

Toward an Understanding of the Nature of the O.C.D.S. Promise and Vow

by John Leidy, OCDS

Secular Carmelites are admitted to the Discalced Carmelite Order by the making of a promise and by the Order's acceptance of that promise. Through the promise the candidate makes a commitment to the O.C.D.S. community and to the Superiors of the Order to "tend toward evangelical perfection in the spirit of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, and of the Beatitudes, according to the Constitutions of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites." After living the definitive promise for some period of time, the member has the "right to make vows" (Const. #39) of chastity and obedience. The Constitutions make it clear that the vow is "strictly personal" and does not change the status of the O.C.D.S. member in the eyes of the Church, as it would in an Institute of consecrated life; the member (except in the case of a cleric) remains in the lay state (Const. #39). What, then, is the difference between the promise and the vow?

The *Catechism* states that, "In many circumstances, the Christian is called to make promises to God. Baptism and Confirmation, Matrimony and Holy Orders always entail promises. Out of personal devotion, the Christian may also promise to God this action, that prayer, this alms-giving, that pilgrimage, and so forth. Fidelity to promises made to God is a sign of the respect owed to the divine majesty and of love for a faithful God. '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.' A vow is an act of devotion in which the Christian dedicates himself to God or promises him some good work. By fulfilling his vows he renders to God what has been promised and consecrated to Him. The Acts of the Apostles shows us St. Paul concerned to fulfill the vows he had made. The Church recognizes an exemplary value in the vows to practice the evangelical counsels..." (CCC #2101-2103). In the eyes of the Church neither the O.C.D.S. promise nor the vow are binding under pain of sin. By agreeing, through the promise or vow, to take on commitments and devotions that are beyond what the Church asks of all her children, the O.C.D.S. member merits additional graces. These graces are therefore not bestowed when one does not fulfill the actions one has committed to in one's promise or vow. Not fulfilling these obligations, since they are not under pain of sin, does not necessitate confession unless sin would already be present (for example, a sin against chastity) regardless of the promise or vow. However, one may still bring such actions or omissions to one's confessor in the nature of a devotional confession, though these do not require absolution.

The major difference between the O.C.D.S. promise and vow is that, whereas the promise is made to the community and the Superior of the Order, the vows of chastity and obedience are made directly to God. The obligations of the vow are, as with the promise, to live in the *spirit* of the evangelical counsels and the Beatitudes to the extent possible in one's state as a layperson. The Constitutions note that the vow "supposes a greater commitment of fidelity to the evangelical life" (Const. #39). Since a vow is a promise to God to perform certain duties, in carrying out the duties associated with that vow, the individual is said to be making acts of religious worship of God. Thus the merit of the "virtue of religion" is attached to the vow. Because the virtue of religion often popularly associated with those who enter religious life, there can be confusion as to

whether in making a vow the state of the individual has changed from that of a member of the laity to that of a religious. It has not. The confusion is essentially based in a misunderstanding of the term “virtue of religion” and of the theological concept behind it. In the context of the vow, the virtue of *religion* has nothing to do with the *religious* state of life. All of the faithful can, and hopefully do, practice the virtue of religion in living out their Christian lives.

Theologically, “religion” is considered that virtue whereby a person renders to God by way of interior or outward acts the homage, worship, reverence, and praise that are his due. The virtue is thus part of the moral virtue of justice in that we are giving God that which is due to him. The *Compendium: Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that, “justice toward God is called ‘the virtue of religion’” (#381). The *Catechism* clarifies that, “Adoring God, praying to him, offering him the worship that belongs to him, fulfilling the promises and vows made to him are acts of the virtue of religion which fall under obedience to the first commandment” (#2135). Fr. Bruno Cocuzzi, O.C.D., wrote that, “As a virtue, Religion inclines us to do what corresponds to the nature and destiny God has conferred upon us, and so helps us to attain our *perfection* as human beings... The virtue of religion is more excellent than all the other moral virtues, including that of Justice, to which it is affiliated. That is because by it we honor God directly and immediately.” Thus, in making the vow, God joins the “merit” and grace of this virtue to our commitment. Fr Bruno also notes that St. Thomas Aquinas viewed the virtue of religion as in command of, or giving order to, all the other virtues. It imparts a holiness that, “influences all a person’s conduct.” St. Thomas also taught that it was more meritorious to make good acts through a vow than without one since the vow in itself is an act of worship, thus engendering the virtue of religion. In this light, it has been said that each act done in association with a vow reaps a double reward: an act of virtue and the act of religion, the latter of which is imparted by the vow.

Fr. Bruno gives some helpful commentary on the Secular’s vow in specific relation to the evangelical counsels of chastity and obedience:

“... obedience and chastity also entitle one to those blessings of God which perfect the individual in his relationship with his superiors and to his fellow human beings, that is, which perfect him and help him to achieve the destiny for which God created him in and through those relationships. By making vows of obedience and chastity, every exercise of those virtues also directly perfect the individual making them in his relationship with God. That is to say: by themselves, acts of obedience and chastity perfect a person directly in relationship to other humans and indirectly in relationship to God. As acts of worship in virtue of the vows, obedience and chastity also perfect an individual directly in relationship to God. Also, as adding the merit of religion, the vows cause one who remains obedient and chaste to be in a state of continual, uninterrupted worship, and cause the individual to be like the Cherubim and Seraphim in Heaven, who constantly and continually consume themselves in adoration or worship.”

In regard to the promise and vow in the life of the Secular Discalced Carmelite, the teaching contained in the Superior General’s 1990 Instruction accompanying the ritual

for the Secular Order is the most detailed. The sections pertaining to the promise and vow are worthy of our reflection and are quoted below in their entirety. It should be noted that the Superior General's, Fr. Philip Sainz de Baranda's, original footnotes accompanying his Instruction make reference to section 44 of *Lumen Gentium*. He comments that many of the principles relating to the Secular promise and vow are *analogous to*, but distinct from, those of persons in religious life. Vows made by religious are considered by the Church to be either solemn or simple and are public vows. The Secular Order is an Association of the Christian Faithful that is part of the religious Discalced Carmelite Order.* The Seculars' vow, in contrast to those of our publicly consecrated religious, is recognized by the Church as personal and private, even if it were to be made in the presence of a Superior (see CCL canons 1191-1198).

7. Anytime after a year from the definitive promise [*Note: the timing and process used herein pertain to the 1979 Rule of Life rather than our current Constitutions*], 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.

8. Since the vows confer a new "cultic" or "worshiping" dimension upon the observance of the evangelical counsels, chastity according to one's state and obedience to superiors become attitudes and acts of divine worship. This new context converts them into cultic expressions of one's baptismal consecration. Thus they witness to a more generous response and interior offering of the whole person to the Father who loved us in Christ.

9. The vows are intrinsically linked to the Eucharist as well as to Baptism, for the Eucharist is Christian prayer and worship 'par excellence.' The vows of chastity and obedience associate the Secular Carmelite by a new title with the mystery of Christ in His prayer of oblation and thanksgiving. Furthermore in the face of human inconstancy, the vows aim at stability of purpose for the present and the future in conformity with Christ's constancy in His obedient, sacrificial offering of self to the Father.

10. While in their intimate association with Baptism and the Eucharist the vows offer God a more intensified dedication and worship, they also assume other ecclesial and eschatological dimensions. The graced freedom, which the vows confer, renders the Secular Carmelite more disposed to serve the needs of the ecclesial community at home and at large. And together with a zealous apostolate, the concrete testimony of the evangelical counsels serves as a sign that the Kingdom of God is in our midst, while the world and its values are passing away.

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.

Through our exploration of the OCDS vow, it has hopefully become evident that it is not something to be taken lightly. The vow is not simply the next goal in the formation cycle to be obtained after the definitive promise. As with our vocation, the vow is something that should be carefully discerned. It is a personal call that involves the disposition of our heart, all of our life circumstances, and our ability to faithfully live out the promise that has already been made. If we discern our capacity for the vow, it will involve a greater level of love and responsibility from us, but with it will come greater grace bestowed to enable us to fulfill the commitment that we make to more completely love God.

*The Church recognizes three categories of *Institutes of Consecrated Life* (*consecrated* meaning to set aside for God and his purposes): 1) **Religious Institutes** are those that are typically called Religious Orders and their members known as “religious”. They live in common and may be either contemplative or active. They make public vows professing to live the evangelical counsels. Religious Institutes include such orders as the Benedictines and Franciscans. 2) **Secular Institutes** are societies of men or women who live in the world, not in religious community. They do make a profession of the evangelical counsels but not by means of a public vow. The Grail and Servite Secular Institute are examples of Secular Institutes. 3) Members of **Societies of Apostolic Life** live out a fraternal life organized around a particular apostolic purpose. They do not make public vows but embrace the evangelical counsels within their society using some other bond of commitment. Such societies include the Maryknoll Fathers and the Paulists.

Though the Carmelite Order is a Religious Institute of Consecrated Life, the Secular Branch of the Order is considered by the Church to be an Association of the Faithful. However, since the Seculars are under the juridical authority of the OCD friars, they fall under the jurisdiction of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life rather than the Council for the Laity. Seculars, however, are not “religious” and their vows are private in nature, though as a branch of the Carmelite Order their lives are lived out in some ways that are analogous to those in an Institute of Consecrated Life.