

Vows of the Daughters of Charity

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Introduction

St. Vincent and St. Louise, co-Founders of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, were aware of the novelty being surmised of the new manner of following Christ and the fact that God was the author.

1. Vows and the Evangelical Counsels

In the theology of Christian Spirituality, we generally understand the word “vow” as meaning the very serious way in which a person commits himself/herself before God to accomplish what was promised by this vow. It is like a covenant between God and the person making the vow, a covenant to which one is faithful by reason of his/her word.

A vow is an act of the virtue of reverence. Through this virtue, the creature feels inclined to give honor and worship to God, which is owed him as Master and Lord of all creation. St. Vincent said that Jesus Christ possessed two great virtues, namely: “*reverence towards his Father and charity towards mankind.*”¹ Thanks to this virtue, Christ gives his Father glory, honor and praise, looking in all things to accomplish the Father’s Will and be pleasing to God.

In the domain and language of consecrated life, the vows are a commitment through which one lives out the Evangelical Counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. There can also be other ways of living them out, for example through promises. Some congregations add a more specific fourth vow; for the Daughters of Charity it is the vow of Service to the Poor.

Vowing to live the Evangelical Counsels expresses the entire offering of oneself to God, in following Christ within these three dimensions of his historical life, while at the same time desiring to overcome the obstacles that can occur and hinder this commitment such as the inordinate use of power, sex, and money. The Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* presents the Evangelical Counsels as “*a spiritual therapy*” for humanity² in the face of the idolatry of the sexual instinct,³ a materialism which craves possessions,⁴ and the distorted use of freedom.⁵

¹ Coste, Correspondence, VI, 413, Letter 2334.

² VC 87.

³ VC 88.

⁴ VC 89.

⁵ VC 91.

Jesus Christ himself suffered these three tests as obstacles to his mission, as can be seen in the temptations in the desert.⁶ St. John enumerates “*carnal allurements, enticements for the eye, and the life of empty show*”⁷ as being opposed to the love of the Father. St. Vincent asked, “*What does a Daughter of Charity say who makes vows of poverty, chastity and obedience? She says that she renounces the world, that she despises all its beautiful promises and gives herself unreservedly to God. That is what one does by making vows, and that is how one should act to observe them faithfully.*”⁸

The vows express a commitment and a spiritual fervor. Through them, one assumes not only the concrete material that makes up the object of the vows, but the corresponding virtue and Evangelical Counsel as well. This is meaningless unless the vow achieves the demands of the virtue. For example: through the vow of poverty, the Daughters of Charity “*commit themselves to a total dependence in the use and disposition of the goods of the Company, as well as in the use of their personal goods.*”⁹ This manner of concretizing the material of the vows does not free the sisters from the requirements that are implicit in following the poor Christ and their condition as servants of the poor. If the Daughters of Charity take literally the way of understanding and living poverty, they will weaken and diminish the evangelical demands, which were asked for by St. Vincent: “*My Daughters, you have chosen him ever since you entered the Company; you have pledged him your word and as he led a life of poverty, you must imitate him in that respect.*”¹⁰ “*All of you who are members of the Company and have not yet made vows are bound to observe poverty; as for those who have made vows, that goes without saying.*”¹¹ That is why, when the Constitutions present the vows of the Daughters of Charity, in addition to concretizing the vows, they take on the theology and spirituality of the virtues and the corresponding Evangelical Counsels.

It cannot be any other way, for Daughters of Charity, in the pronouncement and renewal of vows, confirm their consecration to God which consists in following the evangelical and radical way of Christ, in totally giving oneself to God in service to the poor. In reaffirming this confirmation and to better fulfill this goal, they accept the Evangelical Counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience and all the demands associated with these vows.

2. Vows in the Company

Vows were introduced nine years after the foundation of the Company. Before this, they were, however, authentic Daughters of Charity. When they entered the Company, they began living poverty, chastity and obedience.

Before the practice of vows was introduced, St. Vincent often spoke to the sisters on the need to practice the virtues of chastity, poverty, and obedience. At that

⁶ Cf. Lk 4:1-13.

⁷ 1 Jn 2:16.

⁸ Coste, Conferences to DCs, 820.

⁹ C. 2.7.

¹⁰ Coste, Conferences to DCs, 815.

¹¹ Ibid., 816.

time, the vows were not essential elements of the Company, but more the practice of these three virtues. In speaking of poverty, St. Vincent said to the sisters: *“Some of you have made a vow of poverty and the rest have determined to do likewise. When you entered the Company, all of you were resolved to embrace poverty, otherwise you would not have been admitted.”*¹²

In the Conference of 5 July 1640, St. Vincent said to the sisters: *“Daughters of Charity, ... even though they have not vows to sustain them, do not cease to be in a state of perfection, if they are real Daughters of Charity.”*¹³ During his conference two weeks later, he conveyed with much feeling how he was moved by the vow formula of the Hospital Religious of Italy who assumed the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and service to their lords, the poor. The sisters then expressed that they be allowed to do the same. St. Vincent, admitting the possibility, made very clear that if one day they did make vows, it would not be to become religious.¹⁴

On 25 March 1642, St. Louise, as well as four sisters, pronounced vows for the first time “for life.” Later, other sisters did as well, but freely: some made vows, some did not; for some, they were temporary, for others, perpetual, not that these differences created any obstacles or sense of inequality in the Community. In 1648, the vows began to be annual, and the sisters also asked permission of St. Vincent for first pronouncements as well as renewals.

With time, the practice of making vows and pronouncing them for the first time between five to seven years of vocation began to be generalized. After 1801, this requirement was indispensable for remaining in the Company.

The great concern and effort of the Founders was inculcated in the sisters that, even if they pronounced vows, they would not be as religious but they would continue to be secular. Thus, the Founders wanted to safeguard the mobility of the service of the poor, to be where the poor are found. Fear and danger remained in the fact that in making vows, they could be considered as religious, which would be an inescapable consequence leading to the risk of enclosure: *“If he (the bishop) asks you who you are and if you are nuns, you will tell him you are not ... but that if you were religious you would have to be enclosed and consequently would have to say good-bye to the service of the poor. Tell him you are poor Daughters of Charity who have given yourselves to God to serve the poor.... If he asks you: ‘Do you make religious vows?’ tell him: ‘Oh, no, Sir, we give ourselves to God to live in poverty, chastity and obedience, some of us forever and others for a year.’”*¹⁵

The present Constitutions faithfully convey the Founders’ plan for the Company, as well as the manner in which they conceived the vows.

¹² Ibid., 887.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁵ Ibid., 474.

Currently, the Company is recognized in the Church as a Society of Apostolic Life. These Societies do not have religious vows; they accept the Evangelical Counsels by a specific bond as defined in the Constitutions.¹⁶ The Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity state that the vows are “*non-religious, annual, and always renewable.*”¹⁷ The Church, in approving the present Constitutions, guarantees that the Company, through the manner in which the vows are understood and expressed today, remains faithful to the Founders.

“Non-religious” vows

The expression “non-religious vows” signifies, first, that the vows of the Daughters of Charity are distinct from the vows of religious. The fundamental difference is that religious life accepts the Evangelical Counsels through public vows and it by this act that one becomes a religious, while for the Daughters of Charity it is the gift of one’s life to God in service to the poor. That is why one is considered a Daughter of Charity at the time of entrance to the Seminary. The vows (not public, nor completely private, but specific to the Company) are confirmed by this total gift to God to better serve the poor. The central point within religious consecration is the profession of vows, while in the Daughters of Charity it is charity expressed through the corporal and spiritual service of the poor. St. Vincent told the sisters: “... *you give your whole life to the practice of charity and, therefore, you give it to God*”¹⁸; “(you consumed) *your life for the same reason for which Jesus Christ gave his – for charity, for God, and for the Poor!*”¹⁹

It is often said that the definition of “non-religious” vows, as they are pronounced in the Company, is negative in tone and does not explain well what the vows are. For myself, they are very clearly explained within the areas of the Constitutions and the *Instruction on the Vows* devoted to them.²⁰ Trying to reassert the value of the vows today does not make them become “religious” but allows them to be understood and lived according to the Constitutions.

“Annual and always renewable” vows

The Founders hesitated between the temporality and the permanence of the vows in the Company. Finally, they decided on temporality, through vows that are renewable every year on the Feast of the Incarnation.

The fact of being annual and renewable does not diminish the importance of the vows. Temporality is not a provisional sign, it is a spiritual energy, an impetus for a gradual deepening of the vocation. The annual renovation is a YES without discontinuity in the vocation. Given that the vows confirm the consecration made to God and that this, in a deliberate way, is an option for all of one’s life, the vows are

¹⁶ Cf. Canon 731.

¹⁷ C. 2.5.

¹⁸ Coste, Conferences to DCs, 409.

¹⁹ Coste, Correspondence, VII, 397, Letter 2734.

²⁰ Cf. C. 2.4 to 2.8; 2.1; 2.9 and the *Instruction on the Vows*, 1989.

“always renewable.” In this sense, the yearly recurrence and the renovation are intimately united expressions. In the face of a possible renewal of vows by the fact of being annual, St. Vincent asserts: *“However, it would be better not to make them at all than to do so with the intention of securing a dispensation whenever you wished.”*²¹

The vows must be understood and lived in the light of the “special vow”

Another fundamental aspect of the vows of the Daughters of Charity is that the end of the Company constitutes the object of the fourth vow, the “special vow.”²² It is the most specific of the Company, most directly linked to its identity and its purpose in the Church. The other three must be understood and lived in reference to the fourth. The formula used to express them allows it to be clearly seen: *“In response to the call of Christ who invites me to follow him and to be a witness to his charity to the poor, I ... renew the promises of my Baptism and vow to God for one year, chastity, poverty and obedience ... and to devote myself to the corporal and spiritual service of the poor.”*²³ For *“the service of Christ in the poor is an act of love – both affective and effective love – which directs their lives.”*²⁴ *“The practice of the evangelical counsels ... takes on a specific character from this service.”*²⁵ *“The practice of the evangelical counsels is linked at all times to the service of the poor.”*²⁶ The Company is a Society of Apostolic Life and these are identified, above all, by an apostolic end; that of the Daughters of Charity is the corporal and spiritual service of the poor. This end is the object of a “special vow” and to better fulfill it they take on and practice the other three.²⁷ Constitution 2.1 stresses: *“Service is for them the expression of their consecration to God in the Company and gives it its full significance.”*

3. Difference between religious vows and the vows of the Company

The Code of Canon Law affirms what constitutes consecration specific to religious. It is the profession of the Evangelical Counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience by public vows.²⁸

Daughters of Charity are not religious, they do not make profession of the Evangelical Counsels; therefore they do not consecrate themselves to God in the manner of religious. The words of St. Vincent are very clear on this subject: *“They shall bear in mind that they (Daughters of Charity) are not in a Religious Order, as this state is unsuitable to the duties of their vocation. ... making use of no other form of profession to assure their vocation than the continual confidence they have in Divine Providence and the offering they make to God of all that they are and of their service in the person*

²¹ Coste, Conferences to DCs, 22.

²² Cf. C. 2.9.

²³ C. 2.5.

²⁴ C. 2.9.

²⁵ C. 2.4.

²⁶ C. 3.6.

²⁷ Cf. C. 1.5.

²⁸ Cf. Canon 654.

of the poor."²⁹ Daughters of Charity are not professed. And, since according to Canon Law, religious consecration is made by profession, the Daughters of Charity are not religious nor consecrated from the canonical point of view.

However, the word "consecration," as used in the Constitutions to apply to Daughters of Charity, signifies "unreservedly giving oneself to God," "entirely giving oneself," "offering one's life." In this sense Daughters of Charity are really and truly consecrated. If the specific consecration of religious life is configuring oneself to Christ chaste, poor and obedient, the consecration of the Daughters of Charity is also a configuration to Christ, but through three other dimensions of his life that are no less essential: Adorer of the Father, Servant and Evangelizer.

The Company is part of consecrated life, but not of religious life. It is a Society of Apostolic Life.³⁰ These societies "resemble" religious life because they also strive for the perfection of charity, in short, evangelical holiness, but in following a different route than Institutes of Religious Life. Societies of Apostolic Life do not make public professions; that is why their vows are neither "religious," nor public. They strive for perfection through the observance of their Constitutions and embrace the Evangelical Counsels in a particular manner as determined by these same Constitutions.³¹

St. Vincent also used the word "consecration" as opposed to "profession" in applying it to the Daughters of Charity, in precisely contrasting the terms profession and consecration of religious: "*It is a vocation where one makes a profession to love God and neighbor.*"³²

4. Vows as an expression of a greater spiritual demand and evangelical radicality

Although "consecration" for the Daughters of Charity is different than that of religious, both carry similar evangelical radicality and demands. St. Vincent's text that I just quoted, where he states that the Daughters of Charity do not make religious profession and are not part of the religious state, continues thus: Daughters of Charity "*should have as much or more virtue than if they had made their profession in a Religious Order.*"³³ At the beginning of his conference, after asking the sisters to oppose and cry out if anyone wanted to make them religious (at that time, being religious signified being cloistered, and for this reason it would be impossible to serve the poor), St. Vincent tells them: "*That is why it is most important that you should be more virtuous than religious. And if there is one degree of perfection for persons living in a Religious Order, Daughters of Charity need two.*"³⁴ Behind these words of the Founder was hidden the opinion that some sisters had that the cloistered religious state was more perfect than the "state of charity" of the Daughters of Charity. St. Vincent wanted to convince them that it was not so and that even if he admired religious greatly,

²⁹ Coste, Conferences to DCs, 1213.

³⁰ Cf. C 1.13.

³¹ Cf. Canon 731.

³² Coste, Conferences to DCs, 417, 802.

³³ Ibid., 1213.

³⁴ Ibid., 1211.

he said to the Daughters of Charity that even though they were not religious they “do not cease to be in a state of perfection, if they are real Daughters of Charity”³⁵ and to reinforce this conviction he adds “I have never seen a state so perfect”³⁶.

These words of St. Vincent prove that the consecration of the Daughters of Charity carries with it a great radicality: “Now, to be true Daughters of Charity, it is necessary to have given up everything: father, mother and the hope of establishing a household. The Son of God teaches us this in the Gospel. It is also necessary to give up self ... To be Daughters of Charity is to be Daughters of God, daughters who belong entirely to God.”³⁷

St. Vincent, in addressing the missionaries, commented on this sentence of Jesus: “You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,”³⁸ “that is a high aim,” he said to them, “nevertheless, it is the standard.” And he adds: “But, as all Christians do strive to attain it, God, by certain ways which men should admire, beholding the negligence of the greater number, raises up some who offer themselves to his Divine Majesty to undertake, with his grace, to become perfect themselves and to lead others to perfection.”³⁹

St. Vincent gives a similar explanation to the Daughters of Charity during one of the conferences on the vocation.⁴⁰ And on another occasion, in referring to the Company as a continuation of Christ’s mission, he said: “What! to do what God did on earth? Should you not be most perfect? Ah! yes, sisters, should you not be angels in the flesh?”⁴¹

The vows of the Company are equally an extremely demanding sign, even though they are “non-religious.” Listen to this from St. Vincent: “And it would be well **if those on whom God has bestowed the grace of giving themselves more perfectly to him and who have promised to serve him in the Company were to renew their vows.**”⁴²

“You have, by entering the Company, chosen Our Lord as your Spouse, and he received you as his spouse or, to put it better, you have been betrothed to him and, at the end of four or five years, more or less, **you have given yourselves entirely to him, so that you are his spouses and he is yours.**”⁴³ “My Daughters, the name of each of you was written in the book of charity when you gave yourselves to God to serve the poor; and, **in particular, on the day when you made your vows you received this name which God has given to you.**”⁴⁴

³⁵ Ibid., 12.

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 1235, 1211.

³⁷ Ibid., 12.

³⁸ Mt 5:48.

³⁹ Coste, *Conferences to CMs*, 599.

⁴⁰ Cf. Coste, *Conferences to DCs*, 12-15.

⁴¹ Ibid., 518.

⁴² Ibid., 315.

⁴³ Ibid., 779.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1045.

The Daughters of Charity give themselves totally to God “*in fidelity to their Baptism.*”⁴⁵ They strive to live their Baptismal consecration in serving Christ in the poor and to accomplish this they practice the Evangelical Counsels that they take on as “non-religious,” annual vows.⁴⁶ They pronounce the vow formula after having affirmed: “*I ... renew the promises of my Baptism.*”⁴⁷ In other words, consecration or the total gift of their life to God to serve Christ in the poor, as made by the Daughters of Charity, is also a response to the call of God to live the Gospel teachings that imply baptismal consecration. It is in this sense that St. Vincent wanted, not more, not less, that the Daughters of Charity be “good Christians” and he did not ask anything more exacting than if he had asked them to be good religious.

5. Some points of insistence for Daughters of Charity today concerning the vows

If the first pronouncement of vows and the annual renovation of vows for the Daughters of Charity are a confirmation of the consecration, a new YES pronounced in freedom to the vocation to which God calls them, it must be all that is included in this vocation that is confirmed both in assuming them for the first time as in the renewal each year. This being established, I am going to focus my attention on some aspects that, in my opinion, are currently in need of a special thrust within the Company. While recognizing that others could be listed, I will limit myself to stressing only six points, the first two concern the vows in general and the others refer to each of the four vows in particular.

a) Vows in general

That the vows are “non-religious” and renewed annually does not diminish the evangelical radicality that is implied in accepting the evangelical counsels by vows. St. Vincent urged the sisters to live their vocation with greater preciseness “*from the moment you make your vows.*” Previously, I said that accepting the evangelical counsels through vows has always signified, in the Church, a radical following of Christ. And if the vows are not this, they lose their reason for being. Fr. Maloney wrote: “*The vows are prophetic signs and enticing parables if lived out genuinely to the end. Otherwise they become a scandal, a lie, the story of one who gave but then took back.*”⁴⁸ Without this note of radicality, the vows become like salt that has lost its flavor and like yeast that no longer raises the dough. We must be in a state of heightened awareness of the vows becoming trite and relativized which could happen for some sisters. That is why the Provincial Council must show discernment when the sisters request to make vows for the first time as well as for the renovation of vows and therefore encourage adequate preparation for these acts.

b) Temporality of the vows

⁴⁵ C. 1.4.

⁴⁶ Cf. C. 2.4; 2.5.

⁴⁷ C. 2.5.

⁴⁸ Robert P. Maloney, *Echoes of the Company*, May 1996, 216.

The fact that the Daughters of Charity make vows for one year and that they are renewable does not affect in any way the vocational option that, in itself, is for a lifetime. Our two Founders often insisted on this point. St. Vincent said: “... *you have given yourselves to him in the Company with the intention of living and dying in it....*”⁴⁹ And St. Louise writes: “... *we do not accept anyone who does not intend to live and die in the Company.*”⁵⁰

Perhaps, influenced by the present day culture of fear of lasting commitments and a preference for things that are short term, some sisters relate their vocational choice to the temporality of their vows. The intention of the Founders was just the opposite. They agreed that vows were made in the Company as a vocational sign of maturity and stability. Fidelity to the vocation includes perseverance,⁵¹ even when the vows are made for one year.

The annual Renovation does not mean that the vows are temporary but dynamic, a new thrust and deepening in what consecration in the Company implies. This must be very clear with the Daughters of Charity, even if other congregations are somewhat confused in this respect. A few months ago, during a meeting of Major Superiors, someone suggested that a way of attracting vocations would be to make vows for a year, like the Daughters of Charity. The reasoning for this statement was that there would be a connection to the current sensitivities of young people. This is a false perception of the meaning of the temporality of the vows in the Company and an erroneous and inaccurate way of presenting a vocation to young people; the proof in this lies in the fact that the Daughters of Charity do not attract more vocations than the other institutes.

If the sisters of the Company did not renew vows annually as a sign of confirmation and progressive deepening of their vocation, this temporality of the vows would become an occasion of conflict and casuistry. There are conflicts for the sisters who, when asking to renew their vows, question, year after year, whether they should remain or leave. This causes imbalance, instability, disintegration, moving them to have very little sense of belonging to the Company. There is also casuistry and conflicts for the sisters and for the various legal actions of governance before the various possibilities as referred to in the Constitutions: requesting or imposing a delay in renewing vows, for how long, how will it be lived out, what accompaniment to be offered to them, if they have completed years of vocation or not, etc. What is more serious, is when one asks for a dispensation from vows a little before or after the Renovation of Vows, especially if the alleged reason already existed before. Does this not denote a devaluing of the vows? Happily, these cases are not many given the large number of sisters. Nevertheless, in an institution such as the Company where the members make vows for a year, the request for dispensation must be the exception, if what it means to commit oneself before God by vows is taken seriously.

c) Vow of Chastity

⁴⁹ Coste, Conferences to DCs, 559.

⁵⁰ *Spiritual Writings*, L 486, p. 513.

⁵¹ Cf. Coste, Conferences to DCs, 555-556.

In a hedonistic society that turns the spotlight on sexual satisfaction, the chaste celibate becomes incomprehensible; there is mistrust of the authenticity of living this out or it is doubted. This is the context within which consecrated life lives out the evangelical counsel of chastity today.

Certainly, the sexual revolution helped to make sexuality less repressed and overcame some taboos. But we must not ignore, that despite its positive aspects, sexuality has been made trite and brought disgrace in society as well as religious life.

Statistics, reliable and unreliable, tell us that the unresolved problems of sexuality are the greatest cause of most vocations being abandoned, although we list other causes as well. Likewise, immature and distorted expressions of sexuality and affectivity underlie some behaviors of community life and service of the poor.

Points of emphasis to this vow are: first, a mystique of chastity. If there is not an impassioned love of Christ and his cause, upheld by prayer and supported by a loving community, consecrated evangelical chastity becomes impossible and lacks its true motivation. Secondly, during the stages of initial formation, today more than ever, clear information and a solid formation must be given in what concerns sexuality and affectivity, and in what is implied and is signified in living as a chaste celibate.

A positive view of sexuality does not exclude vigilance and asceticism. Some of the precautions that St. Vincent proposed to the sisters as means to safeguard chastity would seem exaggerated to us today. Yet experience confirms the need to balance affectivity and being on guard within friendships, the use of mass media, and so on. For chastity is at the same time a joy-filled offering and a renunciation. The Constitutions recall that chastity is “*a response of love to a call of love, involving participation in the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of life and death.*”⁵² If it is true that the vow of chastity of the Daughters of Charity is also oriented towards the service of the poor, it is not its basis. It is based on the example of Christ and a love for God above all else. Chastity must not be summed up as being an instrument for the noble cause of service to the poor.

d) Vow of poverty

Today’s points of emphasis for the vow of poverty as taken by the Daughters of Charity can be thus concretized:

The Company serves the poor through diverse works and services. To accomplish this, the Company needs material goods, furnishings and buildings. It has been this way since the beginning and it must be realized that it did not hinder the Founders nor the first sisters in living evangelical poverty.

In an environment of consumerism and wastefulness particular to richer countries, the expression of poverty of the Daughters of Charity must be a lifestyle that

⁵² C. 2.6.

is temperate and simple. We must be cautious for it is very easy to go from necessity to convenience and from there to superfluous.

If it is very difficult to witness to and live out poverty in being rich, a point of emphasis on this vow is addressed to communities and provinces who are poor and are beginning to establish themselves. May they not thirst for riches nor possessions; may they not necessarily attach efficacy of service to the poor to large works. The poor can be served in using simple means without giving the impression of being a powerful institution supported by inexhaustible foreign capital. It is easier and perhaps more evangelical to be poor and live in poverty among the poor when one freely chooses to be among them, than appearing to be poor while having many goods.

Another point of emphasis concerning the vow of poverty of the Daughters of Charity is the use of personal goods. This afternoon we will speak on this point, for it is necessary that the sisters as well as the Directors be very clear in their thoughts when asking or giving permission to use these goods termed “personal.”

e) Vow of obedience

Jesus is, above all else, the Son of God who was incarnated to accomplish the mission that the Father confided to him, a mission of announcing the good news to the poor. The vow of obedience of the Company searches to facilitate the continuation of Christ’s mission among the poor. The determination of St. Vincent that the Daughters of Charity not be religious was so that the cloister would not deter them from going to where the poor were calling.

But in addition to overcoming this physical obstacle, the Daughters of Charity were asked to be “*daughters that go and come,*”⁵³ a total availability and great mobility. When St. Vincent spoke to the sisters of obedience, he almost always expressed it as the availability of the sisters to go where Superiors sent them and the poor were calling.

In the present culture, individualism and egoism often hide under the appearance of respect for personal freedom. The point of emphasis relating to today’s vow of obedience consists in arousing availability. The necessary and continuous revision of works in each province cannot be realized without this total availability of the sisters. The mission of the Company must not be hindered by personal plans nor by affective, professional or apostolic bonds of the sisters. Obedience demands free hearts accepting the will of God, aware also that authority, community discernment and the signs of the times are necessary to discover God’s designs for the Company.

f) Service of the Poor

When the Daughters of Charity affirm that the vow of service of the poor is the most characteristic vow of the Company, that it is the expression of their consecration, the framework that unifies and gives meaning to the other three vows, they are making authentic assertions but have not exhausted the entire truth. For “*it is not enough to*

⁵³ Coste, Correspondence, VIII, 277, L 3077.

serve the poor,”⁵⁴ “many others ... profess, as you do, to help the poor but not in the same way.”⁵⁵ It must always be added: that the service of the poor be done as Daughters of Charity. This requires seeing the poor with eyes of faith, perceiving them as the image of Christ; seeking at the same time to help them, promoting and evangelizing them, giving this service in a true attitude of servant, expressed in humility, simplicity and charity. In this way the sisters will live out this service as an expression of their consecration and avoid the danger of falling into professionalism.

The point of emphasis for the vow of service to the poor will be, then, to recover or develop further the mystique of service. And this has a great deal to do with the “for whom,” the “why” and the “how” the poor are served.

Conclusion

The vows of the Daughters of Charity are “non-religious.” But the object of their vows is the same as for religious: the Evangelical Counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. According to the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, accepting the Evangelical Counsels can only be explained as “unbounded generosity and love.”⁵⁶ Loving God more than anyone expresses itself in chastity; more than anything in poverty; more than oneself in obedience. The difference between the vows of the Daughters of Charity and those professed by religious is not more or less in the great evangelical radicality of one or the other, but in the manner of understanding them and in some juridical aspects. Fidelity to one’s own vocation presupposes an enlightenment of its identity and specificity. These two aspects are understood in this concise phrase of Fr. Lloret: “One is not a Daughter of Charity because of making vows, but one makes vows because one is a Daughters of Charity and to always be so more perfectly.”⁵⁷ These words express well the specificity of the vows in the Company as well as the dynamic sense of the annual renovation.

However, the Daughters of Charity, by reason of their particular consecration to God, do not identify themselves with the laity. Therefore, for this same reason, they must not be identified with religious. They are not more or less one or the other; they are different. It is the Holy Spirit that created within the Church different charisms and varied ways of following Christ. The Church insists that each congregation be faithful to its charism, convinced that this diversity of charisms embellishes the body of Christ.

This diversity of charisms is perhaps a question of details, but this does not mean that it is something done by accident for it touches at the identity of every congregation. That is why it is important to know and faithfully incarnate what is specific in each charism. The temporality of the annual and renewable vows of the Daughters of Charity as a progressive confirmation of their specific consecration is a question of fidelity to their own identity. Moreover, it is a spiritual dynamism that has

⁵⁴ Coste, Conferences to DCs, 1172.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 525.

⁵⁶ *VC*, 105a.

⁵⁷ Michel Lloret, *Echoes of the Company*, September-October 1985.

beneficial repercussions on the vitality with which the Daughters of Charity live their total gift to God.

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