

# *History of Religious Life Up to Vatican II*



*Fr. John Hardon, SJ*

*Conferences 1 ~ 7*

*These Conferences of Fr. John A. Hardon on the History of Religious Life, have been collected from an online resource, **Father John A. Hardon, S.J. Archives**; they have been edited and printed by the Discalced Carmelite Nuns of Rochester, New York.*



## Conference 1 An Overview and New Testament Origins of the Religious Life ~ Part 1



### Introduction

Now I would like to give you something of a birds-eye view of the course and the topics we intend to cover. Necessarily, it has to be short. I do this to have you see, not only the individuals or ideas contained under each heading, but, especially, the relationship between the different titles of our handling of the matter. After this opening survey of the history of Religious Life over the centuries, we will look at the first Conference, **The New Testament Origins of the Religious Life, Part 1**. Here, of course, the purpose is to verify that Religious Life indeed has its foundations in the revealed Word of God.

### Overview of the Conferences

**Conference 2: The New Testament Origins of the Religious Life, Part 2.** This Conference is a continuation of the New Testament Origins of the Religious Life; in this Conference we will consider the requirements of being especially chosen by Christ to follow Him more closely.

**Conferences 3-4: Christian Perfection the First Two Centuries after Christ, Parts 1-2.** We shall look at different classes of persons of whom we have record, who—following in the footsteps of the disciples of the Master—became what we would call the first Religious. There were virgins, there were ascetics, and very early there were hermits. About some of these people we know very little, since we are almost two-thousand years removed. But we know enough to say that from the beginning there were those followers of Christ who listened to His teaching and followed the directives of the Church, but who did not aspire to a special intimacy or live a life of what we now call Christian perfection. There were those who did not thus aspire, and there were those who did.

**Conferences 5-6: The Origins of Christian Monasticism, Parts 1-2.** Now this is centuries before St. Benedict, because long before Benedict came on the scene there had been Communities

of Religious. Although Benedict was surely the Father of *western* monasticism, he was not the father or founder of monasticism as a whole. Providentially, we have a fairly long and remarkably detailed life of the reputed father of monasticism: *St. Antony of Egypt*, by St. Athanasius, whom you may remember as the one who almost single-handedly fought Arius (the Arian heresy denied Christ's Divinity; it was condemned at the first council at Nicaea, largely as a result of Athanasius' efforts). Athanasius wrote the *Life of Antony*, since Antony lived to 356 A.D. That, by the way, is not a misprint; he lived 251 to 356. He was very ascetic, very mortified. Anytime you are tempted to wonder whether mortification might not shorten your life, think of Antony. Ballast mortification, so far from shortening, will prolong your life, if you have not heard this. In any case, Antony, the founder of monasticism, laid the groundwork for what later on became the principal form of Religious Life in the Catholic Church.

**Conference 7: St. Augustine.** Most people never think of Augustine as having anything to do with Religious Life, and Augustine's own early life is, you might say, surely the worst possible preparation you might think for Religious Life. Augustine should comfort all of us. If he could make it, so could we. If we have a past, Augustine had one too. We shall see that the Rule of St. Augustine for women Religious is the first distinctive draft of a rule of life for women. Augustine, and I do not mean this facetiously, understood women. His Rule—not only for men, but for our purpose, especially for women—is wise in the extreme. There is a sense in which all institutes of women that are not monastic somehow follow the Rule of St. Augustine.

**Conferences 8-11: The Rise and Growth of Western Monasticism, Parts 1-4.** Notice we distinguish between *western* monasticism in these Conferences, and what has come to be known as *eastern* monasticism as in the previous Conferences. Before we go into St. Benedict we shall look at monasticism in Italy, Gaul, modern France, and Ireland. Had it not been for the missionaries of Italy, Gaul, England, and Ireland, most of us now would not have the faith. They were the first great missionaries. This is even before Benedict. Then, of course, we will look at Benedict himself and the *Rule of Benedict*.

**Conference 12: The Decline and Reformation of Religious Life after St. Benedict.** Part of the history of Religious Life, and we shall try to see as much of it as we can, is that there is an origin with great fervor and zeal. There is a rise and development reaching a peak of fervor, and then Religious decline and weakening. Then one of two things happens: either the Communities reform or they disappear. And, historically, most of them have disappeared. That is the first lesson we learn. And it is a very salutary lesson for us today!

We shall look at a certain number of great names. This is only the tenth and eleventh centuries; less than five hundred years after Benedict, there was a massive decline in monasticism. Bernard is one of the Benedictine reformers.

**Conferences 13-15: St. Francis of Assisi and the Witness to Evangelical Poverty, Parts 1-3.** From now on until the end of the course, each Conference will focus on a period of time featuring a single great figure, highlighting that person's relationship to some historical phase of Religious Life. With Francis, the great need was for witnessing to poverty. With the rise of commerce, finance, and the use of money not merely as a means of barter, but as a means of developing capitalism, there was need in the Church for someone to witness to poverty. And, of course, the need is more than ever acute today.

This was the beginning of the *Mendicant Orders*. I wonder if someone knows what the word 'mendicant' means? What does the verb, the Latin word *mendicare*, mean? To beg. Every Religious Institute today should look to whether it has lost this vision of the Religious Life. Are we so secure, financially? Have we such fixed revenues, so much real estate and secure assets, that one of the most important features of Religious Life, namely trust in Providence, has become more academic than real? Begging, in some form or another, is in my humble estimation part of the Religious Life.

**Conference 16: St. Dominic and the Apostolate of Teaching the Word of God.** Francis and Dominic were contemporaries. Quite unlike Francis, who was not a learned pedagogue, from the very beginning St. Dominic wanted his men to be learned, most of them to be priests, and all of them to be eloquent preachers who profess and defend the Truth. And while there had already been some medieval universities in existence before Dominic, we can safely say that St. Dominic is mainly responsible for the higher education in the whole world today! He was the one who saw the need for some in the Church to know their faith better than the average person, and especially to cope with the rise of learning, besides the rise of industrialism and capitalism! He realized that learned people could remain good Christians.

Learning, no less than money, is a temptation that may hinder the humble and docile following of Christ. Hence, in addition to the rise of St. Francis, we have the rise of St. Dominic. As we go through the course one thing I want you to notice is how carefully God ensures that as problems arise or needs exist, there is somebody around to cope with the problem. Leave it to God to leave no problems insoluble.

**Conference 17: St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Society of Jesus.** The great crisis that struck the Catholic Church like a hurricane in the sixteenth century was the Protestant Reformation.

Due in large measure to the ignorance of the clergy and to massive disloyalty to the Holy See, Ignatius came into existence providentially to meet that crisis; of course, the crisis is with us still. He worked particularly to educate priests and to make sure that Catholics— especially the leaders of the Church— were loyal to the Vicar of Christ.

**Conference 18: Teresa of Avila and the Carmelite Reform.** [Editor's note] It is unfortunate that Fr. Hardon's Conference on St. Teresa is unusable. It has been replaced with texts about the origins of the Carmelite Order, some background of St. Teresa's life, her inspiration to "return" to the origins of Carmelite life as the fundamental basis for her work of reform in the Order, and finally, the elements that characterize her charism and spirituality. The texts have been drawn from studies made on St. Teresa by several Carmelite and Teresian scholars. We are sure Fr. Hardon would happily put his blessing on this replacement.

**Conference 19: St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane Frances de Chantal.** St. Francis de Sales, of course, was the director of St. Jane. Francis de Sales had the vision of involving women in the active apostolate; this was not done prior to his day. He did not succeed, but his vision was eventually put into effective practice by St. Vincent de Paul. In the process, however, Francis de Sales gave the world, what I would say, the most important spiritual classic for the laity: *The Introduction to the Devout Life*. As for St. Jane, she went through all the states of life: single, married, widowed, and then foundress of a Religious Institute. She was down to earth, deeply spiritual, and, eminently practical.

**Conference 20: Vincent de Paul and the Apostolate of Christian Charity.** With this Conference we enter on a totally new vision of Religious Life. For the first time in Church history, papal-approved Institutes were allowed to take simple vows, and women, while remaining full Religious, were permitted to exercise their apostolate outside the cloistered walls of a Convent. Sporadic attempts here and there had been made and tried before. Vincent de Paul and the Sisters of Charity are why all of you active women Religious are here today.

**Conference 21: St. John Baptiste de la Salle.** St. John Baptiste de La Salle was French, he lived from 1651 to 1719. Chronologically he fits in between Vincent de Paul and Alphonsus. As a matter of fact except for Vincent there could not have been a John Batiste de La Salle. He is the founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The date of foundation and the approval of the Church is 1684. Among the writings, I would especially recommend the *Method of Mental Prayer*. It was written for his own members; simple, clear, detailed. St. John Baptiste did not want priests in his community, though he himself of course was a priest, he was canonized rather late, the year 1900, and has since been declared patron of teachers.

**Conference 22: St. Alphonsus and the Development of Popular Piety.** Alphonsus came on the scene during the suppression of the Society of Jesus. He founded the Redemptorists and the Redemptoristines. He was one from whom we should learn a lot about communicating our own spirituality to the laity that enter our lives. Here, let us make sure that we talk about our apostolates (there are certain themes I will return to all through the year, and this is one of them): our apostolates are two-fold. They are firstly, the apostolate of *sanctification*. We are first to engage in the apostolate to sanctify others. And then, secondly, we are to engage in whatever specialized work of corporal or spiritual mercy we or our Community may be engaged in. Everything that a Franciscan touches, every person who enters a Franciscan's life, should somehow express or encounter the spirit of St. Francis—say, a class in mathematics. I have begun to index the lectures and conferences I have given over the years. I found one two days ago—a lecture on mathematics; in sixty minutes, I managed to bring God into that lecture. So St. Alphonsus caught the vision of *spiritualizing* those whom we affect, and not merely working with them in a specialized apostolate.

**Conference 23: St. Elizabeth Seton and American Spirituality.** As you read the decree of canonization of St. Elizabeth, as well as the homily of Pope Paul after her canonization, you should lay to rest once and for all the myth that Americans cannot become Saints. Pope Paul could not have been more emphatic. He said almost in so many words to us Americans, "Look! We are canonizing this American-born, American-bred person to convince you that you are to become holy and get a few more Saints into the catalogue." There is nothing incompatible between being a true American and being a Saint. We need that kind of encouragement.

**Conference 24: Thérèse of Lisieux, Patroness of the Missions.** Of all the modern Saints I could have picked (you name them: the last thirty years several hundred people have been canonized), why choose the Little Flower? Well, first of all she is popular. Secondly, she makes attainment of sanctity look easy. Moreover, and what a moreover this is, everything she did was apostolic to the *nth* degree; her life of prayer and sacrifice were prodigiously apostolic. And the Little Flower was canonized, as the Church says, mainly to teach us that God is pleased with the hidden life. By it, we not only save our own souls, but we also bring many souls to heaven with us.

**Conference 25: Religious Life in the Light of Vatican Council II.** Finally as a capstone, we will consider the Religious Life in the light of the Second Vatican Council. This could easily be made into a full-length course in itself! What we wish to see, however, are the new insights; there has been a real development of doctrine. There are then, summarily, two purposes for taking this course. The *first* is to see the unchanging continuity in Religious Life from the New Testament to modern times. And the *second* is to see the development, the progress, the

adaptation to the times, the adjustments. There is more to learn about the essential elements, new insights to discover about what had always been there but had never come to the surface. In other words, in this course we want to see *nineteen centuries of the unchangeable Religious Life in a changing world. To know just the one would be unbalanced. To know just the other without the first would be a tragedy.* I really believe that most of the problems in Religious Communities today—and the problems are grave in the extreme—amount to Communities wanting to hold onto things that need adjustment, that is adaptation. Or more seriously and more tragically, they are adapting to everything, losing in the process that substance without which you no longer have Religious Life.



## **New Testament Origins of the Religious Life ~ Part I**

There are many reasons for beginning our study on the history of Religious Life with its origins in the New Testament. Whatever else Religious Life means, it should mean a complete and whole-souled dedication of oneself to God. But this kind of commitment is impossible without strong motivation. The higher the demands, the stronger must be the motive to meet them. And the strongest motive a Christian can find for making the sacrifices called for in the Religious Life is the belief that the foundations of this life are in Divine Revelation. In a word like the Crusaders were told, *Deus Volt*, God wills it. But we have to be sure that God wants it!

Moreover, another reason: persuasive voices are being heard these days and ideas are being circulated raising doubts as to whether Religious Life might not after all be only a later development of or by the Church. If that were true, Religious Life would not properly belong to Christian Revelation—which, as we know, closed with the death of the last Apostle. It would somehow be a creation of the Church, albeit under divine guidance; but even so, what the Church can create, the Church can un-create.

If, then, Religious Life is not based on Revelation, it does not have the absolute guarantee of permanence and stability. By now there have been so many changes in the Catholic Church's way of doing so many things that we had better be certain that this one thing (i.e., Religious Life) is indeed revealed by God. After all, the Church cannot change what is revealed by God. For example, can the Catholic Church drop one of the Sacraments, to have six instead of seven? Why not? Because Christ instituted seven. Can the Church institute an eighth Sacrament—to have an even number? No! In other words, if it was not God but the Church that instituted Religious Life, the Church can change it. For She can change the substance of what She herself has brought into



being. And not a few are arguing that the present confusion in Religious Institutes is a sign that, if there will be a Religious Life in the future, it will be so radically different from what it used to be that it may as well be said to have phased out of existence. I hope none of you has any doubt there are some who are saying this. We should also have no doubt that they are wrong! But the assurance that they are wrong is the fact that the Religious Life is revealed. As long as there is a Catholic Church, and that will be till the end of time, there will be Religious Life. We did not talk this way even twenty years ago. We did not have to. But we had better talk this way now! We need to! For these and similar reasons, it is not only interesting but imperative that we satisfy ourselves on the fact that the categories of Religious Life were already laid in the first century, during what we call the Apostolic Age. So much by way of introduction.

### **First: Jesus, the First Religious**

Why do we say that Jesus is the first Religious? We say that not only because He came first chronologically, but also because what He was and what He taught is primary for whatever follows. This is not only a chronological but also a logical primacy. Christ remains the principal reason why there are Religious and the principal means by which there are Religious. His Life is our motive and His grace is our means.

We might synthesize Christ's life and the example and grace He gives us under four captions: *Christ's Love, Christ's Service, Christ's Sacrifice, and Christ's Grace*. They are the Four Pillars of His own Life as a Religious, and for us they are the motive and the means of trying to imitate Him.

*First: Love.* When we speak of Christ being a Religious, we must make sure that He did so because He wanted to. It was the purest freedom, with no coercion. We choose something freely with no compulsion, no coercion, because we love. Pure freedom is pure love. God in the Person of Christ became man just to please His heavenly Father. He did all He did, lived the way He lived, not because He had to—He did not have to redeem us. Did Christ have to become Man to save the world? No! As Man did He have to die to redeem the world? No! Did He have to die on the Cross? No! All of this was free choice, and if there is one thing that stands as the keystone in the arch of Religious Life, it is the loving freedom with which some people follow Christ in becoming Religious and remaining Religious—because they love! And when you love, you do not have to have reasons, get it? Love is the highest reason. And when you really come down to it, it is the *only* reason. All others are arguments.

*Second: Service.* This Master who is our Master, which means Teacher, as the First Religious loved indeed: loved the Father and loved those whom He wished to save. But His Love

was a fertile love. It was a fruitful love. He did something to manifest His love for the Father. To manifest His love for the Father He undertook to serve the needs of His fellow human beings, who as He saw, were steeped in sin and badly needed a Savior. That is the second lesson the Master teaches us: that when you love it is not mere interior affection or sentiment. You *do* something. You *show* your love by deeds. Another name for that is service. What is service? Love in action. If we love someone, we do not merely tell him, we show him. Christ showed that He loved by serving. But once again, there is a divine logic among these four pillars, as we are calling them, of Christ's being the first Religious. There is service, and there is *service*. We can serve reluctantly, almost rebelliously, or we can serve with eagerness and cheerfulness. Or we can be shrewd and choose; we look around. There are ways of serving, but with a cheap service. Then there is service that is costly.

*Third: Sacrifice.* Another name for costly service is sacrifice. That is the third quality of Christ as the First Religious. His was a total self-surrender, even to the shedding of His Blood, as we know from all four Gospels. Let us make it simple: blood belongs to the essence of Religious Life. I did not know that twenty-five years ago when I took my last vows. I know now. It is real. It is real! And if you are afraid of blood, this is one profession you do not belong in. I mean it! I am not sure whether the bleeding of spirit is not greater than bleeding in body. Blood belongs to Religious Life, and Christ did more than elevate our sentiments by shedding His Blood on the Cross. He reminds us, if we are going to be like Him, we had better be ready to shed ours, too.

*Fourth: Grace.* Finally, why all of this exertion and effort? Why even the Crucifixion on Calvary? Christ did not need it. Frankly, by becoming man, all He got for His efforts was rejection, abandonment, blasphemy, and death. And let us remind ourselves, Christ foresaw that. And He *chose* it. Thank God we are spared; we cannot see the future. How good God is! Probably most of us would panic. Yet He chose. There was a purpose. The purpose was to win grace. It was to merit the grace of salvation and sanctification for all of us; because of His suffering and death, we then would benefit. So it remains in the Church today. We, like Christ, are to have a finality to all of this. It is true, and we will see enough of this as we go through the course, that being a Religious means somehow to grow in sanctity. So it does. But it should never mean that we somehow wish to become holy for our own sakes. Look at me—covered with medals, a virtue here and a virtue there, bulging all over with sanctity. No! And let us not forget this; people can be in the religious life twenty-five or more years without clearly seeing why. The reason why is Christ's reason why: it is to obtain grace for souls.

**Religious: Co-Redemptive Disciples with Jesus**

We are Religious in order to somehow be co-redemptive disciples with Jesus. There is, of course, one big difference, a fundamental one, between Him and us. Unlike Christ, we are sinners no less than the people for whom we labor. So, even as we labor in the imitation of Christ to obtain grace for other people, we all need a bit of grace ourselves. But self-sanctification is not the end product of the Religious Life. Am I clear? Even the Religious Life *qua* Religious is a means to an end, an apostolic end. So much for part one.





## Conference 2 New Testament Origins of the Religious Life ~ Part 2



### Christ, the First Religious

We have already seen very briefly that Christ was and remains—notice, remains—the first Religious. He not only came first, but He also remains our primary motive for and the primary means of such a life. What is the key word in what Christ did during His own mortal Life on earth? What is the key word in what the immediate followers of Christ, who formed with Him the first Community, did? What is the key word that summarizes and thus distinguishes Religious Life from other ways in which Christ can be followed? The distinctive word is “total,” or the noun “totality.” You know that twenty years ago I could not have been giving this conference. The Second Vatican Council has analyzed the meaning of Religious Life more profoundly than it has ever been analyzed before. Honest! One reason there are so many people leaving: they are being told what it is and they would rather not stay.

What did the Church tell us? That we go back to Christ Himself and His immediate followers. Three kinds of totality, we are told by the Church, identify Religious Life as first practiced by the Savior and His immediate followers. All who since the first century have claimed to be Religious likewise imitate these kinds of totality in some way. What are they? 1. the totality of sacrifice; 2. the totality of service; 3. the totality of duration. We will look briefly at each.

#### 1. Totality of Sacrifice (three kinds, related to the evangelical counsels)

The *totality of sacrifice* is threefold. It first means that those who have the grace literally give up the exercise, never the natural right, but the exercise to possess, or at least to use, material goods as their own. Did Christ do that? He did. Did His immediate followers, His close intimates, do that? They did.

Second, the sacrifice of giving up the use of one’s perfectly natural right to marry and to beget children. Do we have the right? We do. Can we yield the right? No. Can we, under the Church’s guidance, sacrifice the use of the right? Yes.

And third, that one who becomes a Religious in imitation of Jesus gives up the use of his or her right to autonomy. There are few more important words in the spiritual vocabulary today than autonomy, derived from two Greek words: *εαυτός*, which means “self,” and *νόμος*, which means “law” (Autonomy = self-governing). It refers to how I am, as far as I can be under God, a law to myself. I get up when I wish, I go to work when I want, I do this, or I do that. Of course, do not forget that legitimate autonomy always falls within the limits of the Divine Law. Do I sacrifice that kind of autonomy by my consecrated obedience to Religious Superiors? Yes. Did Christ do that? He sure did! Were Mary and Joseph superior to Jesus? Well, yes and no. They were not superior inasmuch as they were creatures and He was God; but they were taking the place of God, and to that extent they were superiors. That is the first kind of totality that Christ practiced and handed on to His immediate followers, and as the Church is now telling us with crystal clarity, it is the first condition for Religious Life.

## **2. Totality of Service**

There is also a *totality of service*. When Christ came into the world to serve, He came to serve others. He did not come to serve Himself. Those who, like Him, become Religious, become Religious in order to serve others. But I would like to add, they become Religious in order to serve others *as the Church bids them* serve others. In other words, they serve the people of God through the directives or under the aegis of the hierarchical Church, under the Holy See.

## **3. Totality of Duration**

The third totality is the *totality of duration*. One of the most telling statements of the Savior was on the Cross when He said, “It is finished.” Christ’s service of His heavenly Father in meeting the needs of those whom He came to save was until death. This means that everyone who has a genuine Religious vocation intends to make a lifetime and not just a temporary or part-time commitment of sacrifice to God and of service to the Church. There are not or there should not be any associate members in a Religious Community. We do not put in a forty- or even a fifty-hour week. That is why I do not like to hear Religious people saying they are retired. Retired from what? When I hear Religious going on a vacation—well now, do not get me wrong, we all need a break—but from what I hear, some Religious seem to think that taking a vacation means taking a break from Religious Life! This commitment is twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, twelve months a year, until death.

## **Distinction between His Chosen Followers and His Believers**

Against this background of what Religious Life is, it becomes easier to cope with the more difficult question that we still have to resolve. At this point I want to be as clear as my language can make it. Here is the question. During His visible stay on earth, did the Savior distinguish between His close followers, on the one hand, and His believers (those who were to listen to Him and believe in Him), on the other? Yes, He did. And the whole climate of the New Testament makes the distinction obvious. There were always the people who listened to Christ, who heard His sermons and parables by the thousands. And there were those, say, on Pentecost Sunday, when the first converts were baptized. But there were also those from the beginning whom He called His friends. If I am not clear here, the rest of the course will be wasted.

The Evangelist and St. Paul give different names—‘disciples,’ ‘intimates,’ simply ‘followers.’ And although the English word is ‘Friends,’ the Greek word is ‘Lovers.’ Reread the Gospels with this in mind and you will be shocked to see how often the Savior distinguished. Guess to whom He first preached the Beatitudes? His immediate followers only. With whom and for whom did He first consecrate bread and wine into His Body and Blood? The Disciples. And after His Resurrection, of the tens and maybe hundreds of thousands who heard about or witnessed the *Via Crucis*, relatively few people saw Him after the Resurrection. Christ chose, He picked, He selected. If, then, Christ—and this is a strange expression but it helps me to make it clear—was the first Divine Religious, then certain chosen of His followers were the first human Religious. They were the Apostles, and after Pentecost it included those who waited as Christ told them for the coming of the Spirit. The evangelists keep counting people, so a total is given; notice who belongs, who is in this inner circle? Ah, these are harsh words on today’s democratic ears: a total of about one hundred twenty, including some women and Mary, the Mother of Jesus. How is that? That is how it all began.

## **Specialists in Holiness**

For our purpose, what deserves emphasis is that already in the Gospels the Savior distinguished some persons to whom He said, “Come, follow me.” He did not shout out to the crowd of five or more thousand, “Look you people, way in the back: follow me!” Right? He picked, He chose, and He chose the most unlikely people in Palestine. Now let us be clear. It is not as though the Apostles were necessarily better than the other contemporaries of Jesus. This cannot be. There was a Judas. There was a Peter. And there was a Thomas. That is quite a percentage out of twelve Apostles—a traitor, a denier, and a skeptic. It is not, let us be sure here, that Christ did not want others to be His followers, too, or to become holy. He sure did! No, but

Christ wanted persons from the beginning to be more intimate with the Master, more frequently in His company, more often the object of His special attention and teaching and care.

Having said that, what does all of this mean? It means that the New Testament foundations of Religious Life are to be sought among those persons who are to be divinely selected means of sanctifying others. As St. Paul later said, Christ instituted a Church in which not all are evangelists, not all are prophets, not all are this, not all are that. There are to be in the Church of God, and there were from the beginning, people who are “specialists” in the practice of holiness, in order that they might be the divinely chosen channels through which God sanctifies the rest of His people.

There is more than passing value in emphasizing what we have just said, because otherwise we are liable to lose our balance. It is a seductive temptation to argue that since all the faithful are called to holiness, it therefore seems that no one is called to a higher degree of holiness than anybody else. Is that true? No; some people are called to a higher degree of holiness. We are also liable to think, as some do, that all are called to the same kind or form of holiness. Is that true? No! A mother rearing a family becomes holy in rearing that family, a Bishop in guiding a diocese, and a Religious in living up to his or her way of life. Finally, most importantly, we might have the question or doubt: how do some people become holy? Or how does God want the Church to be sanctified? Through other persons. In other words, what God wants is for some people to be the providential instruments or channels who promote holiness in their fellowmen. We may then conclude that already in the first century, and even during Christ’s visible stay on earth, this is precisely what occurred. Some were chosen, in fact called by name, to “follow me.” Not all received this kind of invitation; some were then called to a higher order of sanctity. Moreover, beginning with the Blessed Mother and John the Baptist, and going on through the great figures of the Gospels and the Apostolic Age, these people were called to be God’s channels, God’s means to sanctify other people. Being holy themselves, they were to sanctify everyone whose lives they entered, as the Savior had done.





### Conference 3 Christian Perfection in the First Two Centuries after Christ ~ Part 1



#### **Distinction of Vocations in the Early Church (about the first 250 years)**

We now begin to reflect on the Christian community in the early post-Apostolic age. My reason for doing this is to give some historical context for seeing what happened immediately after Christ's Ascension into Heaven and, indeed, immediately after the death of the Apostles. Note that we are here discussing the very beginning of the Church which, for our purpose, would extend from Pentecost up to around the end of the third century. And as we shall see, it was not until about two hundred fifty years after Pentecost that we had the beginnings of an organized Religious Life resembling what we have today.

The Christian life of the early Church was structured. There were differences, major differences, in the type of people who belonged to the Church. The largest difference: the hierarchy and the laity. After the coming of the Holy Spirit—that means in the first century—we already find the hierarchy, composed of bishops, presbyters, and deacons; and we also find the laity, who obviously formed the majority of the faithful. Moreover, we can make further distinctions among the laity. I will first give you the structure and then talk about each classification, emphasizing what we are most interested in, namely, the beginnings of Religious Life as we now know it.

First of all, the vast majority of the laity had no special vocation of which there is record. They were simply called 'the faithful,' in Latin, *fideles*. Some of the faithful were fully incorporated into the Church. They were baptized, and normally they would also be confirmed at the time of baptism; that was generally the custom in the early Church. As we also know, many adults were baptized, especially in the earlier years. Others of the faithful were faithful indeed, but they were only partially or incompletely incorporated into the Church, to use our language. These were the catechumens preparing for baptism, as well as the so-called penitents, *penitentes*.



They were the sinners who were labeled and identified as sinners, a classification that, happily, we do not have now.

### **Those with Special Vocations**

Now we consider those with special vocations. Notice what we are saying, though: before the end of the first century there was *already* this stratification. We can distinguish two classes of those with special vocations; the special names of these classes are found in the literature of those early years. Two virtues, chastity and faith, distinguished those with special vocations. Among those distinguished on the basis of chastity we find further classes of people. There were virgins, widows, and ascetics, and there were also the married. The married were expected to practice chastity not indeed because were they called to virginal chastity, but because the early Church strongly stressed this virtue for everyone. In identifying chastity as the first distinguishing feature of a special vocation, I want you to note that marriage was a special vocation. The second distinguishing feature of a special vocation was faith. Here there were three types of persons whose names occur in the literature of the first three hundred years. First there were the faithful in general, who professed the Faith and lived it, but whose faith had not been tried. There were, secondly, the confessors, who had been tried for their faith by paying fines or, especially, by suffering imprisonment. Confessors were often alive and still on earth. Third, there were the martyrs. The Church, then, distinguished three types of people in terms of their generosity in practicing the Faith: the faithful in general; the confessors, who had somehow suffered for the Faith and were known by their scars—for example, the marks of scourging, the loss of a limb, or the gouging out of their eyes—all kinds of torments to which they may have been subject but somehow survived; and then of course the martyrs, who paid the highest price and died.

Consequently, as we look at the early Church the first thing we notice is that in Apostolic times and through the third century, the Christian community was both original and many-sided. It was original in that the Christians were very different from their contemporaries. They lived different lives; they were distinguished. And that life was many-sided according to grade, beginning with bishops and progressing to deacons and the laity; and among the laity were further classifications. There is one book that I thought I would ask you to read, called *The Shepherd*. The author is Hermas; the date is about 150 A.D. It is good to know that we have a work from the second century that gives very detailed information about the life of the Church in those days. This is what I am drawing on.

Let me read just a few lines from this rather poetic work to see how the author expresses himself. The author, Hermas, describes a so-called vision of a tower. An elderly woman, who represents the Church, has told Hermas to go to a field at the fifth hour. When he arrives he sees

an ivory bench on which the woman is seated with six young men. She sends them away and makes Hermas sit on her left. Then she says to him, "You see something great?" "Lady," Hermas replies, "I see nothing." "Come now, look carefully. Do you not see in front of you a great tower being built in the water with splendid, huge stones?" She goes on to explain the vision: "The tower is the Church, the water is Baptism, the six young people who built the tower are the angels, and the stones of different shapes correspond to the different categories in the Church." See what we are saying? By the year 150, then, the Church understood herself as having different categories. We need to hear this in our preoccupation with democratic egalitarianism. I will not read all of it, but just to give you a taste of the literature:

"The first stones squared in white are the Apostles, bishops, doctors, and deacons. The stones drawn from the bottom of the water to become part of the building are those who have suffered for the Name of the Lord—they are the martyrs. Then come the men whom God has tested for their faithfulness in walking on a straight path, the faithful Christians. The new stones that are brought represent those new in the Faith—the Neophytes. The stones thrown aside are those who have sinned. If they repent, they can be used for the building—these are the penitents. Besides these stones, which serve for the building, there are the rejected stones, some of which are broken. They are the hypocrites, who under the appearance of Faith have not given up their evil ways. Other stones crumble; they are those who have not persevered. The cracked stones are those who cling to malice in the bottom of their hearts. The white, round stones, which cannot be used for building, are those who have not renounced their will. The stones thrown round about in inaccessible places are those who have given up the way of truth. Stones found in the fire are those who have totally abandoned the living God. Only those who approach the water without reaching it are the souls who do not have the courage to become Christians."

The account goes on and on and on, all with similitude. In any case, with that as something of a background, let us go on.

### **Bishops in the Church**

The one class of persons in the early Church found in the earliest writing begins with St. Ignatius of Antioch. He is the first one who makes it very clear that *ubi episcopus, ibi ecclesia*, which translated means, "Where there is the bishop, there is the Church." In other words, the first category of people, without which you do not have the Church, is the bishops—beginning with the Bishop of Rome, of course. If anyone nowadays is uncomfortable with structure in Religious Life, that person is ignorant of the Church from her first beginnings. All right? For example, St. Ignatius says that without the bishop you cannot have the Eucharist, remember? And consider

marriage: Ignatius wants men and women who wed to contract their marriage before the bishop. On the bishop's side, he must show charity toward the people. Ignatius, remember, wrote to Polycarp, "Justify your Episcopal dignity by complete solicitude for the body and soul of your flock. Bear patiently with all the brethren as Christ bears with you."

Are the bishops the same as presbyters or priests? In Ignatius, the word "bishop" can cover both categories. But there are also passages in Ignatius where it is clear that he is just referring to the bishop proper. I would say that the passages I have quoted refer to the bishop as such, not just to the priests. And because Ignatius distinguishes between the *episcopas* and the *presbyteras*, I would say as a general statement that Ignatius, wherever he speaks of this, is usually referring to the *episcopas* and not merely to the *presbyteras*. So much for the bishops.

## **Widows**

Now on the level of chastity: this will not follow any special logic except the chronology of time. In the early Church, the widows formed a separate order by a very early date. Thus, in his first letter to Timothy, St. Paul already mentions their existence: "Give widows their due, if that name really belongs to them." He then adds, "The woman who is, indeed, a widow bereft of all help has put her trust in God and spends her time night and day upon the prayers and petitions that belong to her state." Women on the list of widows, already in St. Paul's time, were organized into a separate, celibate group. A widow must have reached at least the age of sixty, remained faithful to one husband, practiced hospitality, washed the feet of the Saints, and attached herself to every charitable cause. You will notice with the widows that the stress is more on the practice of prayer and asceticism and, of course, charity, rather than on living in a community. One of their charitable functions was to teach other women, but they might also have had responsibilities for their own families, which would have made community life, if not impossible, at least impractical. The interesting point is that widows are listed in a register with the conditions that this implies. In other words, the women Paul describes were not just widowed in general; rather, in the first century the Church had already formed them into a specific group among the faithful. The existence of this order of widows is further confirmed by other ecclesiastical literature. St. Ignatius has a strange expression: "the virgins called widows"; it is not sure what he meant by that, but most likely he is referring to widows who then practiced the life of celibacy, and therefore practiced consecrated chastity after having been married. So much for the group of women that goes into the early Church, beginning already in Apostolic times.

## **Charisms Possessed by the Early Christians**

Second (and this will be a large classification of people in the early Church, a classification that gives us the first beginnings of organized Religious Life), there were the so-called charismatics. They were those who had genuine *charisma*—that is the singular; the plural is *charismata*. Now, in the language of the Scriptures, *charisma* is not an ordinary grace. An ordinary grace is called *charis*, and notice the difference: it is an ordinary grace or grace in general, according to St. Paul. But *charismata* are special gifts that are somehow intended not just for the individual but for others. These people are specially gifted with what one might call apostolic graces. We know, from first century letters of St. Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, that the *charismata* were possessed by the early Christians. Clearly, those who received *charismata* received a vocation, you might say, that everybody could recognize because they got those special gifts. So those in the early Church that had a vocation, to transpose our language to the first century, would often receive special graces—*charismata*—that others could recognize. These were received not only by men but also by women.

They were, for example, gifts of healing, gifts of teaching, gifts of prophesying, special gifts of prayer; you would call them mystical graces. But notice there are always two elements to these *charismata*. First is their supernatural character—no one can ever educate himself or be trained in the *charismata*. You either get them or you do not. And secondly, their purpose is not just for the person, him or herself, but for the benefit of others. You notice what we are driving at: that the Holy Spirit was no less selective than Christ. Some people received the gifts, some did not. And those who did not could not complain, or if they got one kind of gift they could not complain, “Why did I not get the other.” This has a lot to do with the concept of vocation. Among these *charismata* the most important, both because of its service to the Church and because it is spoken about most often, is the gift of prophecy.

Here is a description of a prophet. Notice we are using “prophet” in the very restricted sense understood by the early Church, not in the sense of an Isaiah or a Jeremiah. Hermas, as we quoted earlier, gives the following description of a prophet: “When the man who has in him the Spirit of God enters an assembly of just people inspired by Faith by the divine Spirit, and this assembly begins to pray to God, then the angel of the prophetic spirit who helps this man takes possession of him; and the man, thus filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks to the people the words that God wishes.” Are we clear? It corresponds, although we do not use the expression now, to being possessed by the good Spirit. And therefore, you might say, these were supernatural leaders of the people.

Prophecy was clearly an extraordinary gift, but for that reason there arose — along with the true prophets whom God actually inspired to lead the faithful, especially in the liturgy — false prophets. Already in the first century the *Didache*, another non-scriptural document from the early Church, gives this statement: “Every man who speaks possessed by a spirit is not necessarily a prophet, but only if he sees things in the Lord’s way. So the true prophet can be distinguished from the false only by his behavior.” By the way, memorize that: the true prophet can be distinguished from the false one only by his behavior. Because both can be extraordinarily gifted people; both may be talking about things spiritual or religious. The question is, what kind of spirit possesses each? Hermas lays down the same rules, though he says more. “Lord, I asked” — this is Hermas describing his own petition — “how can I tell the difference between the true prophet and the false one?” Then the Lord answers, “Listen to the rule that I am going to give you for distinguishing the true from the false prophet. It is by his life that you will recognize the man who possesses the spirit of God. The false prophet, now listen, first raises himself up. He wants to have the first place. He takes payment for his prophecies; without wages he does not prophesy. Can a spirit coming from God take payment for prophesying? If he enters an assembly of just men filled with the spirit of God, as soon as they begin to pray, he finds himself empty. The earthly spirit, overcome with terror, flees far away and our man remains silent, incapable of uttering a word.” Pretty good.

### **Virginité and Marriage**

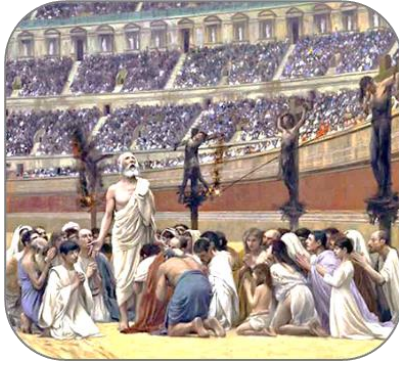
Now the class of people called the virgins. As we know from Christ’s own life and preaching, chastity, indeed virginity, was held in high honor by the early Church. At the same time marriage, as we also know from the teachings of Christ, was not easy for Christ’s followers. They were forbidden a relationship with anybody else except their own spouse, until death. Both virginity and marriage were vocations. One result was that problems arose as to the relationship between the two. Already in the time of St. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians he states — and since he taught this no one doubted — that virginity is superior to marriage. That is what Paul said, remember? And he gave the main reason that the virgin, as he said, can more totally give him or herself to Christ. But in the later generations after Paul, certain people arose who went further. They began to teach that being a Christian seemed almost to imply virginity. Some of these became heretics and taught that, unless married people separated from their spouses, they were considered only imperfect members of the Church. It would seem strange to us; remember though, we are talking about the early generations in the Church. And because of the high demands that Christ made on his followers, there were some who taught this about virginity because they thought that followers of Christ are only those who are capable of these high demands.

I will give you the names of the first heresies as we go along, because they are part of the history of virginity in the Church. The inquitists—this movement was especially evident among the converts from Judaism. They wrote several apocryphal gospels in which this view of virginity is both taught and propagated: the gospel of the Hebrews, the gospel of the Egyptians, the gospel of James, and the gospel of Thomas. These four gospels taught this doctrine (which, by the way, from the very beginning brings out the importance of the Church’s authority in distinguishing the spurious from the true Gospels). In other words, according to the inquitists, married people who did not separate from their spouses could only be imperfect members of the Church. The “perfect” members of the Church were those who either never married or—if they did—abstained from sexual intercourse.

In time other groups joined, such as the Montanists. One of their greatest leaders was Tertullian. There were also the Marcionites—in time not a few groups of virgins or ascetics, communities already formed in the Church, were infected with this heresy. The Marcionites did not go as far as some of the other heretics went, for they did not condemn marriage explicitly. But they at least implied, without actually saying, that the married are only imperfect members of the Church. Now this is one error that we who are vowed to celibacy have got to be constantly careful about, all right? This subject of consecrated chastity can be subtle. The married can be holy. And to say the least, can be good Catholics.

What I mean, however—and now we go beyond the heretics—is that from the earliest times of the Church, virginity was held in highest respect. Thus in St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, while the Apostle does not make virginity obligatory, he does say that for those who have the grace, it is preferable. It is the way he would like to have everybody live, but he did not require virginity, even though he was speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read of the four daughters of the deacon Philip who remained virgins. From the very beginning, therefore, the choice of virginity as a state of life was recognized as a revealed option. Some even went to the extent of saying that it was not only an option but an obligation, but that is the error. St. Ignatius of Antioch (who, by the way, will be referred to many times, because his doctrine is very precious for the Church’s Tradition) speaks of virgins, which seems to indicate that by the end of the first century they had canonical status. They were not merely people who happened to be virgins, but who had a special status in the Church because they were virgins.





## Conference 4 Christian Perfection in the First Two Centuries after Christ ~ Part 2



### **Virginity Was Held in Highest Honor from the Earliest Times**

In the middle of the second century, St. Justin lists it as a feature of Christianity that many men and women at the age of fifty and sixty, instructed since childhood in the teaching of Christ, have kept their virginity. He was writing in the year 150 A.D. This esteem for virginity is found throughout the whole Church, so it is not, you might say, consistent with any particular culture; you might say, “Well, maybe that is the way people were in Palestine.” No: Rome, North Africa, Spain, India, wherever we have record of the Church’s life, virginity was held in the highest honor, and from the earliest times, virgins were given a special status in the Church. We might say, however, mainly because we have so much literature on the subject, that it assumed a very striking aspect in the groups most affected by Judeo-Christianity. What are we saying? From the beginning there were two kinds—you might say two branches—of converts to Christianity: those from Judaism and those from paganism. We would expect converts from Judaism to be different, because of their background, from those who had never been Jews, never had the Old Testament, never heard of Abraham or Moses. On the one hand, especially among those in the Judeo-Christian tradition, virginity appears as almost the principal virtue for a Christian to practice. A great deal is made of Mary’s virginity, of Christ’s virginity.

Unfortunately, when these people went off-base, they also wrote some of the most vitriolic diatribes against marriage. The expression “bitter grass” is a phrase often used by the heretical critics of marriage; they called marriage “bitter grass.” Virginity is compared to things of the spirit, marriage to things of the body. The Marcionites, for example, would baptize only virgins or married people who had taken a vow of celibacy. The Montanists claimed that sexual abstinence is an obligation for all Christians. So much for that.

No doubt one reason for this distorted emphasis on virginity, which I dare say is becoming equally important in our day, was that, in those early centuries, the paganism of the Roman Empire was in the most complete sense unchaste, lascivious, immoral, and obscene. You know

the Romans had gods and goddesses glorifying their vices. This distortion of virginity was, then, I suppose, partly a reaction against the extreme obscenity. In any case, virginity was held in high esteem and perhaps we can say this: that God permitted even the errors of such people as these to bring out the importance of the witness of virginity, if ever Christianity was going to make an impact on a society. Because what I have found in my priesthood is true: whatever other virtue a person may *think* he or she can practice without grace, this is one that nobody cheats on. *You either get oceans of grace or you do not remain chaste. Grace alone enables anyone to practice chastity.* And, therefore, the evidence of God's presence in persons is dramatically shown.

### **The Heresy of Manichaeism**

There are a few other groups that condemned marriage: the Ebionites, the Millenarianists, and, in general, the Gnostics. Now, what is important to know about some of these (by the way, they appear especially in the writings of St. John, who you know was writing at the end of the first century), is that even as the Church exalts virginity, She does not make the error of claiming that marriage is wrong, bad, or displeasing to God. Now behind all of this, and especially with the heresy of Gnosticism, was the more devastating error of Manichaeism. Manichaeism is that heresy which has tormented the Church from the beginning—and I am sure will until the end of time—which claims there are ultimately two gods, two creators: one of spirit (the good deity), one of body (the evil deity). Thus, in Manichaeism, since marriage or marital intercourse involves the union of the body, it is really the work of the evil deity. And insofar as a person experiences less and less of the pleasures or joys of the body, he is becoming more and more perfect. Do you follow the logic? So, asceticism is redefined on these terms as mortifying the flesh until a person is totally indifferent to any pleasure, because all pleasure of the body is somehow a manifestation of and a concession to the evil spirit who stands behind the body. Now that is not the Church's teaching on asceticism.

May I ask, is bodily pleasure wrong? Is it wrong to enjoy our food? Is it wrong to enjoy, say, a warm bed or warm clothing in winter? Is it wrong for the married to enjoy their marital experience? Therefore, it is not true that a person is more spiritual the less he needs the body. So behind the heresy regarding virginity (the heresy we talked about with these various sects), lies the more fundamental error of claiming that the body is evil and only the spirit is good. This the Church condemns.

### **The State of Christian Perfection: Consecrated Chastity**

Now, what is the difference between virgins and ascetics? At first, "virgins" was commonly applied only to women. And even today, is it not the first thought that comes to mind



when you hear the word “virgin”—that it refers to a woman? Well, quite frankly, men are supposed to be virgins, too—those who live a life of consecrated chastity. But the word “ascetic” was more commonly applied to men. It is just a matter of vocabulary. Are women who are virgins called to be ascetical? Yes or no? They had better be, or they will lose their virginity. And men called to be ascetics, were they to be virginal? Yes. All right? It is just to clarify words.

It is not surprising, however, that from the very beginning both ascetics and virgins began to live a common life. And one reason for either forming or living in a community was to assist these men and women to persevere in their life, both of asceticism and of virginity.

And this is where the language is a little uncertain, but we might also say there are references to marriages between Christ and those who had thus consecrated or—and the word is already used by St. Paul right?—*espoused* themselves to Christ. Now, the Church has made many clarifications since the foundation of the life of Christian Perfection as we now understand it, but already from the first century, this life included the practice of consecrated chastity.

### **The Profession of Faith and Martyrdom**

Now, the Profession of the Faith. Just to keep ourselves in balance, we were saying that, up to the end of the third century, groups of persons in the early Church were principally organized on the practice of chastity, or of faith. From the beginning, already in the Apocalypse of St. John, martyrdom appears as the outstanding form of Christian sanctity. As this book tells us, such persons (i.e., the martyrs) are wholly consecrated to the glory of God, and they have “washed their robes white in the Blood of the Lamb.” This is shown by the fact that in the early Church, the first saints who were venerated were the martyrs. There is belief that a person who dies for the Faith immediately enters Heaven. The bones of the martyrs were honored, and miracles were often worked through the application of their relics.

For example, we read in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (second century), “We gathered his [Polycarp’s] bones, more valuable than precious stones, in order to place them in a suitable spot. There, whenever possible, we shall gather in joy to celebrate the anniversary of the day when Polycarp was born to God by martyrdom.” The Eucharist, from the beginning, was offered on the tombs of the martyrs. And if any martyrs survived, they became, as we said earlier, confessors.

You might wonder what this has to do with Religious Life. It has a great deal to do with Religious Life, and if anyone still has doubts, let me quickly dissipate them. *The only Religious who will survive this century are those who have the blood of martyrs in their veins. I mean that. I mean*

it! The first three centuries, all the Popes were martyrs; did you know that? That is right, *all* martyrs. Martyrdom is no longer a luxury. It is fast becoming a necessity. Martyrdom, in the first place, is considered a supreme conflict with the evil spirit. That is the Church's teaching.

We will quote Hermas again—his is one of the great books of the early Church: “Those who have been crowned are those who have struggled against the devil and conquered him.” Is that not a strange expression, “overcoming the devil by dying”? Martyrs are those who have suffered for the Law, of course, the Law of Christ. And again, the devil used all his wiles against the martyrs but he could not conquer them. Martyrdom, as a victory over Satan, is the highest form of the imitation of Christ

That is why I had you read St. Ignatius. Did you notice his longing for martyrdom? It is right there! It is the way, especially in Ignatius, but also in the early Church, to become totally transformed into Jesus Christ. I would almost recommend memorizing the all-time masterpiece on martyrdom, Ignatius' *Letter to the Romans*. It is a fairly short letter. Ignatius writes:

“It is good for me to die in order to be united to Jesus Christ. It is He I am seeking. He, who died for me: Him I want, Him who is risen for all. My hour of birth approaches. Let me receive the Pure Life. When I am there, then I shall be a man. Allow me to be the imitator of the Passion of my God.”

### **The Desire for Martyrdom: to Imitate Christ in His Passion**

As we would expect, martyrdom was often accompanied by, and God would often reward it with, mystical phenomena. I have read enough of the mystics and have had the privilege of dealing with some who, in my judgment, qualified as mystics. Let me tell you this: *all genuine mystics desire martyrdom*. I do not mean in any dramatic sense, but they would *really love* to imitate Christ in His Passion. Finally, a martyr does not merely edify the Church—which is of course one obvious function of a martyr, because the word itself means ‘witness.’ So anytime you shrink or tremble at the word ‘martyr,’ just remember: this is what Christ said we are supposed to be—His martyrs. So that is indeed the martyr's first function in the Church: to give the witness of a strong faith, to testify to God's Presence, and to be willing to die for what he or she believes. But it is also an act of great redemptive value. A martyr does not just die in witnessing to Christ; he dies to lay down his life for the people.

This is a quotation from the *Acts of St. Polycarp*: “Like the Lord Himself, [Polycarp] patiently waited to be delivered; thus wishing to teach us by His example not to think only of our own interests, but also of our neighbors.” For the sign of a true and solid charity is to seek not

only one's own salvation, but also that of one's brethren. That is what Christ meant by saying that the one who has the highest love is the one who willingly lays down his life for the brethren. The practice of charity means wearing oneself out.

This—and with this we can close— is why very early, as Religious Life became organized, *those who lived the Religious Life faithfully were spoken of as having undertaken a life of living martyrdom—as laboring and exhausting themselves in the service of others.* That service is not only physical exhaustion; it is also praying for others, suffering for others, mortifying oneself for others. And in the smaller the community, there is the martyrdom of *living* with others. Does that sound strange?—the martyrdom of *living* with others, and the graces that are thus gained for souls by that kind of generosity. Only in Heaven will we know, when people we have never heard of before come to thank us: “Thanks—it is because of you that I got here.”





## Conference 5 Origins of Christian Monasticism ~ Part 1



### Identifying Features of the Spiritual Patrimony of the Early Church

The last time we met, we tried to make it plain that from the very beginning, from Christ's preaching on, He already distinguished between the masses (so to speak), and His closer disciples and Apostles. We should never, then, apologize for there being a distinction; but we should also be the first ones to admit that we do not deserve the vocation. But the distinction was there from the very beginning.

Now, what do we find as we read the major sources of Christian spirituality before the Council of Nicaea? Note that here we are looking to see what the post-Apostolic Church looked like before the dawn of the Conciliar Age. We want to see what the early Christians believed about the spiritual life, beyond the minimum essentials of keeping the moral law and saving one's soul.

As we read through these more than two centuries of Christian writing—that is, from the end of the Apostolic Age (about the year 100) until about 325—we find certain dominant features of Christian spirituality. My intention is to take them in some sequence, which is not necessarily a logical sequence, although each feature is closely connected with others. And each also had a definite relation to the times we are describing. Our purpose in this conference is very specific: to identify what may be called the spiritual patrimony of the early Church, as the foundation on which were built all future modes of living the evangelical counsels.

#### **First Feature: Distinctiveness**

The first feature we discover is the ideal of separation. This does not necessarily mean physical separateness, but it does mean a moral distinctiveness that must characterize the true follower of Christ. When, in his epistles, Paul talks to the early Christians about being pilgrims in a strange land; or when Christ distinguished between those who believe in Him, and the world;

we get some initial idea of what this separation means. Nowhere is it brought out more plainly than in the so-called *Didache*, also known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, which as far as we can tell was written before the year 100. The first six out of its sixteen chapters have been called “The Book of the Two Ways,” because it reduces all the duties of a Christian to two ways: “the Way of Life” and “the Way of Death.” The Way of Life comprises four classes of duties. For example, the first basic duty of the Way of Life is to love God and neighbor. And at quite some length this important book describes that those who are the true followers of Christ love their enemy and practice liberality. So in following the “Way of Life,” the true Christian not only hears what Christ taught, but also *does* what Christ taught. After the Ascension and Pentecost, Christ’s followers began to do what He told them to do! Christ conferred the grace of His followers to live up to what He told them they should do. That is the Way of Life; the Way of Death is the opposite. It consists in giving way to the vices which those who are walking the Way of Life seek to avoid and overcome.

St. Ignatius of Antioch also refers to the Way of Life and the Way of Death. One he calls the way of truth; the other, the way of error. What do those early Fathers of the Church mean? They mean that Christian spirituality is different. People who are good Christians, and are following Christ the way they should, are distinguishable from others. They are identifiable. In other words, you can tell, externally, who is following Christ and who is not. And the principal mark of distinction is the moral life that Christ’s true followers lead. Remember, we are still talking about separation. Christ’s followers no doubt live in the midst of other people, who are just as human as them, and they may be physically near one another or even live with one another; but they are separated in spirit even if they are neighbors in body. A true follower of Christ is different from other people, if for no other reason than because non-Christians do not behave the way Christians behave. The conduct of Christ’s followers is unique and sets them off from other people more surely than if they were from another planet. In fact, they do live on another plane of existence. And their separateness is part of their distinctiveness as persons who already on earth are living a life that is not of this earth, but partakes by anticipation of the life of eternity. How many times I have had to tell myself this, “I am supposed to be different!” And this can often be a hard thing in the world, today’s especially—say, with our fellow Religious. One of the hardest things for me, Sisters, is to be in a group of fellow priests and Religious when I am the only one who looks like a priest! Or I am the only one in chapel not concelebrating Mass because no one has their vestments on and I cannot offer Mass without vestments. In any case, separateness is very real.

### **Second Feature: Moderation of Passions**

Secondly, there is the restraint of sensuality. Personal duties for those who are to follow the Way of Life consist in the practice of all kinds of virtue, but especially in the avoidance of sensuality, which I would call sexuality. I do not hesitate in saying that the most probable, most publicly overt, and most witness-bearing feature of a good Christian is the restraint of the sex passion; everyone, even the unbeliever, recognizes it. Also, there is the avoidance of cruelty—and as I trust we know, you are not just cruel when you, say, strike somebody. As I have said so often, “give me a knife” any day, compared to some people’s cruel speech. The tongue can be the sharpest and most devastating instrument that man has to wound his fellowman.

### **Third Feature: Charitable Social Relations**

Thirdly, we find emphasis on social duties and respect, especially for the representatives of God. In other words, respect for Church authority, maintenance of peace among the faithful, generosity to the poor, and listen to this—the education of children! Is that not good to hear? The Church was concerned about educating the children from Apostolic times! And this implicates not only parents—say, the mother, educating in the home—but also certain people who would from the very beginning dedicate themselves to Christian education.

### **Fourth Feature: Good Confession**

Fourth, there was the obligation of confessing one’s sins. There were two kinds of confessions: the individual confession made in a group of people, where the individual would admit what he had done wrong to the group that joined together; and a more official confession, that from all the evidence we have was sacramental confession. For some years now, whenever I give a retreat, I tell the retreatants, “You have made a good retreat if you make a good confession.”

### **Fifth Feature: Patient, Suffering Love**

The fifth spiritual feature of the early post-Apostolic Church was the primacy of patient love. We are beginning to see how much literature there is from those very early years of the Church. We find in these writings an extraordinary stress on selfless love of one’s neighbor. You notice what I did—I changed the adjective “selfless” to “patient,” where “patient” means a love that causes suffering. Anyone who wants love and is unwilling to suffer does not really want to love. All the writers, without exception, take to heart the Savior’s last will and testament about the new commandment, which He taught as a condition for sanctifying a world steeped in sin.

To save this world, we have got to suffer this world. To save this world, we have got to be hurt by this world. To save this world, we have got to be patient, which means we have got to “take it” from the world. And if we are unwilling to “take it,” let us at least be honest: we are not willing to save it.

What bears particular emphasis is that the form of this selfless love was too obvious to be missed. Time and again, the early Christians were told to love their enemies. This teaching is all in the Gospels, of course, but it is liable to be missed unless seen against the background of the first three centuries of the Church’s corporate history. Those first three centuries are the most eloquent commentary on the Gospels. As by now we know, loving one’s neighbor can mean many things, but there is no doubt what it means when one’s neighbor is one’s enemy in every sense of the word. When he disagrees with what you believe in, he is your enemy. When he dislikes what you hold dear, he may smile, he may be nice—but he is your enemy. When he disdains what you cherish and will make any sacrifice to obtain, that person is your enemy. When he despises you, opposes you, places every possible obstacle in your way, surely that person is an enemy. When he persecutes you, reviles you, and when all else fails to break down your resistance, imprisons you and puts you to death; if that is not enmity, then what is love?

Providentially for all future generations, the Christians of the early Church were called upon to practice heroic charity in loving people who they were absolutely sure were their enemies. And they loved so successfully that, although thousands died as martyrs in the process, they merited the conversion of the pagan world that had put them to death. The martyrs were left for all time as witnesses to the power of suffering love. Nothing converts like a love that suffers, especially at the hand of the one who causes you the pain—a love that loves those who do not love you, in order to win for them, through patient endurance, what Christ won for mankind by His death on the Cross. How schizophrenic can we be! We read the Passion, study what Christ endured, and then, as it were, forget what Christ taught us: that souls are saved only—this is the divinely revealed adverb—*only* by the Cross. That is the second feature of this pre-Nicaean spirituality.

### **Sixth Feature: Ascetics**

Sixth was the practice of ascetics. There was a strange logic in the spirituality of the early Church, which, being so close to Christ and extraordinarily gifted with His grace, remains for all time the pattern for us to imitate. What is strange about that early spirituality is that it was not satisfied with the practice of patient, even heroic, charity towards those who opposed the followers of Christ. If the early Church was a persecuted Church, it was also an ascetical Church. To place this into context, remember that we are talking about a people living over sixteen

hundred years ago, where nothing of the comfort and convenience and ease that we now have access to was even dreamed of. No electric lights. No sidewalks safe to walk on, no comfortable chairs, none of the tens of thousands of modern amenities. Yet there was luxury in the Greco-Roman world, and there was indulgence of the passions, which as we know from the letters of St. Paul could be very extreme. Therefore, the asceticism of the post-Apostolic Church was especially centered on the virtues that directly opposed the vices of those days. Remember this. What virtues should we moderns concentrate on? Those which are opposed to the vices of our day.

In this regard, the writings of Tertullian are especially instructive. This great man, as we know, went through three stages in his life: he went from staunch Catholic, to semi-Montanist, to totally heretical Montanist who finally broke with the Church he had once defended so well. I want to use him as an example to illustrate the asceticism of that early Church. One reason Tertullian finally broke with the Church was precisely over this question of asceticism. In his, at first laudable, zeal to preserve the purity of Christian morals, he urged the faithful to avoid contamination with the lecherous paganism that surrounded them on every side. No one has improved on Tertullian's caustic criticism of those Christians who in their dress and behavior forgot their Christian nobility and behaved like the pagans. I quote, with apologies, a short passage in which he takes to task those who resort to all sorts of devices to hide their growing years:

“God says, Who of you can make a white hair black? Or a black, white? And so woman proved the Lord wrong. Behold, they say instead of white or black, they make it yellow and more pleasing with a more graceful color. The age that we fervently pray to attain blushes for itself. A theft is committed; youth, the period of sin, is sighed after; the opportunity for grave seriousness is wasted. The more old age tries to conceal itself, the more it will be detected. This, then, is your idea of true eternity: hair that is ever young. This is your idea of incorruptibility: that we have to put on for the new house of the Lord one guaranteed by cosmetics? When do you hasten to greet the Lord? When do you speed to depart from this iniquitous age? You to whom the near approach of your own end seems unsightly.”

That is the great Tertullian. By the way, I quoted one of his mildest passages. Tertullian, in common with the great masters of asceticism, correctly insisted on self-denial of the body, restraint of the senses, and control of the appetites if a person wishes to be and remain a true disciple of a suffering Master. But, and this is the lesson, Tertullian went too far. Eventually he so stressed external mortification as to neglect what is, after all, the essence of asceticism as Christianity understands the term. Other writers from the same period did not make the same



mistake. They, no less than Tertullian, were oppressed by the lewdness and looseness of the non-Christian society in which they were immersed. It was bad. But others took a more balanced view of mortification. They taught the faithful to practice external asceticism, of course, but mainly—listen!—asceticism of the *mind* by internal humility, asceticism of the *will* by childlike obedience, asceticism of the *imagination* by emotional self-control, and above all, asceticism of the *heart* by constant prayer. You do not pray as constantly as Christ said we should without practicing a lot of mortification of every sense and of every faculty.

### **Seventh Feature: Loving, Sacrificial Chastity**

A seventh feature of early Christian spirituality was Christ-like chastity. Christ taught chastity “for the sake of the Kingdom of God”. The Church’s earliest tradition taught what can best be described as absolute chastity. By this the early Church understood Christ’s message to mean that there could be no more or less in the practice of this virtue. The married were to practice conjugal chastity by perfect fidelity to their spouse until their death. The unmarried were to practice pre-marital chastity by keeping their bodies and passions under control. And consecrated virgins, both men and women, were to practice total chastity by sacrificing even the prospect of marriage in order to singularize themselves as the spouses of Christ. There is too much in the letters of St. Paul on the beauty and necessity of chastity to be surprised that the first Christians strove so mightily to be chaste. What we might particularly note, however, is that their chastity was more than mere temperance or sexual self-denial. From the very beginning it seemed to be a form of loving sacrifice. This was something new on the horizon of world religious history: the idea that God is actually pleased with the voluntary surrender of the use of the procreative faculties. That is why, as we have seen, there arose very early, even in the first century, not just individuals but groups of persons who gave up the prospects of marriage and rearing a natural family in order to espouse themselves to Christ.

Even the problems which the celibate life created only serve to emphasize the fact that such a life was prized and practiced on a wide scale long before the Church’s liberation under Constantine. In order to bring out this truth more clearly, let me state, without comment, certain aspects of the Church’s life and policy in the second and third centuries. First, the esteem for continence was so great that very soon it affected the Church’s expectation of celibacy for the clergy. Do not forget this! The mandatory celibacy of the Church for her clergy arose from the spontaneous virginity already practiced in the first century. So it is totally false to say that the Church imposed celibacy on an unwilling people. What She did was legislate what by then had already, without legislation, become a more and more widespread practice. For example, we know that by the third century ordination was denied to those who either were married and refused to sacrifice living with their wives, or were single and did not promise to remain celibate

after ordination. In her conflict with the pagan state, the Church argued that Christians, so far from being guilty of any crime with which they were being charged, lived all their lives in perfect chastity. One expression dating to the year 200 speaks of aged men who were as pure as children: *sanes pueri*. “Sanes” is “old men,” “pueri” is “boys.” Old men in age, but children in chastity.

Already in the third century the Christian laity distinguished themselves by their practice of chastity. So widespread was this practice that we have on record a famous apology by a third-century layman, Minucius Felix. Minucius writes, “We maintain modesty not on the surface but in the mind. We cling freely to the bond of one marriage. In the desire to procreate we know one wife or none. The banquets we attend are not only modest but sober, for we do not indulge in revelry or prolong a feast with strong wine; rather we temper our pleasures with gravity and chaste discourse, and we are even more chaste in body. Many of us enjoy, rather than boast, of the perpetual virginity of a body undefiled.” They would not have dared say this to the pagans unless the pagans who watched them could testify they kept chaste. I believe that in today’s society, the Church struggles most to maintain her credibility when her members are not living chaste lives. Chastity in every state of life is an unmistakable sign of God’s presence, because no one, *no one*, can remain chaste without the grace of God.

### **Eighth Feature: Community Life**

We can identify community life as the eighth feature of the early post-Apostolic patrimony. We know that the early Christians, from Pentecost Sunday on, lived what we now call community life. There is a real problem that our industrialized, commercialized, and consequently fragmented, society creates. The problem is of how those who follow Christ can live in community. Until now, community life has been almost identified with Religious, and sadly, even among Religious many no longer want to live community life. Yet from the very first day of Pentecost, as St. Luke explains in the Acts of the Apostles, the early Christians lived in a *koinonia*. Shortly before his death, Cardinal Danielou, a great Jesuit scholar, published a book in which he said, “The real test of Christianity in the modern world will be the survival of Christians in solitude.” Because, he said, barring extraordinary grace, Christianity cannot survive without Christians living in a community. We need one another: support, example, encouragement. The inspiration for such a community life came, of course, from the apostolic community of which Jesus was the Head. St. Luke goes to great length through several chapters in the Acts of the Apostles to describe the qualities of this community. But notice that this is what Christianity is supposed to be: *koinonia*. His description has become normative for Religious Life, and we Religious are to be normative for the rest of the Church. Is this not good to hear? One of our most important functions as Religious is to witness to community living! Because that is what all Christians—if they want even to survive, let alone thrive, in the Faith—need. It is no wonder,

then, that the Christians of the first century should take up where St. Luke leaves off. And it is no wonder that they practiced communitarian life as a principal feature of the following of Christ, Who was Himself social and apostolic and lived with a group of Apostles. Indeed, "followers of Christ" soon came to mean believers in Christ whose common Faith in the Master bound them together in a communion of love. Two definitions that come out of the Church during those first two centuries are "community of faith" and "communion of love." Those who were Christians shared the same Faith, and they loved one another as members of the same Body of Christ.

Let me note certain particular aspects of how the desire for this communal living just burst, as it were, in all directions once Constantine liberated the Church. First, the desire for community life in that early Church was not mainly, and was in fact only minimally, for the sake of what might be called protective custody. The enemies of the Church say, "Well, the Christians huddled together like sheep would huddle together in a storm." Not so. The desire for community was deeper. Second, its inspiration was first of all the teaching and example of the Savior. What He and the Apostles did, the early Christians wanted to do. They saw that Christ's most emphatic teaching was by His actions, in this case His social living in the company of the Apostles. Do you know what the word "company" means? It comes from *com-*, the Latin prefix meaning "together," and *panis*, bread. So "company" relates to sharing one's bread with another. It is beautiful; it symbolizes what community life is supposed to be. You also recall that the Savior gave His most important teachings when He was together with the disciples and at table, eating. For example, the Last Supper, Cana in Galilee, Lazarus and Martha, and after His Resurrection (remember when He called Peter, who jumped in and swam to shore? Christ cooked a meal for them, right?). That is what company means. How happy I am to say that the official name of the Society of Jesus is the *Compagnia de Gesù!* And third, the Christians wanted to worship God, and not simply to do so singly or as individuals. They wanted to do so in body.

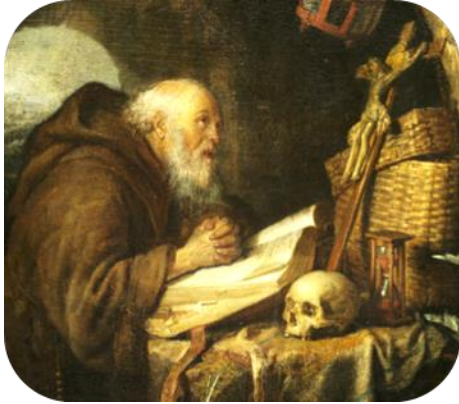
So there are three statements we are making about this so far. First, that the community life of the early Christians was not mainly a protective measure, as though they were scared sheep huddled together. Second, that the principal inspiration was imitation of the Master, who made sure that He ate with them and they with Him. And third, that while they knew God wants to be worshipped by individuals, they also knew God wants to be worshipped by a *body*. This, let us repeat, was a new experience in the history of religion. Even in the revealed religion of the Jews, only one man, totally separated from the people, went behind the veils into the Holy of Holies. Christ changed all that. Remember, He emphasizes the importance of going off periodically by oneself to pray alone. We are individuals. But Christ, also and with emphasis, wants us to gather together, like He did. The early Christians, therefore, felt that they were to honor God as social beings and not only as individuals. And to make sure we should never forget, the single prayer the Savior taught us could not be more communitarian, from the first

word (at least in the English version) to the very end: Our Father; give us this day; lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

### **Ninth Feature: Poverty (Two Kinds)**

A ninth and final feature lies in poverty as a condition of following Christ. The early Christians sensed the impropriety of differences associated with injustice in different strata of society and different economic levels. They therefore stressed the importance, indeed the indispensability, of sharing as a condition for the following of Christ. In fact, it was here that the early Church developed a distinction between precept and counsel in this matter of poverty. In general, two approaches to poverty were conceived, both emerging in New Testament times. First, there was the poverty of sharing as liberality, of giving to others what I have got—or the poverty of sharing in a community. And second, there was the poverty of dispossession. Not all Christians were physically or psychologically capable of practicing the poverty of dispossession. Not all received the grace. And not all now receive the grace. But every follower of Christ can and should practice the poverty of sharing, which means that a Christian believes nothing—and the word is *nothing*—we have has ever been given to us just for ourselves. Nothing. Nothing! You acquire in order to give. You receive in order to share. And that is the heart of our Faith. And this is where Religious, as Religious Life became more structured, makes so much of the practice of community sharing.





## Conference 6 Origins of Christian Monasticism - Part 2



### **The Early Development of Structured Religious Life Up to St. Benedict**

The dates of St. Benedict: he was born around 480 and died around 547. Our intention is to see in historical sequence the early development of what may be called structured religious life, but before the time of St. Benedict, the Founder of Western Monasticism. To get our bearings and keep them, we should first divide the matter to be considered into something like logical parts each preceding, yet connected to the future part on which, then, it will build.

First, we will look at something of the persons whose life and practices set the pattern for Western Monasticism. Second, the features of the life of these persons. Third, the organization in an established Rule.

### **Those Who Practiced Consecrated Chastity and Asceticism**

First, a little about the persons living primitive religious life. If we were to identify the first signs of religious life in the Catholic Church in any semblance of a structured form, we may safely say that this life was first shown in the lives of the Christian virgins already in the first century of the Christian era. That's how religious life started, with people practicing consecrated chastity. Their practice of continence was, almost from the beginning, also associated with the renunciation of riches. By the way, not a few of the earliest virgins came from very wealthy, noble families. Reference to these virgins occurs in the Christian literature of the first century, and the Fathers of the second century praise their mode of living. Shortly after the virgins appeared, those whom the early Fathers called *asketi*, (ascetics), and whom the Latin Church calls confessors came on the scene. *Ascetic* is the Greek word corresponding to confessor from the Latin. They too, made profession of chastity and sometimes of poverty, and surprisingly people we would never know lived this kind of a consecrated life; for example, people like St. Cyprian. In the liturgy, the ascetics took rank before the virgins.

The historian Eusebius, in his *History of the Church*, written in the fourth century, mentions among the ascetics the greatest bishops of the early Church, for example St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Clement of Rome, St. Polycarp; people we usually do not think of as “religious”, in any intelligible sense in which that word could be used in those early ages, most likely were.

### **Austerity and Seclusion from the World**

By the fourth century, we find clear traces of the kind of life in which religious profession becomes, by degrees more developed and brought under a *Rule* with the life of the monks. The note that characterizes the monks, the first thing to recognize, is their seclusion from the world and their love of retirement. Until then virgins and ascetics had edified the world by keeping themselves pure in the midst of corruption and recollected in the midst of dissipation. The monks (and this includes nuns, as St. Ambrose letters indicate), endeavor to edify the world by avoiding and holding in contempt, as we might say, all that the world esteems. Thus the life of a solitary and the monk –they are not quite the same – was really a life of austerity and of retirement. Part of the austerity was retirement because most people, over the centuries till this day, like to talk. Retirement was intended as one means of practicing austerity. The world, which sent visitors to examine the life of these monks, was astonished at the heroism of their penance. I trust you got a few ideas from St. Anthony. Would you say that he was a mortified man?

### **The Early Fathers of the Desert**

The religious life took the form of a war against fallen human nature. Its goal was to achieve, and then witness to others, to a victory of grace over nature. And what wild human natures some of those early monks and nuns had! Then came the severe persecutions, one after another, the most severe was under Decius about 250 A.D. This persecution gave birth to the first great hermit of the desert, St. Paul of Thebes, sometimes called St. Paul the Anchorite, or again St. Paul of Egypt, and again St. Paul the Solitary: it's all the same Paul. Other Christians, too, sought refuge there in the desert from their tormentors. And some of the great writings of that period defend fleeing from persecution, not out of fear, but to imitate Christ. To imitate Christ who more than once escaped from the hands of His would-be assassins, not because He was afraid of them, but He wanted to live a little bit longer to proclaim the Gospel. The Desert Fathers also wished to continue proclaiming the gospel in words, but especially in deeds.

Sometime after Paul came St. Anthony, the dates, as by now you know are authentic, 251 to 356. Never let anyone tell you that austerity will shorten your life. At the age of twenty, he retired to the desert for a different reason; by reading and meditating on the event in the Gospels when the rich young man was called and did not follow the Master, Anthony decided to do what

the wealthy youth in Matthew's Gospel, had not done. He wanted to expiate. He went to the desert where he soon had disciples whom he formed into monastic villages. There they lived in clusters of like-minded men who were all seeking perfection as Christ promised and where they found encouragement from one another.

### **St. Pachomius – Founder of Cenobitic Religious Life**

At the same time that Anthony was loosely associating followers, there was St. Pachomius – another big name. He didn't live quite as long: 292 to 346. He died as a youngster! He also lived in Egypt and decided to bring all his monks under one roof and he is commonly credited with being the founder of *cenobitic* religious life, meaning community religious life. Although he wasn't really the first, his Rule has since affected all others, including every community he represented. His monasteries had large numbers of monks under one head. When he died he was virtually Superior of seven thousand monks, of whom thirteen hundred were in Tabennesi, that is one place, and two hundred to three hundred in smaller foundations.

### **The Structure of this Stage Religious Life**

First, there was the Abbot over all the monasteries. The word abbot comes from the word we have in the Gospels, *Abba*, which means Father.

Second, a subordinate superior which the Latin writers called *praepositus*, that means superior over an individual house.

And third was called the so-called leader - the Latin word is *hebdomedarius*, this is difficult to translate. *Hebdomeda* in Latin is week. Call him the weekly leader, who was appointed on a weekly basis. His job was to call the monks to prayer, lead the Office and relate directives to the monks and take complaints from the monks to the abbots. His was the least enviable of all these positions. That may be one reason why he was on for just a week. Maybe that's about as long as anyone could take it. Moreover, everyone got their chance. What a delightful technique!

### **The Priesthood and Religious Life**

The monks of Anthony and Pachomius were not priests. The priesthood in religious life is a much later innovation. This is a great moment. And as one who is both priest and religious, let me tell you, it is not an easy combination to preserve. I believe this is one of the main reasons why of all the men religious orders in the Catholic Church today, the hardest hit have been the Trappists. One of the problems was that once they became priests with all the education that

implies, and they wanted to engage then in apostolic work; people would come to them. They would want to go out and then what happens to the monastic-Cistercian life? This is very hard. There is the danger that I talk to others and then, like St. Paul feared, become myself a castaway because I haven't been enough with God! So, all the early monks who were what we would call religious, were not priests. Later, there were some that were ordained, but they were usually called in on Saturdays and Sundays for confessions, for the liturgy and for such counsel that only a priest presumably could give.

For example Origen, who lived in the year 240, talks about private confession to a priest among religious when he further notes that Pachomius was eminently successful with his organization in several ways. How?

First, in the large numbers of his dedicated followers, people just wanted to become hermits, and in time, though they were eremitical at first, became organized into communities.

Second; Pachomius is famous for making monasticism available to both men and women. Before his time, though, there had been virgins living in small groups but nothing on any large scale; and, least of all, you just did not send women to the desert. Pachomius felt, well, they can take it too. When he died there were nine Foundations of men and two of women.

Thirdly, Pachomius should be remembered for inspiring other leaders to follow his example and organize communities like his. Again in formulating a Rule, Pachomius was very practical, detailed and yet remarkably adjustable depending always – listen to this – on its interpretation by the Abbot.

### **The Rule of Pachomius: the Prototype for Monasticism**

I thought I would give you as your assigned reading the Rule of St. Pachomius. Pachomius' Rule became the prototype of Eastern and Western Monasticism. It influenced St. Basil in the East and St. Benedict in the West. And all of us are debtors, ultimately, to Pachomius.

Along with Pachomius in the West, was Basil in the East; his is the greatest name in Monasticism. After Pachomius and among the Easterners of course, there is nobody greater than Basil. His contribution was manifold and clearly distinguished the solitary and community religious life. He stressed the one great advantage of the latter, that is community life, namely the opportunity that living in a community affords for the practice of charity, as no religious who is sober and is in his or her right mind, doubts. You either practice charity or you don't survive in the community.



Moreover, while criticizing excessive mortification, he exhorted the Superior to reasonably moderate the external ascetic life. One reason that I wanted you to read Anthony was because Anthony was a law, you might say, to himself; and I suppose when you finish the reading, you are not too surprised that Anthony did not have the thousands of followers that, either Pachomius, or later on Basil had; because Anthony was a rugged saint.

### **St. Basil the Originator of the Aspirancy**

So Basil, with several centuries of followers like Anthony and Paul and Pachomius, well with him there is more balance, you might say, though we should not fault those early great heroes for they were living in rough times. And you may be sure the devil was very active, and Anthony was going to conquer the devil if it killed him! St. Basil also encouraged his monks to undertake the education of children. That is a great moment! And he was pleased when some of these children embraced the monastic life, yet he was careful to make sure they did so of their own accord. In case you haven't heard St. Basil was the originator of the Aspirancy, which I think is a very good idea. I really do! For example, he would not allow the freedom of a son or daughter to be restrained or somehow compelled because their parents wanted them to be religious. He wanted to make sure that his religious were such of their own accord. I believe the hope for future of religious life in countries like our own is to reassess and reestablish some aspect or form or adaptation of the Aspirancy. I speak as one who knows. In any case, with St. Basil, this was the universal practice for a thousand years until the Reformation. Then we went out in search of vocations, well now that's all right. You know what we've been doing, advertising. I'm not sure we always got the best who answered our ads. In any case, just an aside...

### **Augustine: Clerical Religious Life**

The fifth and last great name we should consider in the progress of religious life before St. Benedict was Augustine. Now I didn't think Augustine would mind if I gave you more from St. Ambrose than from St. Augustine to read because you know that Ambrose instructed and baptized Augustine, and every good pupil (and Augustine was a good pupil) always appreciates when his teacher is honored. The best single term to describe Augustine's contribution is to call it, in a good sense, "clericalization" of religious life. Augustine introduced priests into the religious life.

Religious life in the East had remained basically non-clerical; in fact almost to this day, most monks in the East are not priests. In the East religious life was integrated into the social and apostolic life of the Church but not in its priestly state. That is why the Society of Jesus which is mainly priests or priests-to-be that could never have been founded in the Orient. It was then, to

the credit of the West, that brought religious life to the priesthood. Or shall we say the priesthood to the religious life. The roots of this process are found early in the history of that life in the West. Eusebius of Vercelli, just so that we have some names, (and believe me I'm choosing out of scores of names), Eusebius of Vercelli lived about 360 A.D. organized the clerics of his Cathedral – he was Bishop – into the first recorded Clerical Monastery in history. You see what they did? They had priests working already as secular priests, but the bishop Eusebius decided it would be good for his diocese and good for the priests if they formed a religious order. A similar arrangement was made by St. Ambrose in Milan and by St. Paulinus in Nola; all three in Italy.

### **Augustine Organized His Clergy**

However, it was St. Augustine whose efforts had most influence on later generations. His own autobiography is not without importance here. As a priest in Tagaste, Africa, he organized a semi-monastic form of life. But that group was directed to intellectual studies and, if you please, to help with the completion of the education of his son. You know Augustine had lived a checkered life before he became a saint. He called his boy at least the one who is most famous, Adeodatus – given by God – of course he gave him the name after Augustine's own conversion. Later on as Augustine was instructed in the faith and ordained in Hippo, Africa, he again formed a group but this time it was directed to the formation of clerics as a Seminary. Finally as Bishop in the year 396, he organized the whole life of his clergy. I don't know if everybody in the Diocese of Hippo remained in the diocese or some begged to go elsewhere but he told them that he made a decision in the Lord; after a certain date all the priests will be religious. They probably said to each other, "Well where can we go?"

He organized the whole life of his clergy around him with three qualities.

1. Common life - they were to live together, no apartment house living.
2. Renunciation of property - there are plenty of poor people in Hippo for you priests to share your possessions with.
3. Obedience - needless to say, he left no doubt who was their Superior.

The purpose was mainly to direct the pastoral service of the priests rather than to theological activity. Before we leave Augustine we should note that there are two letters of St. Augustine one of which has become the standard for women's communities that follow in the Augustinian spirit. But Augustine never thought for a moment that these women would be

ordained. Augustine, therefore, really drafted two principal rules; one for men and the other for women.

### **Cassian and His Rule: Stability in the Monastic Life**

Side by side with this clerical monasticism, the West also had its proponents of monasticism as it was lived in the East, which is the older type, and was exemplified by a Rule of life fostered by such men as St. Martin of Tours, John Cassian of Marseilles, also in France, St. Caesarius of Aries, also in France. Of these, John Cassian was the most important because he bequeathed in his writings his own distillation of the eastern form of monasticism; it was the rule of Cassian that gave the idea of stability to monastic life. Later on Benedict would adopt the idea of stability and make it one of the principal features of monasticism.

### **The Principal Characteristics**

Necessarily I have touched only on the highlights of that very early structured religious life. I thought this better than going into more historical detail. I will try to synthesize a lot of material classified under certain main headings, all typifying religious life before Benedict.

First feature - Purpose of Religious Life. The life of the monks and nuns was much more systemized than that of the earlier versions – its immediate goal was sanctification of the religious, contemplation through prayer, and victory over the flesh through mortification where it was bound to lead to holiness.

There are three p's that typify this purpose: prayer and penance leads to perfection. The monks did not aspire to the priesthood. In fact, they desired not to be ordained even when as under Augustine some clerics were formed into monastic communities. It was rather, priests who became religious and not religious who became priests. This dialectic between the priesthood and the religious state would remain throughout the centuries as a source of tension and difficulty, but also of development even to the present day. So much for purpose: the primary purpose was perfection. The principal means were prayer and penance.

Second - Obedience. As good Christians these early religious vowed obedience, of course, to their bishop in religious matters. And their profession, if rightly lived, made prompt and complete submission easy. But religious obedience, as the Church conceives it, was associated only with community or cenobitic life. It is community life that calls for religious obedience. The ramifications and interpenetrations of these two – community and obedience – are manifold, just

to state the fact. Depending therefore on how communal the monastic life was, religious obedience took its form and made its commands accordingly.

Third - Poverty. At the time of which we are speaking, poverty consisted in the renunciation of worldly goods, in the most sparing years of food, clothing and all necessaries. The model of religious life before Benedict was expressed in this phrase: no luxuries and mortification in necessities which is not a bad thing to remember. All I can tell you is those who have the vocation like it rough and don't like it when they find it too easy. They say there is something wrong, and their instincts are right. We don't make religious life hard for the sake of making it hard, but why become a religious unless you give something up?

Moreover, the cenobites as they were called, the monks and nuns living in communities were forbidden to enjoy any separate (i.e. individual or personal) property. Absolute dispossession was the common law in the Church up to the Reformation. There were no simple vows of poverty. You either gave everything up or you were not a religious. They had to receive from their Superior or Procurator, as he or she was called, everything they needed for their use. Now there were abuses, but we are talking about the religious life that survived and whose rules have endured to the modern times.

Fourth - Chastity. Celibacy was an assumed prerequisite for the monastic life. Yet, as in the case of Augustine, this did not mean that persons who had not lived chaste lives before could not be religious. A consoling thought! Moreover, provision was made for widows and widowers, also for married persons who having provided for their spouse and children might give themselves to the religious life, living henceforth in celibacy. Marriage for a monk or a nun, once they had left the world, was simply unthinkable.

Fifth - Vows. Having once entered the life of a virgin, or that of an ascetic or monk or nun, the person felt a clear obligation to persevere. Always, from the earliest stages of religious life (and this passage keeps recurring in the literature of those days), was the warning of Christ: "No man putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62) There are passages about virgins in the writings of Tertullian and St. Cyprian that may be interpreted as their having taken authentic vows. Moreover, it was certain that a woman who had bound herself to Jesus Christ by a profession of virginity was liable to severe canonical penalties. You either did not make the promise or if you did, you were punished if you broke it. St. Cyprian regarded such a person as an adulterous bride, but after having absolved her, he allowed such a one to enter marriage if, as he said, she could not keep continency. Just for the historical record, the earliest canonical decree, which we know on the subject of vows was that of Pope St. Siricius, writing to a certain bishop in 385 A.D., it brands as infamy the carnal intercourse

of any monk or virgin. The oldest complete vow formula that we have of a religious, the kind of vow they took, is found in Egypt about the year 400, in one of the monasteries founded by Pachomius. Here is a portion of the extant text:

“I swear before God in His Holy Temple in which the word I have spoken is my witness, that I will not defile my body in any way. I will not steal. I will not bear false witness. I will not lie. I will not do wrong in secret. If I break my oath I am willing not to enter the Kingdom of Heaven although I were in sight of it, God before whom I have made this Covenant will then destroy my body and soul in Hell for I should have broken the oath of allegiance that I have taken.” Then an addition: “as for contradiction, disobedience, murmuring, contention, obstinacy or any such things these faults are quite manifest to the whole community.”

The rest of the text is missing but it seems that the community will take care of me if I am obstinate or contradictory, or disobedient or contumacious, since everybody will see it, and they can take care of me. So much for the vow; we don't have the full text but there is enough there to indicate that it was meant to be taken for life and the penalties were severe.

Sixth - Canon Law. Almost as soon as the Church was liberated by Constantine in 315 A.D., the hierarchy began to enact formal legislation for religious. The first known Church law for religious is from the Council of Gangra, of 330 A.D. Gangra is in Asia Minor. It was addressed to three classes of persons, namely virgins; as well as those who were continent but not virgins, that is, the married or widowed or otherwise; and third, those who retire from worldly affairs to practice more faithfully the duties of piety towards their parents, children, husband or wife, so as to avoid all vanity and pride. Now, this is very interesting and I think an important feature of that early religious life: that people would be formed into a religious community to take care of their parents, or their children, or husband, or wife. In other words, some were able to enter a community mainly because their of age, or the inability to leave an immediate duty which they had, there were special groups formed of people who wanted to take care of their aged parents.

### **Decisions of Church Councils**

There were two important decisions of Church Councils long before St. Benedict paved the way for other essential features of community life. First, the general Council of Chalcedon, date 451, made the erection of a monastery depend on the consent of a bishop. Let's remember that, no community in the Catholic Church exists without the approval of the hierarchy; the date for that legislation is 451 A.D. Even though we Jesuits, who are exempt from direct Episcopal

control, we simply do not enter a diocese unless we are invited by the Bishop. And we stay there only as long as he wants us.

And the second was a series of Councils mainly in France in the fifth century legislating perseverance in the religious state. In other words, already fifteen centuries ago, the Church felt She should make laws, general laws for religious, besides their own specific laws which are approved by the Church for that community.

### **Two Levels of Legislation for Religious Institutes**

So we have two levels of legislation: first, legislation for the community, by the community and within the community always to be approved by the Church, that means the Church's hierarchy; this is the proper law if the institute. Second, general legislation applying to all religious. The proposed revision of Canon Law is not to touch the internal government of each institute, that is not the intent of the Code. The proposed revision of Canon Law is the general laws of the Church affecting all communities. This is why I have been so insistent and urging chapters of religious institutes to make sure that their own proper laws are clear, specific, and sufficiently detailed; that whatever the new provision for the whole Church will be, they will not find themselves in the impossible position of depending on the universal law for survival.

### **Four Basic Rules from which All Religious Communities Derive**

By this time in the history of religious life, what can we call the basic rules of religious life? In the transition we are going to deal with highly organized religious life, starting with Benedict. I think it would be well to recognize that historically the Church speaks of four basic Rules from which all religious communities in the Catholic Church now derive. They are: the Rule of St. Basil, his dates are 329 to 379; the Rule of St. Augustine, his life span is from 354 to 430; the Rule of St. Benedict, his life span is from 480 to 543, and the Rule of St. Francis, and I will give you the date of the first Rule of Francis approved by the Church, 1223. Accordingly, there are two Rules, that of Basil and Augustine which, so far, have deserved our special attention, and there will be the two large Rules of Benedict and Francis that we shall see. And besides those four so many others including, I trust, something for everyone here in class, including something about the Society of Jesus.

[Editor's note]: besides the four basic Rules just mentioned, there is a fifth Rule, that of St. Albert of Jerusalem given to the early hermits of Mount Carmel around the year 1209, which is followed by the members of the Carmelite Order.



## Conference 7

### Augustine: Single Greatest Genius in the History of the Church



#### St. Augustine's and the Religious Life

The subject of this conference is the contributions of St. Augustine to the doctrinal principles and community structure of Religious Life. The best way to approach St. Augustine's doctrinal teaching is to look at the principal heresies that he had to combat during his day. To understand those errors is to understand Augustine, because—and he was in fact the one who expressed this truth—God permits evil in order that greater good will somehow come out of it. Likewise, God permits error that a deeper understanding of the truth might be one of the fruits of the error. Augustine, by all odds, is the single greatest genius in the history of the Catholic Church. St. Paul, of course, as an Apostle, towers above everybody except Christ Himself (but then, Paul is in a class by himself). Among the post-Apostolic giants of Christian religion, none compare with Augustine.

All of us, in greater or lesser measure, are familiar with the life of Augustine. It comes in several stages. He was born of a Christian mother and a pagan father, and until the age of thirty-three he lived, as he admits, a very sordid—even godless—life. He had been for nine of those thirty years a Manichean. The two main reasons for his conversion, as he himself testifies: the prayers and tears of his mother Monica, and the patience and wisdom of Ambrose. His mother saw him converted and died shortly before he became, or began to become, the great man we know. Augustine's writings are numerous and extensive. I suppose the best known of his works is his *Confessions*. Everyone should read certain books in his or her lifetime – this is one of them. His most important work is the *City of God* – that too should be read. It is much harder reading, especially the first third of it, but his wisdom is pretty well synthesized in those two works. There are several hundred of his letters, there are some two-score volumes, and there are many pseudo-Augustinian works (writings that are purportedly by Augustine). Maybe parts of them are by him, but others are by someone else. Augustine, I suppose, is the most plagiarized man in history.

### **Three Principal Errors and Doctrinal Principles**

What were the principal errors that Augustine fought, and as the consequence of which gave us the doctrine that ever since has become the foundation of Christianity itself, not to say Religious Life? The three principal errors were Donatism, Manichaeism, and Pelagianism. Many of Augustine's writings are called anti-Donatist, anti-Manichaean, and anti-Pelagian. Those are the three main divisions of his writings. Now his sermons were different, because they were given to the faithful in light of the errors he was combating. There are also many commentaries on the Scriptures that Augustine has left us. There is a difference, however, between the commentaries on Scripture and his letters. By and large, the commentaries were heard by his audience and then taken down, more or less faithful to his thoughts; whereas, Augustine himself wrote or dictated his letters, and also his treatises. So the sharpest and clearest thought is found in his written treatises.

In each of these three errors, what do we find that Augustine thought of as especially relative to Religious Life?

#### **First Major Heresy - Donatism**

The schism, and later on the heresy, of Donatism arose as a result of the persecutions in the early Church. We rightly glory and are proud of the numerous martyrs that the Church had for the first three hundred years. All the popes were martyrs, and no doubt one reason why we have had no non-Italian popes for the last 450 years is because the last non-Italian pope was assassinated (not common knowledge). In any case, martyrdom is the glory of the Church, but along with the martyrs there also were many apostates.

The problem that gave rise to the error of Donatism was a very human, but tragic, problem. As the persecutions raged, some Christians, in fact many of them, gave up their Faith. This could be done in a variety of ways. For example, one way was to turn over the sacred writings that the Christians would have; another way would be to step on the Cross or pronounce a blasphemous phrase towards Christ; or one could sacrifice infants to one of the idols. In any case, out of fear of death or imprisonment many apostatized.

These persecutions came and went. One result was that after the persecution would let up, those who had given up their Faith often wanted to come back. So what would happen in the case of an apostate bishop? The bishop would apostatize, repent, and want to go back to practicing his Episcopal Office. Some of the bishops would say, "Sorry, once you apostatized you lost everything, including the sacramental seal of Baptism, Confirmation, and in the case of a



priest, the priestly character. You may practice a long period of penance and then maybe be re-baptized, re-confirmed, and re-ordained.” And that in a nutshell is the heresy of Donatism. The name comes from a Bishop Donatus, who apostatized and became the object of this kind of controversy in North Africa.

Augustine fought against Donatism, and in the process he helped develop the Church’s understanding of who belongs to the Church. In effect, the Donatists were saying that the Church Christ founded is a Church exclusively of saints. They were saying that when you sin, say, by apostasy or other grave crimes, you cease to be Christian. And then in some places, depending on the part of the Church, there was almost no re-instatement possible. In other cases, there could be repentance, perhaps, at the moment of death. Clearly, that is not the Church that we know today. Some are now scandalized at the Church’s patience with sinners in going, if you wish, to the other extreme. Look at all the sinners we have here; why do we not clean up the Church? That is a good idea, but the Church has learned a lot over the centuries—and one thing that She now knows, thanks in large measure to Augustine’s genius, is that as Christ foretold, there would be in this Church both “good fish” and “bad fish” (remember the parable). As we also know, at the end of the world there will be the sheep and the goats. Throughout the Gospel, Christ could not have made it plainer that His Church is indeed the Church of potential saints, but also of a lot of actual sinners.

When the chips were down and Augustine had to defend the Church as a Church of both the holy and the unholy, he saw that those who stood in judgment of their fellow Christians were often not so holy themselves. This was, in fact, one of the arguments that he used against Donatism: “who is calling whom a sinner?”

### **Significance for Religious**

What is the significance of the Church’s teaching in the controversy of Donatism (teaching led by Augustine) for us as Religious? There are several levels of significance.

First, because of that controversy, the Church now teaches with unmistakable clarity that admission to a Sacrament or administration of a Sacrament does not depend on the holiness of the one who administers. It was Augustine who coined that beautiful phrase, “When John baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes. When Peter baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes. When Judas baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes.” The Sacraments we receive, the Masses we attend— provided the one administering the sacrament or offering Mass has the power and the minimal intention to do what Christ wants—we get all the benefits. That is not unimportant, because the efficacy of the whole Sacramental system was at stake in the Donatist controversy.

Secondly, as Augustine made so much effort to make plain, we believe on Christ's own testament that He came to call sinners to repentance. The very hope for sanctity presumes that the one who wants to become a saint, is a sinner! And what is most comforting (and I do not think I will be as clear as I should be in the few minutes I will spend on this subject) is this ever practically important advice from Augustine: "Progress in holiness is progress against our sinful drives and passions."

How do you become a saint? Oh, that is easy! Cope with your sins. And you can almost predict the kind of a saint that God wants you to be. That is easy. Take the list of seven capital sins. Which one is predominant? That is usually it. And in case we do not know, ask somebody you live with, they will tell you. Congenital laziness—personification of indolence, nice, sweet, but lazy. Or a trigger temper—whenever you want something; you never tell her to do anything; to protect yourself, you use a mediator. The sins to which we are most prone are the index of the virtues that God wants us to specialize in. So that the Church is a Church of sinners who are striving to become saints. I cannot tell you how consoling that is! Because you say to yourself, well, gosh I really belong to the Church! I really do, because I qualify.

A third profound insight Augustine brought out in his volumes of controversy with Donatism, is that the efficacy of grace depends mainly on Christ. He teaches that if it was left up to us, none of us could even aspire to be saved, let alone to be a saint. And he argues that God actually wants to be glorified by sanctifying the most unlikely scoundrels, so that to Him alone might be the glory. And here Augustine knew—he had no illusions about his own strength of character, none whatever: *reliance on Christ*

## **Second Major Heresy - Manichaeism**

The second major heresy that Augustine fought against in so many volumes was Manichaeism. Manichaeism originated with Manichaeus, an Oriental (from Asia Minor) who became a Christian. After becoming a Christian he decided that what he had been taught was less than true. It is not clear just how much Manichaeus himself held, and how much of what is now called Manichaeism was the result of his followers' speculations. In any case, by Augustine's time it was plain enough that, according to the Manichaeans, the only way to explain evil in the universe is to postulate two gods: a good god who is the originator and the provider of everything good, and an evil god who is the perpetrator of everything bad.

As the Manichaeans held, how could you postulate one god and yet admit there is evil in the world? Either that evil (and this is a famous Manichaean dilemma) is illusory or it is real; and all the evidence indicates it is not an illusion. It is real—moral evil, physical evil, sin, treachery,

crime, and suffering. If this evil is real, they defied the Christians to show how one good God could be responsible for this evil. And, speaking in 1978, let no one tell you that you can shrug that objection off by a smile. In fact, as I have told my students for over twenty years, there is no more incisive objection that the human mind can conceive, because it touches on the deepest mystery on earth—the mystery of evil.

Augustine, having been a Manichaean for nine years, understood the system well. It took a long time for him to see both the errors of Manichaeism and his own particular errors. What he discovered is very valuable for us Religious (or, with God's will, Religious-to-be), because what does the Manichaean explanation of evil, especially moral evil, say about sin? As Augustine realized, it says in so many words that all evil is due to a god, an evil deity outside of you. "How convenient," this is Augustine, "how useful," because then no matter what you do, it is not really you doing it. Augustine was wallowing deep in his lechery when it dawned on him "that the same Augustine who is sinning had the willpower (with God's grace) not to sin; that was a new discovery." Augustine is a great champion of human freedom, of man's ability to make what he wants of his life. Francis de Sales, a great admirer of Augustine, asked, "Why are there so few saints, comparatively speaking? Very simple, very simple! It is not because more people do not get the grace. It is because more people do not use their willpower."

In other words, the Manichaean heresy is an expression of what in philosophy we call "determinism," the idea that we are determined, or pre-determined, according to you-name-it-what. The modern form of determinism is heredity, environment, and education. So billions are being spent because of this illusory hypothesis that virtue is in the suburbs and vice is in the slums; that, provided people are born of virtuous parents, they will be virtuous too. Not true, eh? Provided people are properly educated in knowing what is right and what is true, will they infallibly turn out good? Not so. Provided people live among good people, holy people, nice people, virtuous people, will they be nice and good and holy too? All heredity, education, and environment, strongly favoring practice, of course. It is just latter-day Manichaeism. Millions of Americans could not spell the word "Manichaeism" or "Manichaean," but I believe this is the most common heresy in the western world today. Few people have the willpower even to make a decision. I do not say a life-long decision, just a decision! Or to make up their own minds, they are constantly feeding their minds from the outside. Consequently, the Church's teaching on free will and its power is in large measure due to the impetus that Augustine gave it in the conflict with Manichaeism.

### **Third Major Heresy - Pelagianism**

Third, the heresy of Pelagianism. Pelagianism is the one major heresy that Great Britain, specifically the English, can take for credit. Pelagius was a British monk who made the mistake of leaving England and traveling. As I have told so many people, unless you have the grace, do not travel, because you will be exposed to many whims. Pelagius was. He saw some very misbehaving people, especially bishops, priests, and Religious. He was scandalized, and if you can imagine one heresy being the opposite of another, Pelagianism is the opposite of Manichaeism. Pelagius said, "I do not have the trouble that that misbehaving bishop or monk or nun is having. I know the problem: they are not using their willpower. That is it." And in time, he went around thinking, preaching, and gaining a following. In time he came to deny the need of any grace from God. All you need is a strong backbone, enough willpower. For Pelagius, who are the saints? The Titans of willpower. Who are the sinners? Those who have a weak will.

When Augustine heard about Pelagius, he could not believe it. It cannot be! Augustine, by that time, knew what kind of willpower he had. He thought, at first, the man must be joking; he could not be serious. When he found out so many were following Pelagius, he decided to speak against him. It finally dawned on Augustine that Pelagius was a real heresiarch, that is, an arch-heretic, a heretic who makes other heretics. You know the qualities of a good, effective heretic? That was Pelagius. He was smart. He spoke and wrote well. He was ascetical. Contemporaries say he was skin and bones. He ate very little. He fasted a lot. He was the picture, if you please, of sanctity, so in time, he misled millions. We do not know how many years the heresy lasted, but it raged four centuries and has infected the Church and parts of Christianity ever since. Here Augustine was at his best, because here he could be very autobiographical. He seldom resorted to sarcasm, but with Pelagius he did. Augustine explained, as he knew from experience, that without God's grace we can do nothing in the supernatural order. Not even a single supernatural act can be performed without divine grace, as Christ made plain in one of the most important texts in Revelation, 15:5 of John. Guess what it says? Without me, you can do nothing! *There is no supernatural good without divine grace.*

Pelagianism forced the Church to clarify, through the genius of Augustine, its position on the two lives that we live: the natural life and the supernatural life; the life of nature with which we are born, and the life of grace that we must be given. Out of the conflict with Pelagianism, Augustine covered the gamut of the Church's theology of grace. Grace is divine life, grace is invitation. Grace is the remedy –oh, how Augustine emphasized that—the remedy for our fallen, sinful nature.

Some of Augustine's statements in his anti-Pelagian writings are so outspoken in describing man's inability to do any good that centuries later he was picked up by John Calvin. And then, if one could suffer in heaven, what anguish it would it have caused Augustine to see himself used by Calvin as the foundation for predestination, for the idea that man's nature is totally depraved. Augustine never really meant that. Before he died, he published a whole book of *Retractations*—basically, “things I said that I should not have said, and that I want people to really understand before I die.” Many of the passages of the *Retractations* are former passages of Augustine in which he says what a *massa damnata* human nature is. That is one of Augustine's famous phrases. There is no other translation in English for *damnata*; it means ‘damned.’ And then you can translate *massa* in different ways, so I sometimes translate it ‘mess.’ “Human nature is”—I am quoting Augustine—“a damned mess.” Augustine therefore, from years of sinful living, had no weird idea or illusion about what human nature is apart from Christ. That is what it is. What he did not mean, and he made sure before he died that nobody misconstrued him, was that we are so utterly depraved that we cannot, for example, exercise any more willpower. He did not mean that. He did mean, however, that we can do no supernatural good without grace. And we can, surely, acquire no virtue without grace.

As a consequence, Augustine is the great *doctor gratiae*, the “teacher of grace.” No one has spoken more eloquently about the absolute indispensability of grace if we want to do any supernatural good or aspire to sanctity. He is also the *doctor orationes*, the “teacher of prayer.” Augustine's passages on the necessity of prayer are among the most beautiful in Christian literature. I thank him for teaching that there is no salvation without grace and no grace beyond what God gave us, and that without prayer we lose even what God gave us. Prayer is the key to retaining and growing in that without which no one sees the face of God. So much for his doctrine.

### **On Community Structure of Religious Life**

Let me just say a few words before we go on to Benedict. First, I trust you had a chance to read the Rule of St. Augustine. It is the standard Rule that is now followed by every Augustinian, as well as by certain Religious Orders and Congregations that are based on the Augustinian principle. There are really two Rules of St. Augustine, one for men and one for women. By now, however, each Rule has influenced the other, and what goes as the Rule of St. Augustine is not necessarily that which originally left his hand (unlike the Rule of Benedict, which is Benedict, period). The one for men was drafted for Augustine's own clergy. Even before becoming bishop, but also later on as Bishop of Hippo, Augustine decided to organize his priests and priests-to-be in what we would now call a Religious Community. I suppose the men of the

diocese had the option of going to another diocese if they did not want to become Religious or monks. In any case, that is the masculine Rule.

### **Augustine and the Clericalization of Religious Life**

What Augustine had done for Religious Life was make Religious out of clerics. Augustine clericalized Religious Life. Of course, that does not mean, even to this day, that most Religious are priests. It is not the case among men Religious, which may surprise you. Most Trappists in the world are not priests, just to mention one type of monastic living. However, the idea of priests being Religious and living a Religious Life as priests was from Augustine.

### **Asceticism of the Will: Obedience to Rule**

There is also a Rule that Augustine drew up for women in his own diocese, which has become a standard for women Religious in the Catholic Church. The group was essentially contemplative, as were some men's groups and all women's groups in the early Church. As far as structure goes, Augustine recognized the importance of not denying the necessity of free will, and therefore of freedom, in a person's becoming a Religious in the first place. And he knew he wanted freedom, but not so much in ascetical practices. Augustine was not so strong on asceticism commonly understood. He was, however, very strong in urging asceticism of the will, that is, obedience to Rule. In fact, just to have a Rule of life is already to be a Religious, for Augustine. And there is a norm called a *regula*, which is simply the Latin word for 'rule,' from which our English words 'regulate' and 'regular' are derived.

The asceticism of really conforming myself to a pre-conceived plan approved by the Church—in Augustine's case by the bishop, which he was—serves all kinds of purposes. First, it requires that I sacrifice my own desires in order to conform to the Rule.

The last thing you might want to do at a particular time is to go to eat. The bell rings, but you are not hungry. That is not the point. But I am not hungry! So what? You go to eat. Or the last thing you might be in the mood to do is pray – you want to do something else. So, sacrifice of one's own preferences and desires.

Secondly, charity is fostered by regular living. Notice how we have changed the meaning of "regular." It has the idea of periodicity, right? That is not the real meaning of "regular." Actually, it means 'according to rule,' or 'according to a pre-conceived and pre-determined norm.' Each has to defer somehow to the other. And above all, a Rule fosters unity. The Rules of Augustine for men and for women have both affected all Religious Life since, with one

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observation: there was a mildness, a lack of severity in Augustine's understanding of Religious Life. His idea of it stood in stark contrast with, say, the Rule of Pachomius, also used in Africa (remember, Hippo was in Africa). Augustine realized that the most important sacrifice a human being can make to God is not of the body (although that too should be sacrificed) but of the spirit of both mind and will.

