

Scriptural-Theological Aspects of Religious Life

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The concept of Christian perfection has moved from an almost unilateral emphasis on the eschatological and transcendent aspects of Christian life into the perspectives of person, community, and social consciousness. Pre-Vatican II thinking saw the religious vocation less in terms of becoming a person, creating community, and being involved in the great social issues than in personal detachment and a supernatural charity nourished by spiritual exercises and the observances of the cloister. The emphasis has shifted now to these new values which bring in the role of terrestrial values. Life is seen as a building of a universe in which the individual and society are the agents. A man constructs his life through his multiple relationships with his fellows, through being-with-others, through his history. Simplistically and often in exaggerated reaction, sweeping changes are urged in the name of this new philosophy: silence must cede the place of honor to dialogue, solitude to community, prayer to a peace march or poverty program, spiritual love to human affection, blind obedience to collegiality, poverty to having the most efficient equipment for the work we do. It thus becomes apparent how necessary it is to review from a theological point of view the very foundations of religious life in order to evaluate the changes in religious theory and practice that are occurring.

Religious Life in General

According to one recent writer the task of rethinking religious life in postconciliar terms is almost impossible (J. Mahoney in *National Catholic Reporter*, March 6, 1968). Religious life, he says, is Gnostic and

Jansenistic in its opposition to the world so that it is poisoned in its roots. As an "esoteric sub-culture" with its "Stoic discipline" and "unearthly spirituality," it is a countersign and parody of Christian baptism. This is a harsh judgment; but one that serves to remind us that religious life must be above all Christian life, rooted in Christ, the Gospels, and the Church.

If one distinguishes renewal and adaptation and identifies renewal as revitalization of the substance, whereas adaptation is adjusting forms and structures, the primary task before us is renewal. It is a new realization of the radical Christian dimensions of religious life. Religious life is "a following of Christ" (Pc 2a),¹ "a sharing in the life of the Church" (Pc 2c), a life in the Spirit (Pc 2e). The principal agent of renewal is the Holy Spirit who calls religious to return to Christ in faith and personal decision. Existing structures stand under judgment. They must be rethought and, as necessary, revamped in terms of authentic Gospel spirituality and the concrete realities of our day (Pc 2d). What is obsolete, that is, irrelevant (Pc 20; Es 17),² is to be expunged; what is valid is to be revived; and viable new ways of implementing the ideal are to be created. Religious life is baptismal life; otherwise it is a thief who "enters not by the door into the sheepfold but climbs up another way" (Jn 10:1).

Religious life is a "special" way of Christian life (Lg 44;³ Pc 1), because it is the way of the evangelical counsels institutionalized in the Church. The evangelical counsels, which are "manifold" (Lg 42) and meant for all Christians, are reduced in this case to the three values of

chastity, poverty, and obedience. These counsels can be lived independently of religious life (Lg 42) or concretized in an approved institute in the Church (Lg 43). In the latter case they identify the religious life. The documents stress the theological significance of the counsels, their relation to charity, hope, and faith. The legal bonds in the form of vows, oaths, or promises express the dedication to the ethical values in an approved institute and are necessary as human instruments for the stability and permanency of this state, even as they promote the more basic value of “freedom strengthened by obedience” (Lg 43). The vows are servants of faith, hope, and charity; hence they are open to revision, that is, dispensation, when the religious state, which is permanent, becomes a hindrance rather than a help to faith, hope, and charity. The evangelical counsels and the theological virtues, in other words, are the operative principles of religious existence, in the mind of the Council. The history of the text of *Perfectae caritatis* illustrates the shift in emphasis from law to spirit in the conciliar thinking about religious life.

Is religious life a superior way of Christian life? Chapter VI of *Lumen gentium* and the decree *Perfectae caritatis* imply a higher excellence when they refer to the “special” nature of this life (Lg 44; Pc 1), when they use comparatives in stating that religious are “more intimately consecrated” to Christ and enjoy a union with the Church by “firmer and steadier bonds” (Lg 44), and when they emphasize the “unique” eschatological sign value of the religious state (Lg 44; Pc 1). All of these citations, however, refer to grace offered, not to grace lived. The Council, as is well known, eschewed odious comparisons between one state and another and underlined the universal call to holiness in all the baptized. It refused to speak of states of perfection and took the personalist approach to different vocations in the Church by stressing the uniqueness of each call and the

complementarity of all vocations. The mind of the Council is summed up in the dictum: “Your vocation is the best, indeed the only one, for you.” It might have cited the words of O. W. Holmes: “Every calling is great when greatly pursued.” In summary, we can maintain, it seems to me, that a religious call is objectively a higher grace than the married vocation, but in the teaching of the Council one’s state or way of life is as good as it is *lived*.

Why then does a Christian choose the religious life? It is an “outstanding gift of grace” (Pc 12), a charism; and ultimately the conviction that one has been offered this grace is the only valid reason for entering religion. But the judgment is made on the basis of self-knowledge whereby the candidate believes that in view of his limitations and potential this way of life offers him the best possibilities for his human and transcendent self-fulfillment (see *Development of Peoples*, n. 16). Given the appropriate emotional maturity presupposed for any life-choice, whereby the individual recognizes the values in each option and is free enough to choose either one, human or psychological factors enter the decision in favor of religious life as for marriage. The religious answers a call, but one heard in the depths of his own human aspirations. He does his “thing” as laymen do their own, and together they express different dimensions of human existence as well as different aspects of the whole gospel. Religious life, in other words, is a human value as well as an otherworldly one. It is important today to see religious life under this double aspect. Otherwise it may not appear as worth the burden to contemporary Christians, who deeply sense Karl Rahner’s definition of man as “that being who must necessarily realize himself in love in order to correspond to his own being” (*The Word in History*, ed. T. Patrick Burke, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966, p. 70). I shall try to develop these values by first showing the Scriptural basis for

each of the evangelical counsels and then by indicating the positive values for the person, the Church, and the world in these evangelical counsels.

Scriptural Basis

Consecrated chastity, or virginity "for the sake of the kingdom," is a New Testament value explicitly taught by St. Matthew in these words of the Lord:

...Not all can accept this teaching, but those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who were born so from their mothers' womb; and there are eunuchs who were made so by men; and there are eunuchs who have made themselves so for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let him accept who can (Mt 19:11-2).

Both the source and the goal of the charism of evangelical virginity are taught in this passage. Neither physical impotency nor psychological ineptitude nor social pressure grounds the choice of virginity over marriage for a follower of Christ. Virginity "for the sake of the kingdom" is a gift freely accepted, not out of timidity or selfish bachelorhood, but precisely "for the sake of the *basileia*." It is ordered to charity. This is its positive content: it frees the heart for love (Pc 12); it is a "sign and incentive of charity" (Lg 42). The charism of evangelical virginity makes it possible for a Christian to love God and his fellowmen intensely without the normative and natural support of marriage.

A second *locus classicus* in the New Testament is St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7, especially verses 25-35. Paul is addressing himself to practical cases in the Corinthian church. In view of a parousia that may occur imminently, he advises the Christian converts to maintain their present status, married or virginal, waiting with a certain freedom and detachment as "this world as we see it passes away" (v. 31). The advice is *ad hoc* and pragmatic, in view of "the present distress" (v. 26). Even the general principles which he enunciates in the latter half of the passage are

to be interpreted in the context of an imminent parousia:

...He who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please God. Whereas he who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife; and he is divided (vv. 32-3).

In the context of the Corinthian church, there is no doubt that in Paul's mind virginity is a better way. It disposes for contemplation, for "praying to the Lord without distraction" (v. 35), much as earlier in the chapter Paul allows abstinence from intercourse by mutual consent by husband and wife in order that they may give themselves to prayer (v. 5). Is Paul also teaching as a universal principle that virginity practically speaking is a better way for the Christian than marriage? Exegetes generally seem to have thought so, but some recent commentators restrict the teaching to the extremely eschatological perspective of the Corinthian problem. In this reading Paul is not explicitly asserting a universal superiority for virginity. But there is no doubt in Paul's mind of the particular merits of virginity for the cultivation of what we call today the vertical aspect of Christian life.

The paragraph devoted to poverty in *Perfectae caritatis* (n. 13) cites a number of texts which single out different aspects of the Old Testament theme of the *anawim*, the poor people of God. The first citation, 2 Corinthians 8:9, holds up Jesus himself, who "though he was rich, for our sakes became poor." Alan Richardson writes of these words: "It is Jesus himself who embodies the biblical idea of 'the poor man' who trusts only in God, and herein lies the real theological significance of his poverty" (*A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson, New York: Macmillan, 1962, p. 169). Other texts cited reinforce the interior attitude of trust in God (Mt 6:26), resting one's security in God and not in earthly treasures (Mt 6:20), being detached enough to share everything with the poor (Mt 19:21), with those in need

(Mt 25:34-45; Jas 2:15-6), in effective acts of fraternal love (1 Jn 3:17). The interior attitude of trust, openness, and detachment is primary; but it thrives best in actual poverty, in renouncing riches in favor of the poor, and experiencing, therefore, the insecurity of the *anawim* who are thrown upon the Lord's care and driven to hope in Him since they have no worldly prestige and influence on which to rest their security. Even Matthew 19:21 cannot be invoked as a proof text for voluntary religious poverty, since the context indicates a universal norm of total renunciation for all Christians. Religious life specifies that recommendation in an institutional form, whereby persons become poor "both in fact and in spirit" (Pc 13) in order to create the ideal disposition for centering their lives in God and giving generously to their fellowmen.

The Scriptural basis for poverty, then, lies in the long tradition of the *anawim*, celebrated in the first beatitude in both Matthew (who extols poverty of spirit) and Luke (who proclaims actual poverty). While religious poverty is not primarily a socio-economic condition, it cannot be reduced to mere lack of ownership or legal (often legalistic) dependence on superiors' permissions. Religious poverty is an experience of emptiness and felt need for God created by the lack of significant worldly resources. It is a visible witness to the pilgrim status of the Church, but its essential spirit animates rich and poor alike in the Church who place their resources at the service of men.

Obedience in the Bible is the equivalent of hearing, that is, responding to the word of God; hence for Christians it is an exercise of faith. Thus in St. Paul Abraham "believed in God" (Rm 4:3), while in Genesis Abraham "obeyed God's voice" (Gn 22:8; 26:5). The decree presents Christ's example of love and obedience to the will of His Father (for example, Jn 4:34) recognized in the

institutions of His own earthly existence (Hb 5:8) in total service of His fellowmen (for example, Mt 20:28) as the root of religious obedience. Voluntary choice of submission to a religious regime beyond the hierarchically constituted structures of the Church is not taught explicitly in the New Testament. Religious obedience, therefore, is a development.

Theologians have endeavored to work out a theory of religious obedience (for example, K. Rahner, Hillman, Tillar, Orsy). The following reflection assimilates some of this thinking. Religious institutes are charismatic interventions of the Holy Spirit approved by the Church but not part of the hierarchical structure. The community is the bearer of the charism; hence the exercise of authority and obedience in the group is eminently collegial. But religious communities are not free-floating bodies independent of the Church. They exist in the Church, and the superior is the link between the teaching and ruling authority in the Church and the religious community. While religious obedience, therefore, cannot be reduced to a simple equation of the superior's will and God's will in a magical fashion, still the superior remains the authority, the last word, as it were, in debate and dialogue (Pc 14). In summary, religious obedience finds its justification in the individual members subordinating themselves to a community effort guided by the Holy Spirit in a life-form of service that has the guarantee of the Church for its evangelical validity.

The new ordering of the three counsels, with chastity placed in the first place, is intended to bring out the radical and central role of evangelical virginity in the formation of a religious life. It is the charism which sets an individual and a community apart. Virginity implies close companionship with Christ, an affinity for prayer, and the freedom to dedicate all one's energies to the kingdom. Poverty is a condition for this

positive content of chastity. Like celibacy itself it aims to create an emptiness and disponibility so that one is free to "use the world as though not using it" (1 Cor 7:31), having nothing but possessing all things. Obedience is the way of insuring the ecclesiastical character of this venture.

Chastity forms a celibate community of love in the Church. Without poverty the celibate community gives no witness; without obedience it lacks mission. The poverty must be visible, and obedience must be responsible search by the whole community for the Spirit. All three counsels together, therefore, structure the gift of the Spirit which is religious life.

Values of the Evangelical Counsels

We shall consider the meaning of the vows on four different levels suggested by Cardinal Doepfner in a conciliar speech at Vatican II. These four levels are the ascetical, the ecclesial, the apostolic, and the eschatological, all of which are designated values in paragraph 5 of *Perfectae caritatis*.

Ascetical Value

The ascetical value, which refers to the vows as means of personal sanctification, corresponds to the first principle of renewal, personal union with Christ (Pc 2a). The ascetical significance is the key. Whatever the role in the Church of a particular community, "the members of every community, seeking God solely and before everything else, should join contemplation, by which they fix their minds and hearts on Him, with apostolic love, by which they strive to be associated with the work of redemption and to spread the kingdom of God" (Pc 5). The religious vocation is a call to contemplation and apostolate addressed to *all* religious.

The vows are renunciations of recognized earthly good for the prosecution of this double personal goal. If, however, sexuality, property, and the exercise of

personal judgment and decision are the raw material for growth into personhood, as is recognized today, will not the vows frustrate the maturity which is presupposed for a life of prayer and action? Why then renounce these human goods? The answer is that the vows do indeed presuppose a basic adult self-possession, freedom, and responsibility. This is why only balanced persons, who relate well to their peers, the opposite sex, and superiors, who have a healthy psychic as well as physical development, should be accepted for religious profession (see Pc 12). But the vows take human growth a step further to an even higher fulfillment. *The Development of Peoples* puts the matter well:

... human fulfillment constitutes, as it were, a summary of our duties. But there is much more: this harmonious enrichment of nature by personal and responsible effort is ordered to a further perfection. By reason of his union with Christ, the source of life, man attains to a new fulfillment, to a transcendent humanism which give him his greatest possible perfection: this is the highest goal of personal development (n. 16).

The vows, therefore, are no mere negations: "What are called the inhuman imperatives of the Gospel could just as well be called pointers to unexpected possibilities" (Concilium General Secretariat, "Stirrings in Religious Life," in *Renewal and Reform of Canon Law*, New York: Paulist Press, 1967, p. 171). The vows apply the paradox of human life and the gospel, so that by giving we receive, by renunciation we possess. Ultimately only renunciation is the way to the hundredfold and to full humanity (see Lg 46). The counsels are not defenses against life, protections for an individualistic "spiritual life" against one's body and the world. They are secrets of growth in an age that has perhaps forgotten the necessity of renunciation for true love. If they are lived loyally and faithfully so that the limitations of human nature and of the finite are exposed, if they are renewed daily in the free choices that present themselves in an adult fashion, and not by legalistic, almost unwilling conformity, they

promise the Resurrection as well as the cross and the fullest humanity.

Religious are criticized for immaturity, mediocrity, and lack of joy. Besides the inevitable human failings the fault may lie in the beginnings, in the acceptance of candidates who are too immature to make the renunciations of the vows or in formation policies that preclude further development of the person. Communities should take a long, hard look at the age level and psychological condition of their candidates and the kind of novitiate and juniorate training that is given. Or the fault may lie in the failure of communities to create the atmosphere of openness and trust that will allow *persons* to carry out in freedom the implications of their vows. Liberty, not overbearing law, is the only atmosphere in which the Christian life of renunciation can thrive.

Ecclesial Value

The opening paragraph in *Perfectae caritatis* makes clear that the rule of religious is a double one of being and function, consecration and apostolate, witness and mission. These roles overlap, but they correspond to the ecclesial and apostolic meaning of the counsels respectively; they also enter the final category of this paper, the eschatological value of religious life. Our division, therefore, is inadequate, but one that, hopefully, suits the purpose of exposition.

This call to being, to consecration, to witness in the Church is the call to holiness, not in a purely transcendent, vertical fashion, much less in an individualistic way, but in community as in the present manifestation of the kingdom before the visible return of Christ at the parousia. Religious create communities of fraternal love. They are paradigms of the Church itself, either after the manner of the Jerusalem community as in the case of monastic orders, or in the tradition of the Pauline churches which looked outward as with modern apostolic communities. The

structuring of these two types of community is different, one *ad intra*, the other *ad extra*; and each religious institute must choose between the two according to its own nature and goals. Too long have apostolic communities endeavored to live by a monastic schedule and mystique to the detriment of both professional excellence and religious growth. In both monastic and apostolic communities, however, the witness value for the Church lies in visible charity that unites the members and, in the case of apostolic communities, creates community outside.

The evangelical counsels make religious community possible, first, by creating a need for it, and, secondly, by giving a particular physiognomy to the celibate community. Celibacy needs the support of living community: “Let all, especially superiors, remember that chastity is guarded more securely when true brotherly love flourishes in the common life of the community” (Pc 12). Priestly celibacy is a problem where priests have to live without this human support. The religious house must be home for its members, where individuals can be themselves—accepted, welcomed, understood—where they are treated as persons and not functions or numbers that man the machinery of a rigid horarium and overcommitted apostolates, where genuine friendships prevail, in a word, where the religious like to return to from their apostolic labors. The horarium and observances will depend on the nature of the community work, and the primary concern will be to create an atmosphere of peace and friendship. Where love is, God is; where two or three are gathered in His name, there is the presence of the Lord. This means among other things that recreation is as important as faculty meetings and cordiality as necessary as zeal.

The celibate community complements the married community, and Christian love is at the heart of both. Celibate love manifests its own constellation of the qualities of

Christian love: it highlights the freedom, the all-embracing, non-exclusive character of Christian love that gives without looking for a return. Human love that leads to marriage draws two people apart from the community to form one person (one flesh, one family) whereas celibate love emphasizes the otherness of the one loved. Each love has something to teach the other, and both participate in the same love that animates the union of Christ and the Church. Each expresses part of the Christian mystery, celibacy the freedom of the sons of God, marriage the identification love causes and the intimacy it seeks. The consecrated virgin reserves identification for the Lord and bestows his love on the People of God freely. Even his intimate friends do not close him off from others, for he can call no one his own. His interpersonal relationships, therefore, have a phenomenology different from the friendships that lead to or exist in marriage. His way demands faith in God and trust in his fellowmen; but he stakes his very life on the principle that by giving he receives, by loving he is loved.

The other vows make the witness of celibate love a reality. Poverty in its Biblical meaning must be visible. Some ways suggested in the documents are the sharing of one's goods, one's time, one's love inside and outside the community, identifying with the poor and experiencing their insecurity by belonging to a religious family that is not obviously affluent but has to work hard and stint in order to survive. Experimentation and creative expression in new forms are needed to witness poverty, both personally and as a community, both to our affluent society and to the deprived and destitute peoples in our land. Without real poverty the witness of celibacy speaks to no one, because the kind of charity that is its touchstone will not be seen.

Renewed obedience contributes to this witness insofar as it is more responsible, more collegial in character, when "holy

disobedience" need not be a contradiction in terms. An autocratically oriented Church with a strictly vertical obedience, in which the superior has all the answers and takes sole responsibility for decisions, tends to keep people in a state of perpetual childhood and creates a "gimme" syndrome rather than a "giving" service. In adapting to democratic methods, obedience need not suffer; it does not become majority rule or the totally "dialogal" type condemned in the decree (n. 14). Authority remains, but "an active and responsible obedience" gives it balance and allows the whole community to be actively engaged in community service.

Apostolic Value

The practical contribution of religious institutions to the social apostolate of the Church is evident. Without this army of low-paid, dedicated workers, as Pope Pius XII remarked, the Church's work of education and service would collapse. But the external apostolate of religious is secondary. Paul VI scored "the false idea that the first place should be given to the works of the external apostolate, the second to concern for our spiritual perfection, as though such were the requirement of the spirit of our age and the needs of the Church" (*Magno gaudio*, May 23, 1964). The Council itself sees the apostolic work for the kingdom promoted in two ways, by "prayer or by active undertakings" according to the nature of a given order (Lg 44); and in the case of apostolic orders it inserts "charitable activity" into "the very nature of the religious life" (Pc 8).

The mission of religious in the Church, indeed of the whole redemptive apostolate of the Church, lies on a deeper level than the pragmatic. The apostolate springs from union with Christ and consists in participation in the Paschal mystery of *kenosis* and resurrected life as expressed by prayer and work. More concretely, the apostolate of the Church is the same as Christ's, to break down the middle

wall of partition (Eph 2:14), creating community inside and outside the local religious community itself. It is the work of charity, of self-emptying, that allows God's love for mankind to filter into the lives of others through the agency of those who are bearers of that love. They must possess this love before they can be its instruments. To live and express fraternally this gift of God's love means "the bearing about in our bodies of the dying of Jesus in order that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our bodily frame" (2 Cor 4:10); in this way "death is at work in us, but life in [the community]" (ibid, v. 12). The apostolate, in other words, is charity, expressed in prayer or action. Far from being opposed to the witness of religious life, the apostolate is practically identified with community. Community and apostolate in the Church are thus correlatives and mutually interdependent. Neither one is pure means to the other. In a given institute, especially when it strives to remain faithful to its particular "spirit and special aims" (Pc 2b) in the midst of pressing local needs of the Church, there will be tensions in the structuring and implementation of the two aspects. But in general the type of community life will depend on the institute's apostolate. Apostolic communities will have fewer common observances and perhaps greater flexibility in horaria, whereas monastic groups will subordinate external involvements to the conventual schedule. The apostolic works as well as the prayer forms and religious practices should be rigorously reviewed and evaluated in view of the nature and goals of an institute, and courageous changes made as necessary. Here again a great deal of experimentation is called for in order to make the institute relevant to itself and the Church. Harmonious balance between the common life and apostolic involvement according to the institute's identity is the *desideratum*. Once again renewal is more important than adaptation, since ultimately both community

and apostolate are mere expressions of the one union of charity, of death-resurrection in the Lord.

Eschatological Value

The Biblical notion of virginity, especially clear in the New Testament, contains a strong eschatological note. The state anticipates the future messianic marriage with Christ, "that wondrous marriage decreed by God and which is to be fully revealed in the future age in which the Church takes Christ as its only spouse" (Pc 12). Thus religious life is a "splendid" (Pc 1) and "unique" (Lg 44) sign of the heavenly kingdom.

It is customary to equate this eschatological or transcendent quality of the religious vocation with an exclusive love of Christ that avoids the distraction and competition of a divided heart (1 Cor 7:32-5). But this is the vocation of all Christians. All Christians are called to a unique love of God that does not allow any creature to be placed on the same level as God; otherwise we have idolatry. In the effort to cultivate this unique love of God religious bypass one sign, that of marriage and property and independence, and assume another sign, that of physical virginity lived in poverty and obedience. The celibate community does highlight the eschatological character of Christian life, just as the married community reflects more clearly the incarnational aspect. As two ways to the kingdom, they are not as two ways of living Christian love, totally exclusive of each other; they complement each other as witnesses of the Church's love for Christ. The hazard of the celibate community is to lose sight of the world and people, whereas the hazard of the married community is to forget the transient, passing character of the historical moment and lose sight of the Christ who is to come.

Religious, therefore, are dedicated to an eschatological existence as a bias and emphasis, but not as an exclusive concern.

Especially in the light of incarnational theology that identifies Christ's presence in the person and community, religious today are not absolved from temporal concerns, from making their contribution to human development and the building of the earth. They can engage in the same works as the laity, such as teaching, social work, any human endeavor; only their bias will be different. They come to human tasks with an eschatological eye to the future, to what is not yet, to what will come in the final age, already begun, in Christ. In this sense they live in hope. No matter how important the classes they teach or their social involvement, they bring to their work in the world a sense of the *Deus semper major*, of the person of Christ who is to be revealed in the parousia. Where specialization is feasible, perhaps it is desirable to leave secular tasks to the laity and let religious concentrate on sacred functions. But no universal law demands such a distribution of tasks, and the distinction may continue the unhealthy separation of sacred and secular. We should abandon the dichotomies implicit in the phraseology, "religious first, professional second," or "religious first, apostle second." Religious are not "strangers to their fellow men or useless citizens of the earthly city" (Lg 46). On the contrary they embrace the world in its truth and reality. They see it as inchoate glory, as the kingdom of God in embryo, and yet as "no lasting city," as a moment in an evolutionary process, and as less than the ultimate Good that is Christ reappearing and handing the kingdom over to His Father. In a word they live in hope, and this hope is the secret of the joy that must be their witness if it is to be true. For them as for the married joy is the surest index that they are living their vocation in Christ.

Two practical questions may be raised here. First, what does the eschatological vocation contribute to the Church and the world at large? Second, how does the

eschatological emphasis affect the prayer life and self-denial of religious?

The first question is answered admirably in *Lumen gentium*. Religious are "a sign which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation" (Lg 44). Why is this assertion made? Because religious represent the presence of Christ Himself "contemplating on the mountain, announcing God's kingdom to the multitude, healing the sick and the maimed... doing good to all" (Lg 46).

The second question is more complex. Since prayer and self-denial are founded on the eschatological dimension of Christian life, it is to be expected that religious life will be characterized by these acts. But both prayer forms and the practices of self-denial must become more incarnational. Prayer should become the loving awareness of Christ present in human manifestations. Such prayer is nourished above all by Sacred Scripture and the liturgy, the only two sources of "the spirit and practice of prayer" explicitly signaled out by *Perfectae caritatis* (n. 6). Thus mental prayer as confrontation with the word of God is more important than a multiplicity of devotions (Es, n. 21). For religious as for the whole people of God the liturgy weds the human and divine and is the summit and source of Christian life (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, n. 2, n. 10). Self-denial too will take on a more human dimension. The cross is one's daily life, and it is present wherever Christians endeavor to be an Easter people. The self-denial of religious, therefore, will be the self-renunciations inherent in being all things to all men, in fostering community, in giving generously in the apostolate. As a disposition for this life a discipline, an asceticism, is necessary. Today this discipline would better consist in the cultivation of the openness, understanding, welcome, and patience that are the necessary framework in which charity can operate rather than in the

corporal penances and often meaningless gestures of some religious rules.

Conclusion

We have tried to set down the broad theological principles of religious life. On this background the practical questions about religious life today can be raised and discussed. The basic question which must

guide this inquiry is this: In the welter of change and conflicting ideas, where is the Holy Spirit speaking? To what is He calling American religious at this time? The paper offers some guidelines in which to pursue this question, but only in honest and prayerful dialogue can we ask the right practical questions and move in the direction of the Holy Spirit’s answers.

¹ Pc throughout this article refers to Vatican II’s *Perfectae caritatis* (*Decree on Religious Life*).

² Es throughout this article refers to Paul VI’s *Ecclesiae sanctae*.

³ Lg throughout this article refers to Vatican II’s *Lumen gentium* (*Constitution on the Church*).