Religious Vows and the Trinitarian Faith
Religious Vows and the Trinitarian Faith:  
A Theological Synthesis

I. Introduction: A Closer Look at the Vows

The evangelical counsels of poverty, celibate chastity and obedience have been traditionally identified as “counsels of perfection.”¹ The profession of these counsels in the form of vows characterizes a life more intimately consecrated to God.² However, popular notions of religious life carry a rather legalist connotation. It is often seen only as a life of strict observance. When sharing about religious life with others, the vowed person almost always gets asked about what he or she can’t do. The vows are commonly understood as “boundaries for personal, communal and moral behavior within which the person is expected to live.”³ And when a professed religious goes beyond these boundaries the person incurs the corresponding censure or if merited, expulsion from the order or congregation.⁴ Conversely, the religious who perseveres tends to be looked at as a moral exemplar of heroic virtue, some kind of “religious virtuoso,” an expert in religion or spirituality.⁵

What these commonplace notions seem to highlight is the distinctiveness of religious life as the way to “greater” perfection as opposed to “ordinary” lay life. Inadvertently, the focus becomes the religious himself or herself, his or her moral ascendancy and spiritual superiority. However, as conciliar and synodal documents remind us, religious men and women are called to live the counsels in such a way as to make visible “the characteristic features of Jesus.”⁶ Like the icons of Eastern Christianity, the life of vowed persons ought to direct the eyes of the faithful towards a deeper mystery: the mystery of the Kingdom of God at work in history, “the surpassing greatness of the force of Christ the King and the boundless power of the Holy Spirit present in the world.”⁷ The three vows are meant to be signs⁸ pointing to a greater and deeper reality. They are not ends in
themselves, as though they were goal-states to be achieved for their own sake to gain heavenly merit. They are more than a simple renunciation, but “a specific acceptance of the mystery of Christ, lived within the Church.”

They are meant foremost to mirror Jesus, “the poor, chaste and obedient One.” And as Christ himself is the image of the invisible God, the vows also manifest in some way what God has revealed about Godself and God’s plan.

The main thesis of this paper is that the evangelical counsels open us to perceive various dimensions of our Trinitarian faith. This resonates with what Pope John Paul II declared in the document *Vita Consecrata*: “By practicing the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person lives with particular intensity the Trinitarian and Christological dimension which marks the whole of Christian life.”

*Given its nature as a theological synthesis, this paper makes use of the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as its primary optic in meaningfully weaving together some of the main themes of the Christian message.*

II. Poverty and Divine Self-Gift

The evangelical counsel of *poverty* proclaims above all that God is our only treasure. It springs from “the realization of the givenness of all things – that is, an acute awareness of all God has given us at our own core levels.” Just by being mindful of our lived experience, we realize that our life is full of “givens” over which we have no choice or control. This is poverty of the existential kind. It jolts us to realize that we did not *will* ourselves to exist, and yet we are here and we experience life, beauty, joy, wonder. Paradoxically, in acknowledging our poverty we realize that we are also recipients of marvelous things. Confronted by this awesome paradox, we are led to ask: “Where do these come from?” or “What is the meaning and purpose of all of this?” Sure enough, there are people in the world today whose answer is simply an appeal to the randomness of all that is. The Christian dispensation however offers a coherent, deeply meaningful and ultimately
life-affirming response. Our faith affirms that "the most perfect answer to these questionings can be found in God alone..."\textsuperscript{15}

The vow of poverty then is more than self-deprivation. It is the concrete acknowledgment of our dependence on God who is the source and end of all. It is a free decision to live as a witness to the unfathomable generosity of our God who gives. And what God gives is nothing less than God's very Self and His divine life. At the heart of the Christian faith is the conviction that God, in His goodness and wisdom, reveals Himself to us and makes known the mystery of His will which is to make us sharers in His divine nature.\textsuperscript{16} This self-revelation of God is realized by God's words and action unfolding through time. And in what can only be taken as consideration for the poverty of our created nature, God carries out this communication of Himself in a gradual fashion, preparing humankind to welcome God through various stages of revelation.\textsuperscript{17}

Christian faith affirms that God reveals Himself to us first of all through creation.\textsuperscript{18} The Psalms are replete with attestations of this. We believe that God created the world out of His own free will, not as a product of necessity or chance.\textsuperscript{19} God creates freely "out of nothing".\textsuperscript{20} At the same time, we affirm that God did not create "once and for all" as if all created reality "sprang forth complete from the hands of the Creator." As our catechism declares, "the universe was created 'in a state of journeying' toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained."\textsuperscript{21} By His Providence, God continues to sustain and govern all things, guiding them toward this perfection,\textsuperscript{22} without which everything would come to naught. In all of this, human beings hold a special place, and once more we glimpse the poverty-wealth paradox of the human state, for God has given us a share in His own creative activity\textsuperscript{23} through the exercise of our freedom and human capacities.\textsuperscript{24}

This conviction regarding God's goodness and generous providence in turn brings to the fore the unavoidable question of evil: "If God is good and cares for all creation, why then the presence of evil in the world?" And while acknowledging that the depth of evil can never be totally fathomed, Christianity nevertheless offers a response, particularly when confronted with moral evil:
humankind has not remained true to God's original intent. The Genesis accounts figuratively portray this. Upon the promptings of the fallen spiritual being who freely rejected God, our first parents learned to mistrust God and disobey Him. They were tempted to reject creaturely poverty and aspire to be like God. This constituted the "first sin" leading to the loss of harmony in creation and the consequence of death.\(^25\) Subsequently, the whole world has been "virtually inundated by sin"; moral evil entered the world and human beings lost their original state of holiness.\(^26\) Because of this, creation is held bondage to destruction, decay and death. Human beings have no power to counteract this. Our poverty is made even more acute by this incapacity to save ourselves.

Yet again, this poverty occasions for us a chance to receive a further gift. God did not allow His purpose of uniting all creation to Himself to be thwarted. As Saint Paul writes, "Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more".\(^27\) God did not abandon humankind in spite of our infidelity. On the contrary, God calls human beings and "in a mysterious way heralds the coming victory over evil and his restoration from the fall."\(^28\) The line from the Easter Vigil Exultet resoundingly proclaims, "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam which gained for us so great a Redeemer!".\(^29\) Humankind may have wounded the bond with God by disobeying Him, but as the Protoevangelium from the book of Genesis prefigured, One will come who will live in utmost poverty in order to make us infinitely rich. And his coming will restore the relationship between God and humankind.

III. Celibate Chastity and Divine Intimacy

*Relationship* is what lies at the heart of celibate chastity, contrary to the simplistic understanding of the vow. "The core truth for celibate living is not the denial of sexuality or the suspension of marital and procreative love; these are merely the consequences of a calling which has the primary task of exploring intimacy in its deepest, life-giving potential."\(^30\) Intimacy, or the experience of union or oneness with another,\(^31\) is a basic human need. Once again, the Christian
faith offers a deeply meaningful understanding of an essential human reality: our tendency towards relationship. We are made in the image and likeness of God and this implies relationality. After all, the central mystery of the Christian faith is our belief in one God who is Three Persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — three relations subsisting in one divine nature, three co-eternal, co-equal persons in perpetual fellowship and communion with one another. To be created in the image of God then means first of all that human beings cannot be closed in on themselves. We share an essential relational characteristic.

More importantly, Pope Benedict XVI points out, this relational dynamic is what impels the human being toward God. As intuited by Saint Augustine, our hearts are forever restless until they rest in God. We are beings of dialogue; that is, what makes us humans is that “we are called to be partners of God in a dialogue that begins when we are created….Dialogue is at the center in God’s loving work and saving us.” God’s revelation was never merely a matter of information but relation. “Through this revelation, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.” And by revealing Himself, God wishes to make us capable of responding to him, and of knowing him and of loving him far beyond our own natural capacity.

In the divine pedagogy of revelation, what came after creation was covenant. As attested to in Scripture, humankind’s history of salvation is a record of how God enters into a special relationship with His chosen people Israel which he delivered from slavery in Egypt. God performed great works for His people and proclaimed their redemption through the words of the prophets. Then God, “after speaking in many and varied ways through the prophets,” revealed himself through His Son His perfect and unsurpassable Word. “Our dialogue with God…becomes human in Christ, in whom God speaks to us as human.” In Him, God has said everything, God has revealed His very Self. To see Jesus is to see the Father. The Incarnated Son became the mediator par excellence in a new covenant between God and humankind. Jesus Christ embodied
and achieved the intimate union between divinity and humanity in a most radical way: He is true God and true man. The Church had to struggle through controversies and conflict in order to proclaim this with utmost conviction but on this truth rests the unprecedented value of the Christian message.

Because Jesus was truly human, he could show us through his earthly life and ministry what it truly means to be human; that is, to be given in love and compassionate service for others. And because he is also truly God, the Son who is in intimate union with the Father, He is also the One who can carry out perfect worship of the Father. He did this through his single-hearted love and fidelity which culminated in his dying on the cross. In a way that the animal sacrifices of old could never achieve, Jesus’ own sacrifice, undertaken freely, absorbed “the filth of the world”, wiped it out and transformed it in the pain of infinite love. And in doing so He opened for us the way to be intimately united with the Father as adopted sons and daughters through grace. In Jesus, “the Son becomes man and in his body bears the whole of humanity back to God.” He is the New Adam, come to undo the damage incurred by the Old Adam and restore the broken relationship between God and humankind. And far from being the ransom to appease an angry deity, Jesus’ paschal sacrifice is the sacrifice of God Himself, who is willing to go to such lengths to call humankind once more to intimacy with Him. This is the truth we make present again and again in the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The vow of celibate chastity is yet another profound sign of the desire to hear and heed this call toward single-hearted intimacy.

IV. Obedience and Divine Mission

Hearing is essential as well in the vow of obedience, which comes from ob-audire, the Latin word meaning “to hear” or “to listen attentively.” It stands to reason then that the vow of obedience ought to count for more than just the concern with following rules. Rather, it is the movement towards opening oneself to listen to (that is, to know) God’s will and do it. This of course
became manifest for us in Christ, the Son whose food was to do the Father’s will and who was sent into the world to draw humankind back to God. Subsequently, the Holy Spirit was also sent to carry on Christ’s saving work in the world. A fuller understanding of obedience therefore links it with the sense of mission (“to send” in Latin is missio or missionem) in the light of God’s own mission.

For all the faithful, the obedience of faith, whereby one commits one’s whole self freely to God in submitting one’s intellect and will, is the fitting response to all that God has revealed. For the professed religious, the vow of obedience is the distinctly public commitment to offer one’s availability to serve the mission of this same Church, as expressed in a particular charism or community. The religious state is not part of the hierarchical structure of the Church. Neither is it an intermediate state between the clerical and lay state. Nevertheless, the religious is called from either the clerical or the lay state in order to “be of some advantage to the salvific mission of the Church.” Authentic religious obedience involves subjecting oneself in charity and faith to one’s superiors, but more importantly, it also entails co-responsibility in discernment, the active participation in seeking out the movement of the Holy Spirit, who is the “principal agent of the whole of the Church’s mission.”

In his earthly life, Jesus appointed the Apostles’ ministry and promised that He would send them the Holy Spirit to empower them in truth. Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus sent them out into the world as he had been sent by the Father, commanding them, “Go and make disciples of all nations....” And indeed on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples to remain with them forever. This event constituted the Church, which at that moment was “openly displayed to the crowds and the spread of the Gospel among the nations was begun.” From then and “throughout all ages, the Holy Spirit makes the entire Church one in communion and in ministering; He equips her with various gifts of hierarchical and charismatic nature, giving-life,
soul-like to ecclesiastical institutions and instilling into the hearts of the faithful the same mission spirit which impelled Christ Himself.  

The Church then strives to bring to completion the joint mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the mission that endeavors to bring Christ's faithful to share in his communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit. It is to the Church that the transmission and interpretation of what God has revealed is entrusted, drawing on Sacred Scripture, which is God's speech put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit, and Sacred Tradition, referring to the entirety of the heritage of faith passed on from the Apostles to their successors to this day. It is through the sacraments of the Church that the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ. And it is the Church that stands in the world as a sign and instrument of humankind's communion with God and unity among all. With this comes its ongoing struggle to recognize and uphold its intimate union with the entire human family in all the "joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties of this age", particularly those "who are poor or in any way afflicted." Religious men and women, particularly in their vow of obedience, witness to the Church's universal concerns and love and devote themselves wholly to its mission. In this way, religious life is truly a gift to the Church, and an integral part of its life.

V. Religious Life as Gift: A Jewel of Many Facets

As we have seen, the religious vows of poverty, celibate chastity and obedience are not simply legalistic proscriptions, but rather remarkably radical expressions of the "inner nature of the Christian calling." They bind the person to a total dedication to God who is loved beyond all things and enable one to be free from the obstacles that might draw one from "the fervor of charity and the perfection of divine worship." The Church affirms that these counsels are "a divine gift" received from God and as such can never become personal goals or achievements. Deeper reflection shows us how the life defined by the profession of these vows is a reality with multiple dimensions.
First of all, religious life is very clearly *Christological* since the evangelical counsels are all based upon the words and examples of the Lord. Each of the vows is lived in concrete imitation of Christ: His self-emptying poverty ("...He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave"\(^{72}\)) , His single-hearted chastity ("The Father and I are one"\(^{73}\)) and filial obedience ("My food is to do the will of Him who sent me"\(^{74}\)). Religious life is also *Pneumatological* since it is the Holy Spirit who awakens the desire in the heart to respond to the call and it is the Spirit who "shapes the hearts of those who are called, configuring them to Christ and prompting them to make His mission their own."\(^{75}\) And ultimately, religious life is *Trinitarian*, since it is an initiative coming wholly from the Father, "who asks those whom he has chosen to respond with complete and exclusive devotion" to follow in the footsteps of His Son, guided and consecrated by the Holy Spirit.\(^{76}\) And each of the three vows manifests in a visible way the mutual self-giving, the infinite love and the eternal harmony which the Three Persons share with one another.

Religious life necessarily has an *Ascetical* dimension, which purifies and transforms, involving a renunciation of certain earthly goods but always in a way that does not detract from but instead nurtures the genuine development of the human person.\(^{77}\) It also has a deeply *Communal* dimension in sharing a common life and spirituality. It is to these communities of consecrated life that the Church entrusts the particular tasks of *spreading the spirituality of communion*, both internally and to the bigger community.\(^{78}\)

As affirmed by Church teachings, religious life is essentially *Ecclesiological*. Religious men and women serve the mission of the Church and are accepted and aided by the Church through her proper exercise of authority.\(^{79}\) Included in this dimension is the role of religious in the work of *Christian unity and dialogue*, bearing in mind that "the Church presents Christ to believers and non-believers alike in a striking manner..." through religious men and women. Pope John Paul II himself highlighted the role of religious in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.\(^{80}\) Religious life is also *Sacramental* in the way it parallels how the seven sacraments are sensible signs that "arise
from the saving ministry of Christ, are continued in, by and for the Church.”81 Similarly, the evangelical counsels are also considered signs, arising from the words and lived example of Jesus and the profession of these counsels is recognized and fostered in and by the Church as belonging to “its life and holiness.”82 Sacraments “form us in likeness to Christ in His Paschal Mystery;”83 that is, when we celebrate and participate in the sacraments, we are gradually transformed, through the power of the Holy Spirit, “into Christ’s way of thinking, Christ’s way of acting, Christ’s way of praying and loving, forgiving and serving.”84 This very same likeness is what religious are called to become albeit in a radical way “on the basis of a special vocation and in virtue of a particular gift of the Spirit.”85 The profession of these counsels may not be required of every Christian but they nevertheless serve “to attract all members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation.”86

Lastly, religious life also bears an *Eschatological* dimension. The religious state manifests to all believers “the heavenly goods” available for all in the life that is to come.87 The Church affirms how the life defined by the evangelical counsels is seen as “a foreshadowing of the future Kingdom”88 that foretells the resurrected state and the glory of the heavenly Kingdom.89

In all of these, we can only marvel at these rich dimensions of the life of the evangelical counsels. We can perhaps liken religious life to a finely cut gemstone of infinite value. However, the true beauty of a jewel only shines through when it is able to catch the light and reflect it. It does not make its own light. In the same way, religious life finds its true light in the Triune God as revealed by Jesus Christ. Quite movingly, John Paul II conveys the wonder of consecrated persons, guided by the Spirit “to the heights of perfection”: “I see the beauty of your grace, I contemplate its ...radiance, I reflect its light; I am caught up in its ineffable splendor. I see how I was and what I have become. O wonder!”90 We cannot but perceive here resonances of Mary’s own Magnificat: “The Almighty has done great things for me, holy is his name.”91 It is fitting then to conclude this reflection on the consecrated life by invoking Mary, Mother of God, who “from the moment of her
Immaculate Conception, most perfectly reflects the divine beauty... [who is] considered the sublime example of perfect consecration...[who] reminds consecrated persons of the primacy of God's initiative...[and] is the model of the acceptance of grace." Mary our mother, sustain consecrated persons towards the sole and eternal blessedness."
ENDNOTES:

2 Lumen Gentium, 44.
4 Ibid.
7 Lumen Gentium 44.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Colossians 1:15
12 Ibid.
13 Vitae Consecrata 21.
14 Ibid.
16 Dei Verbum 2; Eph 1:9, 2:18; 2 Pet 1:4
17 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 53.
18 CFC, 65.
19 CCC, 295.
20 Ibid., 296; Lateran Council IV (see Neuner-Dupuis 19).
21 CCC, 302.
22 CCC 302; also Dei Filius 2 (see Neuner – Dupuis, 413).
23 CFC, 65.
24 CCC, 307.
25 CCC, 400.
26 Ibid., 399.
27 Romans 5:20.
28 CCC, 410
29 Roman Missal; CFC, 412
33 CFC 1327.
34 Ratzinger, 47-48
35 Ibid.
37 Dei Verbum 2.
38 CCC 52.
39 CFC 69.
40 Dei Verbum 4.
41 Corkery, 38.
42 CCC 65
43 Dei Verbum 4; Jn 14:9
44 CFC 507-512; CCC 404; see also ND 613
45 Corkery, 38.
47 Ibid., 235.
48 1 Cor 15:44-48; Col 1:15
49 CCC 141; see also O'Murchiu, Prophetic Vision, 155.
50 Jn 4:34.
51 Ad Gentes 4.
52 Dei Verbum 4.
53 Ridick, 106.
54 Lumen Gentium 46.
55 Vita Consecrata 73.
57 Jn 14:26
58 Mt 28:19
59 Ad Gentes 4; Jn 14:16.
60 Ad Gentes 4.
61 CCC 737.
62 Dei Verbum 9.
63 CCC 774.
64 Lumen Gentium 1; CCC 775.
65 Gaudium et Spes 1.
66 Ridick, 106.
67 Vita Consecrata 72.
68 Ibid., 3.
69 Vita Consecrata 3.
70 Lumen Gentium 44.
71 Ibid., 43.
72 Phil 2:7.
73 Jn 10:30.
74 Jn 4:34.
75 Vita Consecrata 19.
76 Ibid., 17-19.
77 Lumen Gentium 46.
78 Vita Consecrata 51.
79 Lumen Gentium 45.
80 Vita Consecrata Part IV
81 CFC 1526
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Vita Consecrata 14
86 Lumen Gentium 44
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 26.
89 Lumen Gentium 44.
90 Vita Consecrata 20.
91 Luke 1:49
92 Vita Consecrata 28.
93 Ibid., 112.
References


