

### Chapter Three

## RELICITIS OMNIBUS

*SUMMARY.* – Detachment from all creatures, the necessary preliminary condition for the soul which aspires to the dignity of Spouse of the Word. Virginity is one of the principal means of this detachment. It is the object of one of the counsels, and constitutes a special grace. How necessary it is to preserve intact virginity of soul and body. This detachment can be perfectly reconciled with the precept of love for one's neighbor. It becomes a source of precious graces.

According to St. Paul, the union of the Word with the human nature is the image of the union of Christ with His Church. Beautiful as this subject is however, and useful for pious meditation, we shall not stop here, for the union of Jesus, with His Church as spouse is not realized in a definite and concrete fashion as is His union with souls. It is, then, the union of the individual soul with the Word that we shall consider.

St. Bernard demands as the primary disposition for that soul which aspires to be a spouse of the Word “a detachment from all things,” fully consented to and realized with a view to supernatural union: *Relictis omnibus*. It is the separation from all that could divide, all that could constitute an obstacle to perfect union.

In the parable of the “royal nuptials”, our Lord Himself enumerates the principal obstacles which hinder souls from responding to the invitation of the King. “I have bought five yoke of oxen and I go to try them.” *Juga bovum emi quinque, et eo probare illa, habe me excusatum*. Here are the absorbing preoccupations of business affairs. – “I have bought a farm and I must needs go out and see it.” *Villam emi et necesse habeo exire et videre illam*. This is the vanity of ownership, joined with independence. “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.” *Uxorem dux iet ideo non possum venire*.<sup>1</sup>

These are the ties and bonds of the flesh: examples of the three main obstacles which impede the soul from union with the King. Now these obstacles are removed by the vows.

We have seen elsewhere the part played by the vows in the work of the soul's detachment.<sup>2</sup> Here we regard specially the obstacles which hinder the complete union of the soul with the Word, considered as Spouse. According to St. Paul,<sup>3</sup> this obstacle consists in dividing human love with Him, and is removed by the consecration of the virginity to God.

Fecundity is one of the Divine attributes; nay, it is the very life of God. For God to live “is to be the Trinity,” to be fruitful in His own substance. Divinity and fecundity are, in a supreme sense, synonymous. Moreover, both are essentially actual. For God to live, is to be in Himself an act of fecundity, to be at the same time source and term of a fecundity always actual. The Father engenders the Son; the Father and the Son mutually communicate their love which is the Holy Spirit. Such is the plenitude of this infinite fruitfulness that it, as it were, exhausts the Divinity; God has but one Son equal to Himself in perfection, so equal that He is unique; so perfect that the Father, contemplating Him exclaims: “Thou art my Son; this day I have begotten Thee.”

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 14:18-20

<sup>2</sup>[Marmion,] *Christ, the Ideal of the Monk*, Conference II, *Following Christ*; VI, *The Religious Profession*.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor 7:33

*Filius meus es tu ; ego hodie genui te.*<sup>4</sup> There is but one Spirit, substantial love, which seals forever the union of Father and Son, and completes the intimate cycle of the Divine life. In giving being to man God grants him the power to imitate this paternity; he gives fecundity to man. Moreover, racially considered, man has received from God the order to increase, for God having created the earth for man wishes that it shall be peopled with the fruits of human fecundity. “Increase and multiply and fill the earth.” *Crescite et multiplicamini et replete terram.*<sup>5</sup> This fruitfulness is a reflection of the Divine fruitfulness. In the design of God, this was the last stage in the natural perfection of man; even after the sin of Adam the human race preserves a superhuman grandeur, a primitive nobility radiating from it because there is a similitude to that fecundity “of whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named.” *Ex quo omnis paternitas in cælis et in terra nominatur.*<sup>6</sup>

Again we hear Eve exclaim as she takes her first-born son in her arms: “I have gotten a man through God.” *Possedi hominem per Deum.*<sup>7</sup> A cry of joy and triumph, a feeble but faithful echo of the cry of God “in the brightness of the Saints”: *In splendiborus sanctorum*<sup>8</sup> celebrating His eternal fecundity.

We understand now why St. Paul says in speaking of human marriage: “This is a great sacrament.” *Sacramentum hoc magnum est.* But he immediately adds “but I speak in Christ and the Church.” *Ego autem dico in Christo et in Ecclesia.*<sup>9</sup>

What does the Apostle wish to convey here? That the grandeur of this sacrament comes from the fact that it is a symbol of the union between Christ and the Church, that is, with souls. There exists, then, a union as intimate as that of marriage upon earth, but a higher reality, a more elevated state. And what is that? It is that in which, according to the expression borrowed from the Pontifical for the consecration of Virgins, “one does not imitate what is accomplished in earthly unions.” *Nec imitentur quod nuptiis agitur* : but where “one loves“ there is sought an intimacy and fecundity, profound but differing, which is typified in earthly marriage. *Sed diligenter quod nuptiis prænotatur.* There is the symbol and the shadow; here the profound and luminous reality. But religious virginity which prepares the way for this spiritual marriage is not the appanage of all: it constitutes a very special grace. Our Lord Himself said: “All men take not this word.” *Non omnes capiunt verbum istud.*<sup>10</sup> In the preface for the consecration of virgins, which is of great antiquity, the Church celebrates in wonderful language the grandeur of that virginity that is consecrated to Christ. The obstacles opposed to this lofty state in the case of the soul united to a body of flesh are enumerated: “the law of nature, the free play of the senses, the force of hereditary tendencies, the stimulus of youth.” Thus, it continues, only God can inspire a life of this sort. “It is you, O Lord, who inspired the soul with the love of holy virginity, who in your goodness nourishest this desire, rendering it capable of enduring.” .... “The Virgin’s Son, the Word incar-

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<sup>4</sup> Ps 2:7; Heb 1:5; 5:5.

<sup>5</sup> Gen 1:28

<sup>6</sup> Eph 3:15

<sup>7</sup> Gen 4:1

<sup>8</sup> Ps 110(109):3

<sup>9</sup> Eph 5:32

<sup>10</sup> Matt 19:11

nate, draws to Himself in the nuptial chamber in the quality of spouse those virgin souls, who like Him are emulous of angelic purity.”<sup>11</sup>

According to St. Bernard this virginal state is necessary for that soul which aspires to an intimate and perfect union with the Word.

What does St. Paul say in speaking to the virgins? “I would have you to be without solicitude, for he that is with a wife is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife,” and the consequence is, “he is divided.” *Et divisus est*. On the other hand, “He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord.” He does not seek to please himself, his love and all his heart is totally given to God.” “The virgin has time to attend upon the Lord without impediment.”<sup>12</sup> The vow of virginity, then, marks the absolute separation from any creature, which is a necessary requisite for that soul which desires to be united with the Word as spouse.

On the day of your religious profession, you fulfilled this condition; then it was that you not only said good-bye to that home in which you were born and nurtured, but freely responding to the divine call, you renounced of your own free will all earthly union, and the legitimate right to found a family: you became detached from all things: you then realized the most complete abandonment even of yourselves, *relictis omnibus*, so that you might consecrate yourself, soul and body, to the Word. This complete donation of yourself, inspired and realized by the help of grace, is the great subject of your interior joy. It should also be a constant source of thanksgiving. For does it not confer upon you the magnificent faculty “of consecrating yourself without impediment to a life of intimate union with God”? *Eo quod facultatem præbeat sine impedimento Dominum obsecrandi*.<sup>13</sup>

Does it not place you always in “the garden enclosed”:<sup>14</sup> there to enjoy the gifts and presence of the Bridegroom?

Does it not make the soul the “fountain sealed”<sup>15</sup> where the living and fructifying waters are?

It is most important however, never to take back what we have once given so generously. Our souls and bodies being consecrated to God, we must take the greatest care to keep from the avenues of approach to our hearts, not only anything that might soil their purity, but all that has the slightest tendency to lessen or weaken the intimacy of the soul with Christ.

In the Preface from which I have already quoted, the Church asks God “to confirm by the seal of His blessing” that soul which is all for Him, demanding that she who has become the spouse of Christ “shall be enlightened and sustained by His support.” And why this demand? Because “the higher the aims the more carefully concealed are the ambushes of the ancient enemy,

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<sup>11</sup> *Agnovit auctorem suum beata virginitas et æmula integritatis angelicæ, illius thalamo, illius cubiculo se devovit, qui sic perpetuæ virginitatis est sponsus, quemadmodum perpetuæ virginitatis est filius.* – Roman Pontifical.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor 7:32-35

<sup>13</sup> According to St. Augustine who is followed here by St. Thomas, to merit the praises of virginity it is not sufficient only to have kept corporal integrity, but this must have been kept in order to consecrate it to God: *Nec nos hoc in virginibus prædicamus quod virgines sunt, sed quod Deo dictatæ, pia continentia virgines sunt.* – *De virginitate*, c. 8. Cf. *Summa theolog.*, II-II, q. CLII, a I and 3.

<sup>14</sup> Sg 4:12

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

who, through the negligence of the soul insinuates himself to dim the luster of perfect virginity.”<sup>16</sup>

It is only by extreme vigilance in avoiding the slightest occasion of imperfection, by cutting short immediately evil suggestions or unhealthy reveries, that we are able to preserve pure and immaculate so sublime a state. This vigilance must be always active; our resolution must never falter. A virginal heart which does not protect itself by the guard of the senses and mortification runs great risks, especially if, through imprudence, it exposes itself to dangers. “Do not neglect the little faults, for by these the great commence, the conflagration which burns all before it springs often from a tiny spark.”<sup>17</sup>

Pride is often encountered as the root of this negligence. For to expose oneself to danger is equivalent to saying: “I can be chaste by myself.” But such a condition, to live virginally in corruptible flesh, is not a triumph of ours, but that of grace.

Virginity is a gift of God’s.<sup>18</sup> Its delicate splendor is only maintained in us by heavenly power; and, above all, it is to humble hearts that God gives this grace. There is a profound supernatural affinity uniting humility and virginity.<sup>19</sup>

Let us then watch humbly over ourselves, never permitting any creature to break into the integrity of our love. The sacred veil with which the Church covers the head of the virgin on the day of her consecration, is it not the sign of the exclusive love which the Bridegroom demands of her? “He has placed His sign on my forehead, so that I shall admit no other love than His.” *Possuit signum in faciem meum, ut nullum praeter eum amatorem admittam.*<sup>20</sup>

Without doubt this love cannot and should not be so exclusive as not to extend to all creatures seen in a divine light: we ought to love our neighbor, not as an abstraction, but as he presents himself to us in reality. We have noted elsewhere the extent of the precept of fraternal charity.<sup>21</sup> Above all, it is in the Saints, that is to say, in souls completely detached, that one finds an unequalled fraternal love.

Take, for instance, St. Bernard. We all know how free he was from any attachment to creatures, and how united to God. If he placed detachment as a primary necessity to attain divine union, it was because he had realized in his own soul this total abandonment. But did he not write to the monk Robert, whom he loved above all, and who had left Clairvaux for Cluny:

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<sup>16</sup> *Da protectionis tuae munimen et regimen, ne hostis antiquus, qui excellentiora studia subtilioribus infestat insidiis, ad obscurandam perfectae continentiae palmam per aliquam mentis serpat incuriam.* – Roman Pontifical.

<sup>17</sup> Bossuet, *Sermon pour une profession*. Œuvres oratoires. Ed. Lebarq, III. p. 533

<sup>18</sup> “All men take not this word, but those to whom it is given.” Matt 19:11-12. See also the “Preface for the Consecration of Virgins”: *Inter ceteras virtutes quas filiis tuis indidisti hoc donum (virginitatis) in quasdam mentes de largitatis tuae fonte defluxit.*

<sup>19</sup> St. Augustine emphasizes the necessity of humility for virginal souls. Citing the words of Scripture: “Abase thyself the more profoundly thou art elevated, and thou wilt find grace in God’s eyes,” he then continues: “Since perpetual continence and, above all, virginity consecrated to Christ, constitutes amongst the Saints of God a gift beyond price, it is necessary to use the most attentive vigilance lest pride should endanger this precious gift.” *De Sancto Virginitate*, Chap. XXIII, n. 33, Cf. Chap. XXVIII, n. 39; Chap. XXXI *et seq.*

<sup>20</sup> Roman Pontifical

<sup>21</sup> [Marmion,] *Christ the Life of the Soul*. Conference, *Love One Another*. See also, Christ, *Idéal du Moine*, pp. 536-538

“How unhappy I am to have you no longer, not to see you, to have to live without you! To die for you is my life, to live without you is to die.”<sup>22</sup>

Do we not see him the day after the death of his brother Gerard, after he had presided at his funeral without shedding a tear, suddenly break down in the Chapter House during his commentary on the Canticle of Canticles, to give vent before all to his pent-up emotion? What pathetic accents we hear. “My grief became more violent the more I restrained it. I acknowledge that I am conquered. The sorrow I feel within must burst forth . . . O Gerard, my brother by nature, and even more by religion, you were so much to me. Why have you been thus torn away? We who loved so tenderly, how can it be that death shall separate us? We were one heart, one soul, the sword of death in transfixing his soul has equally transfixed mine . . .”<sup>23</sup> The whole discourse is a cry of tenderness, exhaling itself from the most intimate depths of his soul.

So loved St. Bernard: in like manner loved St. Anselm and St. Teresa. In fact, the Saints always loved thus. The purity of their love was the secret both of its depth and its tenderness.

Let us then seek to give the Bridegroom the love He claims, mindful that He converted into a commandment the precept to love one another as He has loved us Himself, and also made it the object of His last prayer.<sup>24</sup> Yet divine love is a jealous love: for the celestial Spouse demands the complete love of the soul that is consecrated to Him.<sup>25</sup>

He claims – and what right is more sovereign than His? – that first and foremost it shall be His entirely without reserve, division or adherence to any other person or thing; we must live in complete abandonment, absolute detachment. “*Relictis omnibus*.”<sup>26</sup> These words contain depths which can only be sounded in prayer; they suppose a poverty so radical that they have dismayed more than one soul.

In reality there is no subject where we may so readily be deceived; all of us have some attachments. But we ought to be able to look Christ in the face and say to Him: “My divine Master, You are my God and my all. I seek only You, You alone.” Happy the soul that can pronounce such words with sincerity: Our Lord will reply to her with infinite tenderness, the gage of more intimate blessings: “I am also entirely yours.”

The life of St. Gertrude gives us an example of this absolute detachment from creatures. You are aware that her reputation for sanctity was so great that people came from all parts to consult her. Through charity the Saint responded to these frequent appeals. “For the least demand she interrupted her own employments; prodigally bestowing both time and patience, she willingly welcomed those who came to her sometimes from great distances for help and consolation. During these interviews, however, she could not help longing for the time when she could return to her Best Beloved. These exterior relations were for her a veritable cross; and if she had not known that by these communications with the world she aided in increasing the glory of God, nothing could have induced her to engage in them.

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<sup>22</sup> P.L. t. 182, *Epist.* I, n. I

<sup>23</sup> *In Cantic.* XXVI

<sup>24</sup> Jn 13:34; 15:12; 17:21-22

<sup>25</sup> This priority is encroached upon when affection for a creature is too natural or too sensible; when it occupies the mind too incessantly; above all, at the time of prayer, when it troubles the soul, or is the source of infidelities to the Rule; or again, if it unnecessarily excludes people from its affections.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. St. Mechtilde, *Le Livre de la Grâce Spéciale*, IV. Partie, Chap. LIX.

“Occasionally, carried away by her desire, she would suddenly rise and go to the choir. ‘See, my dear Lord,’ she exclaimed, ‘how wearied I am with this intercourse with creatures. Were I free to choose, I would have no other society, no other conversation than yours; with joy I would abandon all, and return to you my supreme Good, the only joy of my heart and my soul. Then seizing her crucifix, she kissed five times each of the wounds of Christ, saying: ‘I greet you O my Spouse, full of grace and sweetness in the joy of your divinity; I embrace you with the love of the whole Universe, and lay an ardent kiss on the wounds of your love.’ This practice of devotion took but a few seconds, yet Our Lord revealed to her how these marks of devotion touched His Sacred Heart; and for each one of them He would one day reward her a hundredfold. Thus, these frequent visits of seculars which might have been a peril resulted in plunging the Saint more deeply into her mystic union. ‘Nothing pleases me here below save You O my Lord,’ she said, and Christ, as it were, borrowing the phrases of His faithful servant replied in words full of tenderness: ‘And I without you find pleasure neither in heaven or earth – for in my love I associate you with all the joys and happiness that I taste. Moreover, the greater these joys the greater the fruit you draw from them.’”<sup>27</sup>

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Next in the series: Chapter Four, *Votis Omnibus Verbo Adhærere*\*

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<sup>27</sup> D. G. Dolan. *Sainte Gertrude, sa Vie Intérieure*, pp. 110, 111.

\* Editor’s note: “with all its strength to adhere to the Word” – attachment to Spouse