

## On the Worship of God through the Vow III

The worth of a vow is first of all religious. Making a vow and fulfilling it are both acts of the virtue of religion. “To vow is to direct those things which one vows to the divine cult or homage. And hence it is evident that to make a vow is properly an act of *latría* or religion.” (St. Thomas Aquinas, II-II,88.5) Because a real vow is made freely and without any obligation of law, the vow has the special value of a spontaneous sacrifice which ultimately can only be the will to respond to the love of God which is given to us.

The worth of the good in question is made greater if it is vowed and fulfilled under the vow. There’s no question but that poverty, chastity and obedience can be practiced (and practiced very well sometimes) without a vow. I’ve known laity who seem to be more detached from material things than contemplative monks. But when one adds a vow to the effort, one adds to the worth of the virtues themselves the merit of the special worship of God. The effort becomes a consecrated gift to God.

This is symbolized well in a wedding, not only from the blessing and exchange of rings, but the prayers of the priest to consecrate the couple that their great gift to one another might also be a great gift to God.

To digress just a moment, it struck me hard when I read how St. Thomas Aquinas arrived at the extreme conclusion that the consecration arising from the vow of chastity was such that not even the pope could dispense one from it (II-II, 88.11). This is not the case and the pope really can dispense, but I can see why St. Thomas said this. I see it from a different angle (not as good as his, but you’ll see what I mean), and that is from the point of view of the aftermath. If a priest gives that consecrated gift to God, and then does not fulfill it, or tries to take it back, then there is literally hell to pay for the faithful. The damage done when a priest ruins this vow lasts for decades.

I also know that the Church can dispense (in the loose sense of the word regarding annulment) from the vows of matrimony. This sounds fine in theory, but the damage done to the children can also last for decades, and even a lifetime.

Back to the worth of a vow, it seems that its religious and moral worth consists primarily in the firmness of the obligation. This firmness is a wonderful antidote to human inconstancy. It erects a barrier against that grossly legalistic mentality which thinks that the only laws which can possibly apply to us are universal impersonal laws, like the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment. One hears this often, as though the only guy in hell is Adolph Hitler, and maybe some of his cronies. But vows are not concerned very much with universal laws viewed impersonally; so much as they are concerned with God’s good pleasure.

Since a vow binds under sin, it creates a healthy and wholesome fear of offending God. So when laxness tends to weaken the will to good, the vow firms up our resolution and prevents us from abandoning our sacred journey. St. Augustine put it this way, “Do not therefore regret your vow; rather rejoice that you are no longer free to do that which would have been allowed only for your harm. Proceed therefore intrepidly to your task and complete words with acts: He will help you who accepted your vows. Happy indeed

the necessity which impels you toward better things.” (Ep. 127)

To vow correctly as well as to fulfill the vow is a grace. This gives the one who vows great confidence. Again from St. Augustine, “Do not therefore be slothful in making vows, for you will not fulfill the vows with your own powers! He who invites you to make a vow, gives you the grace to fulfill it.” (Ps. 131) What good advice for our times! There are many in our times who are slothful to vow, waiting well past their primes to commit themselves to the Church or to a spouse and a family. Looking at the vow only with natural eyes, it is easy to understand their reluctance. But looking at a vow as a consecrated gift to God, which He will sustain and complete, is not only a better way to look at it...it is the right way to look at it.

What a marvelous thing is a vow... there is nothing like it! St. Thomas stresses three special sources of the singular worth of a vow. First, every act performed in fulfillment of a vow becomes in a special way an act of religion. Second, the vow confirms the will in the good one is to perform in accordance with the vow. Third, through the vow not only the single act but even more so the very faculty itself (“...not merely the fruits but the whole tree and its fruits”) is given to God.

Through the three vows of religion, the three great obstacles to holiness are attacked in their very roots: the lust of the eyes through the vow of poverty, the lust of the flesh through the vow of chastity, and the pride of life through the vow of obedience.

In a similar vein, though not as directly, the vows of matrimony attack the lust of the eyes through the desire to provide for one’s spouse and children, the lust of the flesh by channeling the creative power to the spouse, and the pride of life is diminished by the obedience it takes to have a good marriage. I heard once that you might be able to be proud in front of others, but not your spouse. They know you too well.