

## CHAPTER V

### THE STATES FOR ACQUIRING EVANGELICAL PERFECTION

#### *17. The Evangelical Counsels*

The great Shepherd of the sheep, the Lord Jesus Christ (see Hb 13:20), not only strengthened his Church with saving precepts by observing which the door of salvation would be open to all who believe in him (see Mt 19:17-19); he also provided it with most holy counsels so that to those who were willing there might be provided an easier and safer way to the fulfilment of that love which is the fulness of the divine law (see Rm 13:10). As his death drew near, therefore, to his own example he joined words inviting those who wished to imitate him more perfectly to live without anything of their own (see Mt 19:21; Mk 10:21; Lk 18:22) and in chastity (see Mt 19:11-12), and, as already in antiquity the Church understood and approved, to seek to imitate his obedience towards his Father (see Jn 6:38; Ph 2:8) more strictly under an established authority.

Lest these counsels of obedience, poverty and chastity, commended both in word and example by the holy Apostles and Fathers, remain unheeded, the Lord added to his invitation the grace in virtue of which in all ages of the Church the faithful of both sexes have, either in part or in whole, generously embraced and followed the counsels faithfully. The lives of such persons have greatly contributed to the fact that the note of holiness with which the divine Founder wished his Church to be distinguished shines forth and glistens before the eyes of all with constant and ever increasing splendor.<sup>1</sup>

The Holy Synod teaches, therefore, that these counsels and their exercise are of divine origin, and it strongly recommends their observance, which it reckons among the constitutive elements of the Church's note of holiness.

#### *18. The Importance of the States of Perfection in the Church*

Through the observance of the evangelical counsels, Holy Church, inexhaustibly fruitful in all good things, is ever resplendent. For the grace of the Holy Spirit never ceases to encourage many to undertake, as far as it is possible in the flesh, the life of the heavenly Jerusalem and to seek to imitate Christ more closely, with the result that their apostolate is strengthened and their merit doubled. So it has happened that, under the same Spirit's driving force, from the divinely planted seed various forms of life for attaining that perfection have slowly grown up, like a marvelously branched tree in the vineyard of the Lord. For, since the evangelical counsels are necessarily linked with the imitation of Christ and effectively free the soul from secular concerns, they attract to their observance, more than anyone else, those who desire more clearly to express the life of the Savior in themselves, either by prayer or contemplation, or by apostolic work, or by the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, or by leading a common life.

This way of the counsels, since it is ordered to the perfection of the love of God and of neighbor,<sup>2</sup> is intimately in accord with the role of the Church in bringing God to men and men back to their God. Therefore, whatever may be the form for acquiring evangelical perfection he embraces, each person benefits in his own way the saving mission of the Church.

Let all who are especially called to evangelical perfection remember, therefore, that it is their responsibility that through them the Church show Christ forth more clearly every day, whether it be Christ in contemplation on the mountain, or Christ preaching to the people, or Christ healing the sick and wounded, or Christ converting sinners to good lives, or, finally, Christ doing good to all.<sup>3</sup> Let each one, therefore, earnestly strive to remain and to excel more and more in the vocation to which he has been called.

### *19. The Place of the States of Perfection in the Church*

In order to assume more publicly and to show more clearly that the observance of the evangelical counsels is something proper to herself,<sup>4</sup> kindly Mother Church, zealously following the movements of the Holy Spirit, has on its own supreme authority passed laws or approved laws drawn up by eminent men and women, so that those who follow them might constitute the state for acquiring perfection and a select portion of the Mystical Body of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The state of perfection is not some intermediate position between the clerical and lay conditions, but can be common to both. The closer and stronger the communion with God and Jesus Christ, the more does the Church honor the observance of the evangelical counsels. Hence, of its very nature, this observance is better when undertaken under vow rather than by promise, with a perpetual rather than a temporal bond.<sup>6</sup> By this matchless resolve, a person is at once conformed to the image of the obedient, poor and virginal Christ and likened to the Church herself, intimately and indissolubly bound as she is to Christ her bridegroom and the visible harbor of salvation for all those who journey towards their homeland. This conformity with Christ, who was also a most perfect man, and this assimilation to the Church, which is a society not only human but also divine, more than sufficiently shows that the state of perfection, so far from hindering the growth of the human person, supremely promotes it.

The Holy Synod declares to be false, therefore, the views of those who strive to maintain that the observance of the evangelical counsels is the greater the lesser is the obligation assumed before God and the Church, or that the state of perfection hinders or diminishes the development of the personality.

Since it belongs solely to the sacred hierarchy to approve and to watch over how the life of perfection is to be led and regulated,<sup>7</sup> all institutes founded at any time for the purpose of pursuing it, if they are to grow and flourish, must always and everywhere be subject to the vigilance and authority of the Church. For this reason and so that better provision may be made for the needs of the whole flock of the Lord, the Roman Pontiff, in virtue of his primacy over the whole Church, but without in any way obstructing the principles of the divinely given constitution of the Church, can withdraw any institute of perfection and its individual members from the jurisdiction of Bishops and make them immediately subject to himself.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in carrying out the ecclesiastical office arising from their special way of life, those so exempted must show respect and obedience to the local Ordinaries in accordance with the canonical laws. The reason for this is that they may be closer assistants of the sacred hierarchy in promoting and strengthening the Kingdom of Christ, and that they may draw the other members of the Church to follow the law of the Lord promptly and with all their might.

Therefore, the Holy Synod exhorts every individual especially called to evangelical

perfection constantly to be able to repeat by his own deeds that saying of St. Paul: "Be imitators of me, brethren, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us" (Ph 3:17), so that their works may contribute to the greater glory of God and the fragrance of their lives may delight the Church of Christ.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Vatican I, *Draft of a Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ*, ch. XV, n. 48 (*Collectio Lacensis*, t. VII, 628c.); Pius XI, Enc. *Quas primas* (AAS 17 [1925], p. 609).

<sup>2</sup> See St. Thomas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 188, a. 2; St. Bonaventure, *Apologia Pauperum*, c.3,3 (ed. Quaracchi, t. VIII [1898], p. 245a).

<sup>3</sup> See Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis* (AAS 35 [1943], pp. 214-15).

<sup>4</sup> See Vatican I, *Draft of a Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ*, ch. XV, n. 48 (*Coll. Lac.*, t. VII, 628c).

<sup>5</sup> See Leo XIII, Epistle *Au milieu des consolations* (ASS 33 [1900-01], pp. 355ff); Pius XII, Address *Sous la maternelle protection*, (AAS 50 [1958], p. 37).

<sup>6</sup> Others want to add, "publicly as well as privately".

<sup>7</sup> See Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater* (AAS 39 [1947], p. 114).

<sup>8</sup> See Leo XIII, Constitution *Romanos Pontifices* (ASS 13 [1880], p. 483); Pius XII, Address *Annus sacer* (AAS 43 [1951], p. 23f).