

# Religious vows and the structure of love

Giorgio Buccellati

It is our nature, our instinct, to love; and love, in its truest dimension, is articulated along the lines of the vows.

The splendor of life is an essential correlative of the "splendor of truth." Christian life is based on a positive outlook on reality which consistently affirms the best, even when it appears to negate rather than to affirm. A case in point is asceticism. Christian self-denial is only secondarily negative: if embraced for its own sake, it could not properly be called Christian, because to be Christian it must affirm in the first place the relation with Christ rather than the relation with the self (as with Paul: "if I gave my body up and had no charity . . ."). Concretely, asceticism is not stoicism (which takes pride in its self-generated detachment), not victimism (which wallows in the feeling that others ought to pity us), not masochism (which savors some aspects of self-inflicted wounds), even less suicide (which is the climax of despair). In other words, it is the positive splendor of personal interaction with the risen Jesus that entails, by default, as it were, the letting go of certain attachments; whereas to focus simply on the negative as a primary goal is indeed grim rather than "splendid," and nothing grim can be called Christian (conversely, even the most grim experience, the torture of crucifixion, acquires a new light because of the Crucified hung on the cross). Psychologically, too, we can more easily and consistently accept detachment, and suffering, if it is the result of a perceived call from

a friend who beckons individually to us, who elicits the answer through which we instinctively let go of our selves.

Love, then, is at the root. It is at the root of giving as well as receiving, of suffering as well as enjoying. It is at the root of life, and lends it splendor. Here I would like to propose some reflections on its inner dynamics and articulations; some reflections, that is, on its deeper "structure." (The word is not meant simply to provide a catchy title, it is rather used as a technical term which affects our understanding of the phenomenology of religious experience; but an elaboration of this topic must be left for another time.) I submit that important elements of this "structure of love" can be identified with the three vows which are generally associated with "religious" life—poverty, obedience and chastity. Seen as structural elements of an experience of love, they affect not just those who are canonically religious, in fact not even just those who are Christians, but all human beings. More properly, the vows affect all persons—a specification (that of human beings as persons) which, as we shall see, is fraught with consequences.

## Communion

The notion of "vows" may at first call to mind a negative dimension: poverty as deprivation, obedience as subservience; chastity as celibacy (which means essentially "unmarried," i.e., "not yet married" or "deprived of an otherwise needed spouse"). But such is clearly not the intent. The vows affirm instead a positive dimension of "splendor" which is constitutive of a profound and essential Christian joy. As a way to describe this, I would like to identify as their common root the profound imperative for *communion* that emerges from our fundamentally *social* condition. We are relational by nature, and we are even more relational by grace. Concretely, this means that we are called, by nature as human beings and by grace as Christians, to share our access to: (a) external material resources (through poverty); (b) our internal ability to affect our own self and the world around us (through obedience); and (c) our internal need to be met and fulfilled by others (through chastity).

In this light, *poverty* is not proposed as removal, but as addition. Consider how degradation in general, or more concretely, such acts as suicide, anorexia, even abstinence *qua* abstinence, are not virtues. Rather, poverty adds positively to our perception of material resources because it teaches us that we

truly do not "own" anything. Think, if you will, of God's poverty. He does not have to abuse the world to show that he owns it: the natural unfolding of creation—yes, the very reality of evolution—gives a measure of his detachment, of his "poverty." Our poverty calls, in some analogous way, for a *communio of resources*, and is opposed to a craving for appropriation, to a false belief that accumulation of property enhances our being. This is the call of married life, which places sharing above individual ownership ("for richer or for poorer . . ."). This is the profound instinct of parenthood, which, of its own, elicits sacrifice of personal advantage in favor of sharing with the child. This kind of communion within family life is not just a metaphor for poverty; it is rather the psychological root for possibly all forms of poverty: the instinctive sharing of one's own access to resources for the enrichment of the other. But such poverty extends to many other dimensions of life. For instance, the concept of private property as it applies to inanimate things should best be viewed in the light of poverty: just because we "own" a painting, it does not mean that we have the right to destroy it wantonly, as if by so doing we could more fully appropriate it.

Analogously, *obedience* is not the suspending, but rather the widening, of responsibility. The subtle dynamics of married life provides a beautiful model of reciprocal obedience. Accepting the other's point of view, accepting the recurrence of character failings, even accepting the occasional rejection, must all be grounded in the awareness of an overarching sharing of purposes: within it, we grow as truly coupled individuals. Obedience is then *communio of wills* as opposed to self-gratification, oppression, imposition of self-will, exploitation. Commands which elicit obedience are not just in the form of declarations; they are also built into the exigency of interactive relationships that declare a need through their own urgency. Think of how a mother obeys the needs of an infant, declared at best through babbling sounds; how a spouse obeys the other when a course of action is accepted without so much as a nod.

Finally, *chastity* is by no means the recoiling from the other out of prudish fear, but rather the affirmation of a fuller emotional commitment. The real negation of chastity is the manipulation of affection, the inability to accept the free response of the other because one is unable to offer freedom in the first place. Conversely, true chastity leads to the validation of freedom as one offers and accepts a bond which is never bondage, yet always binding. The inner spring of such a paradox is pre-

cisely that *communio of affections* which would seem to be, in this perspective, the best definition of chastity. If we think of affection as the reaching out for polarity, the resulting communion between two individuals is the reciprocal implementation of such polarity. Sexual intimacy can be, when so understood, a high form of communion, where affection is expressed through all registers of our full personal reality, instinct and cognition, emotion and understanding, fulfillment and self-giving, body and spirit. Hence, far from abdicating its freshness through sheer physiological mechanics, the sexual act becomes the foundation of a personal involvement which is always as fresh and new as the personal depth from which it originates. Christian sex is fundamentally personal sex. To understand the ramifications of this principle, we must look at another concept, that of particularity, which underlies not only chastity, but poverty and obedience as well.

### Particularity

The element of particularity adds a fundamental new dimension to the concept of communion. We are not just called to a generic ecological communion with our environment or a generic philanthropic communion with humankind. Worthwhile as these sentiments may be, they do not begin to exhaust the call for true personal communion. That call implies acceptance of a specific response which arises from the unpredictability and the continuity of personal relations. It is a call for the preeminence of particular bonds, which define freedom at the very moment that they circumscribe it.

Let us look once more at the family as the best demonstration of this dimension of particularity. The spousal communion of resources, wills and affections builds on the most intimate knowledge of each other, the most overwhelming surrender to each other. It is not just a sentimental attraction built on sympathy, however strong that might be at the beginning; it is the reciprocal response to the risk of the unpredictable within the bond of the continual. It is therefore a dynamic communion open to the risk of the other, and yet a stable communion resting on the bond with the same other. As one spouse to the other, I do not use the intimate knowledge of your needs to blackmail you, in the same way that I bare in return my needs to you within the trust born out of communion; nor do I use will or affection to exploit your uncertainty or your vulnerability, but

rather I seek to affirm you, just as I need to be affirmed. Particularity means intimate reciprocal knowledge, which gives an ever more sharply defined face to the polarity of communion. Particularity teaches a great secret of personal reality, namely, that commitment is not bondage. And that, therefore, a particular communion is never egoistic precisely because the more well defined the terms of the polarity, the more needs to be surrendered by each.

Parental and filial communion is also built on particularity, sealed by a biological dimension: we can never be children of different parents, and we can only be parents of the children we engender. (Adoption, by virtue of the very fact that it is patterned on a biological relationship, differs from it. But to the extent that the biological analogy is successfully implemented within adoption, what is said here about the biological sphere applies also to the adoptive sphere.) We accept in this type of communion a particularity which in one sense is even more open to risk, since we do not choose the personality of our interlocutor; while the uniqueness of the biological relationship underscores the fact that the commitment cannot be altered in substance, however often it may be reneged in practice.

We have here what I would like to call *ascribed vows*, i.e., vows for a communion of resources, wills and affections among particular individuals who are bonded to each other within the organic unity of the family. The maternal instinct is perhaps the most powerful embodiment of such a particular communion. And it will be clear in this respect how the particularity of the relationship by no means elicits a dimension of egoism: that a mother should instinctively rise to the highest levels of communion with her own child, more than with another child, should be viewed only as a mechanism triggering a greater response which would not otherwise come to be in the first place.

#### Sacramentality

The significance of particularity is brought out by the sacramental nature of the Christian universe. For to acknowledge oneself as a Christian means to accept the supreme particularity of communion with Christ. It is supreme because Christ's claim is that he can touch each particular individual in his or her own present time, in his or her own particularity. Hence he claims to be particular and universal at the same time,

across time and space. This is the nature of sacramentality: that I am met in my particularity as if no one else mattered, and that I meet Christ accepting his particularity. In other words, particularity is operative not only at the level of the finite, but also at the level of the infinite, because sacramentality means the personal commitment of the absolute to the relative, hence the personal congruence between the two.

In this way, we can say that the sacramental relationship has fundamental ontological implications. On the one hand, it is true to say that, within monotheism, the distance between absolute and relative is fully perceived as a qualitative break, and not just as a progression based on a difference of degrees: there is a true ontological fracture between the two. And yet there is, at the same time, a true ontological congruence which is made possible through the relating of the personal reality of God to our human personal reality. To have been created in his image is an initial positing of such a personal relationship; but to be redeemed by Christ provides the ultimate basis for it. Thus it is that sacramentality is at the same time the manifestation of a communion between particular persons, and the foundation for an ontological relation between finite and infinite, *qua* persons. The communion brought about by Christ, the sacramentality of the new covenant, is in this sense the "trinitarianization" of reality.

Let us see what impact these considerations have on the notion of vows given above. We will look first at the sacrament of marriage. Through it, spouses, parents and children are brought into a relationship of communion and particularity not only with each other, but also each with Christ. Beyond the instinctual level of ascribed vows, we come to the level of *sacramental vows*. The communion of resources, wills and affections is now extended to include Christ each time the communion is enacted. The particularity of our communion is enhanced to the point that it shares in Christ's universality; alternatively, in the particularity of our human communion we meet the particularity of communion with the universal Christ.

One aspect of this sacramental dimension is especially meaningful. It is fundamental to the Judeo-Catholic tradition to recognize the intrinsic coherence between institution and freedom. And that is because institutions, too, can be endowed with divine charism: this is the doctrine of the covenant, the doctrine of the Church (to which we will return later). The social fabric of institutions is not just a legal construct, but an organ-

ism endowed with personal life. (In contrast with this is the Protestant rejection of a sacramental Church, a rejection borne out of individualism, as opposed to proper Christian personalism.) Accordingly, Catholic marriage is not just a legal construct, but a living conduit of grace, which enhances freedom at the same time that it enhances the bond. It is the sacramental, personal relationship to Christ that enhances paradoxically the spontaneity and the commitment, the charisma and the covenant.

### *Sexuality*

Far from being unrelated to each other, the three vows are profoundly integrated in the unity of personal life. This means that one cannot really privilege one vow to the exclusion of another. Concretely, a husband's chastity towards his wife should not simply be the result of a purely negative suppression of alternative sexual attractions; rather it should be the concomitant expression of a love which knows and practices obedience towards, and poverty with, her. It is, in other words, the full affirmation of the other person at the deepest level of commitment and communion. Analogously, "canonical" vows (about which more will be said presently) make sense only if they are assumed and lived as parts of a whole. What appears to be at times an almost exclusive emphasis on chastity may have a negative impact on the very possibility of a full implementation of chastity itself, and may lead to a form of sterile aridity. It may be useful to explore this further with specific reference to sexuality.

The wonder of sex is fully Christian, profoundly wholesome, essentially holy. When we speak of "sex and violence" as if the two were on an equal plane, we are caught in a semantic trap which does injustice to the concept of sex. It is the sin against sex that is reprehensible, not sex as such, whereas violence, as a form of cruelty, is reprehensible as such. Our reflection on vows helps illuminate our understanding of this important dimension of our lives. It is important because it is so profoundly integrative of the various psychological attitudes which are subsumed under the notion of vows. Consider how a sin against sex is by no means just a sin against chastity alone. Such a sin violates poverty since it springs from a lust which seeks gratification by assuming ownership of one's own genital organs as well as the "partner's" (an ugly term, so common today, and

so emblematic of the depersonalization of sex in our societal frame of mind; even if interactive, lust remains auto-erotic). Such a sin violates obedience since it is essentially a form of rape which exploits the "partner" by reducing "it" to the mere role of a mechanical instrument without a will of its own. Finally, it violates chastity in the form of an egoism which manipulates affection to suffocate communion.

The positive counterpart of all this is immediately clear. The integrative impact of Christian sex is such that it brings about a profound and explosive implementation of the vows: a communion of the most intimate psycho-physical resources of the two human persons, a free communion of wills, and a lasting communion of affections, all of which is rooted in the deep particular awareness of exclusive interpersonal bonds, anchored in the efficacy of sacramental reality. It is this positive aspect that we can find, if we seek properly, in recent papal doctrine, often and blindly maligned. Far from prudery, far from stolid insensitivity, far from rigid authoritarianism, documents like *Humanae Vitae* or *Familiaris Consortio* proclaim in a prophetic tone the uniquely fulfilling ideal of truly personal sex. The real Christian perspective must be open to the wonder of such all-enveloping interpersonal relationships. For instance, rather than focusing myopically, as critics do, on biological arguments aimed at showing that sex is not always procreative (as if we needed learned statistics to discover that), we should focus on the exact converse. Precisely because sex is the only possible procreative human act, i.e., an act which brings another human person into existence; precisely because such a privilege, to bring a new person to life, is a gift which we cannot manufacture; precisely because this uniqueness distinguishes us from all other creatures, including the angels or human beings in the beatific vision—for these reasons sex is robbed of its wonder any time its procreative potential is arrogantly thwarted (where arrogance is meant in its etymological sense of *ad-vogare*, to claim for oneself). The perception of hybris in the biblical episode of the tower of Babel was not in the attempt to scale heaven, but in the presumption to preclude revelation through mechanical human means. Analogously, the hybris of contraception (i.e., artificial birth control) is the positive intent to preclude a gift through a specific mechanical intervention against its very possibility.

Concretely, if somewhat paradoxically, it may be said that a sexual life based on contraception is analogous to homosexuality. The analogy, however different the two choices

might be in every other respect, is that both posit sexual gratification as the exclusive goal of the sexual act, a gratification which is to be guaranteed by how one controls the mechanics of the act itself. In both situations (contraception and homosexuality) the very possibility of sex being fertile is thwarted by neutralizing the personal character of sex, by, literally, rendering "neuter" the sexual dimension of the person. Instead of sharing in the fullness of sexual communion, a mechanical inhibition is introduced to block from the outside the intrinsic orientation of sex. In both situations, sex remains interactive, but is no longer fully interpersonal: it excludes, through the deliberate adoption of specific external mechanisms, the most personal of all possibilities inherent in its exercise, namely, the procreation of a person.

#### The Incarnation

The single exception to sex as the only procreative act is the virginal conception of Jesus. (Creation being properly creative, rather than procreative. Modern technology, such as in vitro fertilization or artificial insemination, breaks the sexual act into temporal segments and dislocates the personal interaction between the procreators, but remains rooted in the individual sexual components, even if they are disjointed.) The wonder of this mystery is as staggering in its implications as it is far-reaching in its coherence. Let us briefly review what bearing this has on our argument. It is of fundamental importance to realize that Jesus did not *become a person*. He became a man. The personal reality of the Logos was not humanly conceived, i.e., it did not come into existence at the moment of conception. Such is the case, instead, with all other instances of human conception: personal reality begins at conception. But this could not be the case with Jesus, since the personal reality of the Logos is outside of the temporal and spatial framework of human conception.

Deriving from the consideration that sex is indeed intrinsically procreative not because every act is such in actuality, but because it is the only act that can be such, the first major implication is as follows: the virginal conception is a *christological necessity*, not a prudish veil; Jesus simply could not be procreated, could not begin to exist as a person through the only act by which persons otherwise come into existence. So the doctrine of the virginal conception does not, properly speaking, propose an exception to the manner of procreation (since Jesus was not

procreated), but rather an affirmation of the otherwise profoundly procreative nature of sex.

Unexpectedly, this view of the doctrine of the virginal conception upholds, in a very profound and coherent way, the conviction that abortion truly aborts a person, not an im-personal fetus. Just as Jesus could not be conceived through sex because he could not be procreated, i.e., he could not be generated as a person through human means, just so, if conversely, every other human conception does indeed procreate, i.e., does bring a new person into existence. This is why every abortion, at any time, is abortion of personhood, hence properly homicide. There is a profound and unsuspected link between trinitarian doctrine and the consistently pro-life position of the Church. We know the Trinity only because Jesus, while son-of-man, proclaimed his ontologically personal relation to the Father and the Spirit (mark well, not to Yahweh, nor as Yahweh, because Yahweh is the Father, Son and Spirit). Jesus, the historical human person, is the Logos, the eternal divine Person; as such, he was born of Mary, but not procreated by Joseph and Mary; he became man, not person. Mary was fully the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, because the person Jesus was conceived in her, without, however, beginning at conception, since his personhood was not rooted in human seed—as every other person is. Which means precisely that every other conception is personal, i.e., conception of a personal reality. "Personal" means that each human is ontologically aligned with the personhood of Jesus. Here is the loftiness of our faith: that we are in the image of God because our personal reality can presume to relate to trinitarian personal reality. This is what we affirm when we "dare" to say "Our Father," through "the groaning of the Spirit" alive in us as "co-heirs" with Jesus. Thus even what is seemingly the most abstract of doctrines, such as fourth-century trinitarian theology, can suddenly reemerge with dramatically practical side-effects.

A third important consideration is that the doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus in no way arises from prudish embarrassment, nor does it propose a condemnation of sex as if it were intrinsically impure. Rather than focusing puritanically on the psycho-physiological disposition of the participants in the sex act, we must focus, when meditating on the virginal conception, on the ontological dimension of the act as procreative. Clearly, the point of the doctrine is to recognize ontologically that Jesus could not be procreated as a person through sex, not to assume that he had surreptitiously to be spared a channel

considered somehow degrading and shameful. In other words, the virginal conception should in no way be understood as an implicit debasement of sex, but rather as a glorification of it precisely through a coherent and eloquent recognition of its creative value.

And yet it is also a profound component of the doctrine of the virginal conception (this is our fourth consideration) that the Virgin Mother was not just a physiological channel who "did not know man" (virgin in an asexual sense), but that she was also "full of grace" (virgin in a mystical sense). Imbued with the sense of the overriding creative presence of Yahweh, Mary was able, in line with the prophetic tradition, to hand herself over totally to divine intervention, predictable only in its unpredictability. She was ready for the invasion of grace announced by the angel because the particularity of her communion (in the sense described above) was addressed directly and fully to God. In this respect it makes sense to think of Mary as living the substance of the commitment that derives from vows, not in an anachronistic canonical understanding, but in the abandonment that alone makes canonical vows possible in the first place.

#### *Ecclesiality*

The canonical vows of poverty, obedience and chastity give formal expression to what is known as "religious profession." The canonicity of their form makes them more explicit and specific than even the exchange of marriage vows. On the other hand they are not, and have never been, embodied in a distinct sacramental vehicle. Sometimes, the desire to reassess the significance of the "ordinary" Christian is such that differences become unduly blurred. Yet these differences are marked and must not be underestimated. We should simply look at the gift of "canonical" vows with a genuine sense of awe. Let us try to identify such specificity in the perspective we have been following here.

The communion that is sought through these vows is not with specific human persons, as within marriage. A canonically religious person does not enter a communion of resources, wills and affections with human individuals of his or her choice. The chosen polar term for communion is only Christ and then secondarily, through him, a particular segment of the human community. It is a truly mystical marriage, as St. Catherine

would say, a communion with the *parousia*, i.e., the bursting presence of Christ ascended and "seated at the right hand of the Father." But the concrete embodiment of the vows takes place in a human context, with specific human members of a community. Thus poverty means communion of resources with the particular needs of the community within which the *parousia* is experienced; obedience means communion of wills with a superior whose identity is not chosen and in whom the special expression of God's desire is experienced; chastity means communion of affections within a communal setting, as if with siblings, hence without the particularity of a sexual bond. Given such implementation of the vows within a community that is a segment of the Church, these vows may be called *ecclesial vows*.

The initial definition and early growth of ecclesial vows has been associated with the historical moment that followed the end of the great persecutions at the beginning of the third century, as if the vows were a form of martyrdom. The parallel is indeed apposite, but possibly not for the reasons that one might think of at first. Martyrdom was not chosen as a form of asceticism, nor was it endured to prove a point (i.e., the validity of Christian beliefs). Rather, it was accepted as an overpowering mystical reality, the bursting invasion of the *parousia*. Let us call to mind the episode in Acts where the story of the proto-martyr is told. After delivering a very diplomatic *apologia pro vita sua*, in which he showed no intention of courting death, Stephen left himself suddenly open to condemnation by openly witnessing the incarnate presence of Jesus within the Trinity, i.e., the *parousia* of the ascended Christ seated at the right hand of the Father. In this light, the martyr is a witness (as the term means etymologically) in the sense not of providing verification for others (though that is entailed by default, as it were), but rather of integrating within the incarnation of mortal life the sphere of the unseen. Clearly, martyrdom is a charisma with which human beings are empowered, not a sacrament which can be sought, nor an ascetic exercise which can be chosen.

And so are ecclesial vows. Offered only as a special call, they celebrate the *parousia* as the particular presence of the infinite within our finite life. The Incarnation of the divine Person born virginally was an ontological necessity, but it also sealed the ability of human beings to respond to such an invasion of our world on the part of divine particularity: like martyrdom for some, for others the charisma of ecclesial vows is offered as a special privilege. In this perspective the so-called "evangelical coun-

sels" are properly not counsels as if they were better by a degree, in the way asceticism would be. They are rather a call, a privilege, a charisma—more than a counsel. And, if they are the expression of a call, the "counsels" are not properly optional because we cannot choose to be called (though of course we can turn them aside), in the same way that martyrdom is not properly optional (even though we may of course refuse it).

By seeing ecclesial vows in the perspective of ascribed and sacramental vows we may better appreciate the concreteness of the response that is evoked. Ecclesial vows are not the result of a stoic distancing from normal human experience; they are rather rooted in the fullness and depth of instinct. It is our nature, our instinct, to love; and love, in its truest dimension, is articulated along the lines of the vows. Let us think of a concrete example. Take a middle-aged widow, mother of a convicted gang member who has just been executed; she is quite poor, and the last legacy she has received from her dying son has been to take care of a fellow teenager, just as poor and disoriented. The affection borne of her maternal instinct leads her to rise above the pain of what can be perceived as betrayed affection, to sustain the poverty consequent to his loss, and to accept, as if in obedience, her dying son's wish. The very palpable human instinct of such a mother unites in one single impulse the three dimensions of her response: the great affection for her son, the acceptance of a death which leaves her at a total loss, the assent to his final wish. It is such an instinct, such an impulse, which should serve as a training and summons for ecclesial vows. And if, *mutatis mutandis*, we think of the mother to whom I just referred as Mary, of the scene I just described as Calvary, this should not diminish the full human impact of the episode. When we say we accept the historical grounding of our faith, we mean also that we accept the human dimension of the events which brought it to us. As in the Ignatian meditations, we can only benefit from a tangible, palpable, concrete identification with the protagonists of our redemption as being fully human. Should not our love for Jesus be human love? Ecclesial vows should provide no filter to such humanity; rather, they should be grounded in it. And the training that allows us to fine-tune our human instinct is to be found in the ascribed and sacramental vows out of which we all have come.

#### *The covenant*

We have seen, thus far, three types of vows, which I have called ascribed (affecting all human persons), sacramen-

tal (affecting only Christians), and ecclesial (affecting only those Christians who make a religious profession). But there remains a third category of persons who also choose in freedom to be subject to vows: the Trinity. Put in this way, such a thought may seem startling. But it must be conceded that the concept of a self-imposed bond on God is at the core of the biblical concept of the covenant, in such a way that we can properly speak of *covenantal vows*. Yahweh binds himself through poverty, because he refuses to "own" Israel; through obedience, because he waits for Israel's free response; and yes, through chastity, because he proclaims the eternal particularity of his affection. It is a particular bond, because he chooses a people to whom he is specifically and uniquely related. It is a sacramental bond, because he nurtures its very existence and implementation through the creative power of his revelation.

There are two important corollaries which show how concrete the implication is of a full recognition of the covenantal vows. (1) In the biblical perception, institutional channels are endowed with a profound sense of charisma. There is, in other words, no opposition between individual and institution as targets of the charisma, as if only the former (in the person, say, of a prophet) were privileged with direct access to God. It is in this line that the Church holds firm to her nature as fully charismatic, because specifically covenantal. The Protestant bias based on *sola scriptura* appears in this light to be rather unscriptural. (2) The covenant proclaims, as I just mentioned, the particularity of divine affection, unfathomable in its choice and procedures. Neither can we predict the terms of the covenant, nor should we adapt them. If the covenant is not just a mythical projection, then we must accept the covenantor as a real and free agent, as odd as his choices might seem. A case in point is found in what are often but naive attempts to replace linguistically loaded biblical expressions with a sexually amorphous language. Often, a so-called "nonsexist" language introduces what is ultimately an anti-incarnational bias in our acceptance of God's particular self-revelation.

The description of the covenant as a manifestation of the vows sheds light both on the other types of vows we have considered so far, and on the nature of the covenant itself. In this light, the correlations among the various types of vows may be brought out as follows:

ascribed vows: binding human beings with particular human beings (with-  
in the family)

sacramental vows: binding human beings with particular human beings and with Christ  
 ecclesial vows: binding human beings with Christ and through him with particular human beings

covenantal vows: binding the Trinity with particular human beings

The supreme manifestation of this divine self-vowing to humanity takes place with the Incarnation. Vows are supremely personal. Yahweh is the personal participant of the Old Testament covenant of vows. Jesus is an even more explicit realization of the same covenant. The Logos-son-of-man shows the supreme personal acceptance of poverty—because he lets human culture unfold without his claiming culture as a thing owned; of obedience—because he accepts the free response, even if sinful, of his fellow human beings, refusing all self-gratification; of chastity—because he elicits friendship in secret, with a horror for even the most subtle manipulation. Jesus seeks the particular response of each human, to each of whom individually he offers redemption. And Jesus is *the* supreme sacramental embodiment as he grafts each human branch onto the vine which he is.

It is thus that, ultimately, we are led to consider the fulcrum of personal love, the Trinity. If there is a structure to human personal love, it will have to be in the image of divine personal love, just as human beings themselves are in the image of God. (Hence the possible notion of intra-trinitarian vows, which however I will not attempt to elaborate.) Now, this is precisely the mystery revealed in the fullness of time: Jesus who bares the core of his relationship to the Father and the Spirit. Of this we are witnesses, however little we may be able to realize it, however impotent may be our analytical capacity to deal with it. We are witnesses to Jesus who reveals to us "all that he has heard from the Father": and from this witness, in this internalization of a personal reality within our own personal core, derives our ability to respond as persons.

Ultimately, therefore, our vows are possible only because they are reciprocated. We are not vowing poverty, obedience, chastity to an abstract goal that cannot, by definition, respond. We are vowing only because we can implement a two-way relationship with another personal reality. God accepts our vows because he, in a trinitarian way, offers the same.

#### *The person*

These considerations bring us back to our point of departure: the structure of love. The vows are to be seen as im-

portant structural components of the dynamics of love, and love, in turn, can be rooted only in the person as subject. My vows can only be the expression of my being drawn, as person, to the other, an "other" who responds in kind—for otherwise they would be but fetters tying me down to my own self. It is the reciprocal holding in tension of persons in love that upholds the value of sacrifice. And it is in this light that we should look again at the ascetic dimension.

The goal of self-denial remains absolutely central. Far from promoting lassitude, the personal view of the vows advocates rigor: the rigor of the demand placed on me by my prospective "other" in my specific situation. I yield to affirm. The depth of a personal commitment may be gauged by how it relates to consciousness. I am drawn in love at all levels of my person, whether I am immediately conscious of it or not; there is, as it were, a spontaneity in my response which draws even on the subconscious through the integrity of my personal being. Concretely: a mother responds to a child's need with the instinct of commitment, however conscious she might or might not be at any given time of her role as mother. Or again: a husband and wife need not look into each other's eyes at all times to know of their reciprocal self-surrender. The mystery of personal relationships, or at least a beautiful aspect of this mystery, may be expressed metaphorically in just such terms: we look into each other's eyes even when we do not. We have, in a relationship of love, such a fundamental awareness of each other that it can never (it *should* never) become a mere mechanical juxtaposition; that is to say, our polarity, our being held in tension towards each other is ordained to the personal core of each, even when it affects only the surface. (One way to appreciate this basic reality of our personal being is to contrast it to artificial intelligence, which remains essentially linear, no matter how multiple the interactions among segments, or how fast in time the transition from one segment to the other—whereas personal awareness is characterized by a nonlinear co-presence of elements.)

Such must be the root of Christian asceticism. We must, like a mother, nurture the instinct of motivation; like two spouses, we must learn to look into God's eyes and accept eye contact with him and all that derives from it (not hide as in Eden after the fall). We must, in other words, discover our own ascetic instinct, rooted in a need for personal response to a personal call. It is a natural instinct because we respond as persons; but it is a supernatural instinct as well because we respond to a personal



call from God. This is where instinct emerges as grace—not through an evolution resulting from self-powered determination (as in non-Christian asceticism), but through a call which touches and motivates us in the depths of our being.

There is a fundamental ontological dimension to such a personal structure of love, to which I have already referred above. Extremely far-reaching in its implications, it must be restated briefly to stress its connection with our topic. It all starts with a major paradox built into monotheism: it proclaims at one and the same time distance and closeness, transcendence and communion. Finite beings that we are, we are infinitely distant from God's beyond; and yet, redeemed persons that we are, we are coherent with God—made, yes, but made in his image. The ontological fracture between finitude and infinity is thus bridged by personal identity. It is because we are persons that we can look into God's eyes; and feel his eyes looking into ours. In this way, we can better internalize the role of Jesus as the ontological pivot around which our universe turns: as the incarnate Logos, he is the same person in both realms, that of infinity and that of finitude. It is a profound message of the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* that it proclaims precisely this ontological coherence of reality as the root of all ethics, and especially Christian ethics seen as personal interaction.

Here, then, is the impact of the ontological dimension of the person on our quest for the structure of love viewed through the medium of the vows. Through grace, and *qua* persons, we are made ontologically capable of adoration: this momentous dimension of our regenerated nature is what infuses supreme joy, already during our earthly journey. We are trained, by the vows that bind us to human persons, to live the vows that bind us to the divine Persons. We are propelled to share in the life of the Trinity, we are called to personal communion in the Trinity, through the knowledge that this is truly a reciprocal communion. We vow our life in response to the divine vow of the covenant. We are vowed even as we vow. We receive, even as we offer, the splendor of life. □

# Eternal damnation or universal salvation?

Gaston Fessard

The antinomy [between eternal hell and universal salvation] warns our reason that, from whatever perspective it chooses, it is dealing with a revealed, supernatural object, and thus one that escapes its grasp.

In 1907, at the height of the modernist controversies, Fr. Lebreton was led to defend the value of dogma and theology against Tyrrell. The latter certainly accorded a "prophetic" significance to revelation, taken in its original expression; but the dogmatic formulae and theological truths that subsequently emerged and were dependent on "outdated and antiquated systems," could possess in his eyes only a "protective" function for spiritual experience. It is impossible today, under pain of "halting the growth of this imperishable life," to see in them an infallible and absolute value. Anticipating the danger of such a position, Fr. Lebreton affirmed in this encounter the unbreakable bond between revelation and the concepts and images that render it communicable:

The Church's faith in Christ . . . is born of a revelation from the Father. This revelation was doubtless not the communication of an infused theology, but neither was it a blind impulse. It was the perception of a reality. The man with whom Peter lived for so long and whom he thought he knew so well was revealed to him on a sudden. Do not demand from him a learned and theological study of this revelation, for he would be incapable of it; he could do nothing but hold fast to the reality. But neither ought you to tell him that the idea he has of this reality is purely human and that he has re-