

On the other hand, he does not sin from contempt, but from some other cause when he is led to do something against the ordinance of the law or rule through some particular cause such as concupiscence or anger, even though he often repeat the same kind of sin through the same or some other cause. . . . Nevertheless, the frequent repetition of a sin disposes to contempt' (a. 9 ad 3).



DID CHRIST 'FOUND THE RELIGIOUS STATE?

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IN October 1950, the Holy Father, addressing a Congress of Religious, explained the positions of religious and seculars, especially religious and secular clergy, in the Church. One sentence in the important and far-reaching document is the following: 'It is of divine institution that clergy should be distinct from lay-people. Between these two grades is the state of the religious life, of ecclesiastical origin.' *'Inter duos hos gradus religiosae vitae status intericitur . . . ecclesiastica origine defluens. . . .'* (A.A.S., 1951, p. 27). Many of us then received a first impression that the Pope was reversing a teaching which we had regarded as traditional, and with some the impression seems to have lingered. The purpose of this article is to enquire whether it is true in any sense that Christ founded the religious life and what Pius XII really said in 1950.

Any who have claimed a divine institution have usually relied upon Matthew c. 19. The indissolubility of marriage led up to a counsel of chastity: 'There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He that can take, let him take it.' (v. 12.) After a few words recalling the offering of little children and the injunction of humility—'The kingdom of heaven is for such'—we read of the rich young man: 'If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast . . . come, follow me.' (v. 21.) Here, very clearly distinguished from precepts, are counsels of poverty and chastity. The words, 'Come, follow me', imply a special obedience not binding upon all believers. Christ asks for stability in the one who thus follows, that having put his hand to the plough he should not look back. (Luke 9, 62.) There are

parallel passages in the other synoptics (Mark 10, 17-31, Luke 18, 8 et seq.).

If in these texts there is described an institution of the religious or monastic life, it is here only in a wide and undetermined sense. Even if a theologian says that, considering human frailty, this following of Christ requires a vow, if he says with St Thomas that the apostles did in fact make the threefold vow (I-II, 88, 4 ad 3), still how the counsels are to be observed, how the followers are to be organized, what is to be their position in the Church which Christ is founding—all this remains to be determined. Since it is not here that Christ gives power to teach or rule, there is no evidence that those who profess the counsels are to be identified with those who receive order or jurisdiction. If the Church is to have a social structure we do not know whether the observer of the counsels will have any recognized status, or whether his observance may remain a matter between himself and God. He is only told that, if he truly leaves all and follows, he may be perfect and may possess everlasting life. We see, then, from the beginning, that two questions are going to arise: (1) Who founded the religious state? (2) Who gave it its juridical position in the constitution of the Church?

If any one sees here Christ's foundation of the religious state, his position will not necessarily require, but yet will be greatly strengthened by, some continuity of observance. If our Lord instituted something which he meant to be found in his Church, we rather expect that it should have been there, not indeed in its fullness but still recognizable in some measure, from the first beginnings. We enquire then what happened and what are the evidences.

Christ's counsel of chastity is found only in the gospel which was written for the Jews. Mark and Luke, writing for the gentiles, did not include it, even though the latter prefixed to his gospel the example of Mary. The counsel could have been dangerous if proposed too hastily and was, in fact, misunderstood by some in the early centuries. Perhaps then a certain discretion delayed its promulgation, for St Paul writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7; 7, 25 et seq.), seems to give it not as the Lord's but as his own, and that with some precaution and even hesitation. It is not until the later stages of the Apocalypse that we hear it given with a divine sanction (although the text has had other interpretations): "These

are they who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These follow the Lamb.' (Apoc. 14, 4.) But the words suggest that many have in fact observed the counsel. For a long time after this the increasing evidence is nearly always associated with the female sex. After the turn of the century St Ignatius refers to virgins as to a recognized class (*Ad Smyrn.* 13), and a few years later St Polycarp even mentions them with priests and deacons (*Ad Philipp.* 3). St Justin by the middle of the second century only says that he knows many who have remained pure until old age, of both sexes and from every race of men. (*Apol.* 1, 15; cf. Athenag., *Legatio pro Christianis*, 33.) About the year 208 Tertullian writes an entire treatise *De Virginibus Velandis*, most valuable as an appeal to the tradition and authority of the Church, but having as its chief aim the veiling of virgins from the public view. Defending this from the custom of the apostolic churches, he quotes St Paul's words to the Corinthians and says that the veiling is now the practice of the church of Corinth. The virgins are clearly recognized as a class, to be subjected to a special discipline. In a later work *De Exhortatione Castitatis* he refers to both sexes a phrase which suggests a vow and even a public profession: 'See the Church's ranks filled with men and women known for continence, men and women who have chosen marriage with God.' (c. 13, cf. *De Resurrectione Carnis*, c. 61.) Together with Tertullian, St Cyprian adds the witness of North Africa to that of Rome and Asia Minor. About 250 he writes the *De Habitu Virginum*, the most magnificent indictment ever written of such unnatural adornments as face-painting. Clearly the bishop is addressing a class of women over whom he has a special jurisdiction. Appealing to St Matthew's nineteenth chapter he says that they have dedicated themselves to Christ and vowed themselves to God. Not until later shall we find the liturgical formulae which testify to the public consecration of virgins. Our next witness would be St Athanasius; but to quote him is superfluous, for we know that, when he was writing, the monastic life both of hermits and cenobites was well established and recognized.

So much evidence is there of the observance of one counsel. Of poverty and a common life it is neither so clear nor so continuous. Twice at the beginning of the Acts we hear of the first convert community spontaneously imitating the apostles and renouncing private possessions to live a common life. (2, 43-47; 4, 34 et seq.)

There can hardly have been a strict obligation upon each convert to do this. According to St Peter's words (5, 4) the sin of Ananias and Sapphira consisted precisely in lying to God: they were like present-day religious making solemn profession but keeping something back. Probably converts in other places did not undertake the same life and the circle at Jerusalem became a more and more select one, identified with those 'saints' whom St Paul commended as entitled to the alms of the distant churches. (1 Cor. 16, 1; 2 Cor. 8, 4; 9, 1. cf. Acts 11, 29; 24, 17.) Traditions were very firmly established in Palestine, so we may seriously ask whether such a semi-monastic life continued indefinitely, surviving the two destructions of Jerusalem. What we do know is that St Jerome in the fifth century almost borrowed the language of St Paul in speaking of a community of 'saints' at Jerusalem. Alms were sent there and this was defended on St Paul's authority. (*Adv. Vigilantium*, c. 13.) Another writer well steeped in the traditions of Palestine was Cassian. In several places he speaks of a monastic life which originated from the apostles' preaching and then continued. (*Inst.*, Praef., lib. 2; *Coll.* 18.) He is one with St Jerome in saying that there always was a cenobitic life, but the eremitical came later. Neither writer is borrowing from the other, for St Jerome makes St Hilarion the founder of the eremitical life, Cassian attributes the new departure to Saints Paul and Anthony in Egypt. Not only in Palestine but in Egypt also, Cassian says, there were monks from the time of the apostles. This makes us think of the 'Therapeuts' of the first century described by Philo (*De Vita Contemplativa*). Modern scholars frown upon all such notions, but the authority of the Church historian Eusebius cannot be lightly dismissed (*Hist. Eccl.* lib. 2, c. 17). I have discussed the arguments for and against the Christianity of the Therapeuts in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* (March, 1946). Such are the indications of that continuous observance of the counsels which we might expect to see from the beginning of the Church onwards, if Christ did indeed found the religious life. Some of the testimonies, the latter class especially, do not give us certainty or make history.

The reader may now be looking for an abundance of texts from the Fathers asserting the divine institution. He must be disappointed, for the texts are not there. In fact the idea seems to be one of those which are taken for granted, at most implied, rarely

if ever stated clearly. Anyone may take Fathers who are most representative—Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory—look for what they have to say about the monastic life and its origin, especially see all their references to the pertinent texts in St Matthew's nineteenth chapter, and he will be surprised to find how little can be quoted. I do not believe that my incompetence is the only explanation of my failure in this direction. Suarez, who had more time to spare, in asserting the divine institution (*De Religione*, tr. 9, lib. 3, c. 2, n. 3) gave references to eight Fathers of the Church. Look them up, and I think you may agree that he managed no better. We find a few texts like St Augustine's letter to a certain Hilary (n. 157). The doctor expounds Christian poverty at great length, referring to Matthew 19, and eventually says that he has embraced this, so that he seems to have the monastic life in mind. The most explicit is the last of the Fathers, St Bernard. In his *Apologia* to William of St Thierry (c. 10) he speaks thus of the monastic order in general: 'Our Order, that Order which was first in the Church, whence indeed the Church took its very beginning.' He means that the apostles, by embracing their Master's counsels, became the first monks.

In the scholastic period what had hitherto been assumed was being analysed and expressed. Several passages of St Thomas bear upon our question and it is strange that modern theologians usually refer the reader to those which are least helpful. Besides one noted already two deserve special mention. In I-II, 108, 4 c. & ad 1, the religious life is called a state of perfection based on the three evangelical counsels and is then connected with the two texts of Matthew 19. Best of all is chapter 130 of *Contra Gentiles*, book 3. The Angelic Doctor explains carefully and at some length that the three counsels are of divine origin and that religious are those who embrace the state of perfection by following the counsels. (Cf. I-II, 88, 4, ad 3; II-II 184 & 186, 3 ad 4; 4 ad 1.)

From the sixteenth century onwards the religious life was one of those things which had to be defended by developed argument against the attacks of Protestants. St Robert Bellarmine (*Controv.* lib. 2, *De Monachis*, c. 5) did no more than refute the contention that monachism was introduced in the fourth century and trace it back to the solitaries of the Old Law and especially St John the Baptist. But Suarez insisted that the religious life was instituted as to its substance by Christ, in that he proposed the counsels of

poverty, chastity and obedience. Suarez is generally followed and quoted by later theologians. 'So think all right-minded Catholics', he says.

Finally we must ask what Pius XII said in 1950. For a moment we turn to his predecessors in the magisterium. The Council of Constance condemned the Wycliffite proposition: 'All religious orders without exception have been introduced by the devil.' (*Denz.-Bannw.*, n. 625.) This is a useful safeguard but still negative. Within our own memory Pius XI gave his first broadcast message from the Vatican on 12th February, 1931, and addressed religious as those who obeyed the counsels of Christ. (*A.A.S.*, 1931, p. 67.) He had already written an Apostolic Letter to superiors-general on 19th March, 1924, *Unigenitus Dei Filius* (*A.A.S.*, 1924, pp. 133 ss.). Here he taught clearly that to the precepts Christ added the counsels for a closer imitation of himself, that men and women had always followed these and so formed the various Orders approved by the Church. After this we should have been very surprised if a Pope had told us that Christ in no sense instituted the religious state. But we might have suspected already that there was a sense in which the state could be called of ecclesiastical origin.

By the end of 1950 Pius XII had already traced the dedication of virginity to the very first days of the Church in the *Sponsa Christi*, richly documented from Scripture and the apostolic fathers onwards. Then came the Allocution to the Congress. It has put an end to certain discussions by insisting that there is in the Church a *status perfectionis*—or *status perfectionis acquirendae*—that this is entered by acceptance of the evangelical counsels and that clergy as such are not bound to this by divine law. The very phrases *evangelica consilia* and *status perfectionis evangelicae* leave no doubt that the state finds its origin in the gospel. Yet at the beginning we have read the phrase *religiosae vitae status . . . ecclesiastica origine defluens*. Now, if there were serious doubt about the Pope's meaning, it would be presumption in the private student to interpret. However, to the careful reader the meaning is perfectly clear and he can speak with all the greater ease who finds himself saying the same as the best canonists in our universities. What is said to be *ecclesiastica origine defluens*? Not the *vita religiosa*, nor even the *status religiosus*, but the *religiosae vitae status*. The whole context suggests that a possible translation is as

follows: 'Between these two ranks' (of clergy and laity) 'the religious life finds a status which it owes to the Church.'¹ Indeed the contrast is with the special status given to the clergy not by ecclesiastical but by divine institution. Nor is this anything else but common teaching. The significance of two quotations which follow is that they were made before the Allocution, not by canonists who had to contrive to conform their teaching to it after it had been made. Fr Joseph Creusen, s.J., said in his typescript composed for students at the Gregorian University: 'The Church takes up the practice of the counsels (founded by divine right), defines the practice more exactly to give it public recognition, and so (in the juridical sense) founds the religious state.' Fr Vermeersch had written very similarly long before in his tract *De Religiosis*: 'The founder of the religious state, in regard to what belongs to its very nature, is Christ our Lord. . . . He has given the Church power and office to set this religious state in order.' (*Theol. Mor.* tom. III, ed. 1923, p. 90.)

To say more would be to labour the point. But if anyone were still in doubt he might be sent to the introductory pages of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater* of 2nd February, 1947 (*A.A.S.*, 1947, pp. 114 ss.). He would read phrases similar to those of our Allocution, but in an elaborate context which would explain them very clearly. If I were to quote and comment I should enlarge the scope of this article considerably, but anyone who is anxious to grasp well the Allocution of 1950 may read it with the *Provida Mater* of 1947.

Christ founded the religious state. If anyone likes the scholastic habit of distinguishing, he may say: Christ gave the counsels by observing which men and women have formed the religious orders: Yes. Christ gave religious a determined place in the juridical structure of his Church, as he did to his apostles and their successors: No. Or, if you prefer: I distinguish the second part again: He gave religious this place in his Church by his own direct word: No. He gave jurisdiction to the hierarchy under a Sovereign Pontiff: Yes.

¹ If it were objected that such a translation hardly fitted the second half of the sentence—*qui ecclesiastica origine defluens, ideo est atque ideo valet, quia arte proprio Ecclesiae finii cohaeret, qui eo spectat, ut homines ad sanctitatem assequendam perducantur*—I would answer that the Latin *status* embraces the different shades of meaning which we give to *status* and *state* in England, and that the former meaning is predominant in the first half of the sentence. To translate the whole satisfactorily would need a skilful paraphrase.