

Religious Life as a State of Perfection

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Introduction

RELIGIOUS LIFE is referred to in the Catholic theological tradition as a state of perfection.¹ The claim may seem relatively uncontroversial, and yet it is not immediately evident that the religious state is “perfect” and therefore “objectively higher” than other states of life.² Certainly, in the years since the Second Vatican Council, greater emphasis has been placed on the complementary doctrine of the “universal call to holiness.” *Lumen Gentium* stresses that grace sufficient for sanctity is made available to all the Christian faithful

¹ See, for instance Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, trans. Thomas L. Campbell (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 73–78 (ch. 6). See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] II-II, q. 184, aa. 5–6, and q. 186, a. 1. English of *ST* will be taken from the translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), and Latin of Aquinas texts will be taken from the Leonine edition. See also Francisco Suárez, *Opus de virtute et statu religionis* (Lyon: Horatius Cardon et Petrus Cavellat, 1624), t. 3, lib. 1, chs. 2–5. In general, for all texts composed in a language other than English, I have chosen to cite existing English translations if available (as stated here for *ST*). In the absence of existing translations, the English provided is my own.

² This language and logic have enjoyed continuous use in the modern magisterium. See (all accessible on the Vatican website): Pope Pius XII, “State of Perfection: An address of Pope Pius XII to the Second World Congress of the States of Perfection,” December 11, 1957; Paul VI, “Message of Pope Paul VI to the General Chapters of Religious Orders and Congregations,” May 23, 1964; Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* (1996), §35; *Redemptionis Donum* (1984), §4. For a compilation of selections from papal documents that touch the theme (both directly and indirectly), see Gaston Courtois, *The States of Perfection according to the Teaching of the Church: Papal Documents from Leo XIII to Pius XII*, trans. John A. Flynn (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1961).

in each and every state of life: "All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity."³ In light of this salutary emphasis in the Church's teaching on evangelical perfection, it has become increasingly necessary to refine the language used to distinguish religious life from other states of life, especially as some voices call for the revision or suppression of the category of "states of perfection." In the years immediately following the Council, a particular reading of the documents suggested that the category of states of perfection was to be de-emphasized.⁴ Ernest Larkin observes: "The Council Fathers found the categories of states of perfection unacceptable and the doctrine of holiness in the Church was rewritten in terms of the universal call to Christian perfection. . . . The category 'state of perfection' is by-passed and the emphasis shifted from the juridic to the vital reality of grace and charity."⁵ While this interpretation and its application may seem reductive, it still has proponents in the contemporary setting. Maryanne Confoy has recently argued that commitment to the notion of religious life as a state of perfection impedes the renewal envisioned by the Council, and leads to polarization between "those religious who [are] locked into the status quo of religious life as a state of perfection and those who responded to the dynamic of renewal, [which entails an] 'ever-reforming' understanding of charism."⁶ In light of this influential critique, it is timely to recover and rearticulate an understanding of religious life as a state of perfection for a contemporary audience, lest the doctrine fall into desuetude and our corresponding understanding of religion and charity suffer distortion.

The central difficulty in ascertaining the basis of religious perfection arises from a confusion as to what constitutes perfection. On the one

³ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, §40: "Cunctis proinde perspicuum est, omnes christifideles cuiuscumque status vel ordinis ad vitae christianae plenitudinem et caritatis perfectionem vocari."

⁴ The term "state of perfection" is not used verbatim in either *Lumen Gentium* or *Perfectae Caritatis*, although in *Lumen Gentium* the Council fathers do speak of the religious state in equivalent terms. See *Lumen Gentium*, §45: "The importance of the profession of the evangelical counsels is seen in the fact that it fosters the perfection of love of God and love of neighbor in an outstanding manner and that this profession is strengthened by vows. . . . Any institute of perfection [*perfectionis Institutum*] and its individual members may be removed from the jurisdiction of the local Ordinaries by the Supreme Pontiff and subjected to himself alone."

⁵ Ernest E. Larkin, "Religious Life and Vatican II," *The Sword* 26 (February 1966): 30–36, at 30.

⁶ Maryanne Confoy, R.S.C., "Religious Life in the Vatican II Era: 'State of Perfection' or Living Charism?," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013): 321–46, at 331, 340.

hand, religious life takes its name from the virtue of religion, which is categorized in the Thomistic tradition as a potential part of justice.⁷ On the other hand, Christian perfection—the goal of religious life—is bound up with charity. Antoine Lemonnyer explains: “The end of the religious life is perfection, and perfection consists essentially in charity. Charity, and more precisely the perfection of charity, which essentially makes sanctity, is thus, the sole end of the religious life.”⁸ If the religious life takes its name from and is patterned on the exercise of a potential part of justice (religion), in what sense is it thereby more perfect (charity)? Tommaso de Vio Cardinal Cajetan captures the apparent disjunct: “For the union to God through holocaust of oneself which the virtue of religion works is one thing; and the union to God through love which charity works is another thing.”⁹ The following endeavors to explain the nature of this difference as a way by which to recover the precise sense of state of perfection. In so doing, I will rely almost exclusively on St. Thomas Aquinas, his commentators, and theologians working within a Thomistic framework since the discussion of religious as state of perfection has unfolded largely within this context.

In order to discern how religion and charity interact in the context of the religious state, it helps first to distill the genius and dynamism proper to each respective virtue. In the first section, I examine charity under the aspect of goal or perfective element of religious life. Then, I turn to the virtue of religion, specifically as giving rise to the act of vows.

The second brief section delineates one aspect of the relation of religion to charity. Here, the focus will be on proximately dispositive causality. Religion, as the greatest of moral virtues, stands peculiarly well disposed to the advent and augmentation of charity.

In the final section, I will examine religion as exercised in religious life under the influence of charity. Specifying the relationship between religion and charity at work in the vows gives occasion to enunciate more precisely the nature of religious perfection and thereby to reaffirm the enduring relevance of state of perfection as a theological category.

⁷ See *ST* II-II, q. 80, a. 1.

⁸ Antoine Lemonnyer, O.P., commentary in Saint Thomas Aquinas, O.P., *Somme théologique: La vie humaine: ses formes, ses états*, trans. Antoine Lemonnyer with notes (Paris: Desclée et Cie, 1926), 556.

⁹ Tommaso de Vio Cardinal Cajetan, commentary to Leonine edition of *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 1: “Nam aliud est coniunctio ad Deum per holocaustum sui, quod facit virtus religionis: et aliud est coniunctio ad Deum per amorem, quem facit caritas.”

Charity, Religion, and Vows: A First Look

Charity as Primary Operative Perfection and End of Christian Life

Charity is the primary operative perfection and—taken in this sense—end of Christian life. A proper understanding of the operative role of charity in securing Christian perfection is, therefore, crucial for understanding the sense in which religious life is to be understood as perfect.

In moral matters, St. Thomas deploys the term “perfection” analogously. In a classic text, he distinguishes among essential perfection (sanctifying grace), operative or accidental perfection (charity—acts both elicited and imperated), and final perfection (union with God or created beatitude).¹⁰ Within the category of operative perfection, St. Thomas further details the differences among primary, secondary, and instrumental perfection.¹¹

St. Thomas identifies charity as primary operative perfection: “Primarily and essentially the perfection of the Christian life consists in charity.”¹² In another work he adds even more forcefully: “The spiritual life consists principally in charity. For he that is without charity is spiritually nought.”¹³ As a theological virtue, charity attains to God, the objective term of beatitude—blessedness *in se*. It conducts man to God as the ultimate perfection of all his faculties and person.¹⁴ In other words, charity unites man wholly to his end. St. Thomas writes:

A thing is said to be perfect insofar as it attains its proper end, which is the ultimate perfection thereof. Now it is charity that unites us to God, Who is the last end of the human mind, since “he that abideth

¹⁰ *ST* I, q. 6, a. 3, corp.: “Perfectio autem alicuius rei triplex est. Prima quidem, secundum quod in suo esse constituitur. Secunda vero, prout ei aliqua accidentia superadduntur, ad suam perfectam operationem necessaria. Tertia vero perfectio alicuius est per hoc, quod aliquid aliud attingit sicut finem.” See also the discussion in Jordan Aumann, O.P., *Spiritual Theology* (Manila: University of Santo Tomás, 1982), 78–79.

¹¹ This line of reasoning takes it as evident that the distinction drawn in *ST* I, q. 6, a. 3, is an exhaustive dialectic and that therefore secondary and instrumental perfection are to be taken as species of operative perfection.

¹² *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “Per se quidem et essentialiter consistit perfectio Christianae vitae in caritate.” See also q. 184, a. 1, corp.

¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life* [*The Religious State, the Episcopate and the Priestly Office*], in *An Apology for Religious Orders*, trans. John Procter, O.P. (St. Louis: Herder, 1902), ch. 2: “Consistit autem principaliter spiritualis vita in caritate, quam qui non habet nihil esse spiritualiter reputatur.”

¹⁴ See A. Fonck, “Perfection chrétienne” in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1933), col. 1225.

in charity abideth in God, and God in him" (1 Jn. 4:16). Therefore the perfection of the Christian life consists radically (*specialiter*) in charity.¹⁵

Here for the word which the Fathers of the English Dominican Province have rendered as "radically" (*specialiter*), Cajetan prefers "essentially" (*essentialiter*) or "substantially" (*substantialiter*).¹⁶ This, he argues, more adequately communicates the proper metaphysical perfection of charity in the soul. Lemonnyer summarizes Cajetan's contention:

As Cajetan comments it, the expression which translates most exactly the thought of St. Thomas is the following: The perfection of the Christian life and the Christian life itself consists essentially or substantially (better than specially) in charity. Charity produces the essence or the substance of Christian perfection, being that through which is realized the union of the Christian to God, who is, objectively, his Perfection.¹⁷

Though he is careful not to reify charity, consistently affirming its accidental status,¹⁸ St. Thomas is no less adamant that charity is the "substance" of Christian perfection.

Secondary operative perfection is accorded to the elicited acts of the other virtues (imperated by charity). In a subordinated and secondary sense, the other virtues (including both faith and hope) contribute to man's perfection by ordering the powers of man's soul and so "establishing the proper order into the means that lead to God."¹⁹ St. Thomas refers to the elicited acts of the other virtues therefore as possessing relative perfection or perfection *secundum quid*.²⁰ While each virtue has a proper perfection (religion included among them), they come to full stature in relation to charity. Jordan Aumann observes that in eliciting acts imperated by

¹⁵ ST II-II, q. 184, a. 1, corp.: "Unumquodque dicitur esse perfectum in quantum attingit proprium finem, qui est ultima rei perfectio. Caritas autem est quae unit nos Deo, qui est ultimus finis humanae mentis, quia qui manet in caritate, in Deo manet, et Deus in eo, ut dicitur I Ioan. IV. Et ideo secundum caritatem specialiter attenditur perfectio vitae Christianae."

¹⁶ Cajetan, commentary to ST II-II, q. 184, a. 1.

¹⁷ Lemonnyer, *La vie humaine*, 509.

¹⁸ See ST II-II, q. 23, a. 2, corp.

¹⁹ Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 80.

²⁰ See ST II-II, q. 184, a. 1, ad 2: "Et ideo secundum caritatem simpliciter attenditur perfectio Christianae vitae, sed secundum alias virtutes secundum quid."

charity, the other virtues serve as “integral parts” of Christian perfection:

Christian perfection must be considered as a moral whole, integrated by the conjunction of those conditions that perfect the life of the Christian. It connotes a plenitude that presupposes the perfect rectification of our entire moral life. But this total rectification is not achieved by charity alone, which refers only to the end; it also involves the operations of the infused moral virtues that regulate the proper use of the means to the end. Therefore the infused moral virtues pertain to the essence of Christian perfection considered in an integral manner.²¹

The other virtues retain a place within the integral perfection of man, a place subordinated to the command and final formation of charity. This dynamic will be at play in the interaction of religion and charity.

The last operative perfection to which St. Thomas devotes considerable attention are the counsels (taken collectively), which exhibit instrumental perfection.²² He notes that the counsels too are ordered to charity by “the removal of things that hinder the act of charity, and yet are not contrary to charity, such as marriage, the occupation of worldly business, and so forth.”²³ The notion of counsels as instrumentally perfect will be a major subject of inquiry in what follows.

Charity as End of the Religious Life

With this understanding of charity as primary operative perfection (generally), it follows that the end of the religious state is the perfection of charity (specifically). St. Thomas writes: “The perfection of charity is the end of the religious state. And the religious state is a school or exercise for the attainment of perfection, which men strive to reach by various practices.”²⁴ This identification serves as a foundational principle of his treatment

²¹ Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 80.

²² *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “Secundario autem et instrumentaliter perfectio consistit in consiliis.”

²³ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “Consilia autem ordinantur ad removendum impedimenta actus caritatis, quae tamen caritati non contrariantur, sicut est matrimonium, occupatio negotiorum saecularium, et alia huiusmodi.”

²⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 2, corp.: “Ipsa perfectio caritatis est finis status religionis, status autem religionis est quaedam disciplina vel exercitium ad perfectionem perveniendi. Ad quam quidem aliqui pervenire nituntur exercitiis diversis.” Note that, strictly speaking, the final end of Christian life—its objective term or final perfection as described above—is God (uncreated beatitude) and our participation

of religious life. In the *sed contra* of the first article of the first question devoted specifically to the religious state in the *Summa theologiae* (ST), he writes:

In the Conferences of the Fathers (*Collat.* i, 7) abbot Moses speaking of religious says: 'We must recognize that we have to undertake the hunger of fasting, watchings, bodily toil, privation, reading, and other acts of virtue, in order by these degrees to mount to the perfection of charity.' Now things pertaining to human acts are specified and denominated from the intention of the end. Therefore religious belong to the state of perfection.²⁵

While he will later argue that religious are constituted in a state of perfection by the fact that they are solemnly and stably obliged to means of perfection, here St. Thomas focuses on the role played by the end of religious life. The means themselves, enumerated as "the hunger of fasting, watchings, bodily toil . . ." are taken on as conducive to the perfection of charity. The religious state is principally to be understood as a means to that end. As F. Giardini explains, "The religious state is not a goal, but a way: clear, certain, sure, but only a way, a method for efficiently tending to the perfection of charity."²⁶ Thus, the entire discussion of religious perfection in terms of the virtue of religion (as follows) is to be ultimately referred to charity.

The Virtue of Religion in Religious Life

Since the Christian life (generally) and religious life (specifically) are ordered to the same end (the perfection of charity), they cannot be distinguished thereby. Instead, it is the means adopted in religious life that

therein (created beatitude). Since man attains to God by charity, charity shares in the nature of end. And as the religious state pertains to this life, with the fullness of Christian life as its goal, it therefore makes sense to say that its end is the perfection of charity, always keeping in mind the ultimate and transcendent horizon of beatitude.

²⁵ ST II-II, q. 186, a. 1, corp.: "Sed contra est quod in collationibus patrum, dicit abbas Moyses, de religiosis loquens, ieiuniorum inedia, vigiliis, labores, corporis nuditatem, lectionem, ceterasque virtutes debere nos suscipere noverimus, ut ad perfectionem caritatis istis gradibus possimus conscendere. Sed ea quae ad humanos actus pertinent, ab intentione finis speciem et nomen recipiunt. Ergo religiosi pertinent ad statum perfectionis."

²⁶ F. Giardini, O.P., "Lo stato religioso come olocausto," *Angelicum* 38 (1961): 187-99, at 192.

distinguishes its efficacy from that proper to other ecclesial states. With this in mind, I will consider the virtue of religion as exercised in the religious state and then the vows (as the act of religion) which constitute one in the religious state.

Religion possesses its own proper perfection as a moral virtue. For St. Thomas, religion is a potential part of justice. Potential parts retain the identifiable nature and finality of the virtue to which they are annexed, but participate in it in a somehow deficient manner. As a species of justice, religion renders what is due to another, specifically to God. Religion lacks the full character of justice in that it does not achieve a strict equality of recompense.²⁷ Religion offers due reverence and honor to God and constitutes the worshipping individual as subjected to God and his provident order. Cicero defines religion as what “consists in offering service and ceremonial rites to a superior nature that men call divine.”²⁸ Religion thus constitutes the stable and permanent disposition out of which one subjects himself to God, chiefly as it commands acts of worship (both interior and exterior).

Religious life is a stable and peculiarly intense living of the virtue of religion. The religious, one might say, intends for a wholly religious existence. Commenting on this phenomenon, Antonio Royo Marin observes, “The effort of religious . . . registers fundamentally in the ambit of the virtue of religion, but as borne unto its ultimate consequences. . . . Of itself, the religious life has the ambition of total religiosity. There is nothing—in practice, nothing ought to be—in it which is not totally and essentially religious.”²⁹ This note of *totality* at work in the self-donation prompted by the virtue of religion distinguishes how religion is exercised in the religious state from how religion is exercised without. Royo Marin observes that religious are not distinguished from non-religious in that the former practice the virtue of religion while the latter do not; rather it is by the totality of their exercise of the virtue. Religious are committed by their state to a modally *exhaustive* or *total* oblation.³⁰ Here we encounter the

²⁷ ST II-II, q. 80, a. 1, corp.; q. 81, a. 1, corp.

²⁸ ST II-II, q. 81, a. 1, s.c.: “Tullius dicit, II Rhet., quod religio est quae superioris naturae, quam divinam vocant, curam caeremoniamque affert.”

²⁹ Antonio Royo Marin, O.P., *La Vida Religiosa* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1965), 135.

³⁰ Royo Marin, *La Vida Religiosa*, 136: “Lo que distingue a los religiosos de los laicos no es el hecho de que los primeros practiquen la virtud de la religión y los segundos no, ya que ambos la practican o deben practicarla. Sino únicamente el *modo* de practicarla, llevándola los primeros hasta las últimas consecuencias, o sea, hasta la plena *totalidad*, haciendo de sus vidas un verdadero *holocausto* en honor de Dios.”

first indication of the religious state's claim to perfection. Giardini writes: "To submit totally to the service of God . . . to adhere completely to Him . . . no concept is repeated so insistently as that of 'totality.' *All* and *perfect* are alike: 'that one consecrate, all of himself and all things in God's service just is perfection.'" ³¹ The quality or modality of the offering—specifically its totality—at once distinguishes the religious state from other ecclesial states and establishes its claim to perfection. This is a theme to which I will return in what follows.

Vows

Given this basic understanding of religion and religious life, we can further specify the matter by considering the constitutive act of religion exercised in religious life, namely, vows. This provides a specific point at which religion and charity will appear as closely linked. Vows establish the individual in an ecclesially recognized state by public profession of the counsels. St. Thomas explains that "'state,' properly speaking, denotes a kind of position, whereby a thing is disposed with a certain immobility in a manner according with its nature." ³² Walter Farrell, expanding on St. Thomas's language of *status*, gives the following clarification:

A better translation would be "stance of life." The phrase is taken from a comparison with the physical position of a man standing: he stands when he is erect and quiet. . . . And it is in this position, erect and quiet, that his members are properly disposed. . . . Thus a moral state or stance will be an erect and quiet or permanent position of man among his fellows. ³³

Vows effectively constitute the religious life as a state and so serve as a convenient locus of inquiry when examining its peculiar perfection.

When considering the efficacy of vows, St. Thomas argues that moral acts are more meritorious when vowed; that is to say, *ceteris paribus*, an act which flows from a vowed will is "better" than a specifically identical act which flows from a non-vowed will. The reasons he gives are instructive:

³¹ Giardini, "Lo stato religioso," 191 (internal quotation taken from *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 1, ad 1: "Quod aliquis se totaliter et sua divino cultui deputet, ad perfectionem pertinet").

³² *ST* II-II, q. 183, a. 1, corp.: "Status, proprie loquendo, significat quandam positionis differentiam secundum quam aliquis disponitur secundum modum suae naturae, cum quadam immobilitate."

³³ Walter Farrell, O.P., *A Companion to the Summa*, vol. 3, *The Fullness of Life (IIa-Iae)* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1940), 506.

(1) The vow itself is an act of *latría* which ennobles the acts of lower virtues when it commands them; (2) the one who vows subjects more to God—not only the act, but also the power; (3) by a vow the will is immovably confirmed in the good which represents the perfection of virtue.³⁴ Let us take these notions in reverse order.

First, St. Thomas notes that the vows impose a certain obligation to doing or omitting something, committing the individual to a greater good.³⁵ They thereby fix him in a particular state by debt of fulfillment: “Hence man is obliged before all to fulfill the vows he has made to God, since this is part of the fidelity he owes to God.”³⁶ To some it may seem that vows only make life more perilous by multiplying the occasions of infidelity. To the contrary, St. Thomas affirms that vows perfect one by fastening his will more indefectibly on the good. Only in this sense is it expedient to vow.³⁷ André Ignace Mennessier cites this as one of the principal benefits of the vows: “The vow, by the fact that it fixes our will—and by the effort of determination which this entails—contributes to intensifying our volitional élan [yielding] a more intense will on the part of action.”³⁸

By arguing along these lines, St. Thomas makes clear his particular understanding of freedom. One is not freer by being equally disposed to adhere to or defect from God’s will, but rather by being more stably fixed on the good end and thereby made more perfectly fit to pursue and acquire the best means to that end.³⁹ He explains: “The merit of a good work is increased in proportion as the will is confirmed in good. . . . He who makes a vow, confirms his will to accomplish that which he promises; and when he accomplishes the good work which he has vowed to do, its consummation proceeds from the fact that he who commits it acts from a determined purpose.”⁴⁰ Confirmation in the end affords a greater share in the goodness thereof, both habitual and actual, and thereby renders action more meritorious. A will stabilized in the end tends more reliably

³⁴ See *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 6, corp.

³⁵ See *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 1, corp.

³⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 3, corp.: “Et ideo maxime obligatur homo ad hoc quod impleat vota Deo facta, hoc enim pertinet ad fidelitatem quam homo debet Deo.”

³⁷ See *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 4, corp.

³⁸ André Ignace Mennessier, O.P., “Donation à Dieu et vœux de religion,” *Vie Spirituelle supplément* 49 (1936): 277–301, at 289.

³⁹ See *ST* I, q. 62, a. 8, ad 3, and II-II, q. 88, a. 4, ad 1.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *Perfection of the Spiritual Life*, ch. 13: “Ad laudem boni operis pertinet quod voluntas firmetur in bono. . . . Manifestum est autem quod qui aliquid vovet, voluntatem suam firmat ad id quod vovet; et sic cum implet quod voverat, opus suum ex voluntate firmata procedit.”

toward the goal of its perfection. To illustrate this point, St. Thomas cites the examples of God, the angels, and the blessed.⁴¹ Thus, the necessity that the vows entail is not a hindrance to human liberty, but a blessed bond leading ultimately to a more profound exercise of freedom. St. Thomas quotes St. Augustine: "Happy is the necessity that compels us to do the better things."⁴²

St. Thomas's second reason for the greater efficacy of vows underscores that in the exercise of vowed agency one offers not only the act, but the faculty as well: "He that vows something and does it, subjects himself to God more than he that only does it; for he subjects himself to God not only as to the act, but also as to the power, since in future he cannot do something else. Even so he gives more who gives the tree with its fruit, than he that gives the fruit only."⁴³ Here again, there is a sense that vows inaugurate a total offering.

Finally, for the first of the three reasons why it is more efficacious to act under vow than not, St. Thomas explains that vows make more meritorious the acts of lower virtues:

To vow . . . is an act of religion [*actus latrariae*] which is the chief of the moral virtues. Now the more excellent the virtue, the better and more meritorious the deed. Wherefore the act of an inferior virtue is the better and more meritorious for being commanded by a superior virtue, whose act it becomes through being commanded by it, just as the act of faith or hope is better if it be commanded by charity. Hence the works of the other moral virtues (for instance, fasting, which is an act of abstinence; and being continent, which is an act of chastity) are better and more meritorious, if they be done in fulfilment of a vow, since thus they belong to the divine worship, being like sacrifices to God.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Again, see *ST* I, q. 62, a. 8, ad 3, and II-II, q. 88, a. 4, ad 1.

⁴² *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 4, ad 1: "Felix necessitas est quae in meliora compellit."

⁴³ *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 6, corp.: "Ille qui vovet aliquid et facit, plus se Deo subiicit quam ille qui solum facit. Subiicit enim se Deo non solum quantum ad actum sed etiam quantum ad potestatem, quia de cetero, non potest aliud facere, sicut plus daret homini qui daret ei arborem cum fructibus quam qui daret ei fructus tantum."

⁴⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 6, corp.: "Primo quidem, quia vovere, sicut dictum est, est actus latrariae, quae est praecipua inter virtutes morales. Nobilioris autem virtutis est opus melius et magis meritorium. Unde actus inferioris virtutis est melior et magis meritorius ex hoc quod imperatur a superiori virtute, cuius actus fit per imperium, sicut actus fidei vel spei melior est si imperetur a caritate. Et ideo actus aliarum virtutum moralium, puta ieiunare, quod est actus abstinence, et continere, quod est actus

As will appear in what follows, religion is in one sense the highest of the moral virtues and therefore most proximate to the sphere of the theological virtues. It appears from St. Thomas's reasoning here that vows have the effect of drawing all the acts of a vowed person's properly moral life into the more noble and dignified character of religion, and thereby into a more proximate position to the summit of Christian life. Lemonnyer speaks of this as elevating life into the sphere of a perpetual liturgy:

In the religious state the virtue of religion is not confined to excellently exercising its proper acts. By the vows, especially by the vow of obedience, it consecrates, in their very source, the acts of the other supernatural virtues, moral virtues, in particular, which it raises to the high dignity and merit of works of the virtue of religion. It makes a perpetual and holy liturgy of the whole life of a religious. It is to this fact that the religious state owes its name of religious, and not only its name, [but] its proper and specific efficacy of exercise promoting perfection. The religious advances and arrives certainly at the perfection of charity through the systematic, professional exercise of the virtue of religion. The servant of God in the religious life becomes his friend therein.⁴⁵

The consecration which the vows effect in turn draws the acts of other virtues into a kind of ongoing liturgical dynamism. Giardini speaks in the same vein of the life of a religious as a "perpetual act of worship."⁴⁶ Religion, as greatest of the moral virtues, elevates the whole moral life of the religious into a nobler and more dispositively meritorious mode vis-à-vis charity.

Before pursuing further the subject of charity, religious life appears already as poised for perfection: Vows constitute man in an ecclesial state ordered by peculiar means to the pursuit and attainment of perfection. But, without a clear understanding of how religion is bound up with charity, it remains unclear what the quasi-perfection of religion yields. Thus, we must consider how religion is proximately dispositive to the advent and augmentation of charity.

castitatis, sunt meliora et magis meritoria si fiant ex voto, quia sic iam pertinent ad divinum cultum, quasi quaedam Dei sacrificia."

⁴⁵ Lemonnyer, *La vie humaine*, 516.

⁴⁶ Giardini, "Lo stato religioso," 191. See also *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 1, ad 2.

Virtues in Dialogue

How then do religion and charity relate? One could speak of the dynamic that obtains between the two virtues in the moral organism in terms of general (or architectonic) virtues with the attendant considerations of imperation (of the acts of “lower” virtues) and further/final formation (of virtuous acts), but much has been written on these themes, and here the aim is to address directly the peculiar contribution of religion.⁴⁷ The following approach will be conducted from the bottom up, as we examine the role played by religion in disposing proximally to charity.

At the outset, it bears repeating that in the Thomistic tradition religion is not a theological virtue.⁴⁸ Though this is clear from the fact of its subordination to justice within St. Thomas’s schema, the reasoning for the assignation is instructive. Religion properly considers the cult offered to God rather than God himself as object. Since virtues are specified by their object, religion is generically distinct from the theological virtues. Faith, hope, and charity actually modulate or transpose the reach of man’s intellect and will by conducting human acts unto God—propelling man beyond the limitations of his own nature.⁴⁹ Religion lacks this power. Generally speaking, the moral virtues govern the order of man’s passions and his relations to external goods, operations, and persons. It follows that the stable and solemn exercise of religion in the religious state is a non-ultimate, albeit non-trivial, perfection. Royo Marin characterizes the subordinated but significant contribution of the moral virtues in the following way:

⁴⁷ For a survey of pertinent contributions to the conversation as concerns general (architectonic) virtue, imperation by both charity and religion, and further/final formation, see: *ST* I-II, q. 6, a. 4; q. 18, a. 6; q. 65, aa. 1–2; II-II, q. 23, aa. 6–8; q. 81, aa. 1, 4; *In III sent.*, d. 9, q. 1, a. 3, qcula 3; d. 27, q. 2, a. 4, qcula 3; Thomas Aquinas, *De caritate*, q. 1, a. 3; Cajetan, commentary to *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 8, and q. 81, a. 8; John of St. Thomas, *Cursus theologicus*, vol. 2 (Paris: Ludovicus Vivès, 1886), disp. 19, a. 8, nos. 19, 21; Charles-René Billuart, O.P., *Sancti Thomae hodiernis academiarum moribus accommodata sive cursus theologiae juxta mentem Divi Thomae*, vol. 4 (Paris: Victor LeCoffre, 1886), 542 (*Tractatus de religione et vitiis oppositis*); Odon Lottin, O.S.B., *L’âme du culte: La vertu de religion d’après S. Thomas d’Aquin* (Louvain: Bureau des Oeuvres Liturgiques, 1920); Anthony J. Falanga, C.M., *Charity, the Form of the Virtues according to Saint Thomas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948); Michael Sherwin, O.P., *By Knowledge and By Love: Charity and Knowledge in the Moral Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), esp. 179–80.

⁴⁸ See *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 5, corp.

⁴⁹ Walter Farrell, *Companion*, 3–4.

Christian perfection cannot be considered as a simple form, but as an integrated moral whole through the coming together of conditions that perfect the life of the Christian. It is obviously a fullness that supposes the perfect submission or rectification of our whole moral life. And as this total moral rectification is not obtained with charity alone, which is uniquely referred to the end, but supposes also the full rectification of the means that are ordered to that end, subjecting and rectifying the disordered passions which impede and problematize the act of charity, it follows that the acts of all the other infused virtues—which are referred precisely to these means—enter to form part of the very essence of Christian perfection at least when considering it in a physical or integral manner.⁵⁰

Insofar as the attainment of the end is advanced by rectification of the means, the virtue of religion contributes to integral moral perfection. But, in what sense is religion peculiar in comparison with the other moral virtues?

In *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6, St. Thomas argues that religion is the greatest of the moral virtues or—as he puts it—should be preferred to the other moral virtues.⁵¹ He begins by noting that man's end is God. Those things which serve as paths to that singular end are ordered hierarchically according as they more or less effectively and sublimely secure the end. It follows: "The nearer it is to the end the better it is."⁵² Now, religion is peculiar among the moral virtues in that it directly and immediately orders its operations unto the divine honor.⁵³ Thus, the virtue of religion is most proximate to the properly theological, giving it a kind of preeminence among the moral virtues.

So, while religion is not a theological virtue, nevertheless, it should be preferred to all other moral virtues in part because its moral nobility places it in a privileged stance vis-à-vis charity. In examining this notion, Cajetan uses the Dionysian principle of cosmic continuity to speak of religion's quasi-theological character: "Just as in nature things are so connected and

⁵⁰ Antonio Royo Marin, O.P., *Teología de la Caridad* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1963), 81.

⁵¹ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6, corp.: "Religio sit praeferenda aliis virtutibus moralibus."

⁵² *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6, corp.: "Quanto sunt fini propinquiora, tanto sunt meliora."

⁵³ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6, corp.: "Religio approaches nearer to God than the other moral virtues, in so far as its actions are directly and immediately ordered to the honor of God [Religio autem magis de propinquo accedit ad Deum quam aliae virtutes morales, in quantum operatur ea quae directe et immediate ordinantur in honorem divinum]."

ordered that the inferior in its highest operation attains to the condition of the superior (as, for example, . . . the mind of man in its supreme act understands without discursive reasoning [and thus touches the angelic]), so among the moral virtues, the highest, which is religion, participates the nature of the theological virtues.”⁵⁴ The contention is that religion, as the highest of moral virtues, stands nearest the theological virtues and so most closely approximates their dynamism. St. Thomas locates this aptitude in the propinquity of their respective objects and ends: “It belongs immediately to charity that man should give himself to God, adhering to Him by a union of the spirit; but it belongs immediately to religion, and, through the medium of religion, to charity which is the principle of religion, that man should give himself to God for certain works of Divine worship.”⁵⁵

A complementary text will help to illumine this interrelation. When commenting *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 1, Cajetan describes the peculiar nature of the causality at work in the religious state—a causality deriving from its religious character. He contends that the holocaust of religious life disposes unto the union of charity by a kind of “accessive” or “approaching” causality:

The near relationship of the exercise of this sort (the holocaust of man) to perfection itself appears preeminently from the very start, because the binding holocaust of man to God of this sort, which is begun in profession, is most near [*maxime proximum*] to the union of charity to God. . . . And for this reason religion is called a state of perfection not formally but accessively.⁵⁶

Because he premises this argument on the specifically *religious* character

⁵⁴ Cajetan, commentary to *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 5: “Sicut in universo naturae rerum sic sunt connexae et ordinatae ut inferior in sui supremo attingat naturae superioris conditionem (in cuius signum, natura elementaris in suo supremo movetur motu caelesti, et anima in sui supremo intelligit absque discursu); ita in virtutibus moralibus suprema earum, quae est religio, participat natura theologialium virtutum.”

⁵⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 2, ad 1: “Ad caritatem pertinet immediate quod homo tradat seipsum Deo adhaerendo ei per quendam spiritus unionem. Sed quod homo tradat seipsum Deo ad aliqua opera divini cultus, hoc immediate pertinet ad religionem, mediate autem ad caritatem, quae est religionis principium.”

⁵⁶ Cajetan, commentary to *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 1: “Et quoniam approximitas huiusmodi exercitii ad ipsam perfectionem ex sui initio, quod est holocaustum hominis, praecipue apparet, quia huiusmodi holocaustum mancipativum hominis Deo, quod in professione religionem inchoante fit, *maxime proximum* est unioni caritatis ad Deum. . . . Et per hoc infert religionem nominare statum perfectionis, non formaliter, sed accessive.”

of the religious state, Cajetan's insight can be extended to the exercise of religion more broadly. In his reading of St. Thomas and Cajetan, Lemonnyer takes this tack. To refer to this "accessive" causality, he uses the language of "proximately dispositive" causality: "This union to God in his cult and service, on the plane of the virtue of religion does not constitute perfection itself, which belongs to charity. But vis-à-vis the perfection of charity, the union of religion has the value of proximate disposition [*disposition prochaine*] or of means *par excellence*."⁵⁷ Lemonnyer expands further on the fittingness of this dispensation: "It is normal that we should go to the perfection of charity, queen of the theological virtues, through the perfection of religion, which is the highest of the supernatural moral virtues, and to the intimacy of the divine friendship in charity through the familiarity of cult and service of God in religion."⁵⁸ The religious life, stabilized and solemnized by vows, establishes the individual in a wholly religious mode of life and thus, in light of the kinship of the virtues at play, constitutes him in an accessive or proximately dispositive stance to the advent and augmentation of charity.

To concretize the point further, consider the interplay between acts of religion and charity. In one text, St. Thomas describes the dynamic that obtains between devotion (interior, volitional act of religion) and charity:

Bodily fatness is produced by the natural heat in the process of digestion, and at the same time the natural heat thrives, as it were, on this fatness. In like manner charity both causes devotion (inasmuch as love makes one ready to serve one's friend) and feeds on devotion. Even so all friendship is safeguarded and increased by the practice and consideration of friendly deeds.⁵⁹

St. Thomas begins with a natural analogy to show how acts of two virtues can be mutually enriching, but he is careful with his language lest he be understood to have something cause itself. Charity, he says, *causes* devotion. Here it suffices to say that elicited acts of devotion are well disposed to the command of charity, which St. Thomas refers to in the immediately

⁵⁷ Lemonnyer, *La vie humaine*, 515.

⁵⁸ Lemonnyer, *La vie humaine*, 559.

⁵⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 2, ad 2: "Pinguedo corporalis et generatur per calorem naturalem digerentem; et ipsum naturalem calorem conservat quasi eius nutrimentum. Et similiter caritas et devotionem causat, inquantum ex amore aliquis redditur promptus ad serviendum amico; et etiam per devotionem caritas nutritur, sicut et quaelibet amicitia conservatur et augetur per amicabilem operum exercitium et meditationem."

preceding reply (cited above) as the “principle of religion.”

But what of the causal influence of devotion upon charity? Earlier St. Thomas has established that devotion renders the will prompt in its service, modally augmenting one’s agency to the plane of religion: “Hence devotion is apparently nothing else but the will to give oneself readily to things concerning the service of God.”⁶⁰ It effects the surrender or offering of the man to God. Mennessier defines devotion in St. Thomas as “a surrender, a conferral in which the whole will surrenders to the sovereign and transcendent Authority; so whole, so total that it must be qualified as prompt—in the fullest sense—specifying that the desire is held all the way down, even in its root.”⁶¹

Returning to the text under consideration, St. Thomas explains that charity is fed (*nutritur*) by devotion just as friendship (which St. Thomas identifies with charity in *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 1) is conserved and increased by meditation upon and the exercise of friendly deeds (*amicabilia opera*). Note first that charity is not caused but fed. God is the principal author of grace and thus of charity. Devotion cannot be said to cause charity in the strict sense, but by rendering the will prompt in offering divine service, it “feeds” charity as a kind of energy on which charity can draw insofar as it approximates the volitional dynamism of charity itself.

Taken in this sense, the act of devotion (and the virtue of religion) gestures toward or disposes to the virtue of charity. As John Curran observes, devotion is well-suited to offer the whole man, insofar as “morally speaking, the will is the whole man, for when the will is inclined toward God, the whole man is so inclined.”⁶² Thus, in a sense, the totality of devotion is seen to anticipate the totality of charity. As Curran explains further:

Devotion belongs to the handmaid; charity to the spouse. This is not true in the sense that the handmaid is without charity or that the spouse can neglect devotion. But it is true in the sense that devotion is emphasized in a special way in one and charity in the other. Both are necessary. The handmaid in the Christian dispensation is already a spouse. And the spouse cannot cease to be a handmaid in the service of her lord, for her lord is God.⁶³

⁶⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 1, corp.: “Unde devotio nihil aliud esse videtur quam voluntas quaedam prompte tradendi se ad ea quae pertinent ad Dei famulatum.”

⁶¹ Mennessier, “Donation à Dieu,” 279.

⁶² John W. Curran, O.P., “The Thomistic Concept of Devotion,” *The Thomist* 2 (1940): 410–43, 546–80, at 578.

⁶³ Curran, “Devotion,” 580.

Again, it bears repeating: whereas the theological virtues terminate in God as end—whether as first truth speaking, omnipotent and merciful giver of eternal life, or as divine friend—the moral virtues stand under the theological virtues as disposing means to that end and as integral parts of moral perfection. Devotion, as interior, volitional act of religion, functions within the moral organism as the soul of worship, standing at the threshold of charity's quarters. In this light, the act of devotion (and the virtue of religion) is seen to occupy a place of preeminence in moral perfection (the perfect operation of the moral virtues). Curran writes: "Devotion does for the moral virtues what charity does for all the virtues. . . . Religion is the highest moral virtue and devotion is religion in its pure state, just as the act of charity is total perfection in its pure state."⁶⁴ So, while the offering of devotion (religion) retains a character proper to the moral virtues, we can observe that it stands peculiarly well-suited to advance one in caritative perfection.

Charity, Religion, and Vows: A Second Look

Having considered one aspect of the relationship between religion and charity, it remains to examine how this dynamic is played out in the context of the vows wherein the exercise of the virtue of religion acts as proximately dispositive to the advent and augmentation of charity.

The Evangelical Counsels

Any formal investigation of the vows must account for the counsels to which they bind. The evangelical counsels serve as efficacious means which dispose the religious to the attainment of perfection. In what follows, it will help to set up a comparison between precept and counsels, to show how observance of the counsels "surpasses" observance of the precepts.

Precepts and Counsels—Common End

The end of Christian life is the same for all the faithful—namely, God and the growth in charity which secures our share in that end. All men are equally bound or commanded to attain to perfection understood in this way: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). All are equally called to the first and greatest commandment enunciated in the Old Testament and reformulated by Christ in the Gospels as the double love command.⁶⁵ This precept is identified by St. Thomas with charity and growth therein: "Primarily and essentially the

⁶⁴ Curran, "Devotion," 579.

⁶⁵ See: Deut 6:4–7; Lev 19:18; Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27.

perfection of the Christian life consists in charity, principally as to the love of God, secondarily as to the love of our neighbor, both of which are the matter of the chief commandments of the Divine law.⁶⁶ All are thus bound to pursue charity, and the precept is enjoined upon all: "Now the perfection of Divine love is a matter of precept for all without exception, so that even the perfection of heaven is not excepted from this precept."⁶⁷

Now, a problem arises in that the command of charity is effectively limitless. The precept has no upward bound, a fact evident from the exhaustive nature of the first and greatest commandment ("with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul, and with *all* your strength, and with *all* your mind") and from the formal structure of charity itself. In *ST* II-II, q. 24, a. 7, St. Thomas enumerates the three principles which could potentially circumscribe the growth of charity (agent, subject, and participated form), but he determines that none of these impose a limit. God possesses infinite power; the soul has no upper bound beyond which it cannot further participate a qualitative form; and the depths of charity, as a created participation in God's own love, simply cannot be plumbed.⁶⁸ Thus, the command to be perfect admits of no *ne plus ultra* for the wayfarer. For this reason, as Cajetan highlights, charity is fittingly commanded without limit:

Because the end of charity, which is God himself, is infinite, therefore it is no wonder if charity, which commands what is proximate to the infinite end, be commanded without measure. And so charity is fittingly desired without measure both in that it is the end of the remaining precepts, and in that it is immediately proximate to the infinite end: for nothing is more commensurate to the infinite than what is without measure.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: "Per se quidem et essentialiter consistit perfectio Christianae vitae in caritate, principaliter quidem secundum dilectionem Dei, secundario autem secundum dilectionem proximi, de quibus dantur praecepta principalia divinae legis, ut dictum est."

⁶⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, ad 2: "Perfectio autem divinae dilectionis universaliter quidem cadit sub praecepto, ita quod etiam perfectio patriae non excluditur ab illo praecepto" (cited in Teófilo Urdanoz, O.P., "El precepto de la perfección según Santo Tomás," *La Vida Sobrenatural* 35 [1955]: 164–76, at 169).

⁶⁸ See *ST* II-II, q. 24, a. 7, corp.

⁶⁹ Cajetan, commentary to *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3: "Quia finis caritatis, qui est ipse Deus, est infinitus, ideo non est mirum si caritas, quae ut quid proximum ad finem infinitum praecipitur, sine mensura praecipitur. Ita quod caritati convenit sine mensura appeti et ex eo quod est finis reliquorum praeceptorum, et ex eo quod est ut immediate proxima infinito fini: commensuratum enim infinito nihil magis est quam quod sine mensura est."

St. Thomas explains the practical import of this universal call to holiness: "We so love Him, if there be nothing in us which is wanting to divine love, that is to say, if there is nothing which we do not actually or habitually refer to God."⁷⁰ St. Thomas, himself glossing the first and greatest commandment, expands on this to show how the precept requires of each the complete subjection of the whole self. To love with the whole mind is to subject one's understanding. To love with the whole soul ensures that all that man loves is loved in God and all man's affection is referred to the love of him. To love with the whole strength signifies that all one's words and works are established in divine charity.⁷¹ This is no anemic or partial perfection over which the counsels make additional or supplementary demands. Clearly, the precepts entail a perfect adherence to the common end of human life on which the counsels can make no improvement: "Now the love of God and of our neighbor is not commanded according to a measure, so that what is in excess of the measure be a matter of counsel."⁷² Thus, the difference lies in the means adopted.

Before passing to consideration of how the counsels "improve" upon the common mode of fulfilling the primary precept of charity, it is helpful to compare the counsels to the secondary precepts as St. Thomas himself uses this analogy. Within the treatise on states of life in the *Summa theologiae*, once St. Thomas has established the nature of Christian perfection, he considers the means thereunto. In *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 2, he states that the pursuit of perfection prescribed by the primary precept entails the removal of obstacles which impede man's gradual approach to a wholly actualized charity. This progressive realization, he writes, can be lived in two generic modes, both of which are an adequate response to the Lord's injunction to be perfect. The first way is described as follows: "By the removal from man's affections of all that is contrary to charity, such as mortal sin; and there can be no charity apart from this perfection, wherefore it is necessary for salvation."⁷³ The second way exceeds the first, not in that it pursues a nobler object, but in that it endeavors a more thoroughgoing asceticism: "By the removal from man's affections not only of whatever is contrary to charity,

⁷⁰ Aquinas, *Perfection of the Spiritual Life*, ch. 6: "Alio vero modo ex toto corde, mente, anima et fortitudine Deum diligimus, si nihil nobis desit ad divinam dilectionem quod actu vel habitu in Deum non referamus."

⁷¹ See Aquinas, *Perfection of the Spiritual Life*, ch. 6.

⁷² *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: "Non autem dilectio Dei et proximi cadit sub praecepto secundum aliquam mensuram, ita quod id quod est plus sub consilio remaneat."

⁷³ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 2, corp.: "Uno modo, inquantum ab affectu hominis excluditur omne illud quod caritati contrariatur, sicut est peccatum mortale. Et sine tali perfectione caritas esse non potest. Unde est de necessitate salutis."

but also of whatever hinders the mind's affections from tending wholly to God."⁷⁴ This distinction appears to describe the pursuit of Christian perfection without the counsels and with the counsels respectively, or the common mode of acquiring the perfection of charity and that proper to religious life. But, as this identification is not made explicitly, the point must be established.

St. Thomas makes it clear in the line which immediately follows that this latter course signifies a certain perfection: "Charity is possible apart from this perfection, for instance in those who are beginners and in those who are proficient."⁷⁵ The clear implication is that the second way which removes from man's affection "not only of whatever is contrary to charity, but also of whatever hinders the mind's affections from tending wholly to God," is more fittingly called perfect. The question remains whether the perfection attributed to the latter course is essential (having a higher degree of charity) or instrumental (pertaining to a higher state in pursuit of charity). The categorization of the three ages of the spiritual life (beginners, proficient, and perfect), to which St. Thomas adverts, appears earlier in the treatise on charity⁷⁶ under the aspect of those moral matters which pertain to men of every state.⁷⁷ It would seem from this initial treatment that the categorization pertains principally to essential Christian perfection or the pursuit of charity regardless of state. But the immediate context suggests a different application in the article under consideration. St. Thomas describes the three ages again in the immediately preceding question, and there he construes the division as somehow associated with difference of states.⁷⁸ He affirms baldly in *ST* II-II, q. 183, a. 4, ad 2: "Men are said to be beginners, proficient, and perfect (so far as these terms indicate different states), not in relation to any occupation whatever, but in relation to such occupations as pertain to spiritual freedom or servitude."⁷⁹

⁷⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 2, corp.: "Alio modo, inquantum ab affectu hominis excluditur non solum illud quod est caritati contrarium, sed etiam omne illud quod impedit ne affectus mentis totaliter dirigatur ad Deum."

⁷⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 2, corp.: "Sine qua perfectione caritas esse potest, puta in incipientibus et proficientibus."

⁷⁶ See *ST* II-II, q. 24, a. 9, corp.

⁷⁷ See *ST* II-II, prol.: "... de his quae pertinent ad omnes hominum status."

⁷⁸ See *ST* II-II, q. 183, a. 4, corp.: "Videtur quod differentia statuum non attendatur secundum incipientes, proficientes et perfectos." The cited text is the first line of the first objection, which will be denied in the *sed contra*.

⁷⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 183, a. 4, corp.: "Incipientes, proficientes et perfecti, secundum quod per hoc status diversi distinguuntur, dicuntur homines non secundum quodcumque studium, sed secundum studium eorum quae pertinent ad spiritualem libertatem vel servitutem."

St. Thomas has just defined ecclesial state in question 183 according to spiritual freedom and servitude. It appears thus that in the present treatise the three ages pertain principally to ecclesial state, and that therefore the latter category in *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 2, pertains to religious.

St. Thomas confirms this deduction and elaborates upon it in the next article. There he addresses directly “whether perfection consists in the observance of the commandments or the counsels,” and it is in this context that the analogy with the secondary precepts proves so illuminating. As highlighted at the beginning of this section, St. Thomas begins by distinguishing different senses of perfection: “Primarily [*per se*] and essentially [*essentialiter*] the perfection of the Christian life consists in charity,”⁸⁰ which St. Thomas identifies with the double love command.⁸¹ After a short disquisition on the inexhaustibility of this command, St. Thomas summarizes with the observation that “perfection consists essentially in the observance of the commandments.”⁸² Here commandments should be understood as the aforementioned precepts of love of God and love of neighbor. From this point, St. Thomas passes on to a description of the counsels, the perfection of which he describes initially as “secondary and accidental,”⁸³ and which here he calls “secondary and instrumental.”⁸⁴ In the latter half of the article, St. Thomas describes the counsels in terms of the secondary precepts (those subordinated to the double love command), both of which (secondary precepts and counsels) are “directed to charity, yet not in the same way.”⁸⁵ He goes on to describe how the other precepts (*alia praecepta*)—the secondary precepts—“are directed to the removal of things contrary to charity,”⁸⁶ while the counsels “are directed to the removal of things that hinder the act of charity.”⁸⁷ This division conjures

⁸⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “Per se quidem et essentialiter consistit perfectio Christianae vitae in caritate . . .”

⁸¹ See *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “. . . principally as to the love of God, secondarily as to the love of our neighbor, both of which are the matter of the chief commandments of the Divine law [. . . principaliter quidem secundum dilectionem Dei, secundario autem secundum dilectionem proximi, de quibus dantur praecepta principalia divinae legis].”

⁸² *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “Perfectio essentialiter consistit in praeceptis.”

⁸³ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “secundario et accidentaliter”

⁸⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “Secundario autem et instrumentaliter perfectio consistit in consiliis.”

⁸⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “. . . ordinantur ad caritatem, sed aliter et aliter.”

⁸⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “. . . ordinantur ad removendum ea quae sunt caritati contraria.”

⁸⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, corp.: “. . . ordinantur ad removendum impedimenta actus caritatis.”

the twofold perfection of charity described at the end of the last article, and what is more, here the identification of the common and religious modes is explicit. What is at stake is an analogous attribution of totality or perfection. In the former course the strict contrary (mortal sin) is removed, while in the latter course everything which might detract from the most expeditious and complete actualization of and growth in charity is removed insofar as possible. As Marie-Joseph Nicolas notes, the former is a principally negative totality—"There is nothing in my heart which is contrary to charity (not only to the fervent act of charity, but also to its presence in the soul)"—whereas the latter is at first negative, but also positive—"There is nothing in my heart which hinders me from loving God with all my strength, actually."⁸⁸

The analogy with the secondary precepts is especially important in framing the subsequent discussion. One of the governing paradigms according to which St. Thomas describes the counsels is as non-essential yet more efficacious instrumental means. Scholars have noted that this notion, if understood improperly, may be taken to trivialize the importance of the counsels. Fernando Sebastian Aguilar notes that comparison with the secondary precepts helps one to retain a sense of the counsels' importance:

In reality, commandments and counsels have a similar relation to the great commandment of charity. The secondary commandments are means of fulfilling the commandment of charity imperfectly; the counsels, for their part, are means of fulfilling it perfectly. Perfection consists in neither of the two essentially. If we say that the counsels are not necessary for perfection because it does not consist in them formally, why not say also that it is not necessary to fulfill the secondary precepts in order to be perfect, for Christian perfection consists essentially in neither of them.⁸⁹

By comparing the efficacy proper to the secondary precepts with that of the counsels, one is more likely to avert such a minimization.

There is evidence to suggest that this theme is one which St. Thomas came to appreciate especially in the years immediately preceding his death, as it reappears in a work contemporaneous with the composition of the

⁸⁸ Marie-Joseph Nicolas, O.P., "La perfection chrétienne dans l'état religieux," in *Directoire des supérieures* (Paris: Cerf, 1948), 10.

⁸⁹ Fernando Sebastian Aguilar, C.M.F., "Mandamientos y consejos evangélicos," *Revista Española de teología* 25 (1965): 25–77, at 45.

end of the *secunda secundae*. In the *Contra retrahentes*, he gives a classic formulation:

The manner in which the precept of Charity is to be fulfilled by certain precepts of the Law [*alia praecepta legis*] is different to that in which it is to be accomplished by the Counsels. For some things are so designed to a particular end that the end cannot be attained without them [*sine quo finis haberi non potest*]. Such is the case with food and the maintenance of life. Other things, again, serve to attain an end with peculiar certainty and completeness [*per quod et facilius et securius et perfectius finis obtinetur*]. Thus, though food is necessary for the continuance of physical life, medicine serves for the easier and more certain preservation of health. Now some of the commandments [*alia legis praecepta*] are given for the first of these two reasons, namely as a necessary means of attaining to charity. . . . But the Counsels are given to us in order that we may fulfil the precept of charity, in the second way of which we have spoken.⁹⁰

This text makes clear the analogous use of perfection. The secondary precepts (*alia legis praecepta*), on the one hand, are strictly necessary for salvation and for keeping the precept of charity such that, without their observance, charity itself is lacking. In this sense, they are perfect. The counsels, on the other hand, dispose man more perfectly (*perfectius*) unto the total attainment of the end. Aguilar summarizes: “Both are dispositions to charity; the commandments to the essential existence [*ser*] of charity, and the counsels to its perfection [*su perfección*].”⁹¹ Aguilar compares the characteristic nature of these two modes of fulfillment. The former mode—by observance of secondary precepts (*de necessitate salutis*)—entails the recognition and love of God as final end and *Summum Bonum*.⁹² The

⁹⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Contra retrahentes* [*Refutation of the Pernicious Teaching of Those Who Would Deter Men from Entering Religious Life*], ch. 6, in Procter (trans.), *Apology for the Religious Orders*. “Aliter tamen ad caritatis praecepta ordinantur alia praecepta legis, aliter autem consilia. Ad finem enim aliquid ordinatur ut sine quo finis haberi non potest, sicut cibus ad vitam conservandam; aliquid vero ordinatur in finem sicut per quod et facilius, et securius, et perfectius finis obtinetur: sicut ad vitam corporis conservandam ordinatur cibus ex necessitate, medicina vero conservativa sanitatis ut perfectius et securius sanitas habeatur. Primo igitur modo ad caritatem ordinantur alia legis praecepta. . . . Secundo autem modo ordinantur ad caritatem consilia.”

⁹¹ Aguilar, “Mandamientos,” 54.

⁹² See Aguilar, “Mandamientos,” 46–47.

latter mode—by adoption of the counsels (*de consiliis*)—responds to the prompting of charity unto a permanent and total act of love of God. He explains this beautifully as a kind of drawing nearer and nearer to heaven:

Between avoiding mortal sin and doing some acts of love of God now and again [secured by the fulfillment of the secondary precepts] and living in a permanent and total act of the love of God [secured expeditiously through observance of the counsels], there is room for the possibility of striving to make our love as frequent and total as is possible to us, going beyond the measure of the obligatory and drawing more or less near to the ideal of beatific perfection.⁹³

In the same vein he writes later:

The secondary precepts [*mandamientos*] establish the required acts for the very essence of charity, such that without them it [charity] could not exist; therefore they are like instruments for acquiring and exercising charity in its most essential and indispensable elements; the counsels also are instruments for acquiring and exercising charity, not in its essential elements, but rather with a singular perfection, as the sole reason of the whole of life assiduously exercised.⁹⁴

It is in this sense that St. Thomas will speak of the secondary precepts as, in a sense, ordered to the perfection of the counsels: “But the observance of the precepts apart from the counsels is directed to the observance of the precepts together with the counsels; as an imperfect to a perfect species, even as the irrational to the rational animal.”⁹⁵ This is to say that the fulfillment of the secondary precepts as ordered to the observance of the primary precept of charity can, in a certain sense, be said to dispose to the totality and perfection represented by observance of the counsels. Aguilar writes:

The exercise of charity at the level of the secondary precepts [*mandamientos*] disposes one to exercising it [charity] at the level

⁹³ Aguilar, “Mandamientos,” 47.

⁹⁴ Aguilar, “Mandamientos,” 54.

⁹⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 189, a. 1, ad 5: “Observantia vero praeceptorum sine consiliis ordinatur ad observantiam praeceptorum cum consiliis sicut species imperfecta ad perfectam, sicut animal irrationale ad rationale.”

of the evangelical counsels. . . . The evangelical counsels are more perfect than the secondary precepts; they are more direct and more closely bound up with the perfection of charity; and they contain eminently the perfection of the secondary precepts as perfect charity contains imperfect.⁹⁶

This is the essential point. The counsels, beyond *merely* instrumental and non-essential means available to those who would assume them, exercise a certain perfecting influence vis-à-vis the secondary precepts. (It is for this reason that all are called to observe the spirit of the counsels.) By motivating a more perfect way, the counsels somehow complete and crown the instrumentality of the common course of pursuing perfect charity. This gets at the principal sense in which a life lived according to the counsels is somehow more perfect. It bears repeating that this is not to say that religious have a specifically different charity from that possessed by non-religious. This is emphatically not the case. Grace is one. So too is charity. Lemonnyer writes: "St. Thomas is categorical. This charity which the precept of charity commands for all is perfect charity in all its extent and according to all its modes, both heavenly and earthly. The reason for this is that charity, having as it does the value of an end, is necessarily willed by God and commanded by him without limit or measure."⁹⁷ Both forms of life, with and without the profession of the counsels, are trained on the fulfillment of the precept of charity. But, those who assume the counsels outstrip the mark intentionally lest they be found wanting in the end. With the solicitude of a perfectionist, the religious seeks to remove all the obstacles that could potentially hamper his pursuit of God.

Counsels as More Efficacious Means

St. Thomas speaks of the counsels with greatest frequency as instrumentally dispositive means to the perfection of charity. St. Thomas describes the nature of this instrumental perfection or efficacy in a variety of ways. On the weaker side, he speaks of them as preamble or preparatory to charity.⁹⁸ According to these formulations, the counsels appear to occupy

⁹⁶ Aguilar, "Mandamientos," 56.

⁹⁷ Lemonnyer, *La vie humaine*, 550.

⁹⁸ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibet* I, q. 7, a. 2, ad 2: "Those are said to have a state of perfection who are solemnly obliged to something annexed to perfection. But something is annexed to perfection of charity in two ways. In one way as preamble or preparatory to perfection, as with poverty, chastity, and such like, by which man is withdrawn from concern for things of the world, that he might be given more freely to things of God [Statum autem perfectionis habere dicuntur qui sollemp-

a merely negative place. The counsels, in this sense, are for removing obstacles. Antonin Motte clarifies: "It is a matter of what affords to charity its full growth in aiding it not only to triumph over what could threaten its very existence, but to exclude as much as possible what prevents it from being actualized."⁹⁹ On the stronger side, St. Thomas speaks of the counsels as instruments in the sense of perfective or efficacious means unto perfect charity.¹⁰⁰ Reginald Buckler writes of this instrumental perfection:

The difference between the ordinary Christian and the Religious life lies in the means to be used in each state for gaining the common end. The Christian life provides sufficient means for attaining to perfect Charity. The Religious state provides the perfect means. It is therefore called a state of perfection, because of the perfect means it possesses for attaining the end, and the obligation it imposes on those who join it to use those means permanently in progressing to their end.¹⁰¹

St. Thomas uses a variety of terms to denote the mode or manner of expediency. By the counsels, one attains the end of the religious state more easily,¹⁰² more securely, and more perfectly.¹⁰³ Pedro Lumbreras echoes this language, speaking of the advance of the religious as "better, more expeditious, easier, more secure, and more perfect."¹⁰⁴

niter obligantur ad aliquid perfectioni annexum. Est autem aliquid annexum perfectioni caritatis dupliciter. Vno modo sicut praeambulum et praeparatorium ad perfectionem, ut paupertas, castitas et huiusmodi, quibus homo retrahitur a curis saecularium rerum, ut liberius uacet hiis quae Dei sunt]."

⁹⁹ Antonin Motte, O.P., "La definition de la vie religieuse selon s. Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue thomiste* 87 (1987): 442–53, at 444.

¹⁰⁰ See Aquinas, *Contra retrahentes*, ch. 6: "From all this it becomes clear that the Counsels pertain to perfection of life, not because perfection necessarily consists in their observance, but because they are the way or means to perfection [Sic igitur patet quod consilia ad vitae perfectionem pertinent, non quia in eis principaliter consistat perfectio, sed quia sunt via quaedam vel instrumenta ad perfectionem caritatis habendam]."

¹⁰¹ H. Reginald Buckler, O. P., *The Perfection of Man by Charity: A Spiritual Treatise* (London: Burns and Oates, 1893), 91.

¹⁰² See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibet* IV, q. 12, a. 2, ad 2: "per que facilius ad perfectionem peruenitur."

¹⁰³ See *Contra retrahentes*, ch. 6: "per quod et facilius, et securius, et perfectius finis obtinetur."

¹⁰⁴ Pedro Lumbreras, O.P., *De Statibus Hominum Variis* (Madrid: Graficas Halar, 1957), 79.

The concept of instrumental causality perhaps more adequately connotes a sense of contribution, albeit relative and subordinated, to the pursuit of perfection in the context of the religious state. Thus, while the instruments themselves do not impart perfection infallibly and indefectibly, they are certainly most apt and qualified to an expedient attainment of the end. Marie-Vincent Leroy writes: "And it is necessary that [the state of perfection] deal with a certain type of works objectively better than their opposite, and which, without themselves being perfection, are qualified to lead to it with greater surety and rapidity."¹⁰⁵ Whenever speaking of their instrumental efficacy, St. Thomas deploys three principal images for their manner of operation, the discussion of which follows in turn.

Counsels as Therapeutic, Ascetic, and Oblative

St. Thomas describes the instrumental perfection of the vows in terms of their therapeutic (healing), ascetic (self-emptying and disciplining), and oblativ (self-offering) value. In general, the counsels seek to ameliorate the wounds and remove the impediments which hinder the actualization of charity while effectuating the self-gift of the individual. Charity is habitually retained so long as mortal sin is expunged from one's life. But, St. Thomas observes, the habit itself has a trajectory. It stands as first act with respect to the further perfection of posited acts of the habit. And, as the beatitude toward which man tends is a matter of *actual* charity, it stands to reason that the soul is more perfect which is better disposed to act out of that habit. The counsels cultivate the perfection (understood as actualization) of perfection (understood as habitual charity). The genius of the counsels is that they make just such a reality more attainable. Aguilar writes: "The perfect mode of perfecting the precept of charity tries to avoid, moreover, all which is contrary to the actuality and integrality of charity, to its perfection; [the religious] tries to practice it with the totality and with the actuality with which it is practiced in heaven."¹⁰⁶

The threefold renunciation of the vows begins by reorienting the woundedness of one's fallen desires and advances by distancing him from whatever secondary goods might prove absorbing and engrossing, so that he may give himself wholly to the continual pursuit of a heaven-bound charity. By renouncing legitimate claims to these goods, the evangelical counsels seek first to ameliorate and heal the concupiscent tendency

¹⁰⁵ Marie-Vincent Leroy, O.P., "Théologie de la vie religieuse," *Revue thomiste* 92 (1992): 324–43, at 337.

¹⁰⁶ Fernando Sebastian Aguilar, C.M.F., *La Perfección en la Iglesia: Sus Lineas Esenciales* (Madrid: Victor Pradera, 1963), 69.

which—when aggravated—is inflamed by covetousness, lasciviousness, and vainglory. The vows thus restrain and purify the associated desires under the leavening influence of charity. Taking chastity for example, the counsel does not represent an overly fastidious fear of sexual intercourse or a dualistic depreciation of bodily goods. Rather, St. Thomas explains, it represents a therapeutic means to ameliorate the reproductive faculty's fallen clamoring: "Now the use of sexual union hinders the mind from giving itself wholly to the service of God . . . on account of its vehement delectation, which by frequent repetition increases concupiscence."¹⁰⁷ By extending this logic to obedience and poverty, which respectively curb man's concupiscent tendencies to egoism and acquisitiveness, one can see how the vows are ordered to the progressive healing of man's fallen nature. St. Thomas summarizes in the following fashion:

As regards the practice of perfection a man is required to remove from himself whatever may hinder his affections from tending wholly to God, for it is in this that the perfection of charity consists. Such hindrances are of three kinds. First, the attachment to external goods, which is removed by the vow of poverty; secondly, the concupiscence of sensible pleasures, chief among which are venereal pleasures, and these are removed by the vow of continence; thirdly, the inordinateness of the human will, and this is removed by the vow of obedience.¹⁰⁸

But the value of the vows extends beyond the therapeutic. Indeed, by the vows one abandons claim to everything which occupies or consumes his attention and solicitude. This frees the religious to dedicate himself more wholly to the pursuit of what is higher and ultimately more conformable to his nature. Solicitude is a limited commodity and vehement or sustained activity in any particular aspect of man's life hinders him from

¹⁰⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 4, corp.: "Usus autem carnalis copulae retrahit animum ne totaliter feratur in Dei servitium . . . propter vehementiam delectationis, ex cuius frequenti experientia augetur concupiscentia."

¹⁰⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 7, corp.: "Quantum ad exercitium perfectionis, requiritur quod aliquis a se removeat illa per quae posset impediri ne totaliter eius affectus tendat in Deum, in quo consistit perfectio caritatis. Huiusmodi autem sunt tria. Primo quidem, cupiditas exteriorum bonorum. Quae tollitur per votum paupertatis. Secundum autem est concupiscentia sensibilibus delectationum, inter quas prae-cellunt delectationes venereae. Quae excluduntur per votum continentiae. Tertium autem est inordinatio voluntatis humanae. Quae excluditur per votum obedientiae."

pursuit of higher things.¹⁰⁹ Thus, by freeing man from even legitimate objects which greatly absorb his attention, the counsels leave him better disposed to attain a higher good. Picking up at the end of the last cited text, St. Thomas goes on to describes this ascetic aspect of the vows:

In like manner the disquiet of worldly solicitude is aroused in man in reference especially to three things. First, as regards the dispensing of external things, and this solicitude is removed from man by the vow of poverty; secondly, as regards the control of wife and children, which is cut away by the vow of continence; thirdly, as regards the disposal of one's own actions, which is eliminated by the vow of obedience, whereby a man commits himself to the disposal of another.¹¹⁰

By virtue of the renunciations and purifications which the evangelical counsels entail, the religious is freed to adhere to the one thing necessary. Apropos of the ascetic quality of the instrumental efficacy of the counsels, St. Thomas writes elsewhere: "It is abundantly clear, that the human heart is more intensely attracted to one object, in proportion as it is withdrawn from a multiplicity of desires. Therefore, the more a man is delivered from solicitude concerning temporal matters, the more perfectly he will be enabled to love God."¹¹¹ Thus, by disciplining his concern for the principal goods which impinge upon his life and attention, man is thereby freed to dedicate himself more wholeheartedly to the pursuit of perfection. And by hemming in his use of these goods, he can reasonably expect a concomitant asceticism of affection. Nicolas writes: "The religious chooses actual poverty, perfect chastity, and universal obedience, not in order to make his perfection consist in them, but in order to arrive by these means at a *purity of heart*, that is to say at the abolition in himself of all the affections which

¹⁰⁹ See *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 2, corp.

¹¹⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 7, corp.: "Similiter autem sollicitudinis saecularis inquietudo praecipue ingeritur homini circa tria. Primo quidem, circa dispensationem exteriorum rerum. Et haec sollicitudo per votum paupertatis homini aufertur. Secundo, circa gubernationem uxoris et filiorum. Quae amputatur per votum continentiae. Tertio, circa dispositionem propriorum actuum. Quae amputatur per votum obedientiae, quo aliquis se alterius dispositioni committit."

¹¹¹ Aquinas, *Perfection of the Spiritual Life*, c. 6: "Manifestum namque est quod humanum cor tanto intensius in aliquid unum fertur, quanto magis a multis revocatur; sic igitur tanto perfectius animus hominis ad Deum diligendum fertur, quanto magis ab affectu temporalium removetur."

present obstacles to actual, total, direct, and immediate love of God.”¹¹²

Now, in addition to the therapeutic and ascetic, there is an oblation dimension to the instrumental efficacy of the counsels.¹¹³ St. Thomas shows that, by an exhaustive dialectic, the counsels lay claim to all the goods of the religious which he offers with a certain élan:

Again, ‘a holocaust is the offering to God of all that one has,’ according to Gregory (Hom. xx in Ezech.). Now man has a threefold good, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. i, 8). First, the good of external things, which he wholly offers to God by the vow of voluntary poverty: secondly, the good of his own body, and this good he offers to God especially by the vow of continence, whereby he renounces the greatest bodily pleasures. The third is the good of the soul, which man wholly offers to God by the vow of obedience, whereby he offers God his own will by which he makes use of all the powers and habits of the soul.¹¹⁴

St. Thomas regularly uses the Scriptural image of holocaust, a species of Old Testament sacrifice, to signify the complete nature of the offering in religious profession.¹¹⁵ St. Thomas relies on St. Gregory the Great to draw the connection between the Old Testament sacrifice and religious oblation: “Hence Gregory says (Hom. xx in Ezech.): ‘Some there are who keep nothing for themselves, but sacrifice to almighty God their tongue, their senses, their life, and the property they possess. . . . When a man vows to God all his possessions, all his life, all his knowledge, it is a holocaust.’”¹¹⁶

¹¹² Nicolas, “La perfection chrétienne,” 17.

¹¹³ I have described this feature at length in the discussion of religious self-offering as devout sacrifice or holocaust. It suffices to supply the final division of the quotation from *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 7, corp., for the sake of completion.

¹¹⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 7, corp.: “Primo quidem, exteriorum rerum. Quas quidem totaliter aliquis Deo offert per votum voluntariae paupertatis. Secundo autem, bonum proprii corporis. Quod aliquis praecipue offert Deo per votum continentiae, quo abrenuntiat maximis delectationibus corporis. Tertium autem bonum est animae. Quod aliquis totaliter Deo offert per obedientiam, qua aliquis offert Deo propriam voluntatem, per quam homo utitur omnibus potentiis et habitibus animae.”

¹¹⁵ St. Thomas gives a summary description of the holocaust offering in his treatise on the Old Law in *ST* I-II, q. 102, a. 3, ad 8.

¹¹⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 186, aa. 1 (corp.: “Unde Gregorius dicit, super Ezech., sunt quidam qui nihil sibimetipsis reservant, sed sensum, linguam, vitam atque substantiam quam perceperunt, omnipotenti Deo immolant”) . . . and 6 (corp.: “Cum quis omne quod habet, omne quod vivit, omne quod sapit, omnipotenti Deo voverit, holocaustum

Transposing the cultic sense of holocaust (from the Greek, “burnt whole”) in which the entire host is consumed on the altar, St. Thomas uses this notion of religious life as an immolative self-offering to capture the comprehensive nature of a life vowed to God according to the evangelical counsels.¹¹⁷ The vows inaugurate this offering not merely by the offering of discrete goods or of discrete acts, but the very person—possessions, body, and soul (with all its powers).

The therapeutic, ascetic, and oblationary features of the vows are ordered and animated by perfection, as ordered to the more fixed, stable, and permanent actualization of the virtue of charity—an inchoation of the perfection of heavenly love. Taken in this light, the healing, training, and offering which the counsels effect at once signal the presence of charity’s prompting and dispose to its growth in extent and intensity. Lemonnyer writes on this score:

A holocaust accomplished under the influence of initial charity and in view of perfect charity, the vows are an authentic work of perfect charity and represent an excellent starting point of the religious towards perfection. A complete liberation of the will and of the spirit, the vows assure [the religious’s] total and permanent preparedness, exterior and interior, for charity itself and for its distinguished works—contemplation and works of mercy, spiritual and corporal.¹¹⁸

So while the counsels proximately dispose only the means, they do so perfectly. By ordaining means more proportionate to the end of man’s high calling, they assist the religious to accede more rapidly to love’s abundance.

Counsels and State of Perfection

At this point, we are in a position to appreciate why religious vows constitute religious life as a state of perfection. All that remains is to make the connection explicit. Religious life is fittingly called a state of perfection because vowing the evangelical counsels according to a rule of life fixes one solemnly and stably in an ecclesial state wherein one adopts the means best

est”).

¹¹⁷ Because the host is wholly consumed in a holocaust, St. Thomas, following the testimony of Scripture, teaches that it is the preeminent (*praecipuum*) or perfect sacrifice: “Inter omnia sacrificia holocaustum erat praecipuum, quia totum comburebatur in honorem Dei, et nihil ex eo comedebatur” (*ST* I-II, q. 102, a. 3, ad 10).

¹¹⁸ Lemonnyer, *La vie humaine*, 520.

suited to the perfection of charity and the life of heaven:

There is required for the state of perfection a perpetual obligation to things pertaining to perfection, together with a certain solemnity. Now both these conditions are competent to religious . . . For religious bind themselves by vow to refrain from worldly affairs, which they might lawfully use, in order more freely to give themselves to God, wherein consists the perfection of the present life.¹¹⁹

By the assumption of this obligation in solemn manner as ritually attested, the religious is bound to perfect means to perfection: "The state of perfection requires an obligation to whatever belongs to perfection: and . . . poverty, continence, and obedience belong to the perfection of the Christian life. Consequently, the religious state requires that one be bound to these three by vow."¹²⁰

At first the claim may seem modest or unremarkable. Are not the counsels only perfect instrumentally vis-à-vis charity (which is perfect simply)? How then does a vowed life justly merit consideration as a state of perfection? Recall that, for reasons adduced earlier, perfection in charity cannot function as the object of a vow (in the strict ecclesial sense), as it is not a concrete and immediately realizable higher good, itself having no upper bound; by comparison, the counsels given shape by a prescribed rule can serve in just such a capacity. And, in light of their proximately dispositive position vis-à-vis charity, they are especially well-suited to serve in this stead. Thus, given the distinctions already formulated regarding the analogical use of perfection and the proper perfection of religion and charity, we can appreciate the content, scope, and significance of the claim that religious life is a state of perfection.

¹¹⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 5, corp.: "Ad statum perfectionis requiritur obligatio perpetua ad ea quae sunt perfectionis, cum aliqua solemnitate. Utrumque autem horum competit et religiosis et episcopis. Religiosi enim voto se adstringunt ad hoc quod a rebus saecularibus abstineant quibus licite uti poterant, ad hoc quod liberius Deo vacent, in quo consistit perfectio praesentis vitae."

¹²⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 6, corp.: "Ad statum autem perfectionis requiritur obligatio ad ea quae sunt perfectionis. Quae quidem Deo fit per votum. Manifestum est autem ex praemissis quod ad perfectionem Christianae vitae pertinet paupertas, continentia et obedientia. Et ideo religionis status requirit ut ad haec tria aliquis voto obligetur."

Conclusion

Religious life takes its name from the virtue of religion, and its constitutive act is an act of religion. And yet, religious life does not limit its aspirations to the subjection of divine servitude through acts of worship within a merely natural setting. Rather, the religious is trained ultimately on the fullness of charity which pursuit his state animates in peculiar fashion. In considering the vows, we have seen how this plays out in the concrete order of virtuous acts. Acts of religion (devotion, prayer, vows, etc.) have their own proper perfection, but they do not operate in isolation from charity. Rather, religion—by approximating the perfection of charity in the register proper to the moral virtues—proves proximately dispositive to the reign of charity and indeed conduces to the advent and augmentation of thereof.

Thus, religious life is not a state of perfection in that it infallibly generates a more intense charity by the sheer instrumentality of the state itself. Such claims, in addition to being verifiably false, justly incur the wrath of those seeking to appropriate the Church's ascetical tradition and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council in the present context. Rather, the dignity and suitability of the means adopted in the religious state dispose one—provided he consents and cooperates—unto a more expedient growth in Christian perfection, which perfection God wills for all persons of whatever rank or state. Here, the suitability and continued pertinence of the language of “state of perfection” emerges.

In the end, there are a variety of excellent ways to go to God. The manifestation of God's glory cannot be exhausted by merely one way. Rather, he chooses to bless a diversity of states so that each might testify to his glory with a certain excellence. Some means are better than others and some can fittingly be called perfect. Thus, we can appreciate that religious life—as deploying especially efficacious means—serves in this sense as an eschatological sign. The goal is heaven. Some states are especially transparent to that reality, from which other states may in turn benefit. Ultimately, religious life and the language used to describe it ought not to dispirit or rankle but rather to orient the mystical body toward the perfection of charity in the integral union of the worshipping Christ unto the praise of God's glory.