

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

CHAPTER 8:

CHRISTIAN VOCATIONS

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

This course is a revised translation of the work "I Fondamenti del Cristianesimo" written by Rev. Piero Ottaviano and Didaskaleion.

The course is divided into units with a logical sequence. Therefore we suggest you to read them following their progressive order.

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8 CHRISTIAN VOCATIONS

In this section we shall deal see:

- the fundamental Christian vocations:
 - consecrated religious vocation
 - secular vocation
- ... and their relationships

8.1 FOREWORD

Historically, the fundamental principle of Christian behavior - the imitation of Jesus - has always been put into practice in two different ways: the secular and the consecrated religious way.

Jesus lived and committed himself within this world, but now He is resurrected and lives godly life - eternal life - out of this world. Jesus taught that the same will happen to everyone who lived the way He lived.

Essential documentation:

Jesus said [to His disciples]: "This is the will of Him who sent me: that I shall lose none of all that He has given me, but raise them up on the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the son and believes in Him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day." (John, 10,39-40)

Jesus said [to his disciples]: "Do not let your hearts be troubled; [you] trust God and also trust me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so how would I ever have told you « I'm going and preparing a place for you »'? [or: If it were not so I would have told you: I'm going to prepare a place for you.] And if I go and I prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you too may be in the place where I am. And you know the way to the place where I'm going. (John, 14,1-4)

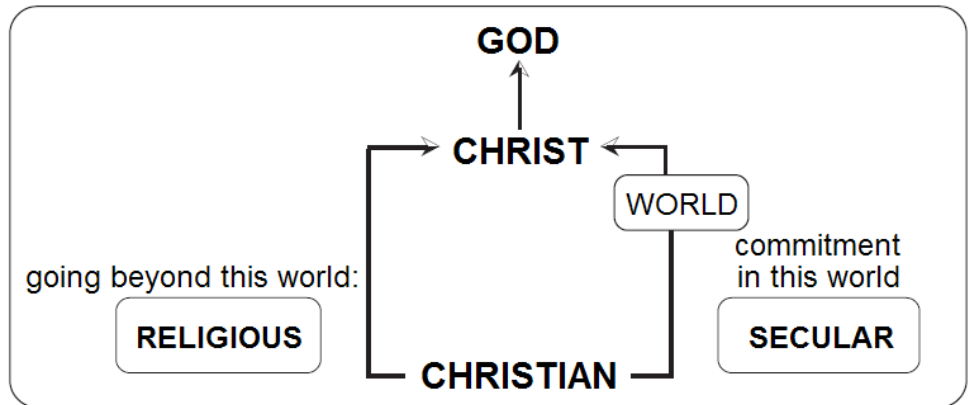
Now then the Christian, who is in this world but is not of this world (John 17,14-16), can imitate Jesus in two ways:

- either by engaging himself in the reality of the present world, looking forward to eternity; (secular life)
- or by immediately starting to realize - as far as possible - the final life, namely by anticipating eternity even though he is still living within time. (Consecrated religious life)

Specifications:

1. It's an absolutely personal and unquestionable choice whether to imitate Jesus as a consecrated religious or as a layman: it's the fundamental answer as given by the Christian to the calling (vocation) that God has written into his life;

2. By the word "religious" we do not mean "the one who practices a religion"; as we expounded, a religious is a "consecrated" Christian who has taken a formal engagement before God to live going beyond this earthly world.



But let's see it in further detail.

8.2 CONSECRATED RELIGIOUS LIFE

What does it consist in?

It consists in living and anticipating (as far as possible) in this world the kind of life that everybody will live after death.

What will eternal life be like?

The Christian looking for an answer in the New Testament eventually finds that in eternal life "this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7,31; Mark 13,31; Luke 21,33; Matthew 24,35).

Particularly:

- There will be no such thing as marriage (Matthew 22,23-32);
- The things of this world will not be there (1 Corinthians 7, 29-31; 1 Tim 6, 7-8)

The religious Christian, being guided by Jesus' word, tries to do this in anticipation, by devoting himself to live as directly as possible with God only, by overcoming creation and by using as little as possible of the things of this world (just the minimum necessary to live).

So the consecrated religious chooses to:

- give up marriage in order to live in perfect chastity;
- detach himself / herself from all unnecessary things, in order to live in absolute poverty;
- give up a normal community life with his / her brothers in order to live with God alone.

Other details:

- Consecrated religious life is a clear act of faith in resurrection (which non-Christians will hardly ever understand): relying on Jesus' word, the religious believes in eternal life so much that he gives up all the things of this world in anticipation of it - not because they are bad, but because they are just transient values.
- Jesus does not expect such a radical choice from all Christians: here is a significant passage from the gospel according to Matthew:

The disciples said to Jesus, "[Since this is the situation]... it is better not to marry." Jesus replied: "Not everyone can understand this, but only those to whom it has been given"; for some are eunuchs because they were born that way, other were made that way by men and others have made themselves eunuchs because of the Kingdom of Heaven. He who can understand this, let him understand. (Matthew 19,10-12)

- A Christian who chooses to live as a religious engages himself freely and responsibly before God. Very often such an engagement is also made before the Christian community and therefore the religious may take the vows publicly by following a rule approved by some bishop or by the Pope.
- Perfect chastity (namely the total giving up of the sexual faculty) has always been regarded as the essence of religious life. Both poverty and solitude, on the other hand, have been experienced in different ways by the religious. This last aspect in time caused the differentiation of very different forms of religious life.
- Sometimes, young people have a bad approach with their own vocation, as they think they have to choose: "either God or a woman/a man". To compare infinite God with a finite being is an insult to God. The correct Christian way to face the problem is: "either reach out to God directly, or through a woman/a man".
- Note that we have not been talking about priests, so far. In many western countries people tend to mistake priests with religious men. We will talk about priests further on. Suffice for the moment to say that there are both secular and religious priests, or, rather, priest seculars (or deacons, or bishops) and priest religious (or deacons, or bishops). Being a priest is anyway a specific commitment within the Church (see next chapter).

8.2.1 HISTORICAL FORMS OF CONSECRATED RELIGIOUS LIFE

1. According to tradition, ideal religious life is hermit life (=life of oneness with God in complete solitude). But there is a serious risk about hermit life: if the hermit has not attained true spiritual maturity, his initial zeal about his own total devotion to God might eventually diminish and very serious temptations might arise, easily causing the hermit to yield.
2. This is the reason why coenobitic life (= religious community life) came about, both as preparation to hermit life and definite choice. In order to protect himself from both weakness and the "backfires" of his own will - or in order to live in a community where it is possible to fully put the gospel into practice - the monk thus accepts:
 - the discipline of a rule

- to be controlled by a superior: obedience¹!
- the help of a community sharing (or supposed to share) the same ideals as his.

These religious men live together a life of prayer (contemplatives don't grow completely estranged from human community life; in fact they are ready to intervene in case of emergency, should other people need their help.

3. In order to cope with all this in an organic way, some religious groups for active life have arisen, devoting themselves to prayer, mission and charitable activities. By preceding the actions of other men, or by co-operating with them, such religious men have devoted themselves to preaching and missions; they freed slaves, established hospitals, hostels, orphanages, poor-people homes, schools and colleges. Everything for the sake of the poor! Very often they were the first to do things whose importance was only later realized by everyone.
4. To conclude, it's also possible to live a true consecrated religious life at home, by engaging oneself in things of this world "looking forward to the kingdom of Heaven". When such "in-the-world" religious people are organized in some group approved by ecclesial authorities, they do make up a "secular institution"²

CONSECRATED RELIGIOUS PEOPLE	
WITH PUBLIC VOWS	WITH PRIVATE VOWS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HERMITS - COENOBITS - MEMBERS OF SECULAR INSTITUTIONS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HERMITS - SPONTANEOUS GROUPS

{ CONTEMPLATIVES
 { ACTIVES

{ CONTEMPLATIVES
 { ACTIVES

8.3 SECULAR LIFE

a. What does it consist in?

It consists in living a Christian's life by engaging oneself within this world (Latin: *saeculum*) in order to transform it in view of the *parusia* (= Christ's final presence/aparition/ manifestation).

Seculars are people who imitate Jesus Christ by committing themselves within this world's reality, on condition that they always comply with God's will.

The secular sphere of activities are: family, paid work, politics, trade unions... in short, any activity which is strictly bound to the present world's situation and that will eventually end with death.

¹ By taking the vows and obeying his superior, the religious does not choose to be a slave, but to be free, for he leaves it all up to the superior the task to interpret God's will for him. Hermits overcome such problem.

² It's still being discussed whether secular institutions ought to be regarded as religious or rather as "consecrated" secular institutions. It all depends on the rules that they have.

These same "secular" activities are sometimes carried out also by religious people, who in turn are to act only as temporary substitutes, just in order to show the seculars the ways to charity. As soon as these engage themselves to make it on their own, the religious should withdraw from such secular activities and return to their monastery. Otherwise they would lose any reason to be and would consequently become extinct.

b. The seculars' functions

These functions are the main functions of every Christian³: to live as one with Jesus, by imitating His life. According to the Second Vatican Council, three features characterize the seculars⁴ identity with Jesus:

1. Prophetic function: the secular is a prophet.

Since Christians have the Spirit of Jesus, they have thus become *prophets* (= the ones who speak in God's name and manifest God's plan in history). So the Christian discloses to non-Christians the meaning that God has given to this world and, therefore, the heavenly meaning of each and every reality.

As a result:

- they are to know this plan by meditating on the Holy Scriptures (= get deeper in one's faith profession);
- they are to show to other people what they have seen in faith:
 - with their words - mission of evangelization
 - with their lives - mission of testimony of the truth (= *a coherent life of willingness to charity*) up to death (= *martyrdom, namely the supreme testimony*).

2. Sacerdotal function: the secular is a priest (but this applies also to the religious).

This **fact** was clearly stated in the New Testament. Addressing the Christians, Peter thus wrote:

You are a chosen offspring, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may preach about the greatness of Him who called you out of the darkness into His most admirable Light (1st Peter 2,9).

The **explanation** is that, according to religion, a *priest* is a mediator between God and mankind, he is the one who offers men's sacrifice of atonement to God and lets men know God's will.

Jesus is priest because He offered His own life as sacrifice of atonement to God.

Each man is priest as for his own sacrifice when he expresses his will to obey God and to be even prepared to lay down his own life.

³ So, this is applied to religious people too. The difference lies in the fact that religious people's function is aimed to the other Christians; while seculars' function is directed to non-Christians.

⁴ The Council calls them "laymen", but it actually refers to the secular who are not members of the hierarchy (see next chapter).

In such a way, *the Christian* does nothing but extending Jesus' Sacrifice through time, by doing his / her best effort to make Jesus' feelings his / her own.

3. Royal service: the secular is king.

a. *The Christian is one with Jesus*, he is a son of God in Jesus and therefore he may share the dignity of King-God.

Using biblical terms, we can say that "*the Christian is a king, but he is the kind of king Jesus was, namely one king who does not exercise authority, but one who serves everyone. (Luke 22,25-30)*

b. *Whom does he serve?*

Surely not God, who does not need to be served, but mankind.

And the way the secular ought to serve all his brother-men is stated by the Second Vatican Council: "*He is to consecrate all earthy situations to God*" (*Lumen Gentium, no. 34*), namely:

- to offer to God's children (= *all men*) the things of this world⁵, through his work;
- to teach men to make a sensible (= *according to Gods' will*) use of all the things of this world;
- to commit himself in order to actually see that all things are used sensibly for good;
- to humbly and firmly commit himself "'till the end", so that God's authority, namely His kingdom, will not find any obstacle.

FUNCTIONS OF THE SECULARS

- **PROPHETICAL** = making manifest the world's meaning according to God
- **PRIESTLY** = joining Jesus' Sacrifice in doing one's duty
- **ROYAL** = serve brothers in order to help them to do God's will

8.4 COMPARISON BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR LIFE

1. They are both expressions of Christian life, namely a life meant to the imitation of Christ. Therefore, you should not think that religious life is "more Christian" than secular life!

Every Christian is called to imitate Jesus, obey God and overcome selfishness through his personal choice, made taking into account the talents he thinks God has given him (vocation).

According to Christianity, however, secular life is not yet the definitive life, being just a preparation to it. On the other hand, religious life is already

⁵ Objectively, almost all working people actually work for other people, since the fruit of their work is enjoyed by other people. What we want to highlight here is the spirit, the reason for one's work. It might well be that one works at his worst, just to get an income (selfishness), or at his best, in order to serve God's children in a better way (unselfishness).

the definitive life which is being lived "in advance". Therefore, religious life -in itself- is a better life than secular life, like everlasting is better than temporary. By no way we do intend to claim that religious are "holier" than the secular, for holiness consists in doing God's will in the actual situation one finds himself in.

2. Chastity, poverty and obedience are sound values for all Christians; however, they are experienced in different ways by religious and seculars:

- **Chastity**

- To the **religious** chastity means: to totally give up one's sexual faculty, "in view of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19,12; 22,30; 1 Corinthians 7,29): perfect chastity;
- to the **secular** it implies one's will to integrate one's sexuality within Christ: premarital and marital chastity.

Not all seculars do marry, for it takes two to get married!

It is not because one has not found anybody to get married to that one can be considered a religious! It has to be a choice, not a necessity.

- **Poverty**

Jesus said:

Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14, 33).

But:

- To the religious this implies a total detachment - both emotional and actual - from the things of this world;
- On the other hand, this implies that the secular may have possessions so that he can serve other people according to God's will (affective detachment).

- **Obedience:**

- To the **religious**: the total giving up of one's will, so that one can always be after God's will as regards to eternal life; to people living in a community this implies the total obedience to a superior, who represents God.
- To the **secular**: the giving up of one's will in order to be always after God's will as related to present life, which is regarded as preparation to eternal life.

3. Mutual influence of either Christian life-style:

According to Christian tradition,

- the **secular** is to:

- teach the non-Christian to make a sensible (= according to God's will) use of creation;

- remind the religious that the things of this world are good.
- the **consecrated religious** is to:
 - remind the secular that only eternal values are true absolutes and that therefore his heart should not stick to the things of this world because they are transient;
 - try new ways to practice charity and show them to the secular.

Please note that...

... non-Christians will hardly ever understand the function of the religious - particularly the contemplative ones -: they are more likely to think that these are squandering their own lives, or that they are parasites on society.

Therefore we would better remind that:

- The consecrated religious in themselves are to give their testimony to secular Christians only;
- As a rule, the religious have always been living on their own work, without weighing on society (see the motto of St. Benedict: "*Ora et labora*" = pray and work).

4. Specific temptations:

- The **consecrated religious** might be tempted into "*Angelism*", which may cause him to:
 - object to his body and all its conditioning, as though it were a bad thing, (thus failing to remember that Jesus took on a human body in order to be just like one of us) as well as pass judgment on created realities (such as marriage, for instance) by considering them evil things;
 - be unfaithful to men because of pretended faithfulness to God (selfishness);
- The **secular** may be tempted into worldly life, which might cause him to:
 - become worldly and convert the world's functional values (designed for a specific function within the world only) into absolutes, thus forgetting that creation ought not to become an end, but is just a mean to reach God;
 - be unfaithful to God because of pretended faithfulness to mankind (*activism*).