

On the Worship of God through the Vow II

Marriage vows refer to the matrimonial consent given by the couple before the altar of sacrifice. Since love is a desire to sacrifice one's self for the good of another, then it is most appropriate for a wedding to take place in a church, before the altar and tabernacle, which are vessels of the perfect sacrifice of our Lord. This is one of the many reasons why we don't have weddings in a garden gazebo.

This consent is much more than a simple contract. It is a sacred promise of fidelity placed in the hands of the Church, a religious act of mutual submission to the consecrated order of marriage ordained by God to the service of Christ and His Church. Before we examine this great truth more carefully, it would be useful to speak about vows in general.

A. On the part of the one making the vow:

1. He must act freely and with full deliberation, for God does not welcome a consecrated gift which is forced from His creature. Any vow which is induced by external force is invalid. This should be obvious to us all. A vow made because of a wholesome interior dread of sin and the punishment of God is not invalid however, as some have maintained. Making a vow from fear of sin may not be the best motivation, but it is acceptable to the Lord.

2. The vow must be the object of prudent reflection and decision. "It is ruin to a man to devour holy ones, and after vows to retract." (Prov. 20.25) As a general rule, vows should not be made without the advice of a confessor, or spiritual director. An obviously imprudent vow (doing something clearly beyond one's ability, something which is an obstacle to a higher good or even the source of damage to one's neighbor) is not valid.

3. Essential to the vow is firmness of decision. Unlike a mere resolution that we might make for the New Year (which allows of various degrees of firmness and as such does not bind in conscience) an obviously imprudent vow is not valid. There should be no indecisive vow; it consists of a promise made to God with the firm will to oblige oneself in conscience. Just as liberty is absolutely essential in making a vow, so the obligation contracted in full liberty is absolute after the vow has been made. "If thou hast vowed any thing God, defer not to pay it. For an unfaithful and foolish promise displeaseth him: but whatsoever thou hast vowed, pay it. And it is much better not to vow than after a vow not to perform the things promised." (Eccles. 5.3ff)

"When thou hast made a vow to the Lord thy God, thou shalt not delay to pay it: because the Lord thy God will require it. And if thou delay, it shall be imputed to thee for a sin. If thou wilt not promise, thou shalt be without sin. But that which is once gone out of thy lips, thou shalt observe: and shalt do as thou hast promised to the Lord thy God, and hast spoken with thy own will and with thy own mouth." (Deut. 23.21ff)

4. If one doubts (regarding a private vow) whether he has made a vow or only a simple

resolution, he is free; for liberty is in possession. There is no need to be scrupulous about it. If there is some question about the validity of a private vow, dispensation may be obtained from one's pastor or spiritual director. As to public vows, the decision of the Church is decisive.

B. On the part of the object.

1. The thing promised must be possible and better than its contrary. In other words, the thing promised must truly promote Christian perfection. If one takes a vow, but can foresee that he will most likely not be able to keep it or that in his effort to do so he will be in constant danger of violating it, then such a vow is invalid. It ceases to be valid as soon as it becomes evident that the opposite of what has been promised would be better in the sight of God for the individual concerned than what has been actually vowed.

2. Again, if there is a question about a public vow, the decision concerning it must be left to the authority of the Church.

C. The role of the Church.

1. Since the Church is the community of divine worship in which the Christian participates in the priestly dignity and activity of Christ (the high point of this is the *sursum corda* at the Mass), every vow must be in harmony with the nature and will of the Church. The vow is a participation in the priestly vocation of the Church, and so the Church is in a mysterious way a participant in carrying out the vow. The private vow is assumed into her perpetual ministry of consecration and sacrifice. The public vow must be expressly placed in her hands, accepted and ratified by her. For this reason it is entirely right to lay down conditions essential for her participation and cooperation. Thus, the ecclesiastical effects of vows depend exclusively (but not arbitrarily) on the will of the Church. She alone has the right to determine which vows are to be recognized as public and what are to be their legal effects (in the Church).

2. The Church enjoys the competence to test, regulate, and adjudicate matters regarding the acceptance and continuation of individuals in the state of vows (the religious or married state). What an obligation there is for those acting on behalf of the Church to guide men prudently and wisely in the making of vows and their fulfillment! In virtue of her priestly office the vows in a sense are made her own, so that they receive from her (ultimately from Christ) their value and merit. Because she has the jurisdiction by which she binds and loose, the Church has the right, vicariously and in the name of God, to interpret vows in His name. She has the right to free men from them, or as the case may be, to insist on their observance.