

XXVII. MONASTIC VOWS

¹ In discussing monastic vows it is necessary to begin by considering what opinions have hitherto been held concerning them, what kind of life is lived in the monasteries, and how many of the daily observances in them were contrary not only to the Word of God but also to papal canons.

² In the days of St. Augustine **monastic life was voluntary**. Later, when true discipline and doctrine had become corrupted, monastic vows were invented, and the attempt was made to **restore discipline by means of these vows** as if in a well-conceived prison.

³ In addition to monastic vows many other requirements were imposed, and such fetters and burdens were laid on many **before they had attained an appropriate age**.

⁵ Many persons also entered monastic life **ignorantly**, for although they were not too young, they had not sufficiently appreciated or understood their strength. ⁶ All of those who were thus ensnared and entangled were pressed and compelled to remain, in spite of the fact that even the papal canons might have set many of them free. ⁷ The practice was stricter in women's convents than in those of men, though it would have been seemly to show more consideration to women as the weaker sex. ⁸ Such severity and rigor displeased many devout people in the past, for they must have seen that both boys and girls were thrust into monasteries to provide for their maintenance. They must also have seen what evils came from this arrangement, what scandals and burdened consciences resulted. ⁹ Many people complained that in such a momentous matter the canons were not strictly adhered to. ¹⁰ Besides, monastic vows gained such a reputation, as is well known, that many monks with even a little understanding were displeased.

¹¹ It was claimed that **monastic vows were equal to Baptism, and that by monastic life one could earn forgiveness of sin and justification before God**. ¹² What is more, they added that monastic life not only earned righteousness and godliness, but also that by means of this life **both the precepts and the counsels included in the Gospel were kept**, ¹³ and so monastic vows were praised more highly than Baptism.

According to Roman Church, the **Precepts of the Church** are certain laws considered binding on the faithful, because of church authority under the 4th commandment. As usually understood, they are moral and ecclesiastical, broad in character and limited in number. In addition to the Ten Commandments, there are five:

1. You shall attend Mass on Sundays and on holy days of obligation and rest from servile labor
2. You shall confess your sins at least once a year.
3. You shall receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least once during the Easter season.
4. You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church. (Abstinence from meat (but not fish) on Fridays), and abstinence-plus restriction to one meal only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. There are differences in some countries.)
5. You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church.

According to Roman Church: The **three evangelical counsels** Christianity are

1. **chastity**,
 2. **poverty** (perfect charity), &
 3. **obedience**.
- These are counsels for those who desire to become "perfect" (Matthew 19:21). They are not binding upon all and hence not necessary conditions to attain eternal life. Rather they are "**acts of supererogation**" that exceed the minimum stipulated in the Commandments in the Bible.

They also claimed that **more merit could be obtained by monastic life than by all other states of life** instituted by God — whether the office of pastor and preacher, of ruler, prince, lord, or the like, all of whom serve in their appointed calling according to God’s Word and command without invented spirituality. ¹⁴ None of these things can be denied, for they are found in their own books.

¹⁵ Furthermore, those who were thus ensnared and inveigled into a monastery learned little about Christ.

The Purpose of Monasteries

Formerly the monasteries had conducted schools of Holy Scripture and other branches of learning which are profitable to the Christian church, so that pastors and bishops were taken from monasteries. But now the picture is changed. ¹⁶ In former times people gathered and adopted monastic life **for the purpose of learning the Scriptures**, but now it is claimed that monastic life is of such a nature that thereby **God’s grace and righteousness before God are earned.** In fact, it is called **a state of perfection and is regarded as far superior to the other estates instituted by God.** ¹⁷ All this is mentioned, without misrepresentation, in order that one may better grasp and understand what our teachers teach and preach.

¹⁸ For one thing, it is taught among us with regard to those who desire to marry that all those who are not suited for celibacy have the power, right, and authority to marry, for **vows cannot nullify God’s order and command.** ¹⁹ God’s command in 1 Cor. 7:2 reads, “Because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.” ²⁰ It is not alone God’s command that urges, drives, and compels us to do this, but God’s creation and order also direct all to marriage who are not endowed with the gift of virginity by a special act of God. This appears from God’s own words in Gen. 2:18, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”

Vows do not set aside God’s order and command.

²² What objection may be raised to this? **No matter how much one extols the vow and the obligation, no matter how highly one exalts them, it is still impossible to abrogate God’s command.** ²³ Learned men say that a vow made contrary to papal canons is not binding. ⁷ How much less must be their obligation, lawfulness, and power when they are contrary to God’s command!

Annulment of Vows:
-Contrary to Papal Canons
-Contrary to God’s Law

²⁴ If there were no reasons which allowed **annulment of the obligation of a vow**, the popes could not have dispensed and released men from such obligation, for no man has the right to cancel an obligation which is derived from divine law. ²⁵ Consequently the popes were well aware that some amelioration ought to be exercised in connection with this obligation and have often given dispensations, ²⁶ as in the case of the king of Aragon and many others. If dispensations were granted for the maintenance of temporal interests, how much more should dispensations be granted for necessities of men’s souls!

²⁷ Why, then, do our opponents insist so strongly that vows must be kept without first ascertaining whether a vow is of the proper sort? **For a vow must involve what is possible and voluntary and must be uncoerced.** ²⁸ Yet it is commonly known to what an extent **perpetual chastity** lies within human power and ability, ²⁹ and there are few, whether men or women, who have taken monastic vows of themselves, willingly, and after due consideration. Before they came to a right understanding they were persuaded to take monastic vows, and sometimes have been compelled and forced to do so. ³⁰ Accordingly it is not right to argue so rashly and

insistently about the obligation of vows inasmuch as it is generally conceded that it belongs to the very nature and character of a vow that it should be voluntary and should be assumed only after due consideration and counsel.

³¹ Several canons and papal regulations annul vows that are made **under the age** of fifteen years. They hold that before this age one does not possess sufficient understanding to determine or arrange the order of one's whole future life. ³² Another canon concedes still more years to human frailty, for it prohibits the taking of monastic vows before the eighteenth year. ³³ On the basis of this provision most monastics have excuse and reason for leaving their monasteries inasmuch as a majority of them entered the cloister in their childhood, before attaining such age.

³⁴ Finally, although the breaking of monastic vows might be censured, it would not follow that the marriage of those who broke them should be dissolved. ³⁵ For St. Augustine says in his *Nuptiarum*, Question 27, Chapter I, that such a marriage should not be dissolved, and St. Augustine is no inconsiderable authority in the Christian church, even though some have subsequently differed from him.

<p><u>Monastic Vows are Null and Void</u> Because they seek to obtain righteousness for themselves and others by their works.</p>

³⁶ Although God's command concerning marriage frees and releases many from monastic vows, our teachers offer still more reasons why monastic vows are null and void. **For all such service of God that is chosen and instituted by men to obtain righteousness and God's grace without the command and authority of God is opposed to God and the holy Gospel and contrary to God's command.** So Christ himself says in Matt. 15:9, "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." ³⁷ St. Paul also teaches everywhere that one is not to seek for righteousness in the precepts and services invented by men but that righteousness and godliness in God's sight come from faith and trust when we believe that God receives us into his favor for the sake of Christ, his only Son.

³⁸ It is quite evident that the monks have taught and preached that their invented spiritual life makes satisfaction for sin and obtains God's grace and righteousness. ⁴ What is this but to diminish the glory and honor of the grace of Christ and deny the righteousness of faith? ³⁹ It follows from this that the customary vows were an improper and false service of God. Therefore they are not binding, ⁴⁰ **for an ungodly vow, made contrary to God's command, is null and void.** Even the canons teach that an oath should not be an obligation to sin.

⁴¹ St. Paul says in Gal. 5:4, "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace." ⁴² In the same way, those who would be justified by vows are severed from Christ and have fallen away from God's grace, ⁴³ for they rob Christ, who alone justifies, of his honor and bestow this honor upon their vows and monastic life.

⁴⁴ One cannot deny that the monks have taught and preached that they were justified and earned forgiveness of sins by their vows and their monastic life and observances. In fact, they have invented a still more indecent and absurd claim, namely, **that they could apply their good works to others.** ⁴⁵ If one were inclined to count up all these claims for the purpose of casting them into their teeth, how many items could be assembled which the monks themselves are now ashamed of and wish had never occurred! ⁴⁶ Besides all this, they persuaded the people that the

invented spiritual estate of the orders was **Christian perfection**.⁴⁷ Certainly this is exaltation of works as a means of attaining justification.⁴⁸ Now, it is no small offense in the Christian church that the people should be presented with such **a service of God, invented by men without the command of God, and should be taught that such a service would make men good and righteous before God**. For righteousness of faith, which should be emphasized above all else in the Christian church, is obscured when man's eyes are dazzled with this curious angelic spirituality and sham of **poverty, humility, and chastity**.

⁴⁹ Besides, the commands of God and true and proper service of God are obscured when people are told that monks alone are in a state of perfection. **For this is Christian perfection: that we fear God honestly with our whole hearts, and yet have sincere confidence, faith, and trust that for Christ's sake we have a gracious, merciful God; that we may and should ask and pray God for those things of which we have need, and confidently expect help from him in every affliction connected with our particular calling and station in life; and that meanwhile we do good works for others and diligently attend to our calling.**⁵⁰ True perfection and right service of God consist of these things and not of mendicancy or wearing a black or gray cowl, etc.⁵¹ However, the common people, hearing the state of celibacy praised above all measure, draw many harmful conclusions from such false exaltation of monastic life,⁵² for it follows that their consciences are troubled because they are married.⁵³ When the common man hears that only mendicants are perfect, he is uncertain whether he can keep his possessions and engage in business without sin.⁵⁴ When the people hear that it is only a counsel not to take revenge, it is natural that some should conclude that it is not sinful to take revenge outside of the exercise of their office.⁵⁵ Still others think that it is not right at all for Christians, even in the government, to avenge wrong.

True Christian Perfection

--not that we can live without sin or attain justification by our works, but in what way do we seek to please God out of thankfulness.

⁵⁶ Many instances are also recorded of men who forsook wife and child, and also their civil office, to take shelter in a monastery.⁵⁷ **This, they said, is fleeing from the world and seeking a life more pleasing to God than the other.** They were unable to understand that one is to serve God by observing the commands God has given and not by keeping the commands invented by men.⁵⁸ That is a good and perfect state of life which has God's command to support it; on the other hand, that is a dangerous state of life which does not have God's command behind it.⁵⁹ About such matters it was necessary to give the people proper instruction.

⁶⁰ In former times Gerson censured the error of the monks concerning perfection and indicated that it was an innovation of his time to speak of monastic life as a state of perfection.

⁶¹ Thus there are many godless opinions and errors associated with monastic vows: that they justify and render men righteous before God, that they constitute Christian perfection, that they are the means of fulfilling both evangelical counsels and precepts, and that they furnish the works of supererogation which we are not obligated to render to God.⁶² Inasmuch as all these things are false, useless, and invented, **monastic vows are null and void.**