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CONSECRATION TO THE APOSTOLATE¹

Cornelius van der Poel, C.S.Sp.

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INTRODUCTION

Consecration to the apostolate holds an important place in the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. The personnel directory of the Spiritan Province of the Netherlands, for instance, lists the date of the consecration to the apostolate among the three most important dates of identification for each individual member. While this may not be the case in the official *État du Personnel* of the Congregation, or indeed in most other provincial directories, it reflects, nevertheless, the importance that has traditionally been given to consecration to the apostolate in the life of the Congregation. In this context, I would like to reflect briefly on the following questions: (1) What is the theological meaning and reason for this act of consecration? (2) What did this act of consecration mean for Libermann and what does it mean for the Spiritans today?

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON CONSECRATION TO THE APOSTOLATE

Consecration² means more than dedication or seriously trying. Consecration, in its deepest significance, touches the heart of human and religious life. The *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Ascétique et Mystique* describes consecration as: “An act by which a thing or person is made sacred. This means an act which places a person (or thing) in a special category that bestows on him/her/it characteristics which take him/her/it out of the realm of ordinary relationships and confers on him/her/it a value that exceeds other values.”³ A secular dictionary, such as Van Dale, gives a similar meaning: “...to consecrate a person or a thing to a deity, a saint, etc.” An act of consecration he calls: “... a prayer by which one consecrates oneself to the Sacred Heart as the symbol of God's love.”⁴ In these descriptions we see a number of elements that ask for further explanation:

- Consecration is seen as something *special*. It is a ‘setting apart’ that reaches past the usual visible/corporeal human aspects. To see consecration as a special call/gift from God contains, however, a certain contradiction. We accept that people, living on this earth, are created in the image of God. Therefore, the human being is spiritual as well as corporeal. These are not two separate parts that are temporarily joined together, but they are two aspects that form together one inseparable unity. The human being is meant to be simultaneously the visibility of a

spiritual reality and the expression of a spiritual value of the corporeal. Every person is by nature called to a holiness that surpasses whatever is visible but that must give value, meaning, and direction to the human totality, including the corporeal. A human person is by creation itself consecrated to God; however, it belongs to human dignity to acknowledge this consecration (God-directedness) freely and consciously. This introduces another element.

This recognition is the most human act we can perform, because it is the first step toward a vision of our human wholeness.

Consecration becomes an expression of freedom and personal responsibility...

- Consecration involves the **human totality**. We live in world that is visible, tangible, and perceptible. Within this corporeal setting we recognize ourselves and discover our identity, we find our place, and we fulfill our tasks in this world. But, because our identity is discovered and experienced in the material setting, the spiritual/invisible reality of our existence asks for a special and conscious acknowledgement on our part. This decision is the recognition of the person that we are in our corporeal-spiritual unity. This recognition is the most human act we can perform, because it is the first step toward a vision of our human wholeness. We are led to another point.
- Consecration, as **conscious recognition of what we are**, confirms the meaning and direction of our human existence and human activity. Consecration is a recognition of the wholeness of a person without taking this person away from daily life. Such a person remains completely within material existence. The purpose of existence and one's personal identity not only remain the same, but they are clarified and enriched. The focus is not any longer limited to what is visible and calculable, but is widened with a spiritual perspective that includes the whole human being. This brings us to a final point.
- Consecration presupposes **an integration** or blending of the spiritual and physical dimensions so that a person becomes a oneness or human wholeness. The vision of soul and body as two distinct parts falls away to make room for an attitude that unites these different perspectives into a oneness. Consecration then becomes an expression of freedom and personal responsibility for the activation and direction of all one's talents toward an intended cause or person.

As my focus is on the consecration *to the apostolate*, let me also try to define 'apostolate.' My dictionary, *de Grote van Dale*,

gives six variants on the word “apostolaat,” all of which suggest a religious meaning. Three of these variants are more related to our discussion, namely, apostolate is to “be active as an apostle,” or it means “the activity of the Church to spread the faith,” or it indicates “the attitude and activity of the Church as it relates to the world.”⁵ These three variants represent “mission,” “purpose of the mission,” and “the people (object) toward whom the mission is directed.”

When we look at the Church’s teaching on consecration, there are two points among the numerous references that particularly strike me. First, the Church looks at the role of individuals in the perspective of the whole community, e.g., in the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, we read: “*In the organism of a living body no member plays a purely passive part; sharing in the life of the body, it shares at the same time in its activity.*”⁶ If a part of a living body is healthy, it necessarily contributes to the health and wholeness of the body. The apostolate is not something that is added to the community, it is rather a development or contribution of an individual within the community. When the Council applies this more directly to religious aspects, its meaning becomes more precise: “*On all Christians, accordingly, rests the noble obligation of working to bring all men throughout the whole world to hear and to accept the divine message of salvation.*” And further: “*From the reception of these charisms, even the most ordinary ones, there arise for each of the faithful the right and duty of exercising them in the Church and in the world for the good of men and the development of the Church.*”⁷ Therefore, the apostolate is not the privilege of a few select souls. It is the right and obligation of every person. However, within this call that is directed to the whole community, some persons have a special task, such as we ascribe to founders and leaders. My concern here is what consecration meant for Libermann and the congregation he founded.

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LIBERMANN AND CONSECRATION TO THE APOSTOLATE

The entire life of Francis Libermann was directed toward one end, namely, to establish and to strengthen God’s love in the hearts of people. Whether we focus our attention on his letters, on his conversations, on his readiness to help others, on his ministry for the most abandoned, or on the foundation of a religious, missionary society and its discontinuance with a view to fusion with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, everywhere his deepest motivation is this desire to establish and to deepen God’s love in the human community. This urge was the wellspring of his life and activity, and for him it was fulfilled in the experience of being consecrated to the service of God.

This consecration was not a task imposed from the outside. It was an aspect of the inner structure of his life and personality. What he felt in his soul had an irresistible repercussion on his thinking and acting. Consecration to the apostolate was for him identical with being human and being Christian. It is therefore not surprising that the word “apostolate” occurs so frequently in his writings. We find it often in his *Règle Provisoire* in which he describes the apostolic task of his congregation as follows: “*The apostolic life is nothing else than the life of complete love and holiness that the Son of God has led on earth for the salvation and sanctification of souls and through which he offered himself to the glory of his Father.*”⁸

In this one concept of “apostolic life” he describes the life of Jesus as mission, as gift of self, and as self-sacrifice for the redemption of humanity and the glory of God.

In this one concept of “apostolic life” he describes the life of Jesus as mission, as gift of self, and as self-sacrifice for the redemption of humanity and the glory of God. At the beginning of his *Règle Provisoire*, he speaks about his Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary as “... *an assembly of priests who, in the name of and as envoys of Our Lord Jesus Christ, devote themselves completely to preaching his holy Gospel and to establishing his reign among the most poor and most deserted souls in the Church of God.*”⁹

The notion of “consecration” lies at the center of his life. He uses the word frequently and what it means to him he explains (almost casually) to Mr. Conny in a letter congratulating him on his ordination to the subdiaconate: “*What a joy it must be to consecrate oneself completely to God. I think that this would be the only thing that I would desire if God would allow me.*”¹⁰ He sees this consecration as a special grace by which the candidate, through God’s grace, is set apart from all worldly affairs to be wrapped in an immeasurable holiness.¹¹ But immediately he cautions that this holiness does not at all eliminate our ordinary human tendencies. He continues in his letter: “*Don’t think that you are so changed that all your weaknesses have disappeared and that from now on you will be as the angels in heaven who live without fear, without distrust, and without temptations. Your body will always be your body, this means it will always be miserable, weak, poor, filled with corruption and sin. But what does that matter to a soul who totally lives in God, who is not interested in this world and who does not know any other happiness than God alone to whom he belongs completely?*”¹²

For Libermann, consecration to the apostolate is the commitment of the whole personality in answer to the invitation to establish God’s kingdom of justice and love in those places where it does not yet exist, to confirm it where it is in doubt, to support and

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strengthen it where it is weak or unstable. The importance he attached to the notion of consecration to the apostolate can be clearly seen from the fact that he envisaged a double consecration for every member of the congregation he founded: a consecration of one's whole being on entry, in the form of a solemn promise ("Act of Consecration," which does not explicitly mention the apostolate) to live a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience,¹³ followed by a special act of consecration ("Act of Consecration of our Apostolate to Our Lord Jesus Christ") prior to leaving on mission, when one is about to begin one's active engagement in the apostolate.¹⁴

Consecration to the apostolate means for him a total commitment to labor for the establishment and maintenance of the kingdom of God's love among all people. Let us take a moment to see how his doctrine is reflected in the writings of our congregation today.

CONSECRATION TO THE APOSTOLATE IN THE SPIRITAN RULE OF LIFE

Our *Spiritan Rule of Life* (1987) does not offer a separate description of consecration to the apostolate, distinct from our religious commitment. On the contrary, SRL seems to identify the consecration to the apostolate with the profession of final vows. We read under the title of 'perpetual profession': "*Our final consecration to the apostolate gives its full expression to the intention that we were keeping in the depths of our hearts, the day of our first profession, of devoting ourselves completely to God in the family of the Spiritans.*"¹⁵

Throughout the remainder of this section, SRL only speaks about perpetual vows, without mentioning again the term of consecration to the apostolate. This consecration is, however, so intimately connected with the life of the Congregation that admission without the intention to devote oneself to the apostolate would be a contradiction. Referring to the Spiritan vocation, SRL says: "*In the midst of God's people, among the numerous and varied vocations which the Holy Spirit inspires, we Spiritans are called by the Father and 'set apart' (Acts 13:2) to follow Jesus and to announce the Good News of the Kingdom.*"¹⁶

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To be called to the apostolate seems to be integral to what it means to be a Spiritan. The particular form this apostolate will take, however, will depend on the time in which we are living. Spiritans must read the "signs of the times," but their apostolate must always have the characteristic of being an answer to a need in the Church or society for which it is difficult to find laborers. For Libermann, this characteristic was present in the miserable

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and inhuman condition of slavery, identified at the time with the condition of “Black people.” Therefore, he speaks about the apostolate to the Blacks (“L’Œuvre des Noirs”). Although the concern for the deepest needs in the Church or society remains the goal of the apostolate in the spirit of Libermann, the object of this concern changes. SRL gives many examples:

We are participating within the Church in the mission of Christ, in communion with him and all people, proclaiming a salvation that is a gift from God, liberation from all that oppresses people, joy in knowing the Lord and being known by him.¹⁷

Any particular work is taken on in communion with the Church as it is in our time. The responsibility for carrying on Christ’s mission belongs in each place to the local Church. We, in keeping with the calling that is proper to us, participate in this mission.

We take as our own the points that the Church is currently stressing in mission:

- the universal mission understood as the responsibility of local Churches in communion with each other;*
- mission understood as preaching the gospel and founding new Churches;*
- mission as service and liberation;*
- mission as dialogue;*
- mission as inculturation of the gospel message in each local Church.¹⁸*

Today, our concern should be directed toward the total human personality...

At the present time the most abandoned souls are not necessarily to be found in situations of physical poverty or where human rights and dignity are violated. Today, our concern should be directed toward the total human personality which, through progressive secularization and individualization, seems to have become trivialized in an existence that is totally confined to human reason and calculation. In these circumstances, the human person becomes an image of God from which all divine value is excised. The consecration to the apostolate that is intended in our Rule of Life tries precisely to include this dimension as an essential perspective of humanity:

The charisms of our Founders, Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann, and fidelity to our tradition urge us to respond creatively to the needs of evangelization of our time.¹⁹

The evangelization of the “poor” (cf. Lk. 4:18) is our purpose (cf. N.D. XIII, 170). Therefore we go especially to peoples, groups, and individuals who have not yet heard the message of the gospel or who have scarcely heard it, to those whose needs are the greatest, and to the oppressed (cf. N.D. II, 241). We also willingly accept tasks for which the Church has difficulty in finding workers.”²⁰

It is, therefore, our task to live the eternal values in our times...

The Spiritan charism received and lived by Libermann, explained in his letters and apostolic activities, passed on to his congregation as a consecration to the apostolate, is also presented to us. It is, therefore, our task to live the eternal values in our times and in contemporary ways and so to inspire the Church and society. Times change, visions and purposes need to be adjusted, but it is the breath of God’s Spirit that must guide it all, for it is the breath of the Spirit that shall renew the face of the earth.

Footnotes

¹ First presented as a lecture to a gathering of the members of the Province of the Netherlands on February 2, 2008.

² In this presentation I freely use my earlier study, “Consecration in an Institute of Apostolic Life,” presented at a month of reflection conducted by the International Centre for Research and Animation of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, held in Gentinnes, Belgium, August, 1983. I also draw on a presentation that I gave on “Apostolische Toewijding en Practische Eénheid” at Halfweg, the Netherlands, February 2, 1999.

³ *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Ascétique et Mystique*, Vol. IIB, p.1576.

⁴ *Groot woordenboek van de Nederlandse taal*, Van Dale, ed. 2005, under ‘toewijding.’

⁵ Op. cit., under ‘apostolaat.’

⁶ *Vatican Council II*, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, no 2, Flannery, 1981, p.768.

⁷ Loc. cit., no 3, p.769.

⁸ N.D. II, p.290. See also N.D. X, p.505, quoted in SRL 3. All translations of Libermann’s writings are proper to the author.

⁹ N.D. II, pp. 235-236.

¹⁰ *Lettres Spirituelles I*, p.519.

¹¹ Op. cit., p.520.

¹² Op. cit., p.520.

¹³ N.D. X, p.498.

¹⁴ N.D. X, p.503.

¹⁵ SRL 133

¹⁶ SRL 1

¹⁷ SRL 11

¹⁸ SRL 13, 13.1

¹⁹ SRL 2

²⁰ SRL 4