

VOWS IN THE SECULAR ORDER OF DISCALCED CARMELITES

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The moment we hear the word “Vows” we think automatically of religious. The “vows of religion” is a phrase that comes immediately to our minds: vows and religion are always associated in our thinking. Indeed, for religious men and women, vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are of the very essence of their vocation. Regularly vows are made after novitiate, and again a few years later; the only difference is between simple (temporary) and solemn (perpetual) vows.

So it is a new concept when we encounter vows in the context of a Secular Order as we do in Carmel. Yet, the exclusive association of vows with religious people is not warranted. A glance at the Canon Law of the Church will illustrate this. The Canon Law speaks about vows in numbers 1191-98, just before a chapter on oaths. Our Secular legislation makes no reference to the Canon Law when it speaks about vows. That is not necessarily a defect or lacuna in our Constitutions. Our legislation is in accord with sacred canons, but it is essential to be familiar with these. Let me summarize the chapter. It begins with a precise definition: “A vow is a deliberate and free promise made to God concerning a possible and better good which must be fulfilled by reason of the virtue of religion.” Then it goes on to distinguish vows which are a) public, i.e., accepted in the name of the church, b) solemn or simple, c) personal or real, d) how vows cease or are dispensed, etc. These canons should be read by all who are inspired to make vows.

Regarding the taking of vows in the Secular Order, there has been quite an attitudinal shift in the course of the years. And I feel we should be familiar with that if we would fully appreciate our present legislation. Have patience with me as I take you back over the years and our Secular Order history. Just about a century, no more. Don’t panic; this is a useful exercise. And we will not need a century to do it.

We can begin with a look at a little book which goes back to 1921, approved by the Definitory on April 13. It is entitled *A Manual of the Third (Secular) Order of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and St. Teresa*, and was approved by Pope Benedict XV on March 6 of that year. This book, which contained the Rule of Life, plus a section on the government of the Third Order and a section on Ritual (Ceremonial), had served as the handbook of the Third Order for many years. The reason for the 1921 edition was the appearance of the Code of Canon Law in 1917. All subsequent legal documents in the Church had to be conformed to that. This little volume in 1921 incorporated the changes consequent on the revision of Canon Law in 1917.

In this legislation, at the end of the year of the novitiate, the tertiary made profession. And this profession involved vows of obedience and chastity only. Paragraph 30 stated,

after giving the profession formula, that the vows were to be renewed twice a year; and then in Number 31: “The vows of Obedience and Chastity have not the same binding force as Religious vows; they expire on leaving the Order.” (There was no need to dispense from the vows as there was for religious who left the Order.)

Chapter 8 and 9, in typical fashion and very precisely, indicate the conditions for sinning gravely against these vows. Briefly, one would have to disobey a *written precept* given by a superior in the presence of two witnesses.

We notice therefore about this early legislation that only vows of obedience and chastity were made at profession time. And that took place one year after clothing. Clothing took place after a postulancy of two months’ duration. We are accustomed to a much longer period of time – up to a year before reception, a formation period of two years leading up to the temporary promise; a further three years before the final promise. Then in the case of vows, a year of deliberation and prayer before application is made. With the adoption of the present draft Provincial Statutes, at least one more year will be added before vows can be taken. That can be summed up: In former times, vows could be made after one year and two months; nowadays the minimum time before making vows is 7 ½ years. By means of these statistics we can see the extent of the change that has occurred between 1921 and the present; strictly between 1921 and 1979, since the 1921 legislation remained in force only until 1979.

The transitional change from this old style to the present was not achieved in one phase. It began with the approval and publication of the *Rule of Life* in 1979. This publication came following the Second Vatican Council. We recall that all religious Orders were invited, after the conclusion of the Council, to initiate a process of revision of their Constitutions. For us Carmelite religious that was accomplished through a series of General Chapters with the collaboration of the entire Order. Proposed *ad experimentum* in 1976, our new laws under the title of *Constitutions and Norms* were finalized by the General Chapter of 1979. By mandate of the Chapter they were approved by the Extraordinary Definitory in 1980, and ratified by the Sacred Congregation – Pentecost 1981. Further modifications in Canon Law at this time delayed the publication of the final text until 1986, and the English translation until 1988.

I mention these details and dates because the process of updating the Secular Order legislation went on during the same time. The work began after the Council. The revision followed wide consultation concentrating on “basic principles and highlighting the way of life of our Secular Order members.” The text was approved *ad experimentum*, October 1970. A commission of experts from diverse regions later set to work on a definitive text. It was approved by the Sacred Congregation on May 10, 1979, and published under the title: *Rule of Life*. The decree of approval notes: “The faculty is granted to discontinue the old name: Third Order, and take on the new name: The

Secular Order of the Discalced Carmelites which is more in keeping with the earliest traditions.” I should like to observe here that the Manual revised in 1921 had as its title: *Manual of the Third (Secular) Order ...*. I like to note that, as it is sometimes thought that the 1979 *Rule of Life* was the first to use the word “Secular”.

It is in this legislation for the first time that we are introduced to “promises”. “After sufficient contact with the community, the candidate is admitted for a period of formation, which normally extends for two years before the temporary promise, and for another three years before the definitive promise.” (1979 *Rule of Life* Art. 10) Vows are only mentioned as an option for members who request them a year after final promises.

Hence, in our Secular Order, the 1979 *Rule of Life* introduced us to the new reality of “promises”. If Vows are taken after a year has passed since final promise, this legislation notes, in Article 15: “These Vows are understood and interpreted in the same way as the promises in articles 12 and 14.” These two articles refer to the promises of chastity and obedience. Article 15 also notes: “The Vows add to the observance of chastity and obedience the merit of the virtue of religion. They constitute a more complete offering of oneself and therefore entail a greater moral responsibility.” We note in the profession formulas used for Vows and Promises this difference: Vows are made “to God in the hands of the superior...”, whereas Promises are made “to the Superior of the Order ...”. This difference is vital for the understanding of the Vows: their special merit consists in the fact that they are made directly to God; hence they link us up with the virtue of religion. It is here that we need to be precise: they oblige in accordance with the virtue of religion, but they do not make us religious; and this is made abundantly clear in our present legislation.

Exaltation of Vows

Let us consider for a moment an Instruction of Fr. Philip Sainz de Baranda, OCD – former Superior General (updated in 2003). It is appended to the Ritual of 1990 (October), and approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in February, 1991. It was written as an aid to priest assistants, homilists, and council members. It speaks first about the Promise. Then it deals with the Vows.

“7. Anytime after a year from the definitive promise, a member may ask, as a personal option, to be admitted by the council to the profession of the vows of chastity and obedience for life. While the Promise was made before God to the Superiors and members of the Order, the vows are made directly to God, for vows are acts of religious worship. Thus, the vows add the merit of the virtue of religion to the observance of chastity and obedience. They constitute a more complete self-offering and therefore entail a greater moral responsibility. The binding force of these vows, freely made, renders more

visible the bond of love and commitment that exists between Christ and His Bride the Church.

He adds this note:

⁵⁷From the Juridical point of view, these are authentic vows with effects in the “external forum”; more than merely “private vows”, they are “recognized” by the Church. (Their juridical standing runs parallel to the nature of the vows taken by members of Secular Institutes, explicated by the Vatican II Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 11). The nature of Secular Order vows is given in OCDS Constitution #39, officially approved by the Holy See in 2003 (Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life: Prot. n. C.228-1/2003). By means of the vows, members are more fully bonded with the Secular Order which is a “Public Association” according to Canons 301 and 312 of the Code of Canon Law. Admission to and dispensation from these vows require the confirmation of the Provincial Superior, who represents the authority of the Order (cf. *OCDS Constitutions*, #39, #47a & #58f).”

He goes on to link vows with worship, and Baptism and Eucharist. He has this explanation for the fact that our Secular Order members do not take a vow of poverty:

“11. The fact that Secular Carmelites may add vows of obedience and chastity to their promise does not devalue poverty which is not formalized by vow. Christian baptism itself entails the cultivation of the spirit of poverty, great attention to the needs of the poor, and the living in this world as though possessing nothing. For pastoral reasons poverty is not vowed, for its concrete object and material limits are not easily determined by general principle. Rather, living the beatitude of poverty is a matter of on-going personal discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, it is clear that, by making one’s definitive commitment in the Secular Order, a member explicitly promises to tend, for the whole of one’s life, towards evangelical perfection in the spirit of the evangelical counsel of poverty as well as of chastity and obedience. This holds true with or without a vow.

After this outline of our legislation since 1921 concerning vows, are we in a position to formulate some ideas that might lead to a theology of the vows at the present time? I shall try to contribute something to that, dealing with the matter under various heads.

A remarkable change

We have seen since 1921 a remarkable change in the deliberation period before vows are taken. As I mentioned, the change in the time frame for taking vows from a year and two months in the earlier legislation to 7 ½ years in our present *Constitutions* is truly remarkable. This, as we saw, came about in a series of intermediary Rules of Life, and with the introduction at a certain stage of promises leading up to optional vows (in our legislation since 1979). Any comment on that shift in perspective must surely see in it an acute realization of the gravity and sacred nature of vows. It invites us to be keenly aware of the exalted nature of this offering directly to God, which derives its merit from the virtue of religion. This is something which needs special deliberation and mature discernment. I was very pleased to see in the new draft Provincial Statutes that the taking of Vows is given further precision and clarification.

The 1979 legislation states, in Article 15: “One year after having made the definitive promise, the secular Carmelite who so requests it, may be permitted to take the vows of chastity and obedience”. Our new *Constitutions* (n. 39) do not specify the time. Instead in Number 58f, they leave it to the Provincial statutes to determine the circumstances and conditions for taking vows. In accordance with that, compare our draft Provincial statutes (Sec. XV Vows). Let me quote a few of the provisions:

- “1. Any member who feels called ... may petition the council not less than one year after the definitive promise.”
- “2. ... the member will commence a year of prayerful discernment.”
- “3. The member must be fully informed of both the serious obligations and the rich graces associated with the vows.”
- “5. The member will provide the council with the name of the priest who will be directing him/her during the one year discernment.”
- “6. The vows are strictly voluntary. The promise makes one a full member of Carmel and the vows do not change that status.”
- “8. After the year’s discernment, the member will send a formal letter ... requesting consent to make vows. A letter of recommendation from the directing priest should be sent....”
- “9. When making its decision the council should consider the following criteria: the member must be faithful in living the promise; the member’s life must be suitably ordered, with any major irregularities resolved so that there are no blockages to grace; the member must have a healthy, balanced integration of the experience of God with the experience of

daily life. There should be evidence of greater charity, detachment and humility.”

“10. An individual guided preparatory retreat and a general confession are highly recommended.”

11. The council, together with the spiritual assistant, will prayerfully deliberate... council will inform the Provincial in writing of the request”

Among other things, if I read it correctly, this extends the one year required after definitive promise in the 1979 *Rule of Life* to at least two years. And it gives a number of important directions on this time of preparation. Another notable difference in our present legislation is that now the Provincial has the ultimate word of approval after the Council has ended its deliberations.

A different slant

These recent requirements (in the draft Provincial Statutes) and the explanatory note by Fr. Philip which we have seen, have the effect of exalting the importance of vows and their special obligation. On the other hand, one cannot fail to notice in our Constitutions a rather different slant. Constitution 39, the basic legislation for the vows, begins with a very casual, almost dismissive phrase: “All of Christ’s faithful have the right to make vows ...” – a partial restatement of Canon 1191 §2, which is concerned only with vows in the most general sense. Then it goes on: “With the consent of the community and the permission of the Provincial, a member of the Secular Order may make vows of obedience and chastity in the presence of the community. These vows are strictly personal and do not create a separate category of membership. They suppose a greater commitment of fidelity to the evangelical life but do not transform those who make them into juridically recognized consecrated people as in Institutes of consecrated life. Those who make vows in the Secular Order continue to be laypersons in all juridical effects.” Further, in Number 12 the *Constitutions* state: “By the *promise* made to the community in the presence of the Superior of the Order or his delegate, the person becomes *a full member* of the Secular Order.” (Emphasis added.)

In light of these contrasts, we should, I think, have recourse to what is called creative tension. This is an attitude of mind which helps us to respect and understand two aspects of reality which are both valid, but seem on the surface to be in contrast. Our tendency at times when we encounter this actuality is to emphasize one over the other. A good example occurs in our thought processes regarding God. God, we are taught, is Transcendent. That means he is totally other, beyond our ken, he is spirit, infinitely distant from us, eternal, omnipotent, etc. At the same time, we are taught that God is immanent. That means he is as close to us as we are to ourselves. He lives in us. He

communicates with us. We bear Him within us. These two realities are contrasting. And to hold to these truths simultaneously we need to receive them in our minds as different aspects of a complex reality. In the matter of vows, our legislation is aware of the seeming anomaly of a community of lay persons assuming the profession of vows. This is not the case that is envisaged in Canon Law – a private individual making a vow. As Fr. Philip, our former General, makes very clear in his note in the Ritual, these vows are more than private; they are authentic, with effects in the external forum, recognized by the Church. In our present *Constitutions*, Article 39, these vows are made with the consent of the Council and the permission of the Provincial.

Observations for the future

By way of conclusion, may I be allowed to make a few observations in relation to the future. I assure you I am not taking on the mantle of a prophet; just a few words about the ongoing matter of legislation. I like to remind myself here of the canonical status of our present *Constitutions*. You remember that they were definitively approved by the Sacred Congregation on June 16, 2003, having received them from our General Definitory on June 10. Our Father General, in his letter, indicates “surprise” with this definitive approval, since he was expecting only approval *ad experimentum* for five years. Hence he writes, “We, the Order, will still make use of the five year period for making concrete observations on this text, eventually asking the Holy See to approve certain changes as practical application indicates.”

We have seen quite a sea change in our legislation just since the year 1921. For those of us who may remember the years between 1921 and 1979, the differences would be impressive, and not only in the matter of the vows. They would manifest themselves especially in the way in which the Third Order of old replicated the style of the Friars. Office holders were called Priors, discreets, subprior, master of novices, etc. The normal clothing was “a scapular of brown serge, composed of two parts, about ten inches in length and seven inches in width.” However, this was “without prejudice to the laudable custom of wearing a more elaborate habit on solemn feasts.” My lasting memory of a group which met in St. Teresa church on Clarendon Street, Dublin, is associated with the wearing of the full habit. I do not recall these details in any belittling way, but to show how things have changed because of a new consciousness in the Church regarding the theology of the laity.

Let me quote here an observation made following on the Council document on the laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (November 1965). In Father Walter Abbott’s edition of the Council documents, he includes a comment on each document. In this case the comment is by Martin Work, Executive Director of the National Council for the Lay Apostolate in Washington. He writes:

“Although a ‘lay apostolate’ has existed in the Church since the days of our Lord in Jerusalem, it was not until the Second Vatican Council that the Church’s official thinking on the matter was stated in a conciliar decree. As one layman put it pungently, ‘The lay apostolate has been simmering on the ‘back burner’ of the Church’s apostolic life for nearly two thousand years, and finally the Fathers of this Council moved it up to the ‘front burner’ and turned the heat up all the way.’ Everyone hopes it will ‘come to a boil’ soon because so much of the Church’s mission depends on an apostolic laity. Indeed, the renewal of the Church, called for by the documents of the Council, depends in great part on a laity that fully understands not only these documents but also their own co-responsibility for the mission of Christ in the Church and in the world.”

I know that further documents on the apostolate of the laity have come since: notably *Christifideles Laici* in 1988, quoted at great length in our *Constitutions*. But that paragraph by Martin Work expresses well the developing consciousness of the Church concerning the laity, a vast development indeed.

Are we to say that such development in doctrine and praxis has reached its peak and come to an end? One would not like to answer yes to that question. We are always in mind of the phrase in St. John’s gospel: “When he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will lead you into all truth.” (John 16, 12) But we leave all that to the Spirit and to our receptivity to the Spirit. Meanwhile we possess *Constitutions*, which reflect for us the ideals of Carmelite Seculars in the Church. They take into account the most up-to-date theology of the laity, while retaining many venerable traditions. They inspire us, pointing out a way to God based on a renowned spiritual tradition. Let us in our day strive to be worthy of this, our Carmelite charism.