "the ark of the covenant."

The new covenant was not made between individu-
als but between Christ and the whole group of his dis-
ciples, a community destined to regroup all of humanity
in unity. The details of Pentecost mentioned in the Acts
of the Apostles, the violent wind and the tongues of fire,
recall similarities and parallels in the Sinai covenant (see
Ac 2:2-3). In the Old Testament, the new covenant was
foretold and described in terms of a marriage covenant.
Francis de Sales emphasizes this in his explanation of the
church's perpetuity. This idea is so central to this study
that the pertinent passage needs to be cited at length:

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The glorious secretary of God says in this place (Rv 21:2) that the church is a new city, decked out by God as a bride for her bridegroom. Now just try to imagine... what kind of a bride she would be if she were fashioned according to the wish and desire of her groom. If the bridegroom were to fashion her as he wished, I believe that he would make her the most beautiful, the most virtuous, the healthiest, and the most long-lived that one could imagine. For there is no love like that of husband towards his wife... I ask you, would it be fitting for our Lord to have shed his blood to reconcile his church to God, his Father, and then to forsake this church in the end so that she is devastated? Certainly such a mediator merits an endless peace, a very close covenant, about which Isaiah says, speaking of Christianity: “I will make a perpetual covenant with them.”

This text not only illuminates Francis’s teaching on the church, but on the religious life and marriage as well. He uses the exact same expression—“a very close covenant” (une alliance estroitte)—in the chapter on marriage in the Introduction to the Devout Life. The Old Testament prophets like Hosea, Jeremiah, and Isaiah were fond of describing the new covenant in terms of conjugal union and fidelity. For them marriage was the inspiration for a full understanding of it. The covenant in the New Testament, however, gets its inspiration not from marriage but from the marriage of Christ to humanity, that is, from the incarnation and its consummation in Christ’s death and resurrection—his Passover. St. Paul makes this clear when he writes to the Ephesians, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church” (5:25). Here he envisions the church as the bride of Christ and redemption as the act of love par excellence, the model of conjugal love.
The church’s loving response and fidelity to Christ are admirably realized in the life of consecrated virgins. Virginal consecration is the integral expression of fundamental marks of the church—covenant community, mutual union, zeal for the apostolate. This is Francis de Sales’ perspective when preaching to the Calvinists. The religious life is a sign of the presence of Christ’s fullness, a sign of the church in its perfection. This suggests how necessary consecrated life is to the church. Without it the church would not be the covenant community; it would not be a full mirroring of Christ.

**Ecclesial Dimensions of the Religious Life**

In founding the Visitation congregation, Francis de Sales evidently had this truth in mind. In his preface to the Visitation constitutions, he explains that bishops in the early church continued what the apostles had started with regard to virgins and widows. They looked after those especially who “by a special inspiration were called to the state of consecrated chastity.”¹⁰ Francis notes that these were of two kinds—those who lived in community and those who lived at home. He carefully lists the testimony of Fathers of the church who witnessed to various assemblies of virgins and widows consecrated to God. If we remember that the word “assembly” is his favorite word for the church, the ecclesial relevance of his conception of the religious life become more evident. In fact, he wanted the Visitation to have its official beginning on the Feast of Pentecost. He takes pains to show the apostolic origins of the religious life. He says: “St. Ignatius, disciple of the apostles, wrote to the Philippians, ‘I greet the assembly of virgins and the congregation of widows,’ and moreover he requests that the people of Tarsus

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honor virgins ‘as consecrated to God’ and widows as the altar or ‘sanctuary of God.’”

Of course, we have to avoid a strict parallel between the state of virgins and consecrated widows with that of the religious life inasmuch as “virginity founds the order of virgins and not the religious life as such.” Eventually the state of virgins and widows coalesced with historical developments in religious life, yet they have separate identities: “Religious life requires and consecrates not so much virginity as chastity.”

As Francis sees it, the believability of celibacy is closely linked to the believability of the church. This helps us to understand the unique place of the vow of chastity in the Salesian conception of the religious life. Before the Visitation became a religious order, the only vow that was taken before the oblation was that of chastity: “Since the fundamental vow of this congregation is made expressly and formally of perpetual chastity and continence, it is not necessary to declare how much all the sisters are obliged to it; for in a word they must belong completely to God their Spouse.” This article should be compared with an earlier one on the vows: “All those who are to receive the veil will make the simple vow [of chastity] immediately before they present themselves for the holy oblation. But, with regard to the vows of poverty and obedience, they shall only be made upon the advice of the spiritual father and with the permission of the superior.”

We get a deeper insight into Francis de Sales’ understanding of chastity in the church in a letter to a young lady who later became a Visitandine: “Consider how agreeable the virtue of chastity is to God and the angels because he wanted it to be eternally observed in heaven, where there will no longer be any kind of carnal
pleasures nor marriages. Will you not be happy to begin in this world the life you will continue eternally in the next? Praise God, then, for having given you this holy inspiration.”

Today, with all the talk about the sanctity, nobility, and dignity of conjugal love and the sacrament of matrimony and with the consequent attacks on priestly celibacy, and indeed on all kinds of dedicated celibacy, as affecting and deforming human personality, many people are uncomfortable with this eschatological value of chastity. The world looks upon us as freaks of bygone ages.

"After all," some say, "marriage is a sacrament and celibacy is not." What Francis has to say about the complete consecration achieved by this vow will shed further light on the matter. In the letter mentioned above, he continues, "[This virtue] makes our body sacred and gives us the comfort of belonging completely to his divine Majesty—heart, body, mind, and sentiment." So Francis does not view it merely as a consecration of our bodies, but as a complete attachment to Christ involving the whole person.

Marriage is the sign and image, the sacrament, of the relationship between Christ and his church. “It is to be admitted without scandal or resentment that marriage, even though a sacrament, is no more than a sacrament; it is a sign of the love of Christ and is nourished by his grace; but marriage does that under carnal conditions

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which Christ will abolish in his final reality and which he sanctifies only to teach us how to surpass them. . . .

This is what medieval thinkers meant when they said that marriage ‘signified’ the union of Christ and the church but did not ‘contain’ it.”18

But this otherworldliness or eschatological character of the religious life does not militate against a genuine interest in the secular city. In fact, its genuineness can be judged only by the life of service to others that one undertakes here on this earth. Francis de Sales’ teaching on this is clear. He sees necessary contact with the world as important for religious. In his mind, there is no essential conflict between the life of contemplation and that of the apostolate or the active life, as is clear when he states the purpose of the Visitation: “Inasmuch as this congregation has two principal exercises—the one contemplation and prayer, which is practiced mainly in the house, the other the service of the poor and the sick . . .—it has fittingly chosen as patron Our Lady of the Visitation, because in this mystery the most glorious Virgin performed that solemn act of charity toward the neighbor of going to visit and serve St. Elizabeth in her pregnancy and composed nonetheless the canticle of the Magnificat, the sweetest, the most elevated, the most spiritual and contemplative prayer that has ever been written.”19

The authenticity of our contemplative prayer is seen in how we relate to others: “It is necessary to meditate and to contemplate only insofar as it is required to perform our duties well, each according to our vocation. . . . Do you want to know whether you have prayed well and whether you have kissed our Lord with the kiss of the mouth? See if you have a heart full of kind and charitable affections toward your neighbor, if your heart
is disposed to help him in all his needs and to put up with him lovingly on all kinds of occasions.”

At this point it is important to point out once and for all that Francis de Sales gave in to Cardinal Marquemont's demand to change the Visitation from a congregation with simple vows to a religious order with solemn vows because he felt that, without his support and approval, the Visitation could not be established in France. Bear in mind that Marquemont was influential and a close friend of Louis XIII. Francis revealed his true reasons for this change not in his letter to Marquemont, but in a letter to Mother Favre, the superior of the Visitation monastery in Lyons. After mentioning that Marquemont wanted to see the Visitation become a religious order, Francis says: “Now my feeling was that it would be better [to leave] it a simple congregation, where only love and fear of the Spouse would serve as a cloister, with the withdrawal that is suitable to and required by such assemblies, as we have put it in the Rules. But, since what this congregation can hope to receive in all of France depends upon the good reception that the Reverend Archbishop [Marquemont] will give it in his city, I consent that it be changed into a religious order.” The entire letter makes it abundantly clear that he went along with Marquemont for very practical reasons. Let us, then, bury once and for all the assertion that he did this through obedience to his metropolitan, Archbishop Marquemont. His metropolitan was the archbishop of Vienne and not Marquemont.

Even though de Sales decided to give in to Marquemont, there are two things that he would not accept. First, he would not change the name from the Visitation to the Presentation, as Marquemont
requested. To Marquemont he gives juridical reasons to satisfy the cardinal’s legalistic mind. His real reason is that the name and the mystery of the Visitation is tied to its very nature and purpose, that is, to the nature of the religious life as he conceived it. Second, he used every trick in the book to obtain a modified cloister or enclosure so that, if the sisters could not go out into the world, the world, at least in the personae of women who were disturbed, could come and spend some time in the monastery to regain their peace of soul and mind. In this way the sisters could still serve the poor: “Inasmuch as the congregation must hold in high esteem charity and solicitude for the poor and inasmuch as there is no greater poverty than that of the soul, it will be permitted to receive in the house not only for a day, but for several days, as many as required, women who either need consolation or need to prepare themselves for a general confession or to amend their lives.” Along this line, it is helpful to remember that some of the sisters taught catechism in the cloister to the young ladies of Annecy.

For Francis, another consequence of the eschatological meaning of the religious life is that it stresses the importance of the covenant community’s communal life. In his correspondence with the Barnabite Dom Just Guérin, he tells him to use every resource
to obtain permission for the sisters to say the Little Office of the Blessed Mother. He felt strongly that, if the Visitandine nuns were obliged to recite the Divine Office as all cloistered nuns were obliged to do in those days, they would not be able to accept the sick and infirm and so would lose the charismatic character of making present on earth the church in heaven: "It seems that, according to the parable [of the Wedding Banquet, Lk 14:16-21], [St. Augustine, in his Rule] makes room in the religious life not only for the hale and hearty, but also for the sick, the lame, and the blind, so that like the nuptial feast of the heavenly Spouse his home may be filled with guests." 

Francis's original purpose in establishing the Visitation is what struck the people of his day. It was an ecclesial sign representing to them the kingdom of God on earth. While on his second journey to Paris, Francis discussed the Visitation with laypeople who were in the party. The observation that the nobleman Albert de Genève made is extremely enlightening: "In this regard, he used to say to us that religious life is like the banquet of the prince in the Gospel, where no one should be refused admittance, where even the ordinary citizen, the blind, the cripple, is to be admitted. All these things stuck out in my mind because I had seen by experience all that he foretold [about the religious life] in the great perfection which reigned in this monastery [of the Visitation of Annecy]." 

Inasmuch as it is eschatological, religious life points to and makes present, to a certain degree, the life to be lived in heaven. It is like the wedding banquet of the Gospels. In Francis's mind, life in heaven is a communal one. Of the communion of saints in heaven, he says, "They give to one another [indescribable] content-
ment and live in the consolation of a happy and indissoluble union.”28 The eschatological, communal, and ecclesial aspects of the religious or consecrated life are, for Francis, inextricably intertwined, and that is how the saintly doctor of love expounds them. His vision can revitalize religious life today by supplanting the exaggerated individualism that threatens to diminish or destroy it.

Notes


8 Sermon on the Perpetuity of the Church, OEA, 7, pp. 215-222, here pp. 215 and 217.

9 De Sales, Introduction, Part 3, chap. 38. Unfortunately, Ryan translates the French word “alliance” as “alliance” instead of “covenant,” which it obviously means if we understand the term as used in the sermon cited above.

10 OEA, 25, p. 294.

11 OEA, 25, pp. 3-4.


13 Martelet, “Church’s Holiness” (Part 2), p. 33.
14 OEA, 25, p. 369-370.
15 OEA, 25, p. 245.
16 OEA, 14, p. 18-19.
17 OEA, 14, p. 19.
19 OEA, 25, p. 214.
20 OEA, 9, pp. 466-467.
21 See OEA, 25, pp. 333-342.
22 OEA, 17, p. 139.
24 OEA, 25, p. 220.
25 See OEA, 18, pp. 140, 186, 195.
26 OEA, 25, p. 53.
27 Deposition of Albert de Genève, Archives of the Annecy Visitation Monastery, fol. 763.
28 De Sales, Introduction, Part 1, chap. 16.

Rose Window

A great flower glows in the stone
welcoming light with every petal,
turning in circles of blue, yellow, rose,
transplanted here from some celestial meadow
to bloom in the house of God.

Kate Martin OSC

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