



The Three Vows of Love

Sr. Gabriela of the Incarnation, O.C.D.

Our Carmel recently had the great joy of celebrating the First Profession of Sr. Talitha of the Trinity! Sr. Talitha has successfully completed the first four years of formation as a Discalced Carmelite: the year of aspirancy, the year of postulancy and the two years of novitiate. During this time, she grew in her understanding of what it means to be a Carmelite in our Community and she believes that God is calling her to give herself to Him in this Carmel. She has taken the step of vowing herself to Him for three years to find out if this is truly where He is calling her. She will have five years in all to make sure before deciding if she is called to take the definite step of pronouncing her solemn vows.

Men and women throughout history, and in all cultures and religions, have vowed themselves to the divine in different ways. As the centuries passed, Christians drawn to this total gift of themselves to God, found that vows of chastity, poverty and obedience presented a good framework for their self-offering. The three vows are all different aspects of the single gift of oneself to God, but each emphasizes a different facet of our human nature. Pondering the different vows one by one can help us to deepen our understanding of the whole gift that we make in religious profession. Let us take a closer look at each of them.

The Vow of Response

*“Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.”*

(Song of Songs, 2, 10)

Every human being has a vocation from God. The vocation may be to a state in life, to an activity, to a task, but whatever form it takes, it is a personal call to a living relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Priests and religious are called to a more intense and total relationship with Him. A woman religious is often called a “spouse of Christ,” a “bride of Christ”. The word “spouse” (from the Latin, “sponsa”), derives from the verb “spondeo” which means “to promise, bind, pledge”. The words “respond”, “response” come from the same verb. A spouse, whether man or woman, is one who responds to the pledge offered to him or to her. A spouse of Christ binds herself in response to the love by which her Lover has first bound Himself to her.

This is a growing relationship, an ever-deepening union between Bride and Bridegroom. It is not accomplished once for all at the profession of vows. The profession is a wedding, but, as the saying goes, “a wedding takes place, a marriage takes time.” At her profession, the religious binds herself to grow into her union with Him. God never ceases to bestow graces on His beloved; she, by her vow, promises to try to respond to all the graces that He gives her.

This is a mutual total self-gift. The profession of vows is public because the Church publicly consecrates this woman to God. He, in His turn, enfolds her totally in Himself.

*“A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a garden locked, a fountain sealed.”*

(Song of Songs, 4 12)

The Vow of Trust

*“I opened to my beloved,
but my beloved had turned and was gone. “*

(Song of Songs, 5, 6)

Each of the vows has a legal aspect: by the vow of chastity, a nun in solemn vows cannot get married. If she goes through a marriage ceremony, it is legally invalid. Similarly, by her vow of poverty, she renounces the right to possession and the right to transact business in her own name. If she signs a contract without her superior’s permission, it is legally invalid. As a nun with temporary vows, Sr. Talitha retains ownership of what she possessed when she entered the monastery, but she cannot legally administer any of it.

However, the legal aspect of the vows is only their hull: like the shell of a nut, they exist to protect the kernel within. That kernel is the mutual gift of Bride and Bridegroom, and like the kernel of a nut, that gift bears life for others.

A nun gives up everything for Christ. She receives His total possession in return, but that possession is greater than she can imagine. She must grow in her ability to receive Him, and this happens when she goes in search of Him. The search demands trust: the trust that He will let Himself be found. That trust is tested by His apparent absences, and she will be tempted to fill her emptiness with other things: other friendships, other activities, even her imagined thoughts of Him. It takes courage to let go of all these and to continue searching for Him until He lets Himself be found.

And then He vanishes again, and she must go on searching, and every time she searches, her capacity to receive Him grows. This game of love continues until every corner of her being is open to receive Him.

*“I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves.”
(Song of Songs, 3, 2)*

The Vow of Union

*“Making their rounds in the city
the sentinels found me;
they beat me, they wounded me,
they took away my mantle,
those sentinels of the walls.
(Song of Songs, 5,7)*

Originally, there was only one vow for religious men and women: the vow of obedience. This was given to one's spiritual guide or religious superior. As far as actions involving marriage or ownership were concerned, the vow of obedience covered any decisions the religious man or woman could make. With time however, the additional vows were added to deepen and clarify the life that the man or woman was undertaking.

By the vow of obedience, the religious chooses to depend for her actions on the will of God as mediated through her superiors. This demands an incredible trust in Jesus's promise that He works through His Church. After all, superiors, whether religious, priests, bishops, or popes, are all sinful people. How can we trust that God works through such instruments?

Such an act of faith is like St. Peter stepping out on the water when Jesus called him. Even though our vow of obedience works through obviously flawed persons, by faith we know that by it we are united to God's will, and that will is infinite, life-giving love. We know that Christ entrusted the keys to St. Peter, and for this reason, **"Inasmuch as institutes of consecrated life are dedicated in a special way to the service of God and of the whole Church, they are subject to the supreme authority of the Church in a special way. Individual members are also bound to obey the Supreme Pontiff as their highest superior by reason of the sacred bond of obedience."**ⁱ This is important, because the greatest challenge to the vow of obedience is not giving up our independence, it is confusion about what God's will is in a specific situation.

To obey God's will can be excruciatingly painful. Jesus showed us this as He suffered the Agony in the Garden. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me." In spite of the agony, He chose the Father's will over His own. "Yet not my will but Yours be done."ⁱⁱ

Yet Jesus had something that we do not have: He knew what the Father willed, He knew the Father's will directly, without any intermediary. We only know God's will through intermediaries, and, since confusion is the devil's favorite tactic, he will try to confuse us about what that will is and who we are to obey. I need to keep clear in my mind to whom I made my vow of obedience. I obey my Prioress and she obeys the Pope. It's as simple as that. The line of command is clear. St. Teresa of Avila counselled her nuns: "Strive to obey, even if this may be more painful for you, since the greatest perfection lies in obedience."ⁱⁱⁱ

The pain may be physical, as the martyrs teach us, but it can also be more insidious and therefore more agonizing. Here is one example. Slowly, throughout the 19th century, it had become apparent that the Church in France had to come to a *modus vivendi* with the French Republic. Catholics in France still remembered the guillotine of the French Revolution, and they were for the most part strongly royalist. It would be extremely delicate to make them understand that it was necessary for Catholics to work within the political framework in order to defend their own religious interests.

After several plans were discussed and discarded, Leo XIII told Cardinal Lavigerie, the Primate of Africa and the Founder of the White Fathers, to break the ice. Cardinal Lavigerie was to make a statement urging French Catholics to work with the Republic. Knowing the deeply royalist passion of French Catholics, especially those in position of authority and influence, Lavigerie decided to make the announcement at a banquet he arranged for the senior officers of the French Mediterranean Squadron stationed at that time in Algiers. He said that obeying the Pope in this matter "was the most terrifying act of his life". He knew how his statement would be received. At the banquet, in his toast to the French Navy, he said, "Faced with a past whose wounds are still unhealed, with a future which still holds out threats, our supreme need at this hour, is indeed unity...But when the will of a people has been unmistakably expressed,,,; when

the only way to rescue the country from the abyss that gapes before it is honest adhesion to that form of government, then the moment has come to ... put an end to our divisions, to make every sacrifice which conscience and honour permit us to make, indeed command us to make, for the survival of our country."

The result was what he expected: his toast was rejected by the officers. "The sensational news was telegraphed at once to the press agencies: Cardinal Lavignerie was advising Catholics to respect the Republic and to collaborate with it...His immense popularity was destroyed in one fell swoop. The dumbfounded amazement produced by his declaration was quickly over; it gave vent to an explosion of fury." Choosing to obey the Pope cost him rejection even by his own clergy. It was only when Leo XIII published the encyclical *Au Milieu des Sollicitudes* giving weighty approval to the position Lavignerie had taken, that the Cardinal, then close to death, was at peace.^{iv}

St. Teresa knew the persecution from good, devout faith-filled people. She describes a vision she once had where **"I saw myself standing alone in prayer in a large field; surrounding me were many different types of people. All of them I think held weapons in their hands so as to harm me: some held spears; others, swords; others, daggers; and others, very long rapiers. In sum, I couldn't escape on any side without putting myself in danger of death; I was alone without finding a person to take my part. While my spirit was in this affliction, not knowing what to do, I lifted my eyes to heaven and saw Christ, not in heaven but quite far above me in the sky; He was holding out His hand toward me, and from there He protected me in such a way that I had no fear of all the people, nor could they harm me even though they wanted to.**

"This vision seems fruitless, but it greatly benefited me because I was given an understanding of its meaning. A little afterward I found myself almost in the midst of that battery, and I knew that the vision was a picture of the world; everything in the world, it seems, bears arms so as to injure the afflicted soul. I'm not referring to those who don't serve God well, or to honors, property, delights, and other similar things; for it is clear that when you least expect you are ensnared -- in any event, all these things strive to ensnare. But I'm referring to friends, relatives, and, what frightens me most, very good persons. I afterward found myself so oppressed by them all, while they thought they were doing good, that I didn't know how to defend myself or what to do."^v

Few Catholics will experience such a challenge to their obedience to the Church, though contemplative nuns have had a taste of it in recent years with the condemnation by some people of *Vultum Dei quaerere* and *Cor orans*. But just as Teresa saw Christ stretching out His hand to her and protecting her, we who obey His will as made known to us through His Church, know that the result will be glorious, for

*"Scarcely had I passed the sentinels,
when I found him whom my soul loves."*

(Song of Songs, 3, 4)

Conclusion

*“Who is that coming up from the wilderness,
leaning upon her beloved?”*

(Song of Songs, 8, 5)

Union of wills with God is spousal union.

“I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.”

(Song of Songs, 6, 3)

This union of God and his faithful lover is life-giving to the world. His beloved is
“a fountain sealed”, but it is

*“a garden fountain, a well of living water,
and flowing streams from Lebanon. “*

(Song of Songs, 4, 15)

The vows of religion are a gift God offers to those whom He calls, a gift of His love. Sr. Talitha and many like her have recognized this, and she has answered His call, for she knows that

*“love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.*

*Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.*

*Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.*

*If one offered for love
all the wealth of one’s house,
it would be utterly scorned.”*

(Song of Songs, 8, 6-7)

*“I am my beloved’s,
and his desire is for me.*

*Come, my beloved,
let us go forth into the fields,
and lodge in the villages;
let us go out early to the vineyards,*

*and see whether the vines have budded,
whether the grape blossoms have opened
and the pomegranates are in bloom.
There I will give you my love.”*
(Song of Songs, 7, 11-13)

ⁱ Can. 590 §1 and 2

ⁱⁱ Lk 22, 42

ⁱⁱⁱ “Way of Perfection”, 39, 3

^{iv} “The Cardinal of Africa”, by José de Arteche, The Catholic Book Club, London, 1964, pp. 180-187

^v “Life” 39, 17-18