

On the Worship of God through the Vow I

We must now consider the nature of the vow in our faith. The terrible damage done to everything (and I mean everything) when vows are not kept, is before us always. We must do all in our power to prepare well for the vows we took at our baptisms, and which we take at our marriages and ordinations. And once they are made, we *must* keep them.

Not only in the Old Testament but in the whole history of religions we find the vow to be a forceful prayer of petition and thanksgiving. A strictly binding promise of a gift in gratitude for favors received, coupled with an offering or sacrifice, makes the prayer of petition more insistent and the expressions of gratitude more secure.

Take for example the vow of St. Jacob the Patriarch. "And he made a vow, saying: If God shall be with me, and shall keep me in the way by which I walk, and shall give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, and I shall return prosperously to my father's house: the Lord shall be my God: And this stone, which I have set up for a title, shall be called the house of God: and of all things that thou shalt give me, I will offer tithes to thee." (Gen 28.20ff) Jacob rightly binds himself to these acts of petition and thanksgiving, making his intention solemn, and far more serious than quotidian intention. We cannot imagine him saying, "If God takes care of me, I'll say 'Hey thanks' in return."

Look at the vow of St. Anna the Prophetess. "As Anna had her heart full of grief, she prayed to the Lord, shedding many tears. And she made a vow, saying: O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt look down on the affliction of thy servant, and wilt be mindful of me, and not forget thy handmaid, and wilt give to thy servant a man child: I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head." (I Kings 1.10ff) Prayer is itself an act of worship, that proclaims our dependence on God, but its religious character appears more explicit when it is accompanied by a vow.

When a vow is bound up with the prayer of petition, it is called a conditional vow because its fulfillment does not oblige unless the request has been answered favorably. If the prayer is not heard, there is no obligation of fulfillment of the vow. God Himself makes these conditional vows. He promises to destroy Nineveh and all its inhabitants – a vow which seems terribly final. But He sends Jonas to them that they may repent. Nineveh is so overwhelmingly corrupt that the story of Jonas being swallowed by the whale is the perfect image of anyone who tries to reform a large institution. Like a night custodian trying to influence the giant corporation in whose building he works, so the voice of one speaking the truth is like speaking in the belly of a whale. But Nineveh did repent, and so there was no destruction.

A vow made unconditionally is not attached to a prayer of petition. It is not dependent on the answer to prayers. It arises either from a deep sense of gratitude for favors received, or from an interior spirit of desire to consecrate all to God. Only the unconditional vow reveals the depth and beauty of the Christian vow, since it is rooted in a complete and unconditional devotion to God.

What is expressed in the unconditional vow can be understood only in the light of sacrifice. This vow, like sacrifice, must be a sign and symbol of the offering of one's self

and one's service to God. It stands for man's personal oblation of self to God, a pledge of what he promises to Him, and his engagement in the divine service.

Since the three great evangelical vows of voluntary poverty, chastity, and obedience offer man's deepest and most personal gifts to God, they surpass in dignity and value all other vows, in which the personal is not offered, but only specific real gift. These evangelical vows symbolize a total personal oblation. This is why in religious life, the orders which take these vows are the highest, in comparison to the diocesan priesthood, or to the societies of apostolic life (such as the FSSP), which take only the vow of chastity.

It would be a very superficial judgment to see the vow merely as a self-imposed (or institution-imposed) obligation to do certain things or offer certain things to God. In the case of celibacy and the priesthood, this ignores the priestly dignity and the possibility for the Christian to honor God truly in his vows, to transform the promised gifts into consecrated gifts or sacrifices.

Hence, the summit of all vows is the baptismal vow. Have you noticed that when the newly baptized child is anointed, he is anointed with the chrism of the priesthood? His baptismal promises attain a new depth – they become the consecrated promises of one anointed for the divine service. The very name "Christian" refers to one who has been anointed, since the Greek word *Christos* means "anointed one." So every true vow made by the Christian is a renewal in depth and in extension of the interior acceptance of the promises made in baptism, and renewal of the priestly consecration given in the baptismal character for the perfect worship of God.

Man has three principal goods: 1. The free power to dispose of his own personal goods. 2. The right to found a family. 3. The free power to dispose of one's own person. When these rights are properly and voluntarily renounced, they become the three great personal vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. They are freely added to the Christian duties arising from baptism, and are the most sure and direct way to fulfill those duties.

The vow of chastity is intimately connected with the priesthood then, since it makes plain the fact that the priest must be one who not only offers sacrifice, but also one who is offered. From the very depth of his being, from the center of that which is human within him, he must be both priest and victim. One who embraces this holy state must do so in obedience to the call of grace and resolutely make the sacrifices necessary to preserve virginal chastity.