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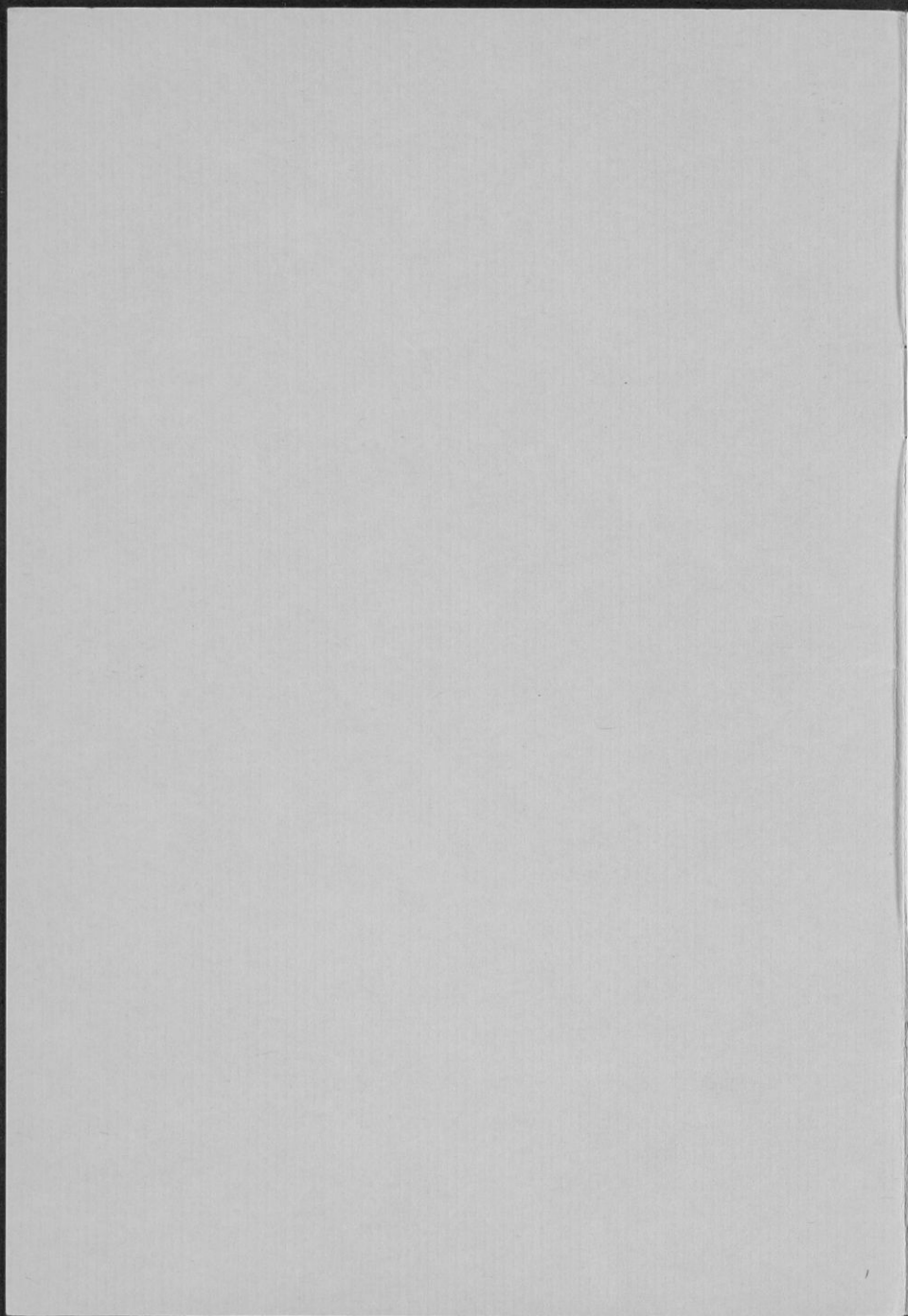
The Truth About the Religious Life

By

REV. J. A. CHAMARD, S.J.



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*"If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what
thou hast, and give to the poor, and
thou shalt have treasure in heaven;
and come follow Me" (Matt. xix. 21).*

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FOREWORD

Why this booklet on the religious life?

1. Because too many, even among Catholics, have but vague or false notions on that subject.
2. Because too few of our schoolboys and girls are interested in the religious life as a possible career for themselves.
3. Because too little is done to remedy this glaring deficiency in Catholic education.

Such are the alarming facts revealed by a recent, limited survey of our Catholic High Schools by one of our Catholic organizations.

All must admit the supreme importance of religious vocations as a factor of Catholic life and activities. Let the source of these vocations run dry, and what becomes of our Catholic schools, our hospitals, our missions?

Since God wants the welfare of His Church, He cannot fail to sow the seed of such vocations in many chosen souls; but that seed must be nurtured and brought to maturity. Few modern parents are willing to do this for their children; hence the task of doing it naturally devolves upon pastors and Catholic teachers, particularly teachers of religion.

4 THE TRUTH ABOUT THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

To stimulate interest in this subject, especially among the young, by a clear, concise exposition of the nature, obligations and advantages of the religious life, is the aim of this booklet. It does not claim to be a learned, exhaustive treatise on the subject. It seeks to be suggestive and practical as a guide to further inquiry and discussion, and, incidentally, with God's blessing, to help in garnering an abundant harvest of vocations.



PART I

WHAT IS THE RELIGIOUS LIFE?

TH**ERE** is much ignorance and misunderstanding even among Catholics about the religious life. Some imagine that cloisters are real earthly paradises peopled by angelic perfect beings without human frailties. Others believe that they are nothing but prisons, or at best retreats for victims of illusions, deceptions, disappointments or misfortunes, whose life is a hopeless grind and torture. Not a few pretend that Religious lead a life of ease, comfort, self-indulgence and idleness. Such notions, needless to say, are groundless and erroneous, the fruit of ignorance or prejudice, if not of malice. What, then, is the religious life in reality?

Broadly speaking, it may be called a special Christian way of life; a life of voluntary sacrifice based on the profession and practice of the three evangelical counsels or vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In other words, it is the narrow way of evangelical perfection recommended by Christ in the Gospel and sanctioned by the laws of the Church. Strictly and theologically speaking, it may be defined thus: a common life of voluntary poverty, chastity, and obedience under a rule approved by the Church.

The religious life is characterized by three essential marks: detachment from creatures, strict dependence, intimate union with God.

A Life of Detachment

First, it is a life of detachment from creatures; a life of comparative isolation from the world. It means the sacrifice of one's earthly possessions and the joys of family life. It means leaving home—father and mother, brothers and sisters and other actual or prospective family ties. Such are the demands of the vows of poverty and chastity. Such are the implications of Christ's own words to the young man whom He called to a life of perfection: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven and come follow Me" (Matt. xix. 21). To be perfect, this detachment from creatures must be not only exterior but also internal; that is, it must wean the heart from all affection for earthly things. One can be poor in reality without being poor in spirit; that is without being really detached from creatures and deserving the rewards of true poverty.

A Life of Dependence

In the second place, the religious life is a life of dependence—dependence in the choice of one's place of residence, one's companions, and one's occupations; dependence in the use of one's time, one's talents and practically everything else. In practice, it means the surrender to God of one's personal liberty and natural right to do one's will, a right of which we are so jealous and so proud. Such is the yoke imposed on Religious

by the vow of obedience and by the rules of religious Orders and Institutes.

It cannot be denied that such a yoke is burdensome and repugnant to human nature. In fact, we might call it unbearable, were it not lightened and sweetened by supernatural motives and considerations. As a matter of fact, Christ calls it sweet and light. "Take up My yoke upon you," He says, "for My yoke is sweet and My burden light" (Matt. xi. 29). It is indeed sweet and light in the cloister, because it is a burden of love, and we are told that love feels no burden. It is sweet and light because it is the pledge of countless blessings both here and hereafter, as we shall see further on. It is sweet and light because, in the cloister, it is not compulsory but freely chosen and freely carried, not only out of love, but out of gratitude to Christ Who did share that yoke with us for our sake and for our encouragement. Well may He call it His yoke, for He, too, practiced obedience, "becoming obedient unto death," says the Apostle St. Paul, "even to the death of the cross" (Phil. ii. 8). His whole life from the crib to the cross, was an uninterrupted act of heroic obedience such as no man will ever be called upon to match. In fact, He still obeys in His eucharistic life where He is still subject to His creatures.

Here it is well to note that subjection to authority and to regulations is not peculiar to Religious, but is the common lot of all created beings. If there is a universal law in the world, it is the law of obedience.

It was the first law promulgated by God to our first parents. If we look around us, we shall find obedience everywhere; in the home and in the school, in the Church and in the State, in the army and in civil service, in stores and in factories, in every sphere of human activity and organized labor—obedience even in nature which is subject to definite laws. God only knows how heavy and galling is the yoke of obedience imposed by the world upon its servants. In comparison with it, Christ may well call His yoke sweet and light.

A Life of Union With God

We come now to the third and noblest characteristic of the religious life: intimate union with God of which it is the reward and the pledge. Isolation from the world and detachment from creatures are not the main object of the religious life. They are necessary, but only as a means to a noble end and a greater good. After all, one may retire from the world and even despise it without being a Religious or even a Christian, like some ancient philosophers and cynics. For Religious, the main object of seclusion from the world is to facilitate their union with God, and that, by way of consecration. By this is meant no ordinary union such as every Christian may aspire to, but one exclusively reserved to Religious. One may be united to God in many ways and in various degrees, as for instance by faith, hope, and charity; by grace and by prayer, by recollection and conformity of will; but

these bonds of union are common to all and not peculiar to Religious. Over and above these common bonds, stands the religious profession which extends and completes one's union with God by dedicating one's soul exclusively to God's service and glory, even as a temple or a chalice are set apart for divine service by their consecration.

Such is the meaning, the purpose, and the effect of the vows of religion. In virtue of these vows, not only is a Religious cut off from the world and incorporated or adopted into a spiritual family of his choice, but he becomes God's exclusive property by a new title distinct from that of creation and Redemption, namely, by a voluntary, unconditional and total donation of his whole being and his whole life, to be consumed like burning incense, in God's service and for His glory in any field of activity proper to his vocation.

From this sacred contract of consecration, as from other contracts, naturally arise certain obligations and certain privileges. Since donation is a valid title to ownership, God means to exercise His rights of property over consecrated persons. He means to dispose of them as He sees fit, often regardless of their own tastes or repugnances. We find this duty of Religious aptly formulated by our Blessed Lord Himself in His remonstrance to His Blessed Mother. "Did you not know," He said to her when she found Him in the temple, "did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luc. ii. 49). Christ's own life, like that of Religious, was a consecrated life, as His

very name implies, for Christ means the anointed one, and in consequence, not even the ties that bound Him to His Blessed Mother could turn Him away from His Father's business.

Such ought to be the attitude of every Religious. Since, in consequence of his consecration, he no longer belongs to himself or to the world but to God alone, he is bound to subordinate everything to his Father's claims and business, by which is meant obviously whatever belongs to God's service according to his vocation—the practice of his vows and of his Rule; the various duties and exercises of community life and the various tasks of his particular office.

God is not outdone in generosity. If the religious profession imposes obligations and burdens, it is also the source and the pledge of countless blessings and privileges, too numerous to be mentioned separately. Christ Himself did not attempt to enumerate them but summed them up under the comprehensive term "an hundredfold." These are His own words: "Everyone that hath left house or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for My Name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold and shall possess life everlasting" (Matt. xix. 29). In the next part of our inquiry we shall consider some of these precious advantages, and show how the religious life is a life of dignity, of usefulness, of security and happiness.

PART II

DOES IT PAY TO BECOME A RELIGIOUS?

A Life of Dignity

Some worldly-minded people pretend that convent life is socially mean, abject, undignified. Are not Religious required to do the work of servants; to wash dishes, sweep corridors, or feed chickens? They forget, those good folks, that Christ Himself did those very things at Nazareth. Was it contemptible on His part and unworthy of the Son of God? God's standards of dignity and fitness are not the world's standards. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways My ways, saith the Lord" (Isaias lv. 8).

Measured by worldly standards, convent life may indeed appear contemptible, but is it so in reality and in the eyes of Faith? We have God's answer to that question in the inspired words of the Psalmist: "To me, Thy friends, O Lord, are made exceedingly honorable" (Psalms cxxxviii. 17). That Religious are God's friends, no one will deny. That they are truly honorable is not less evident.

When a new President selects his Cabinet or official advisers and associates in the administration of his office, the men of his choice feel honored at such a preference, and rightly so. What, then, shall we say of the honor conferred by God on those whom He calls to co-operate with Him in the extension of His King-

dom; to share with Him the confidence and reverence of the Faithful, and to live with Him under the same roof, not as servants but as friends, as members of His household, like the angels and blessed in heaven?

There was a time when the scions of princely families deemed it an honor and a privilege to wait upon earthly kings as pages and attendants, without, however, aspiring to closer relations with their royal masters. Even today, distinguished ecclesiastics consider it an honor to be appointed domestic prelates and attendants at the papal court. What, then, shall we say of the glorious title of brides of Christ which is bestowed officially by the Church upon the inmates of the Cloister? If that is not greatness and distinction, where shall we find it? Small wonder if Cardinals and members of the proudest aristocracy, including royal personages, have at times exchanged their scarlet robes and vast estates for the religious garb. Small wonder if that garb is held everywhere in such veneration even by non-Catholics. Let the daughter of a millionaire, arrayed in silks and jewels, walk side by side with a humble Sister of the Poor in a public thoroughfare, and you will see which of the two commands the greater reverence; but let that same Sister cast off her habit; and she will be wholly ignored. The writer of these lines has seen white folks step aside to make room for colored Sisters in a public conveyance, and that in the South where race prejudice is so strong. Such facts as these are significant and bear eloquent witness to the dignity of the religious profession.

A Life of Security

A second advantage of the religious state is its security, both material and spiritual. By material security I mean freedom from the cares and anxieties of extreme poverty or excessive wealth, which poison the lives of the majority of seculars living in the world. Many are those about us who must live from hand to mouth, without stable resources; without comforts or proper care even in sickness; with the wolf always at the door, and without hope of better things for the future. Religious are spared such anxieties and hardships, at least under normal conditions. Of course, they, too, are poor by profession, but with a poverty of dependence rather than indigence, for they seldom lack the essentials of decent living—adequate food, clothing and lodging and proper care in sickness. As for the rich, they, too, have their burdens, their responsibilities and their worries. Reverses of fortune are not rare, and the very administration of their wealth is often burdensome. Did not King Solomon, that spoiled child of fortune, conclude from his own experience that all is vanity and vexation of spirit? From all these vexations Religious are happily exempt.

More precious still is the moral security which Religious find in the cloister. By this is meant not absolute immunity from moral danger, but relative security, resulting from adequate means of protection or safeguards provided by cloistered life. Think of the powerful safeguards which Religious find in their vows

and in the rampart of their rules, their enclosure, their very habit; to say nothing of the vigilance of their superiors! Not only are they protected from danger, but they are positively stimulated to the practice of virtue by powerful incentives and means of grace at their disposal, such as their daily spiritual exercises; the Real Presence of Christ in their midst; frequent exhortations; good example; annual retreats and many others. Their whole life is charged, as it were, with a mighty current of spiritual energy which carries them onward and upward, preserving them from serious falls or helping them to rise quickly if they stumble, so that, according to St. Bernard: "In Religion, one leads a purer life; one falls more rarely, rises more quickly, walks more cautiously, rests more securely, dies more confidently and is rewarded more abundantly." Is it surprising if monasteries have become nurseries of saints? With a little good will and moderate efforts it becomes not only possible but comparatively easy for Religious to run, like the Psalmist, in the way of the commandments, and even to scale the heights of sanctity, as many have done.

How different is the lot of seculars in this respect! What is the world in which they live but a Babylon of iniquity and corruption whose very atmosphere is poisonous? Turn where they may, they are confronted with temptations at every step and in every form. Only the bravest and the most vigilant can hope to escape the snares and pitfalls by which they are surrounded on all sides.

But the supreme blessing of the religious state is its security against the worst calamity that can befall an immortal soul—final reprobation. Even good Christians in the world have no infallible guarantee of salvation. Good Religious have such a guarantee, based on Christ's own formal promise. "Everyone," He says, —mark well these words—"Everyone that leaves father and mother, etc., for My sake, shall possess life everlasting." Christ does not speak at random. He means just what He says, and His words clearly denote a formal promise of salvation for all Religious who remain loyal to their calling. Could anything be more inspiring than such a promise?

A Life of Usefulness

It is often alleged, in word and in writing, that convent life is barren, unprofitable, a dead loss to the individual and to society at large. Of such critics we can only say that they know not what they are saying. If the reproach of idleness fits anyone, it is not the inmates of the cloister. Who but the monks rescued ancient literature and civilization from the ravages of the barbarian invaders of the Roman Empire? Are not Religious still in the front ranks of scholars and social workers all over the world? Shall we call unprofitable the labors of our devoted religious teachers who consecrate their lives to the education of youth in our parochial schools, our academies and our colleges? Shall we call unprofitable the sacrifices of our heroic

Sisters of Charity and Mercy who minister to the needs of the sick and orphans and lepers and other children of misfortune in our asylums and hospitals? Shall we call unprofitable the lives of our missionaries who brave the dangers of land and sea to bring the Gospel to the remotest corners of the globe, from the frozen snows of Alaska to the steaming jungles of wildest Africa?

But, insist the critics, granting the usefulness of active and apostolic Orders, what of the contemplatives who never leave their cloister or engage in social work? Of what use can they be to the Church or to the world? The best answer ever given to this question comes from a missionary bishop whose name escapes my memory. To those who blamed him for inviting the Carmelite nuns to build a monastery in his mission—such a luxury for a mission, he was told!—he made this reply: "Ten cloistered nuns praying and doing penance, are worth twenty active missionaries." Such is the language of Faith. Did not the great Pope Pius XI officially place all the missions under the joint patronage of the Little Flower—the Carmelite nun who never left her cloister, and the great Francis Xavier whose field of activity extended from Bombay to Tokyo? And when busy Martha complained of the inactivity of her contemplative sister Mary, did not Christ declare that Mary had chosen the better part? (Luc. x. 41). Such facts as these only remind us that there is such a thing as the apostleship of prayer and penance as well as of action. In God's vineyard, all are not

called to reap the harvest. Some must do the ploughing and the sowing; the watering and the fertilizing. Their task may be obscure and less advertised or pleasant than that of the reapers, but is it less essential? God alone knows how much the world is indebted to the prayers and atonement of these cloistered intercessors and victims. We are told that Christ once said to the great St. Theresa: "Woe to the world but for Religious!" Surely they, too, deserve the title of public servants and benefactors.

Besides, we must remember that man's chief concern in this life is not to dazzle his fellow men by the glory of his public achievements, but to glorify God and to save and sanctify his own soul. Now if anyone is well situated to achieve this end, to promote God's glory and to lay up for himself lasting treasures of merit in heaven, it is the Religious. His whole life of consecration is a perpetual homage and hymn of praise to God and a public glorification of His attributes. So, too, who is in a better position than a Religious to sanctify his actions and hence to fulfill all the conditions of merit, that is, to live habitually in the state of grace; to do God's will in all things with a pure intention and with due care, diligence and fervor? No Religious of good will need fear to appear before God with empty hands. To call their lives unprofitable is to blind oneself to the evidence of known facts. We might as well call unprofitable Christ's obscure labors at Nazareth.

A Life of Peace and Happiness

But we are told that convent life is a life of gloom; a life without sunshine and happiness. Were happiness nothing but a life of ease and pleasure in every form, as some would have it, Religious would indeed be handicapped. But can we say that happiness depends on pleasure? Can we say that our pleasure-mad world is a happy world? Are divorces and suicides, labor troubles and strikes, signs of happiness? If, on the other hand, happiness means peace of mind, freedom from care and anxiety, a sense of security and well-being, the enjoyment of universal esteem and confidence, and, above all, the joy of doing good to others—and we know that these are factors of true happiness—then must we admit that convent life is a perpetual feast of the heart; a wellspring of happiness such as the world can neither give nor understand.

In proof of this, we have the unanimous testimony not only of the inmates of the cloister, but of those who have come in close contact with their lives. Speaking of convent life, a French writer describes it as "happiness in heaven purchased by happiness on earth." More convincing still is the testimony of that wonderful child of the cloister whom the whole world knows and reveres as the Little Flower, and we know that she left an ideal home, a real earthly paradise, to enter Carmel, one of the strictest cloisters. "Here in Carmel," she writes, "a prey to bodily and spiritual anguish, I am happier than in the world, yes, happier

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than in my home by my beloved father's side." Can we doubt the sincerity of such a witness?

Were the cloister the home of regrets and discontent, it would soon become empty since no one is kept there against his will; but the fact is that very few of its inmates retrace their steps back to the world. Some years ago, a millionaire's daughter, a convert to the Faith, became a nun, much against the will of her father. After the death of her parent, she was informed that most of his fortune had been willed to her, but on condition that she would leave her convent. Had she been unhappy in her vocation, she would, no doubt, have welcomed this opportunity to regain her freedom, but as a matter of fact, the condition was never fulfilled, and the legacy was never claimed. Not for all the millions in the world would she exchange the peace and security of her solitude for a life of ease and opulence. Such facts as these speak for themselves and should convince the most prejudiced that convent life is not as gloomy as they imagine. No, you need not look in the cloister for mourners who, like Jephthé's daughter, come to bewail in a solitary cell the blasted hopes of a disappointed life. You will find only cheerful, merry creatures in love with their vocation and thankful for the privilege of living for God alone in peace and security.

Must we conclude from this that in the cloister there is no room for the cross? Far be it from me to belittle the heroism of a sacrifice which has been likened by St. Bernard to martyrdom itself. Were the

path of Religious strewn only with flowers, it would soon lose its attraction for a disciple of a crucified Master. No true friend of Christ cares to lead a life of ease. Yes, like all earthly joys, the happiness of Religious is imperfect and even marred at times by grievance and trial. Their path is narrow, steep and rugged, for it is the path of perfection, and perfection means heroic virtue; it is the royal road of the cross which leads to Calvary. Yes, it costs to become a Religious and to live as a Religious; but, after all, it is not the road that matters, but the goal to which it leads; and we know, and Religious know, that the narrow path of the counsels is safe and leads infallibly to God's eternal Kingdom. Can the world say as much of its boasted, flowery path?

Incomplete as is this survey, enough has been said to justify the application to the religious life of the Psalmist's words: "Blessed are they, O Lord, whom Thou hast chosen and taken to Thee." What King Solomon has said of Wisdom is true of the religious life. "All good things came to me together with her" (Sap. vii., ii., 64, 5). Is it surprising if such eulogies have filled our monasteries with noble souls?

PART III

WHO ARE CALLED TO THE RELIGIOUS LIFE?

Since we seek to be practical, we must add a few words to our inquiry in answer to the question: "Who are called to the religious life?" It can be said that a general invitation to the religious state is addressed in the Gospel to all those who are able and willing to embrace it. This invitation is clearly implied in the call of the young man to a life of perfection (Matt. xix. 21), and still more explicitly in the passage of the same chapter where Christ commends to all the practice of perfect chastity, concluding with the words: "He that can take, let him take it" (Matt. xix. 12). Unfortunately many lack the will to take it; others lack the qualifications, and some lack the opportunity, so that the Church is often cramped in her work for lack of vocations and good will among her most favored children.

Besides this general invitation, there are special calls to the religious life, more direct and more personal, reserved for some chosen souls, and manifested to them through special graces and opportunities or even miracles.

In every genuine vocation we may distinguish three distinct and essential elements or stages: eligibility, free choice, and official admission.

Eligibility

First comes eligibility or fitness of the candidate, by which is meant freedom from legitimate impediments, together with the possession of such physical, intellectual and moral qualifications and dispositions as may be required by various religious Orders or Institutes. Some would like to become Religious, but they may be too old or invalid or burdened with debt or other obligations incompatible with the religious life. Such persons may be said to have no vocation. Others may lack the strength or the talent or other qualities required for the particular work of the Institute to which they feel called. Candidates deficient in these requirements are not eligible and are not admitted. The same is true of defect of character, lack of piety, worldliness and the like—they disqualify a candidate unless corrected or offset by outstanding qualities and unequivocal positive signs of true vocation.

This element of fitness comes from God as we learn from St. Paul, in his first Epistle to the Corinthians, where he says: "Every one hath his proper gift from God" (1 Cor. viii. 7); but it is subject to the judgment and control of lawful authority, for no one is a good judge in his own cause.

Free Choice

In the second place, a religious vocation cannot be regarded as genuine unless it is chosen freely and

with a right intention by the candidate. Since the religious state is the way of the counsels and not merely of the commandments, it must remain optional, as Christ willed it. His call to the young man was by way of invitation not of command: "If thou wilt be perfect." No one must be compelled by threats or otherwise to become a Religious. God cannot sanction a contract which is vitiated by violence. Even a matrimonial contract is invalidated by fear or compulsion. The same would be true if a religious vocation were chosen for unworthy, selfish motives such as ambition, pride and the like. Vocations are too sacred to be desecrated by such unholy motives.

Official Admission

Last but not least among the essential elements of a true vocation, is the official admission of the candidate by lawful authority. In the matter of vocations as in everything else, God is wont to act vicariously through his representatives. He calls some to the priesthood through His bishops. He calls others to the religious profession through religious superiors. Hence we can say that a candidate's vocation is finally decided by Church authority which alone gives him the right to his priesthood or to his profession. Such is the doctrine of the Church on the subject of vocations officially promulgated by the saintly Pope Pius X. In conclusion, it may be said that a religious vocation is not so much a matter of feeling or attraction, as a

matter of conviction and choice under the inspiration and guidance of divine grace.

This being understood, may we not say that a vocation to the priesthood or to the religious life is one of God's choicest graces and a special mark of His personal love for a soul? Such being the case, may we not address to our young readers the fervent plea of the Psalmist: "Today if you shall hear the voice of the Lord, harden not your hearts"? We know how gladly our service men have answered their country's call for defenders in the hour of need. May God's appeal for vocations find a responsive echo in the hearts of our American boys and girls.



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