

HOW MUCH OF US LIVES ON FOREVER? THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF SACRIFICE AND DEDICATION

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SUMMARY: I. *Deliberation and permanence.* II. *Two paths towards immortality.* III. *Final Resurrection and the quest for an integral immortality.* IV. *The meaning of Christian sacrifice and dedication.* V. *A specific example: the meaning of consecrated life.*

I. DELIBERATION AND PERMANENCE

WHY do people deliberate? Why do they take time and become silent as they “make up their minds”? Why do they get solemn and serious when a decision has to be made? Other living beings don't seem to do that, as far as we can tell. Plants act as they're programmed to act. Animals just follow their instincts. Perhaps we may say that neither one nor the other experiences any sense of *responsibility* for their actions. Yet we humans do. Our perception is as follows: actions are temporary, brief, short-lived, whereas consequences are (often) long-lasting or permanent. We decide in a moment; we have to live with our decisions for years, in some cases forever. We take a particular path, but simply cannot turn back. Human freedom works that way: it is short-lived in action, but long-term in effect.

But this paper is not about freedom, but about permanence, immortality. The reason why we deliberate carefully, the reason why we make our decisions responsibly, is because we realise in a sense that we are ‘making ourselves’, we are designing our future, more or less permanently. Gregory of Nyssa had it to say that “we are parents to ourselves”.¹ Obviously if we are not destined for immortality, if human life is finite in duration, then our decisions are of little importance. If life is finite, then decisions are banal. The shorter life lasts, the less relevant it becomes, and the less do we need to deliberate. On the contrary, if our life goes on forever, if it reaches out towards permanence and immortality, then our concrete actions are indeed critical, for we are determining the profile of our eternity. Blaise Pascal made the following interesting observation: “It is true that the mortality or immortality of the soul must make a huge difference to morality. And yet philosophers have constructed their ethical systems inde-

¹ Cf. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *De vita Moysi II*, 2-3.

pendently of this".¹ Morality, ethical behaviour, is determined critically by the prospect of immortality, or by the lack thereof. Yet it must be added that it is determined not only by the *fact* of immortality, but also by the *content* of immortality. Let us consider this statement more carefully.

II. TWO PATHS TOWARDS IMMORTALITY

The basic thrust humans experience towards immortality throughout history takes on two forms that determine correspondingly the way they act: the immortality of *human life* and the immortality of *human selfhood*.²

The idea of *the immortality of human life* arises from an awareness of the fact that humans instinctively seek recognition, honour, appreciation, acceptance, admiration, fame, love. They wish to be remembered, if possible forever, by the people they lived with and loved, and perhaps even by humanity at large. Nobody is willingly prepared to be neglected or forgotten. Our lives and actions reach out toward immortality, they seek permanent recognition. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera, reflecting on the Romantic-idealist period, considers *fame* as the true essence of immortality.³ Ancient Greek literature is full of this quest: Homer's epics, especially when explaining the exploits of the heroes at the battle of Troy, Herodotus' *Histories*, the tragic drama of Euripides, Sophocles and others. According to Cicero, "death is a terrible thing for those for whom life extinguishes everything. But not so for those who do not die in the esteem of the people".⁴ The immortal identity of a people is not an abstract quantity for the Greeks: it is situated in the city, the *polis*. To destroy a city is to destroy the identity of its people, to rob them of their memory and thus of their immortality. Thucydides in his *Peloponnesian Wars* memorably recounts the address of Pericles, governor of Athens, to the people after the victorious battle of Marathon, describing the city as the place of the memory of the gods and immortality of the people.⁵ But here of course immortality is attributed not to individuals but to humanity as a whole. Many modern philosophies inspired in Marx and Nietzsche follow this path, which finds interesting parallels in the Old Testament.

The second kind of immortality is more typical of the philosopher than the poet, of the intellectual than the soldier, of the sage than the politician. Plato is the best known defender of it. Humans are considered *immortal in their ontological and spiritual constitution*, in their individual selfhood. The spiritual soul, the very core of the human being, survives death, lives on forever, is immortal. The self survives in the immortal soul, leaving behind what is perishable, corrupt-

¹ B. PASCAL, *Pensées* (ed. Brunschvicg), n. 219.

² For a fuller explanation, cf. P. O'CALLAGHAN, *Christ Our Hope. An Introduction to Eschatology*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2011, 25-31.

³ M. KUNDERA, *Immortality*, Faber and Faber, London 1991.

⁴ CICERO, *Paradoxa*, 18.

⁵ THUCYDIDES, *History of the Peloponnesian War II*, 41-48.

ible and ephemeral as a useless encumbrance: life as it is lived out day by day, impassioned dedication and hard work, military or political success, fame, material riches, historical memory, the human body. Clearly the quest for Platonic wisdom and salvation results in life on earth being trivialised; body, society, desire, action, success and the rest are all eventually thrown onto the scrapheap of history.

Thus, Platonic ethics are basically derived from the doctrine of the immortality of the soul: our innermost selves are identified with a spiritual, immortal *psyche*, and our life should consist of a sustained effort to overcome the draw of corruptible matter and impermanence deriving from the body, in that way establishing the priority and permanent presence of the spiritual soul. Once it is purified from the body and from the senses, the immortal soul will spend its eternity contemplating the world of ideas. That is man's destiny according to Plato. That is what determines, what should determine, his behaviour.

III. FINAL RESURRECTION AND THE QUEST FOR AN INTEGRAL IMMORTALITY

And so we may ask a question, indeed a key question: are the two versions of human immortality – both of which humans aspire to – compatible with one another? Will they ever be integrated one with the other? Classical thought seems to establish an insoluble alternative between the two: either my life endures but I do not; or I endure and my life does not. In other words, either immortality of my life, or immortality of my selfhood; either enjoy this life to the full, or look forward to the next one. The dilemma is a real one.

For the Christian believer a positive reply to this question may be found in the doctrine of final resurrection. This central teaching of the Church attempts to offer a more specific reply to the question: what will heaven consist of?; how much of us will live on forever?; what will be left behind? It is true that we need to keep our imagination under control when speaking of the afterlife: St Paul tells us that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). Still, the question is important, indeed critical, for it determines not only the weight of ethical choices, but also their content. For followers of Plato, things are simple in a sense: hold on to your soul, for it's permanent and spiritual; let go of your body, and everything associated with it: senses, passions, pleasures, friendships and the rest. But Christians cannot accept this. For we are created by God, in his own image and likeness, soul *and* body. We are inseparably material and spiritual. We belong to a world which is our natural habitat. We are saved by God's own Son becoming *flesh*, and are destined to spend our eternity in personal communion with the Trinity as human beings, not as disincarnate souls. Above all, we are promised the gift of final resurrection, the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection of the body, at the end of time. Matter and all that is associated with it, is destined for eternity, is called to permanence. And so the question arises

spontaneously: how much of life lived on earth will carry over? How much of our present baggage will we bring with us into the next life? What will the risen state consist of?

The thesis I intend to propose in this paper is the following: the two immortalities described above “coalesce” and merge successfully in the light of the Christian doctrine of final resurrection. This means there is no ultimate need to choose between a personal and collective immortality, between personal happiness and societal well-being, between immortality of the self and immortality of life.

The doctrine itself of final resurrection is deeply rooted in the Old Testament, and draws directly on the saving power of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. It is an essential Christian teaching: “If there is no resurrection of the dead”, Paul says, “Christ has not been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor 15:13f.).¹

Thomas Aquinas, in line with many other authors, suggests three characteristics of the risen body: spiritualisation, immortality, incorruptibility. *First* spiritualisation, in that the body that rises up in the power of the Spirit will be deeply and definitively informed and dominated by the soul. Body and soul will be perfectly integrated with one another. *Second*, immortality, in that the union between body and soul will become permanent, the body thus sharing in the soul's intrinsic immortality. With resurrection, Paul says, “death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:53). And *third*, Thomas tells us, the risen body will be incorruptible. “What is sown is corruptible, what is raised is incorruptible” (1 Cor 15:42). What belongs to the comings and goings of human life, its beginning, development and consummation, its earthly condition, its changeableness, will no longer be found in the risen state. Aquinas, who had a somewhat strict and severe view of eschatological consummation, and identified heaven with static, beatific contemplation of the divine, said that “neither eating, nor drinking, nor sleeping, nor generating belong to the risen state, for all these relate to corporal life”.²

And what may be said of Jesus' words on resurrection addressed to the Pharisees and Sadducees: “For in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mt 22:30)? The fact that Jesus contrasts the risen “angelical” state with the married state indicates that human procreation will have no place in heaven. Because of this teaching some Christian writers – for example Origen, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa – suggest that no sexual distinction will obtain among humans in the risen state. The majority of Church Fathers, however, took it that men and women will remain as such in the risen state, because the sexual distinction belongs, according to the book of Genesis (1:27), to human nature itself. Augustine says: “He who established

¹ On the Biblical doctrine of resurrection, cfr. P. O'CALLAGHAN, *Christ Our Hope*, 75-100.

² THOMAS AQUINAS, *S.Th. III, Suppl.*, q. 81, a. 4, c.

both sexes will restore both... Nothing of the body will be lost... everything will be according to rule".¹ It is quite clear of course that the purpose of Jesus' comparison of the risen state to angelic life was one of helping believers avoid an excessively materialistic, worldly and mutable view of our immortal state, insisting rather on its glory and permanence.

Besides, resurrection is the lot of *all* humans. Both just and unjust will rise up, to receive reward or punishment as the case may be (Jn 6,28f.). Aquinas adds that the just will rise up in a state marked by an absence of suffering, by subtlety, agility and – last but not least – beauty. A medieval author, Honorius of Autun, summed up the characteristics of the risen saints as follows: "They will have seven special glories of the body, and seven of the soul: in the body, beauty, swiftness, strength, freedom, delight (*voluptas*), health, immortality; in the soul, wisdom, friendship, harmony, power, honour, security, joy".²

All this speculation is very well as it stands. However, it may come across as a trifle abstract, and maybe even a bit individualistic: we still find ourselves asking in what way *our lives*, our *concrete lived lives*, the *life we loved*, will rise up and last forever. Of course our full identity is not just that of the soul or spirit, the ecstatic, risen glorified body, but is rooted in *the life we lived with and for other people*: our history, our narrative, our projects, our relationships, our friendships. St Josemaría said that his heaven would consist of contemplating God, but also of seeing his sons and daughters contemplating God, much higher than himself, very close to God.³ The life he lived on earth, his dedication, his apostolate, his persevering work of formation, his paternity, the concreteness of it all, the specific relationships with a wide variety of different people... all that would somehow continue forever in heaven. He would enjoy God face to face but through the prism, in the context, of the life he had lived on earth. His identity, his vocation, his life's work, would not be left behind as something belonging essentially to the past, something to be left behind, but would continue on forever. Resurrection would thus be *the rising up of a life once lived*.

It is interesting to note that from the earliest times Christians spoke not only of the resurrection of the dead, but of *the resurrection of the flesh*... and they were fully aware that the term "flesh" referred to our mortal, tangible, impermanent life on earth. As if to say: this life as we have lived it in all its concreteness and temporality will rise up again. It was a clearly anti-Gnostic teaching, clearly life-affirming, or better, *this-life-affirming*, *this-world-affirming*. Several early Christian texts go so far as to speak of "the resurrection of *this* flesh". Tyrannius Rufinus († 410) in his commentary on the Apostles' Creed says the following: "the Church teaches us the resurrection of the flesh, though qualifying it with the term *huius*, 'this'. 'This', doubtless, so that the faithful know that their flesh, if it has been conserved free from sin, will in future be a vessel of honour, useful

¹ AUGUSTINE, *De Civitate Dei* XXII, 17 & 19,1.

² HONORIUS OF AUTUN, *Elucidarium* II, 17.

³ Cfr. JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, *Notes from a family meeting* (5 April 1970): AGP, biblioteca, P 01, VII-1975, p. 117.

to the Lord for all good works; if however it is contaminated by sin, in future it will be a vessel of anger for destruction".¹ Not only will our spiritual and corporal being rise up, but also our actions, our narrative, our relationships, our very life. For this reason it is commonly held that final resurrection is a pre-condition for general judgement.²

The idea that final resurrection will consist of the rising up of a life once lived is frequent among modern thinkers.³ Two of them may be mentioned, the XIX century poet Fr Gerard Manley Hopkins and of the theologian Romano Guardini, who died in 1968.

Hopkins in his poem *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo* encourages his reader to give everything to God, the very best things, holding nothing for oneself, for God will give it all back in return, purified and eternalised, at the end of time.

Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty's self and beauty's giver. See, not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost; every hair is, hair of the head, numbered... O why are we so haggard at the heart, so care-coiled, care-killed, so fagged, so fashed, so cogged, so cumbered, when the thing we so freely forfeit is kept with fonder a care, fonder a care kept than we could have kept it... Where kept? Do but tell us where kept, where. –Yonder. –What high as that!⁴

Hopkins encourages his readers to surrender their lives, their very best gifts, to God who gave them in the first place, as a treasure stored in heaven (Mt 19:21), and God will give it all back, he says, immeasurably multiplied and enriched, at the end of time. Nothing will be lost. Or perhaps we should say, nothing *need* be lost. For this precise reason the acts of sacrifice and renunciation we make are not meant to express any definitive rejection or much less despising of God's gifts: they are but temporary, willing signs of our love, of our trust, of our hope of being rewarded.

The theologian Romano Guardini pays more attention to the nature of the risen state. He asks: "From its origin to its decay [the body] goes through an endless number of forms. Which of these is properly its own? Is it the child's, the mature man's, the elderly person's?" What is the true identity of the human being? In other words, what kind of human being will rise up at the end of time? He replies in the following terms:

The answer can only be: All [forms] are essential. The individual form does not exist only that the next should take its place, and so on, one after the other, in order that the last one, death, might appear. Each phase is the man, and each is indispensable to his life as a whole. That endless series of configurations which is the human body must be included in the resurrected body. It must have a new dimension, that

¹ TYRANNIUS RUFINUS, *Comm. in Symb. Apost.*, 46.

² Cfr. P. O'CALLAGHAN, *Christ Our Hope*, 135f.

³ Cfr. *ibidem*, 109-112.

⁴ G.M. HOPKINS, *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo*, in N.H. MACKENZIE (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Gerald Manley Hopkins*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1992, 170-71.

of time, but time raised to the power of eternity, with the result that its history is included in the present, and all the successive moments of its past exist in an absolute now... There must also be present his joys, sorrows, frustrations, liberations, victories, defeats, his love and his hatred. All the unending experiences of the soul were expressed in and by the body and have become part of it, contributing either to its development or to its crippling and destruction – all are present and retained in the risen body. The pattern of life is there with all that befell man, for the resurrection of the body means the resurrection of the life that has been lived, with all its good and all its evil... In the resurrection, form, substance, life, all will rise. Nothing that has been is annihilated. Man's deeds and his destiny are part of him, and, set free from the restrictions of history, will remain for all eternity, not by any power of his own, not as a final phase of an inner development, but at the summons of the Almighty, and in the strength of his Spirit.¹

Through the power of God nothing humans have truly lived will be left behind: body, soul, form, substance, life, history, relationships... nothing, that is, except what has separated them from the Lord of Life, sin. But that is another question we shall not deal with here.

Two corollaries follow from what we have just seen, the first regarding the meaning of Christian sacrifice and dedication, the second in respect of the significance of consecrated life in the Church.

IV. THE MEANING OF CHRISTIAN SACRIFICE AND DEDICATION

Throughout the XIX century the accusation directed at Christians by social reformers (especially Karl Marx) was a simple one: believers decide on the basis of eternity, they want to get to heaven, they think about the next life; *as a result* they have little or no interest in this one. Or at best, their interest is instrumental, fleeting, unpredictable. Religion, it is said, is the opium of the people.² It tells them not to waste their time looking for happiness in this life, as they are meant to find it only in the next. So goes Marx's narrative. But Marx was not the only one to promote the myth of Christian essential other-worldliness. Friedrich Nietzsche was probably even more influential in this regard. He speaks of "the great lie of personal immortality".³ "Be faithful to the earth", he exhorted his readers, "and do not believe in those who speak of ethereal hopes; they are venomous, whether they know it or not".⁴ Human hope directed towards a beatific afterlife is deeply alienating, Nietzsche says, and must be eliminated if we wish to affirm life in all its power, immediacy and richness. By right, hope is meant to involve human, tangible, temporal goals, a position thoroughly de-

¹ R. GUARDINI, *The Last Things*, Pantheon, New York 1954, 68-69.

² And not only that: since it is faith-based, Christianity is considered by some as supra-rational, or, worse, irrational, and so, potentially totalitarian. Pope Francis' encyclical with Benedict XVI, *Lumen fidei* (n. 25) draws attention to this mistaken reading.

³ F. NIETZSCHE, *Der Antichrist*, n. 43, in *Nietzsche Werke*, vol. 6/3, De Gruyter, Berlin 1969, 215.

⁴ F. NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Vorrede 3, in *Nietzsche Werke*, vol. 6/1, De Gruyter, Berlin 1968, 9.

veloped by Ernst Bloch, an Marxist-humanist philosopher who was very influential in the 1960s.¹

But Nietzsche's critique went further than Marx's. He took it that Christians' hope in an eternal, idyllic afterlife was a clear sign that *Christians hated life*, this life, this world. As pilgrims on their way to the fatherland, they despised the world they lived in, they looked down upon their fellow travellers and even more so on those installed on the side of the road. A clear sign of this is to be seen, it is commonly said, in the way Christians glorified and promoted sacrifice and renunciation. In doing so, as we know, they were attempting to follow their master, Jesus Christ, who died on a Cross not – believers say – on account of a travesty of justice, but because in willingly forgoing life on earth, he saved humanity from sin, destroyed the power of the devil, showed forth his love of God. In their attempt to live forever, indeed to live beyond death, Nietzsche sees Christians as life-denying killjoys, trained to mortify their inclinations and desires, to sacrifice their lives for 'noble' causes, to 'give up' good things, to bear suffering of whatever kind, to forego 'legitimate' pleasures, to turn the other cheek (Mt 5:39), to be meek and humble of heart (Mt 11:29), to accept injustice without as much as a whimper... And what does it matter, if afterwards heavenly happiness awaits them for ever!

The accusations made by Nietzsche left their mark, doubtless, and Christians have attempted with some degree of success throughout the xx century to put a somewhat Jansenistic tendency of institutionalised harshness and sacrifice behind them. In attempting to flee from one extreme, however, some Christians may have fallen into the opposite one, by adopting an 'accommodationist' *modus vivendi et operandi*, becoming 'life-affirming' in every possible situation... and maybe little else.² In effect, perhaps one of the characteristics of mainline Christianity over recent decades may be expressed in the following syllogism: God created the world; God is good; therefore the world is good. Everything is good! Life and all its expressions should be affirmed and celebrated. Anything goes! That is to say, evil and sin are but apparent. No redemption is needed, no intervention of the divine, no need for grace that elevates human life. All our inclinations and desires are licit at heart, and we can – indeed must – allow ourselves be led by them uncritically. And of course, by contrast, whoever attempts to live a life of sacrifice and self-denial, stands out as fanatical, fundamentalist or demented. To some degree this process – recounted in a somewhat exaggerated way – has been verified among Christians in recent decades.

The problem of course is that Nietzsche's diagnosis and the unilateral remedy he recommended has simply not worked. We are living in a world where unbridled, individualist desire has brought misery to untold millions. Pope Francis

¹ P. O'CALLAGHAN, *Hope and Freedom in Gabriel Marcel and Ernst Bloch*, «Irish Theological Quarterly» 55 (1989) 215-39.

² Cfr. R.G. DOUTHAT, *Bad Religion: how we Became a Nation of Heretics*, Free Press, New York 2012, 83-112.

has warned us about it time and again. It is more than obvious that discipline, training and self-control are in short supply.

Christians teach that God is a living God, the God of the living. Thus they are and should be “life-affirming” in every possible way. But as we saw earlier on, ethics is determined eschatologically. Behaviour in this life is driven by and is closely related to the next life. This means that Christians should live out and affirm in this life *only* what will last forever in the next. And given our fallen condition and our tendency to treat created goods as God-substitutes or idols,¹ given besides the fact that we need to grow in love for other people and, we *need* to make sacrifices, for ourselves and for the sake of other people... In doing so, however, we are not *ipso facto* despising or rejecting the things we give up. We are recognising two things. *First*, the fact that growth needs effort and discipline... humans are historical beings, they need time and effort to grow. *Second*, the fact that our human condition is a fallen one, and we do not always recognise the relative value of created things. Besides, and this is the critical, through final resurrection our life will rise up again and last forever: nothing will be lost. Sacrifice-making is risky... but it is not a life-denying risk, but rather the risk of faith and hope in God who has promised to reward those who have given up all things to follow him (Mt 19,21). We do not reject created gifts when we freely renounce them; rather, we affirm that God alone is good, that God alone is the source of goodness, that only God should be adored... and from him we expect to receive all we have sacrificed back again, and much more besides. Without that, idolatry slips in almost without our noticing it. The words of Pope Francis in the encyclical *Lumen fidei* written with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI should be carefully read:

Once man has lost the fundamental orientation which unifies his existence, he breaks down into the multiplicity of his desires; in refusing to await the time of promise, his life-story disintegrates into a myriad of unconnected instants. Idolatry, then, is always polytheism, an aimless passing from one lord to another. Idolatry does not offer a journey but rather a plethora of paths leading nowhere and forming a vast labyrinth. Those who choose not to put their trust in God must hear the din of countless idols crying out: ‘Put your trust in me!’ Faith, tied as it is to conversion, is the opposite of idolatry; it breaks with idols to turn to the living God in a personal encounter (n. 13).

Summing up, we may say that the sacrificed dedication of Christian believers involves a life-affirming act of faith and hope that recognises the historical human condition as well as the reality of fallen human nature.

V. A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE: THE MEANING OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Another example of the dynamic I have been describing may be in order. The life of consecrated men and women (religious) is marked, as we know, by the

¹ On the question of postmodern idols, see P. SEQUERI, *Contro gli idoli postmoderni*, Lindau, Torino 2011.

public profession of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Called by God, they freely and publicly commit themselves to live without any personal property, to forego marriage and family, and to strictly follow the will of a superior, renouncing their own will. Doubtless, their commitment involves a denial, a sacrifice, a forfeiture. God is adored and thanked and adored, as it were, by humans giving him back his own gifts. Yet to give back presents is always a delicate issue. Be that as it may, many would consider that this very process, lived by the most exemplary of Christians, is intrinsically life-denying. Religious men and women, isolated from the world, with no children and family of their own, without economic responsibility, unable to decide for themselves...: what meaning could such a lifestyle take on? Would it not be better for them to simply accept God's good gifts, use them and enjoy them to the full, in that way showing Him the gratitude he deserves? Something of a kind may be said of other potent aspects of Christian asceticism: corporal mortification, fasting, pilgrimage, almsgiving, etc.

Some authors are of the opinion that the dedication of religious men and women may be considered *paradigmatic* for Christian life as a whole.¹ Or at least that religious life is in absolute terms *the most perfect form* of Christian life. This would seem to indicate that Adam and Eve were religious; so was Jesus, and so should be his followers, especially Mary and John the Apostle; to some degree the saved are and will be consecrated men and women in heaven. According to this reading, their immortal destiny will be marked, to put it a bit crudely, by the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, by which they freely *and perpetually* renounce the great gifts of God: the world, their own future, and, at the heart of it all, their very will. For, as we saw earlier on, what is immortal, what lasts forever, becomes *ipso facto* paradigmatic, typical, emblematic. But if *all* Christian life demands the permanent renunciation of God's great gifts, then in real terms they simply cannot be considered as good. In this context, it is understandable that many people still consider Christianity as inhuman, as life-denying, as incompatible with joy. Nietzsche would be right all along.

Of course no authentic consecrated man or woman would claim to be more perfect Christians than the rest of the baptised... the doctrine of the universal call to holiness preached intrepidly by St Francis de Sales, St Theresa of Lisieux, St Josemaría and others, proclaimed besides by Vatican Council II,² has left its mark. Neither would they suggest that the human realities they forego are to be rejected out of hand as if they were not God's gifts. Perhaps it may be put this way: the eschatological witness religious men and women are supposed to give in the Church and for the world³ does not mean that heaven for one and all

¹ See my study, "Gli stati di vita del cristiano". *Riflessioni su un'opera di Hans Urs von Balthasar*, «Anales Theologici» 21 (2007) 61-100.

² Cfr. P. O'CALLAGHAN, *Figli di Dio nel mondo*, Edusc, Roma 2013, 294-301.

³ Cfr. VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decr. *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 13; GIOVANNI PAOLO II, Apost. Exhort. *Vita Consacrata* (25 Marzo 1996), nn. 7, 14-16, 26.

will be a material replica of their life and dedication. God's gifts will abound in heaven more than anywhere else. Nothing good that God gave us will be lost.

So what is the true meaning and value of religious life, of the testimony of consecrated women and men? What does the real renunciation it involves actually achieve? And, what of the renunciation all Christians undertake? Maybe St Peter Chrysologus, a fifth century bishop, got it right when he said: "what you do not give to others you will lose yourself".¹ When all is said and done, as Charles Péguy put it, "all that is not given is lost". The meaning of the sacrifice of consecrated men and women, made to God and witnessed by others, is to give *public, visible witness* to the power, the love and the fidelity of God to the world he created. It is essentially missionary and apostolic. "The habit doesn't make the monk", it is said. If this expression is taken to mean that "the habit doesn't make the *saint*", then it is perfectly valid, for only God's grace can bring about holiness, and it does so in all kinds of circumstances. But in a way the habit *does* make the monk, in the sense that it reveals in a public, visible way the dedication of people who for the love of God, with ultimate trust and hope only in the Lord, freely give up personal dominion over property, life and will. Their lives thus become a provocation, an inspiration, a reminder, an encouragement for humanity at large to look towards God as the unique, unfailing source of all good things, though not necessarily as an example that all would have to follow literally.

Of course all Christians can and should live their quest for holiness in a wide variety of fully authentic ways, that do not involve taking vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Still, their life, which must include living the *virtues* of poverty, chastity, obedience, among many others, requires a deep and practical conviction that without God's grace they can do nothing of value. Sacrifices they will have to make, doubtless, sacrifices lived joyfully, without drawing too much attention to themselves, aware that the Christ who lives in them (Gal 2,20), the *bonus odor Christi*, 'the perfume of Christ' (2 Cor 2:15), will communicate powerfully with humanity through their lives, bringing them to give glory to the heavenly Father (Mt 5,16).

ABSTRACT

The article considers the theological and anthropological meaning of Christian sacrifice and mortification. It is commonly held that the sacrifice of a created good by a Christian believer constitutes a denial of its goodness, a rejection of God's gift. The author attempts to show, on the basis of the doctrine of final resurrection, that whatever we have sacrificed willingly in this life will be restored to us, full, complete and purified, at the end of time. Thus the believer's personal sacrifice is not life-denying but involves a grateful affirmation of God's creation, and a way of ensuring that the created world, as it is, is not turned into an idol. The principle is likewise applied to the significance of vows undertaken by consecrated men and women.

¹ PETER CHRYSOLOGOUS, *Sermo* 43.