

# Mysterion of Christ's Consecration. The Carmelite «*Ordo Professionis Religiosae*» as a source of Systematic Theology

*di Kurt Mizzi*

## ABSTRACT

In retrieving a fuller understanding of «consecration», the new rite of Religious Life, in line with the theology of the Second Vatican Council and the living Tradition of the Church, presents a coherent synthesis of Religious Life, which might itself be the source of further theologizing. A solid biblical and sacramental basis is now offered, whilst the 'mysteric' element of religious consecration is retrieved both in form and language used, leading various theologians to speak of a quasi-sacramental nature of Religious Life. Thus understood, Consecrated Life (as celebrated in the Rite of Profession), initiates to and professes a particular understanding of the content of faith, making the intellection of the same richer for the whole Church.

## Introduction

We always have to embark on a pilgrimage back to the sources. Each and every time we do this, we find ourselves renewed. It is precisely this pilgrimage that we wish to do. But whereto?

A. Cordovilla speaks of Tradition as the memory of Theology,<sup>1</sup> which is not to be separated from Scripture, but which is informed by it. We too wish to meet this living memory of the Church and inquire it on the nature of Religious Life. Thus, our initial intention is that of writing a theology of Religious Life having Tradition as our main source.

This we do seeking first and foremost not museums or bare bones, relics of time gone by, never to come back again. This is not what we mean by Tradition. We shall consult the organ of Tradition where this is most alive: the Liturgy. A. Grillo writes:

La liturgia si inserisce [...] non solo come parte, ma come "parte del tutto", capace di influenzare quella "sintesi della sintesi" che è la sistematica e che inevitabilmente deve servirvi anche della mediazione della riflessione speculativa.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A. CORDOVILLA PÉREZ, *El ejercicio de la teología*, 137

<sup>2</sup> A. GRILLO, *Teologia fondamentale e liturgia*, 48



It is precisely this what interests us. What we are looking for are not the parts but the whole. Asking the question on the part (in this case Religious Life), we are convinced that we shall receive an explanation on the whole of the Faith.

We shall use as our main source the *Ordo Professionis Religiosae O.Carm.* (OPROC), published in 1974. This ritual follows closely the *Ordo Professionis Religiosae*, the *Editio Typica* of which was published in 1970, as part of the liturgical renewal called for by the Second Vatican Council. It was a complete novelty that the Roman Rite should include a liturgical book on religious profession. The choice to follow the Carmelite adaptation of this rite is solely moved by the vested interest the author has, as a professed Carmelite, in investigating the text.

## 1. Anthropological and Theological Elements at the basis of Religious Life

### 1.1 In search of 'Form(s)' in the OPROC

We shall start from the question of the form structuring the rite. Ratzinger, following Guardini, points out that this should interest not only rubricists but also dogmatic theologians: as the form, it was suggested, already conveyed dogmatic meaning.<sup>3</sup> We ask therefore, which are these smaller structures which might help us to gain a better grasp of the ritual we are reviewing?

Definitely, the juridical elements which have been assimilated from the legal milieu of Antiquity and the Middle Ages immediately stand out. We refer to the contractual forms of *stipulatio* and *commendatio* which have given the basic structure of the monastic *professio super altarem* and the mendicant *professio in manibus* respectively.

This structure emphasised that the candidate was now entering *in religionem* in a spiritual pact with the Lord. «*Consacrare*» is interpreted through this 'contractual' perspective. Terminology associated thereto, such as *promittere*, *dicare* and *vovere* found in the Liturgy continue to emphasise the authentically human quality of this act, which should not however be interpreted as *exclusively* human. The presence of other structures might help us to better discern the meaning of the action celebrated.

If on the anthropological level what lies at the centre is the idea of allegiance and covenant, passing unto a biblical level, we too see how these concepts (of allegiance and consecration) are too used by Scripture, which modifies them at the same time. The Septuagint employed the term *hagizein* to denote a passive consecration where God is the agent (unlike the profane Greek *hagizein* where the subject was uniquely the human agent).<sup>4</sup>

The idea of a passive consecration is also present in the history of Religious Life. The fact that terminology such as *ordinatio*, *benedictio* and *consecratio* was employed to denote monastic profession might already indicate this.<sup>5</sup> This becomes clearer with the epicletic element of the liturgies of consecrated life, as testified in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and also in the ancient ritual of consecration of virgins.<sup>6</sup> Thus the choice of the passive

<sup>3</sup> Going down this lane, theologians discovered the manifold smaller structures which form the background of our Liturgy. It was discussed for example whether the eucharist ought to be interpreted from the basic structure of a meal, or whether other elements, such as some taken also from synagogue and temple liturgy ought to be taken into consideration. Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Forma e contenuto*.

<sup>4</sup> H. SEEBASS, «Santo, sacro», *DCBNT*, 1652-1658

<sup>5</sup> J. Gribomont – *al.*, «Professione» in *DIP*, VII, 917

<sup>6</sup> J.M. CANALS CASAS, «Professione Religiosa, 2. "Rito della Professione"», *DTVC*.



*consecratur* made by *Lumen Gentium*, 44 and (following in its trails) the decision to include a prayer of blessing/consecration in the *Ordo Professionis* can in no way be seen as a complete novelty but rather an exercise in *resourcement* and the organic development of Liturgy.

Yet I believe that we are lacking one final decisive remark on the *form* of this liturgy. In investigating the *Grundgestalt* of the liturgy we ought not only embark on a historico-critical exercise to arrive at basic forms which lie beneath our liturgies. Indeed, this exercise is needed for a proper hermeneutic. However, we must ask ourselves which is the formal element of this particular rite. I believe that two crucial elements of the Prayer of Consecration for male religious in the OPROC can be of great help. I am referring to the expressions: «[...] *Iesu Christus Dominus noster, qui a te, Pater, forma sanctitatis effectus*» and «*emitte in eos Spiritum sanctitatis*». If there is a Form in-forming the rite, this is to be found in Christ himself. Any other form which might be present (covenant and allegiance, consecration, gift of self...) is christologized by this Form.

Religious life, as I shall try to argue later on is all about this Form: the *forma vitae Iesu*. This is what the Spirit gives to religious: the participation in Christ's salvific way of life, his *forma vitae*, which was a complete oblation/consecration to God, his people and all of creation. There can be no interpretation of the rite, if not through this Form.

## 1.2 Wider appraisal of the theological basis of the OPROC

Having established the form as consecration, we move now to the biblical and sacramental basis of the same in order to show that Word and Sacrament lie at the basis of this theological reality.

A particular richness of the OPROC is the biblical basis it offers to religious life, an element which has evident ecumenical importance. Two important elements stand out: first and foremost, the Lectionary included in the Ritual and secondly the euchology thereof which is eminently biblical in tone, especially the Prayers of Benediction/Consecration and the Preface.

Religious life inserts itself in the context of the universal call to holiness «*elegit nos Deus in Christi ut essemus sancti*».<sup>7</sup> This is the basic structure of the Prayer of Consecration; it is a reading of the history of salvation from the perspective of God's plan to call the human person to holiness. Baptism and Eucharist as conversion and oblation are more explicitly recalled in readings such as: «*in novitate vitae ambulamus*»<sup>8</sup> and «*exhibite copre vestrum hostiam viventem*»<sup>9</sup> and Christ's life as *a continuous oblation to God* is recalled in the Gospel readings proposed (manifestly linked to the three vows) and – especially – in the Preface.

Passing on to the sacramental basis, I believe that a symbol proposed by the ritual, that of the religious habit<sup>10</sup>, can be of a great help in our reflection, as it fundamentally speaks of

<sup>7</sup> Cf Eph 1, 3-14

<sup>8</sup> Cf Rm 6,3-11

<sup>9</sup> Cf Rm 12, 1-13

<sup>10</sup> The habit is the synthesis of the main values and dimensions of religious life: the Christological reference (the mystery of the incarnation: «*Filio tuo [...] nostrae mortalitatis trabeam induisti*»); discipleship («*qui sequuntur Agnum sine macula, ambulant cum eo in albis*»); community life («*quod Sancti Patres [...] portari sanxerunt*»); the eschatological dimension («*ut hi famuli tui, Christum induentes in terris, resurrectionem praefigurent futuram*»). Cf. OPROC, Part I, no. 20.



conversion and consecration, being presented as «*consecrationis signum*»<sup>11</sup> and «*innocentis et humilis vitae indicium*».<sup>12</sup> This is why we refer to its synthetic dimension.

Conversion and consecration therefore cannot be dissociated from one another in treating of religious life. All other theological elements find their source in this basic dynamic where conversion leads to consecration and consecration is the perfect expression of the journey of conversion.

*Consecration* hence necessarily refers to Baptism and Eucharist, or better still, it necessarily leads us to the connection between Baptism and Eucharist, for what was begun in Baptism necessarily leads us to the Eucharist: the life of conversion cannot but aspire to become a life of perfect sacrifice offered to God.

In this light the *conversatio religiosa* (where *conversatio* is understood primarily as conversion - the essence of Baptism - understood as *conversio ad Dominum*) leads the religious to the *conversatio Christi* (where *conversatio* means *way and form of life*, which is essentially *pro-existence*, *ie.* Eucharistic.);

It is in this space (the space between Baptism and Eucharistic existence), and in reference to these two events (Baptism and Eucharist), that Religious Life takes place. The collect of the second formulary for Mass on the day of Solemn Profession reads

«Domine [...] fac ut baptismatis gratia, quam novis [servorum tuorum] cupiunt nexibus roborari, *plenum in eis sumat effectum: quo tuae Maiestati debitum cultum retribuunt*».<sup>13</sup>

Thus, religious consecration always refers to this sacramental basis.

## 2. Mystery as a mystagogue to Mysteries: The Liturgy of Profession speaks of Consecrated Life and the Faith as a whole.

We move now to inquire on the *proprium* of religious consecration. In so doing I also hope to present how theology of Religious Life is in itself a systematic theology, inasmuch as it nourishes the contemplation and intellection of the mysteries of Faith.

Having already seen that the form is that of consecration (understood as «*me consacro*, «*consecratur*» and «*Christi forma*»), and situated Consecrated Life between baptismal and eucharistic consecration, we continue to delve deeper in the idea of consecration.

We know that there can be no consecration (be it in baptism, in Eucharist, in Orders...) which is not in some way or another a conformation and configuration to Christ. Thus, we have to investigate further if we wish to arrive at the *proprium* of religious consecration.

Religious life equates, so to say, *consecratio Christi* with *conversatio Christi* (understood as *way/form of life*). Christ's consecration to the Father assumes a *form* in his *conversatio: in his form of life*. This shapes his whole being: his affectivity, liberty and property, everything is directed to the Father. In the Preface we read:

sua conversatione docuit castitatis fastigium [...] usque ad mortem factum obediens, hostiam se tibi voluit perfectae caritate offerre [...] omnia pro te relinquentis in terris.

The eternal Logos' being-towards-the-Father assumes in the mystery of the Incarnation, a human form and becomes *forma et exemplum sanctitatis*. The religious, yet at the threshold of his journey in Religious Life, confesses that there can be no other model but

<sup>11</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 32

<sup>12</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 20

<sup>13</sup> OPROC, Appendix, 130. Added emphasis.



Christ crucified: «*docete nos, rogamus Christum crucifixum sequi, pauperes, oboedientes, castosque vivere*». <sup>14</sup> He is indeed the «*Divinus Magister*». <sup>15</sup>

Yet this *learning Christ's way of life* is not a gnostic learning. It entails a mystagogy: a sacramental and theological initiation in the mysteries of the Faith. This is precisely the mystery that is celebrated in religious consecration: a representation and reading of the mystery of the Incarnation read through the category of consecration.

The symbol of the habit may again help us to explicate this further. The habit recalls the mystery of the incarnation: «*Deus, qui Filio tuo in casto Virginis sinu nostrae mortalitatis trabeam induisti*» and then connects the clothing with clothing Christ: «*praesta [...] hi famuli tui, Christum induentes in terries, resurrectionem praefigurant futuram ac beata mereant immortalitate vestiri*». <sup>16</sup>

Thus the *proprium* of religious consecration is the participation in and the representation of the *forma vitae Christi*. The ritual gives ground to think along these lines and recent theology has been slowly but surely moving along this lines. <sup>17</sup> Firmly rooted in the Incarnation, the *imitatio formae Christi* would not be interpreted first and foremost as the mere imitation of the Christ's external demeanour but rather in reference to his inner consecration, his being-towards-the-Father, of which his external way of life is an expression. In Christ therefore we don't find three separate intentions: that to be poor, to be chaste and obedient separately but his unique *propositum* of *pro-existing towards his Father*. So too, the religious' *propositum* in one and unique.

Now, we know that the incarnation - which we have qualified as consecration - is an *opus Trinitatis*. Moving from the christological to the proper theological dimension of religious consecration, we see how religious consecration too is an *opus Trinitatis*. A central text in one of the versions of the Solemn Prayer of Consecration refers to this:

Respice ergo, Domine, super hos famulos,  
quos superna providentia vocavisti,  
et emitte in eos Spiritum Sanctitatis,  
ut quod, te donante, laeti promiserunt,  
te adiuvente, fidelis adimpleant.  
Divini Magistri exempla  
Studiose intuentur,  
imitentur assidue. <sup>18</sup>

The Father, author of the vocation, pours out his spirit, so that what was promised through divine inspiration can now be brought to completion through divine assistance, namely the contemplation and imitation of the Divine Master's examples (i.e. His way of life). It is at the impetration of the Church that the Father configures, blesses, sanctifies and consecrates the religious <sup>19</sup> with a new title, a new consecration. <sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 8.

<sup>15</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 8.

<sup>16</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *inter alia*: G., URÍBARRI BILBAO, *Portar las marcas de Jesús*; S.M., ALONSO RODRIGUEZ, «Consacrazione», *DTVC*. This last article includes further references to other theologians who too argue in favour of an active consecration by God in profession, including A. ANDRÉS ORTEGA and J.M. TILLARD.

<sup>18</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 64.

<sup>19</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 59.

<sup>20</sup> PAUL PP. VI, «Allocuzione ai Capitolari di Ordini e Congregazioni Religiose» (23.05.64), cited in S.M., ALONSO RODRIGUEZ, «Consacrazione» in *DTVC*





In so doing God acts on what has been donated in baptismal and eucharistic grace, giving a new breadth and scope. Thus I believe that we can't speak of sacrament *strictu sensu* but this absolutely doesn't reduce religious consecration to rituality and legality. Religious consecration participates in the universe of sacramentality inasmuch as the analogy with Baptism and Eucharist is not only in structure but also in substance: that is, according to the analogy of being. Religious consecration therefore participates dynamically in this great sacrament of Christian initiation (Baptism – Confirmation – Eucharist), and it does so in a unique manner, making it different from other forms of Christian life, thus we speak of quasi-sacramentality.

Religious life not only is within the Church but also expresses an understanding of the Church. It is an expression of the church's apostolicity (not as ordained ministry, but inasmuch as the Jerusalem community is the model of consecrated life par excellence; thus, the two readings form *Acts* proposed by the lectionary. It is also an expression of the church understood as *communio*, «*sicut pristinis Iesu discipulis eis cor unum sit et anima una*». <sup>21</sup> Eminently, however, it expresses the Church's holiness. <sup>22</sup>

This perspective sheds a new light on new eschatology. Consecrated life is not an eschatological sign in the sense that it is a condemnation of the world (even though it does indicate the passing nature of this world), but rather inasmuch as it – as a sign – refers to the attainment of full transformation in Christ, the fruition of baptismal grace. It is the final victory over sin: Religious Life which had begun in the novitiate as a plea for mercy <sup>23</sup> arrives, through Grace to the redeemed form of the human person, recreated at the image of Christ. <sup>24</sup> In this sense it is a «*bonorum caelestium signum praeclarum*». Moreover, it is an eschatological sign inasmuch as it speaks of an undivided heart centred on the Lord, whom the Church awaits, pleading, *come Lord Jesus!* <sup>25</sup> Far from being a passive awaiting, it anticipates and calls for the definite Kingdom of God: «*vitae suae dono adventum Regni festinent*». <sup>26</sup>

### 3. Carmelite Life

Yet the OPROC speaks not only of Religious Life *in genere*, but also of Carmelite Life in particular. Ever since its Medieval origins, Carmel has always kept close to heart the idea of a life lived in *obsequio Iesu Christi*. The synthetic symbol of this movement is that of the *professio in manibus*, which Carmel has adopted and conserved ever since its inception. The hands joined together represent the act whereby the subject makes present, in that single instance, all his intention and will, summing up all that he/she is, and places them in the hands of his new Lord. <sup>27</sup>

Each and every Carmelite has repeated this simple yet eloquent movement of putting our hands in His hands, promising allegiance. Yet it doesn't stop there. As with the Mediaeval contract of *commendatio* we too receive the *osculum pacis* from our Lord, signifying thereby that he has accepted us as his *juniores*, his vassals, and that he too shall comply in being our Lord. It is for this reason that Cicconetti writes:

<sup>21</sup> OPROC, Part III, no. 63.

<sup>22</sup> J. DANIELOU, «La Place des Religieux dans la structure de l'Eglise»

<sup>23</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 8.

<sup>24</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 32, indicating the clothing with the white cloak.

<sup>25</sup> Hence the reading on Apoc. 22, 12-14. 16-17. 20 is suggested in the Lectionary of the Ritual. OPROC, Part III, no. 24.

<sup>26</sup> OPROC, Part III, no. 67.

<sup>27</sup> C. Cicconetti writes: «Nella professione non sono promessi atti [...] ma la persona stessa che [...] viene tradita, mancipata.» Cf. C. CICONETTI, *La Regola del Carmelo*, 139.



La professione religiosa è il patto di alleanza sponsale, contratto personalmente con Cristo, che precede e viene esplicitato socialmente (reso pubblico e vincolante davanti alla Chiesa).<sup>28</sup>

Carmelites recognized they do this in the spirit of Elijah, whom the Fathers of the Church regarded as the founder of monasticism. He is the model of all contemplatives. Even the Roman *Editio Typica* of the *Ordo Professionis* proposes his encounter with God on Horeb as one of the readings. He stood in God's presence and emptied himself to be filled only with God.

Yet Carmelites find in Mary the model *par excellence* of what they wish to be in the Church. She is very much present in the ritual. She too lives a life of consecration<sup>29</sup> and supports us through her intercession.<sup>30</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

We have seen therefore how the OPROC (in line with the Roman *Editio Typica*), offers a rich theology of Religious Life which we have especially considered from the perspective of consecration.

This has led us to appreciate religious consecration as an authentically human and divine art. We see here yet another instance of the theology of Grace, where the new man, re-created at the image of Christ is thoroughly divine and human, work of God involving (not destroying or supplanting) human collaboration. Indeed, as he does with the elements which we bring on the altar, God does not destroy the oblation we present unto him. He purifies and sacramentalizes it through his Spirit. In analogy we believe that the same thing happens in religious consecration, which represents in the Church and the World the *vitae forma Christi*, a prophetic voice recalling towards holiness of life.

We conclude in J. Danielou's words:

Si nous envisageons l'Eglise dans sa plénitude, dans sa intégrité alors elle comporte nécessairement des vies consacrées à Dieu. Celles-ci sont la marque de l'épanouissement même de la communauté. Tant qu'elles n'existent pas, le commandement n'est pas pleinement accompli. [...] Il est en relation avec le fin de l'Eglise, qui est la sainteté. Cette fin concerne évidemment tous les chrétiens. Mais elle est une expression institutionnelle qui la manifeste non seulement individuellement, mais dans la structure même de l'Eglise.<sup>31</sup>

### Abbreviations

DCBNT – Dizionario dei Concetti Biblici del Nuovo Testamento

DIP – Dizionario Degli Istituti di Perfezione

DTVC – Dizionario Teologico della Vita Consacrata

OPROC – Ordo Professionis Religiosae O.Carm.

Riv. Liturg – Rivista Liturgica

### Bibliography

<sup>28</sup> C. CICONETTI, *La Regola del Carmelo*, 137.

<sup>29</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 56

<sup>30</sup> OPROC, Part I, no. 31

<sup>31</sup> J. DANIELOU, «La Place des Religieux dans la structure de l'Eglise», 153.



ALONSO RODRIGUEZ, S.M., «Consacrazione» in *DTVC*, 436-476.

AUGÉ, M., «I Riti della Professione Religiosa e della Consacrazione delle Vergini», *Riv. Liturg.* 60 (1973), 326-340.

———, «Notas para una teología de la vida religiosa que emergen de los ritos de profesión religiosa y de consagración de virgenes», in *Miscellanea Lateranense*, Rome 1975, 458-470.

———, «Reflexión Teológica sobre la Vida Religiosa a la luz del Ritual de la Profesión», *Phase* 154 (1986), 317-329.

———, *La liturgia della professione religiosa : dal rituale tipico ai rituali particolari*, Magnano (BI) 2011.

BONI, A., «Professione Religiosa, 1. “Dimensione Teologica”» in *DTVC*, 1327-1356.

CANALS CASAS, J.M. «Professione Religiosa, 2. “Rito della Professione”» in *DTVC*, 1356-1373.

CALABRESE, V., «Le orazioni collette ‘in professione religiosa’: dalla lex orandi alla lex vivendi», *Notitiae* 51 (2015) 522-541.

CICCONETTI, C., *La Regola del Carmelo : origine, natura, significato*, Textus et Studia Historica Carmelitana 12, Rome 1973, 20182.

*Ordo Professionis Religiosae.*, Rome 1970.

*Ordo Professionis Religiosae O.Carm.*, Rome 1976.

POSSANZINI, S., *I Riti della Vita Religiosa*, Florence 1985.

RAMIS, G., «El Ritual de Profesión Religiosa y Consagración de Virgenes (Aproximación Teologica)», *Phase* 117 (1980), 199-228.

RATZINGER, J. *Forma e contenuto della Celebrazione Eucaristica*, in Müller, G.L., ed., *Opera omnia*, XII, Vatican City 2010, 412-449.

TRIACCA, A.M., «Fondamenti Liturgico-Sacramentali Delle Forme di “Vita di Consacrazione”», *Riv. Liturg.* 60 (1973), 326-340.

URÍBARRI BILBAO, G., *Portar las marcas de Jesús : teología y espiritualidad de la vida consagrada*, Biblioteca de teología Comillas 006, Madrid 2001, 20023.

VAGAGGINI, C., *Il senso teologico della liturgia : saggio di liturgia teologica generale*, Rome 1965.

