

**ON THE CONSECRATORY NATURE OF THE VERY ACT
OF SOLEMN VOWS
IN THE THEOLOGY OF SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS**

The *Ordo Professionis religiosae*, promulgated in 1970 by the Apostolic See by virtue of the conciliar constitution *Sacrosanctum Consilium*, to which all religious families are to conform, *salvo iure particulari* (“without prejudice to particular law”), appropriately highlights the *solemn blessing, or consecration of the professed individual* (no. 67; cf. 6b). In this it takes its inspiration from the end of no. 45 of the constitution *Lumen Gentium*:

“However, the Church does not only raise religious profession to the dignity of canonical status by its sanction, but by its liturgical action it also shows it to be a consecration to God. The Church itself, by the authority entrusted to it, receives the vows of those making profession, by its public prayer it asks God for help and grace for them, commends them to God and bestows on them a spiritual blessing, as it joins their offering to the Eucharistic sacrifice.”

The conciliar text does not contain any reference, either to transform the Pauline allusion in Ephesians 1:3 (*spiritual blessing*) into an argument strictly speaking, or to base itself on the ancient Roman prayer for the consecration of virgins or the tradition of the *blessing of monks*, which, in the Latin Church until Vatican II, was specifically monastic.¹

The rite of profession of the *Order of Preachers*, as we recall, has its roots in the primitive constitutions of the Order. It took on its definitive form up to the present time in the Dominican liturgy of 1254-1256 and, along with the liturgy, upon the petition of the Order, obtained the confirmation of Clement IV in 1267. It is especially appropriate to take note of the great ritual sobriety that characterizes it.

The fact that there is a certain spiritual originality and particular law involved does not take away the obligation for Dominicans to ask themselves an important question, as it happens rather frequently in the liturgical reform of Vatican II: namely, *the solemn blessing or consecration of the one professed* is at the same time a novelty for the non-monastic religious families and a return to the sources of Tradition, inviting the Order of Preachers and all religious to no longer place a division between the interior reality and the exterior or canonical forms, as had been done after the time of Saint Bernard. Have Dominican spirituality and theology really confronted that question? It seems they have, judging by the *Summa* of Saint Thomas (*Secunda Secundae*, question 89).

¹ cf. O CASEL, “Die Mönchsweihe” (“Monastic consecration”), *Jahrbuch für liturgische Wissenschaft* 5, 1925, 1, 47.

Certainly Saint Thomas Aquinas was aware of the *blessing of monks*, because he received his education at Monte Cassino. Moreover, he had heard Albert the Great commenting on what is said about monastic consecration in chapter 6 of the *Ecclesia Hierarchia* of Pseudo-Dionysius, and the Dionysian Corpus of Saint James (today ms BNF lat. 17341), in which the Dionysian writings are accompanied by notes, which was copied in that convent, perhaps at the initiative of Albert himself, at the time when Thomas was his student.²

It was in his frequent study of the Dionysian corpus that Saint Thomas dictated the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*³, both situated in the debates of that time (the status of the mendicant orders was a subject of heated discussion) and profoundly marking the spiritual identity of the Order of the Friars Preacher. Thus it was in the *Secunda Secundae*, and in contact with Pseudo-Dionysius, that Saint Thomas reflected on the religious state as a state of perfection⁴ - a category that is difficult to understand in a non-Dionysian context - or also on the *contemplari et aliis tradere* (“to contemplate and to pass on to others”)⁵, a theologian’s reflection in which the Dominican Order recognizes its ideal.

In terms of solemn vows - today we say perpetual religious vows - Saint Thomas, taking his theological basis from the chapter of the *Ecclesiastica Hierarchia* that deals with monastic consecration⁶, that religious vows as such constitute a consecration and what the letter to the Ephesians calls a spiritual blessing.⁷

*“A vow is a promise made to God. Thus the solemnity of the vow is connected to something spiritual that pertains to God, that is, some spiritual blessing or consecration, which is observed from the institution of the Apostles in the profession of a certain rule, on the second step after the reception of sacred orders, as Dionysius says in chapter VI of Ecclesiastica Hierarchia.”*⁸

² Cf. P.M. GY, “La documentation sacramentaire de Thomas d’Aquin. Quelle connaissance ce saint Thomas a-t-il de la Tradition ancienne and de la Patristique?” (“The sacramentary documentation of Thomas Aquinas. What knowledge did Saint Thomas Aquinas have of ancient Tradition and the writings of the Fathers?”), *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 80, 1996, 426.

³ Paris, 1271-1272.

⁴ q. 184.

⁵ *Secunda Secundae*, question 188, article 6. As for *contemplari*, cf. the Dionysian *theôria* (θεωρία).

⁶ Cf. the Dionysian *monachikê epiklêsis* (μοναχικὴ ἐπικλήσις).

⁷ It is difficult to say whether Saint Thomas’ text had any influence on number 45 of *Lumen Gentium*. In any case, it is clear that, for Saint Thomas, this blessing is not added to the religious commitment; it is intrinsic to it.

⁸ *Secunda Secundae*, question 88, article 7.

Once the reference to an apostolic institution has been set aside, it remains that the view of religious profession as a reality that is not only canonical or only the consecration of oneself to God, but as being in itself a spiritual blessing and a consecration by God, represents an authentic value that deserves to be respected. This profound unity between a religious vow (or offering) and a consecration by God is harmonized, in the theological vision of Saint Thomas, with the twofold function of worship and sanctification inherent in the sacraments, and in a still broader sense with the twofold movement of the *going forth* and the *return* connected with the salvation of man and his return to God.

Therefore it is our wish that, in the *restored Rite* of religious profession of the Order of Friars Preacher, the *solemn blessing or consecration of the one professed* not be obligatory and, whenever it is not used, a monition would point out the consecratory meaning of perpetual profession, for which the Order has preserved the name of solemn profession.⁹

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⁹ This is the wording proposed by no. 73 of the *Rite of Profession of the Order of Preachers*: Once the formula of profession has been pronounced, unless the Solemn Blessing is to be given, the Prior advises the newly professed in these or similar words: “Dearest brothers, by this solemn profession you have handed yourselves over to God and his will: therefore through the ministry of the Church God has consecrated you to himself.”