

LOVE, ACTION, AND VOWS AS ‘INNER FORM’ OF THE MORAL LIFE

• David S. Crawford •

“The counsels are not only one state of life, they are in some sense the inner meaning of the whole Christian life made explicit. . . . Each state of life, and indeed the entire moral life, must ultimately look to them to see its ‘inner form,’ even while each retains its integrity as such.”

Introduction

In his *The Christian State of Life*, Hans Urs von Balthasar makes a crucial claim about the nature of love. After reminding us of the strict necessity of an account of love in arriving at any understanding of the meaning of human existence and activity, that is to say, of the fact that *caritatis perfectionem* is not only counseled but is strictly commanded, Balthasar goes on to state the following:

As soon as love is truly awakened, *the moment of time is transformed for it into a form of eternity*. Even erotic egoism cannot forebear swearing “eternal fidelity” and, for a fleeting moment, finding pleasure in actually believing in this eternity. How much more, then, does true love want [*will*] to outlast time and, for this purpose, to rid itself of its most dangerous enemy, its own freedom of choice. Hence every true love *has the inner form of a*

vow [*die innere Form des Gelöbnisses*]: It binds itself to the beloved and does so out of motives and in the spirit of love.¹

This passage might at first strike us as odd. Of course, we are accustomed to thinking of love in terms of eternity, both in popular and in theological literature.² Love, it would seem, even love that is in reality all too ephemeral (“erotic egoism”)—precisely in its pretense of eternity and of giving itself entirely—would seem to disclose at least something of the infinite and timeless. We are also accustomed to the idea that love brings about union with another; love bespeaks a desire on the part of lovers to “bind” themselves to one another.³

However, the development of these ideas in the two further claims—viz. (1) that “love has the inner form of a vow,” and (2) that love wants to eliminate “its worst enemy,” freedom of choice—may strike us as more problematic.

The first claim seems to reverse our instinctive sense of the relation between love and vows. Doesn’t Balthasar have it backwards? Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say, after all, that a vow has the inner form of love, at least insofar as the cause of a vow is love? A man and a woman exchange marriage vows because they love each other; a religious takes vows because of his love. Moreover, it seems that a vow is only *one* possible expression of love. Even were we to grant that vows are the highest expression of love, they are not necessarily the *only* expression. Rather, love would seem to be the more fundamental (and therefore *formative*) reality, giving meaning to the possibility of a vow rather than vice versa. To say that something is the “inner form” of something else is to suggest that it makes that something else what it is, gives it its most fundamental character and nature. Thus, if a vow is only one possible expression of love, it cannot be love’s “inner form.” The question, then, is

¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 38–39 (emphasis original; the English translation of this passage omits a sentence: “Liebe auf Zeit, Liebe auf Abbruch ist nie wirkliche Liebe”).

²See Angelo Scola’s discussion of nuptiality as “event,” in “The Nuptial Mystery at the Heart of the Church,” *Communio* 25 (Winter 1998): 630–662.

³Aristotle, for example, speaks of friends wanting to spend time together or live together (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1157b 19–24), and Thomas, of love tending to both affective and real “union” (*ST I-II*, q. 25, a. 2, ad 2; q. 28, a. 1).

inevitable: Are vows really so very much at the root of love that we would want to call them love's "inner form"?

The second of these claims, on the other hand, appears to threaten the annihilation of love itself. Isn't love (at least in rational beings) a matter of freedom? Isn't freedom dependent on the possibility of choosing otherwise? In short, then, isn't freedom of choice essential to love, rather than its "worst enemy"? Of course, if we follow out the logic of this position, we may end up concluding that, insofar as vows eliminate freedom, love's culmination in a vow is simultaneously love's death. Thus, if vows constitute the "form" of love, and if they amount to the surrendering of the creature's very freedom and autonomy, then its culmination in vows would be at best a kind of Pyrrhic victory.

It seems to me that these initial objections—assuming we are able to offer adequate responses to them—provoke us to explore the importance and profundity of Balthasar's insight. Now, there are two fundamental implications regarding Balthasar's claim. First, there is the question of the way it causes us to think about love's relation to exterior vows, which are a culmination and paradigmatic actualization of love. Second, there is the question of the way we understand love in its beginnings and in relation to human freedom and action generally. I shall touch on each of these in what follows.

1. Freedom and "inner form"

1. Vows as a cause of love? It is important to bear in mind that the claim that love has the inner form of a vow is made in the context of Balthasar's theology of the Christian states of life, and particularly in the context of his discussion of the three evangelical counsels—poverty, chastity, and obedience. In making this claim, Balthasar is emphasizing love's culmination in self-giving disponibility. Only an irrevocable vow is capable of taking up the whole of a person, including his future, in such an act of open-ended self-commitment. We might say, then, that explicit vows are the "objective" actualization of love itself, because they do not simply lead to but in fact *constitute* love's giving away of self. Love, in other words, is manifested outwardly and becomes a human action in the form of an explicit vow.

Now the significance and depth of this point is particularly well developed in Balthasar's discussion of the role of the "state of

perfection” and the evangelical counsels in St. Thomas.⁴ Thomas’ main discussion focuses on the counsels as a means to the perfection of a charity that transcends them. If perfection is charity, the counsels are only a *means* to or an instrumental cause of that charity,⁵ they are not charity itself. This is an important distinction, because it allows Thomas to explain why those who do not enter the religious state are not thereby left in a state of *imperfection*.⁶ As Thomas famously puts it, *not all* who are in a state of perfection are perfect (Thomas uses the example of wicked bishops and religious), and some of those who are not in a state of perfection nevertheless *are* perfect.⁷

According to this understanding, then, vows given according to the counsels are a sort of regimen which simplifies life, because it takes our focus off the multiplicity of objects and directs it toward the one thing necessary. The counsels may, in other words, be the best tools or means of achieving perfection, but they are not the only ones. Virtue may be learned in a variety of contexts and concrete life situations. At first glance, Thomas’ answer to the conundrum posed by the disparity between objective state and individual reality seems to recommend itself as eminently reasonable.

Thomas goes on, however, to view the counsels as a personal imitation of Christ’s self-holocaust.⁸ As Balthasar observes, “the evaluation of the counsels as ‘the way of perfection,’ as merely a means of attaining a goal toward which all must strive, shifts noticeably to an evaluation of them as a ‘degree of love,’ as the higher level of love that itself seems to be greater because it proceeds from greater self-renunciation.”⁹ But this second claim seems to have shifted the ground slightly. If the counsels constitute the actual self-holocaust, the giving away of self in love, then they cannot constitute a mere means to an end that transcends them. This further elaboration of the meaning of the counsels is therefore difficult to reconcile with the first; Thomas seems to have undermined his purpose in calling the evangelical counsels merely a means.

⁴Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 41–65.

⁵ST II-II, q. 184, a. 3; see also *De Perfectione vitae spiritualis*, cc. 6, 10.

⁶See Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 44ff.

⁷ST II-II, q. 184, a. 4.

⁸ST II-II, q. 186, aa. 1 and 6; *De Perfectione vitae spiritualis*, c. 11.

⁹Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 46.

We seem to be left with a conundrum. Are the counsels merely a “means” or do they in themselves, in some sense, constitute the actual giving away of self?

If the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience are simply a means to an end that transcends them, we can easily see how the potential disparity between state of life and personal perfection could occur. But in this first alternative, the vows seem to be merely instrumental, rather than in themselves constituting the self-gift of love. The implication, however, is that they are of secondary importance to Christian moral and ecclesial life; perhaps they are even dispensable. The answer to the so-called vocations crisis might then be simply to allow the counsels to die out as outmoded and inessential.

Alternatively, perhaps the vows are in themselves the self-gift of love, in which case we can see the vows in terms of the fuller reality of an *imitatio Christi*, of the “self-holocaust” of love, and therefore as central to the Gospel and Christian identity. This result would suggest that the vows of consecration constitute the actual act of love to which all are called, as it was lived out and embodied in Christ. But this second alternative would also seem to identify the state of perfection with perfection itself; to choose a state of life other than the consecrated state would seem to be the choice of a lesser love. But how can we say that choosing a lesser love is not choosing an “imperfect love”? We would therefore be left wondering about the “universal call to holiness” and whether the majority of the faithful can realistically live up to the new commandment—which comes from the lips of Jesus himself—to “love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12) and, in doing so, to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).

2. *The counsels as forma sui et totius.* Balthasar’s solution is grounded in “indifference,” in the Ignatian sense of complete disponibility to God’s will.¹⁰ A Christian enters the state of the

¹⁰It is important to note that Balthasar employs the word “indifference” in two different and fundamentally opposed senses, both of which are referred to in this article. The first of these is the sense alluded to here. Balthasar draws on the idea of “Ignatian indifference” to indicate the basic Christian stance of readiness for God’s call and initiative, particularly as this readiness is manifested in relation to a potential vocation to the consecrated life. For Balthasar, this sort of indifference correlates with love. While it does not reject human desires and inclinations, it does involve a willingness to subordinate them to God’s personal call. Indeed, the argument of this essay can be taken to suggest that indifference used in this sense takes up and

counsels only in response to a specific vocation. What is important, then, is not so much the particular state of life one enters as it is one's openness to God's possible call to the state of election. A state of life is therefore most fundamentally a "response," rather than an individual choice between a superior means and a "lesser," albeit still "good," means. In this way, Balthasar is able to account for the possible perfection of those who do not live in the "state of perfection" in terms of their prior and continuing openness to God's call in a particular state. Balthasar is quite insistent that it would be wrong for someone who is not called to the "state of election" to force his way into it.¹¹ Thus, the state of perfection may be "objectively superior,"¹² but it does not follow that it is subjectively so. Hence, the one who is open to whatever state God calls him to and is content simply to follow God's wishes has at least implicitly and potentially offered love in the form of the three vows of consecration. Because of this openness, his love may be said to carry the "inner form" of the evangelical counsels in the sense that it is ready to give all in the actual and explicit taking of those vows. Given this starting point of disponibility, the vows of the state of life to which an individual is in fact called take on analogously and hiddenly the "all" of the state of election.

The somewhat surprising result of what has been said thus far is that the significance of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience is effectively universalized. We can see this first in relation to the other Christian states of life. Claiming that the "inner form" of love is a vow means in the first instance that the vows of a state of life are the objective actualization of this form. The paradigmatic instance is the consecrated state, which partakes more directly in the "supra-sacramental" character of Christ's and Mary's virginity.¹³ In

radicalizes these desires and inclinations. But Balthasar also speaks of "freedom of indifference" (cf. *The Christian State of Life*, 30–31), by which he means a type of freedom that has been reduced to pure "choice" and as such implies an impassive stance that objectifies and holds itself aloof from potential objects of love. As we shall see below, "freedom of indifference" correlates for Balthasar with a lack or at least weakened state of love. See Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Noble (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1995), 327–353, for a critical discussion of "freedom of indifference."

¹¹Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 54–55. See also *Vita consecrata*, 30 (1996).

¹²*Vita consecrata*, 32.

¹³Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Layman and the Church," trans. Brian McNeil,

an analogous way, the vows of the other states of life also actualize this "inner form" insofar as they take up an initial and continuing Christian disponibility.

Thus, the claim that love has the inner form of a vow serves the basic purpose of showing love's interior ordination to explicit vows, which become the fullest actualization of this "inner form," either directly in the counsels themselves or analogously (*mutatis mutandis*) in other states of life (Balthasar mentions the ordained priesthood, matrimony, and the general Christian state of life inaugurated by the vows of Baptism). In other words, the real possibility of perfection outside of the counsels means essentially that the counsels are not only a particular state of life but also constitute the inner meaning and shape (the "inner form") of the whole of Christian and ecclesial life, precisely because this "form" is the form—and therefore "glory"—of God shining in Christ's and Mary's state of life. The counsels are not only one state of life, they are in some sense the inner meaning of the whole Christian life made explicit. As Balthasar puts it, the counsels are *forma sui et totius*. Each state of life, and indeed the entire moral life, must ultimately look to them to see its "inner form," even while each retains its integrity as such.

To speak in this way is also, however, to say something about the beginnings of love. If vows offer the basic possibility for the explicit actualization of love (i.e., a vow is the basic act of love), then this basic act shows us the nature of love's original ordination. We might say that a state of life, and the state of election in particular, shows us the objective structure and order of love as such, a structure and order that is already given prior to any individual, personal act. Indeed, all love, however primitive or seemingly inapt, bears within it this "inner form" insofar as all love is ultimately directed toward the fullness of explicit vows.

In a deep sense, then, vows are indeed a cause of love. They are a "cause," not so much because they are the means or training ground of love (although Balthasar is clear that in a fallen world of very imperfect love they are at least *in part* a "means"), but they are "cause" because they are implicit in the earliest moment of love as its very structure and its deepest meaning as directed toward communion, which is finally only realized in explicit vows. Thus,

in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2: *Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 315–331; 315.

vows are not only the end or culmination of love, but also in some sense its beginning and formal cause.

3. *The problem of love and freedom.* This leads us to our second objection, regarding the claim that the lover desires above all to rid himself of “freedom of choice,” that “indifferent freedom” is the death of love.¹⁴ Vows, such as those leading to consecration or marriage, relinquish the possibility of choosing otherwise. Wouldn’t religious life or marriage be more loving situations, therefore, if they were freely dissolvable?¹⁵ In fact, this second issue logically follows upon the first insofar as it is precisely the claim concerning the fundamental character of vows that seems to threaten freedom. If love has the “inner form of a vow,” we might suppose, it must also have a self-annihilating dynamic built into it. The question of freedom therefore quickly expands into a more general one: viz. the ambiguity inherent in different kinds or senses of love as “need-love” or “gift-love,” *eros* or *agape*.¹⁶ (I recognize that these terms are

¹⁴Cf. Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 30–31. See footnote 10, above, regarding the meaning of “indifference.”

¹⁵St. Thomas poses a variation of this basic question in an objection to his discussion of the necessity of religious vows for the state of perfection. The objection quotes Augustine: “The services we render are more pleasing when we might lawfully not render them, yet do so out of love.” The objection goes on to argue that since “it is lawful not to render a service which we have not vowed, whereas it is unlawful if we have vowed to render it,” it must also be “more pleasing to God to keep poverty, continence, and obedience without a vow.” The objection then concludes, “a vow is not requisite for religious perfection.” Indeed, the logic of the objection’s argument could easily lead to a strengthened version of its conclusion: not only is a vow not requisite, but also it is in fact opposed to the realization of love. Thomas’ response is the following: “religious perfection requires that a man give his whole life to God.” “Because that life taken as a whole is not simultaneous but successive,” it is impossible to do this except by way of a vow. Hence, “[a]mong other services that we can lawfully give, is our liberty, which is dearer to man than aught else. Consequently when a man of his own accord deprives himself by vow of the liberty of abstaining from things pertaining to God’s service, this is most acceptable to God.” Thomas’ response therefore relies on the idea of love as being most fundamentally constituted in a kind of “self-holocaust” (*ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 6, obj. 3 and ad 3).

¹⁶For a thorough discussion of the “problem of love,” see Margaret H. McCarthy, “‘Husbands, love your wives as your own bodies’: Is Nuptial Love a Case of Love or Its Paradigm?” *Communio* 32, vol. 2 (Summer 2005). I do, of course, recognize that the conceptual range contained in the two pairs, need/gift love and *eros/agape*, are not simply equivalent.

not entirely equivalent.) A presupposition of our discussion of vows is that love finds its culmination in self-gift and that vows are the means by which human creatures, who are situated in a world of time and movement, can take up and give themselves away.¹⁷ We must ask, therefore, whether the sense of love realized in the desire for perfection or fulfillment, and all of the human values and goods associated with it, is lost by the claim concerning love and vows. This leads to two issues.

First, the question concerning freedom is in part a question about the potential annihilation of the lover through the negation of human goods. Does the characterization of love as possessing the inner form of a vow, insofar as it entails the understanding of love as self-gift, undermine human values or the realization of authentic human goods, which can only be realized in freedom? Does it tend toward an alienating reduction of love, a one-sided evaluation that tends—as P. Rousselot puts it in his discussion of “ecstatic love”¹⁸—toward the “violent” and arbitrary suppression of what is most human, including natural inclinations and passions as those are so richly elaborated in Thomas’ *Secunda Pars*?

Certainly, the significance of human striving for “perfection” in goods cannot simply be ignored. The question, then, is how to understand the authentic and necessary striving for those goods in relation to the objective actualization of love implied in explicit vows and the significance of the claim that the idea of a vow constitutes love’s inner form from its very beginning. To put this in positive terms, if love possesses the interior form of a vow from its beginning, this can only be so insofar as vows indicate the interior meaning of *all* love, and therefore of all human striving for goods. This conclusion is, in fact, suggested by use of the idea of “wanting” (*wollen*) in the very passage we have been discussing—“How much more, then, does true love *want* [*will*] to outlast time and, for this purpose, to rid itself of its most dangerous enemy, its own freedom of choice.”

The question of freedom’s relation to vows is at the heart of the dramatic tension of human action. First of all, it is important to

¹⁷Balthasar seems most especially to have defined love in terms of self-gift: “[p]erfect love consists in the unconditional surrender of self, in the *donum Dei* . . .” (*The Christian State of Life*, 59).

¹⁸Pierre Rousselot, *The Problem of Love in the Middle Ages* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002).

note that behind the goods and values for which human actors strive, and which constitute the ground of the movement of love, is the gratuity of being. The movement toward these goods, therefore, is already in some sense a movement toward their author, as well as toward the persons around us who draw us out of ourselves. It is the mother's smile and all that it discloses that, drawing the child beyond himself, starts him on a movement toward the fullness of love. The *desiderium naturale*, which underlies the movement toward God concretized in a state of life,¹⁹ remains a latent capacity, until it is disclosed to the creature and launched toward its end through God's self-disclosure.²⁰

As a preliminary matter, this primordial *desiderium* ought not to be seen as opposed to human goods and values, since it is quintessentially human. The problem is that we tend to abstract human goods from their concrete meaning, which is always situated within a communion of persons. Thus our pursuit of those goods always occurs within a whole set of personal relations that both give me life and call me out of myself to its fullness. If we abstract them from their origin in communion, we then see the self-donation called for by the presence of the other as a threat to self-realization. We then characterize the goods, and indeed the final good, as if they were simply possibilities for my flourishing abstracted from the original call and gratuity standing behind those goods and we therefore fail to locate that pursuit of goods sufficiently within the idea of a necessary self-donation entailed in their realization. The *desiderium* turns in on itself, positing others and even (or most especially) God, as occasions for "my flourishing." Such a result is less a grotesque inflation of the role of desire than it is desire's self-defeating enclosure within the bounds of its own solitude. Such a result would finally imply that there are no longer "others" who are not finally reducible to me. Thus, the desire that animates freedom in itself already implies the necessary capacity and need for the self-giving love essential to its perduring in human freedom and action *precisely as* the movement toward self-fulfillment.

¹⁹David S. Crawford, *Marriage and the Sequela Christi* (Rome: PUL, 2004).

²⁰Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 295–299; id., *The Theology of Henri de Lubac* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991); Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 88.

Second, these considerations imply a re-centering of our basic presuppositions regarding the underlying freedom at stake. According to Balthasar, "freedom of choice" is the worst enemy of love insofar as it tends toward an objectification of the beloved and therefore a tacit distancing. It may very well be that I choose to remain loyal to the beloved, that I remain in the service of God, and so forth. Nevertheless, such an understanding of love presupposes a basic "indifference" with respect to the beloved, which ultimately degenerates into calculation.

We recoil from the objection that marriage vows, for example, should be freely dissolvable because we recognize that love does not want to give away only this moment but to give away *every moment in this moment*. Anything less is to betray the essence of love. What is necessary for love to remain true is not only that it give without calculation, but that it give more than it would ever be able to calculate. For love to be love, in other words, it must simultaneously be an act of faith.

Indeed, to give away only the moment, rather than the whole of one's life, is really not to have given away anything at all, since as Augustine suggests, "this moment," having no duration, fades infinitesimally into the background of an eternity that both encompasses and gives being to the whole: past, present, and future.²¹ Thus the giving away of this moment, if it is truly a giving, necessarily also entails the implication and promise of the whole of one's time and eternity. To love for this moment, insofar as it truly is love, is already implicitly to have taken up and disposed of the whole, since the point in time we call the present moment cannot be abstracted from the whole without effectively ceasing to exist.

Hence the "love" that would reject the vow in favor of moment-by-moment gift cannot be the fullness of love, however much it may be filled with a certain passion that mimics and tacitly desires love's fullness.²² Indeed, the understanding of freedom behind this concept of love is a kind of non-freedom insofar as it is not free—beyond its own alienation—to dispose of more than the fleeting and momentary present, a present nihilistically abstracted from the flow of time and dislocated historically from its part in the movement of the world toward its end.

²¹St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.

²²Scola, "The Nuptial Mystery at the Heart of the Church," 646–647.

2. Some implications for human action

We have argued that a state of life is the paradigmatic actualization of the “inner form” of love and that this actualization offers an insight into love in its beginnings, as it is expressed in freedom and human action generally. Love, in the form of an original aptness for and participation in the good, necessarily always stands at the source of freedom and action.²³ Can the insight contained in Balthasar’s formula, “love has the inner form of a vow,” offer a deepening of our understanding of human action as a whole, and not only of the definitive action realized in a state of life?

1. *The radix of action.* One conclusion to be drawn at this point in our discussion is that any discussion of love is necessarily going to refer, sooner or later, to the Christian states of life.²⁴ My claim goes further, however. It seems to me that Balthasar’s formulation of the relationship concerning love and vows suggests that the states of life should have a more prominent place in fundamental moral theology generally. Of course, the basic state of life, membership in the Body of Christ, is brought about in baptismal vows.²⁵ However, the vows of consecration (and, analogously, the vows of marriage and the priesthood) constitute a further articulation of this basic state of life. If an explicit vow makes the “inner form” of love concrete, then we could also say that a state of life constitutes something like, what we might call, along with Thomas, a “radical

²³Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 25, a. 2; Livio Melina, *Cristo e il dinamismo dell’agire: Linee di rinnovamento della Teologia Morale Fondamentale* (Rome: PUL, 2001), 24–25.

²⁴Thus, the question of the states of life is a central and recurring theme for Balthasar, and one that had profound implications for his understanding of his overall project and mission as a theologian (cf. *Our Task: A Report and a Plan* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994]). Indeed, the idea of the relation of vows and love is rooted in Balthasar’s trinitarian theology and is closely related to his Christology and theology of mission, as well as to the priority he gives to the category of Beauty/Glory. The Son does not continually choose to follow the will of the Father as a possibility for an action toward which his freedom is structurally indifferent or neutral. Balthasar is careful to show that the idea of a vow is latent in the Son’s relation to the Father (e.g., *The Christian State of Life*, 35–37).

²⁵Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 39.

act" ("radicem") by which someone dedicates his "whole life to God,"²⁶ or what John Paul II calls a "decision of faith."²⁷

We can conclude from the discussion so far, then, that the vows of a state of life constitute the quintessential moment of the Christian moral life and of its further instantiation in all of the innumerable actions of daily life. All of these actions, we might say, are both a *preparatio* for the love made visible in the "radical act" and, at the same time, an elaboration of the interior meaning of that "radical act."

If the actual vows of a state of life constitute this radical act, then it would seem that every action, insofar as it tends more or less (willy-nilly) toward this actualization, carries within it the implication or structure of such a vow. Now, my basic claim is that moral action always (at least implicitly) constitutes a personal commitment (and hence is "vow-like") to a vision of reality as a whole and that this commitment implicitly entails a sacrifice, a certain loss of self, precisely at the heart of human action—viz. its desiring and striving after goods. The implication of these dual claims is clear: the basic inner form of love—the vow—is present in all loves, and therefore in all action, insofar as all action arises from and is a response to love. This is true however detached particular actions may seem from the explicit question of a state of life. Hence, my argument is intended to recuperate the idea of "inner" form—insofar as "inner" suggests what is at least initially "implicit"—from love's explicit realization in actual vows.

Let me elaborate two ways in which I think this is so.

2. *Action as a personal commitment to the real.* If we consider the discussion of love and freedom above, we recognize that the horizons delineating the arena in which human action occurs are most fundamentally marked out by the movement and aspiration of the creature in relation to God's invitation. As John Paul II tells us, the moral life is a "response of love," which is "due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man" (*VS*, 10). Indeed, the word "response" already suggests the idea of commitment or "pledge" or vow through its Latin root (*respondere*, which in turn is related to *spondere*: to pledge or vow). A "response" is a "pledge-in-return."

²⁶*Quaestiones quodlibetales*, q. 3, a. 7, ad 6 (cited in *The Christian State of Life*, 62).

²⁷*Veritatis splendor (VS)*, 66 (1993).

Within this basic character as “response,” human action is always a personal commitment to *some* love, to the attachment to some object as good and indeed good *pro me*. However, every action, insofar as in the moment of its realization it necessarily takes up all of my time and eternity, is also a commitment to more than can in fact be known or controlled from within that action. Hence, human action always entails a commitment to much more than it is ever actually capable of performing or grasping. What is utterly unique about human action, what makes it in some sense more fundamental than speculation or contemplation abstracted from action, is that it takes up the entirety of the person in the passing moment of the action’s placement in a way that determines and situates this “entirety” in relation to the whole of reality. Action makes the world real for me because it entails the most demanding possible commitment to the world precisely insofar as it puts everything that I am or ever will be on the line.

Indeed, it is on this point that the idea of morality—and the discipline of moral theology—stakes its claim. Without it, the idea of moral responsibility falls by the wayside, and we suffer a slide toward a number of the difficulties that have arisen in recent moral thought, according to which human actions tend to be reduced to simple “happenings” detached from the actor except by way of motivation, or which posit quotidian action as abstracted from a transcendental act of freedom. And yet this taking up of the whole of the actor constitutes a tremendous vulnerability insofar as no actor can predict or control or even know all of the global significance of his action. Hence, moral action is a binding of oneself through a commitment to a certain faith in the underlying character of reality in the implicit knowledge that this action is inadequate to the open-ended character of this commitment. Every action then is a staking of one’s life on a vision of the whole of reality. And it is not until there is concrete commitment to reality as a whole, until the human person has committed himself to that vision, that one can be truly said to accept it.²⁸

²⁸Unlike ancient views according to which the Fates dictated a given human destiny, Christianity reincorporates the idea of a human destiny that is given from without, but locates the responsibility for achieving that destiny more solidly within the person himself. Also, the Christian claim is opposed to that of certain trends in modernity in which a kind of absolutizing of freedom as choice is accompanied (ironically) by various forms of determinism (cf. *VS*, 32–33). At the same time,

In this sense, then, as an open-ended commitment to a vision of reality as a whole—a commitment in which the risk of my existence is somehow taken up and engaged—genuine human action (*actus humanus*) possesses the “inner form” or the interior structure of a vow. Now, behind this commitment to reality as a whole, this “response” to the world as it presents itself, there is always the invitation of another who has set my being in motion and who calls me to himself. It is a commitment that takes up the whole of the actor in relation to this other. Hence this commitment is not simply self-referential—a vow to oneself, so to speak—but is implicitly a preparation for or an affirmation of an explicit vow, embodied in the radical act of a state of life.

3. “Goods for the person” and the “good of the person.” Within this commitment to a vision of reality as a whole, which clearly grounds the possibility of what *Veritatis splendor* refers to as the “good of the person,” that is, the goodness of the person as such in his moral development and maturity, the tradition relates particular actions to goods as ends, what *Veritatis splendor* calls “goods for the person.”²⁹ Now, if the argument up to now holds, then these goods have to be considered in relation to the states of life as radical act.

Christian revelation implies that the idea of human freedom is mediated by God’s ever greater freedom. According to the Christian claim, action is always covering some distance or closing some previously indeterminate or unbridged gap between who I am and who I want to be. And yet this question of who I am and who I want to be is never entirely in our hands.

²⁹John Paul II defines “the good of the person” as “the good which is the person himself and his perfection,” while the “goods for the person” or “personal goods” are those goods that are “safeguarded by the commandments, which, according to St. Thomas, contain the whole natural law” (*VS*, 79; cf. *VS*, 13). Hence, the “good of the person” is most especially related to human goodness *simpliciter*, viz. a person’s *moral goodness or perfection*, which in turn must be understood in terms of the human vocation in Christ. As *Veritatis splendor* tells us: “Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are in conformity with man’s true good and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person towards his ultimate end: God himself is the supreme good in whom man finds his full and perfect happiness. The first question in the young man’s conversation with Jesus: ‘What good must I do to have eternal life?’ (Mt 19:6) immediately brings out *the essential connection between the moral value of an act and man’s final end*” (*VS*, 72, emphasis original). The encyclical later tells us: “The primary and decisive element for moral judgment is the object of the human act, which establishes whether it [a moral action] is *capable of being ordered to the good and to the ultimate end which is God*” (*VS*, 79, emphasis original).

As the phrase “goods for the person” indicates, these goods for the person are not simply goods pertaining to a human nature understood in abstraction from that nature’s concrete personal realization. These goods are in some way constitutively and intrinsically related to the complete good of the person, although the good of the person also transcends these goods both in their particularity and in their totality. The goods for the person are ingredient in the good of the person, but the good of the person is not simply their sum.

A basic question, then, is how to characterize this relation. Goods for the person, such as life itself, certainly are ingredient in the fullness of human flourishing. Yet the real possibility of martyrdom tells us that life, at least as such, even when combined more fully with the other goods for the person, is not yet the “good of the person.” It is also clear that the moral actor who loves will want his own flourishing and that of those around him in human goods, but he will most of all want the good *of* the person for himself and his beloved.

John Paul II tells us that “[t]he commandments thus represent the basic condition for love of neighbor; at the same time they are the proof of that love” (*VS*, 13). Later he adds that the goods protected by the commandments give way to their fullness in the Beatitudes, the “self-portrait of Christ” (*VS*, 16). When we situate particular “goods for the person” in this larger context of the “good of the person,” we see that particular goods are never simply moments of human flourishing in abstraction from the flourishing-in-self-donation of human destiny itself. Insofar as human action is a response whose inner meaning and final perfection are disclosed by explicit vows, it is also ordered not simply toward achieving fulfillment in goods simply understood as appetible. Rather, particular goods are in themselves and as such occasions for flourishing-in-self-donation. That is to say, precisely in their realization as goods *pro me*, they also and simultaneously entail a kind of kenosis or sacrifice.

The point is not that the realization of human goods requires a prior or additional kenosis or sacrifice, that the goods are only good insofar as I approach them in accordance with the moral limitations imposed on my realization of them in moderation and consistent with the just and charitable relations I owe to my neighbor. Nor is the point that the goods are genuinely goods but that a higher good may be achieved by their sacrifice. Each of these statements is certainly valid. My point, however, is more fundamental, if not paradoxical. It is that each of the goods themselves,

precisely insofar as it is good for me, also demands a kind of kenosis in the realization of that good. In short, it is not that self-emptying is the necessary context or precondition for receiving the good in an authentic way. It is that the good itself is intrinsically kenotic. To the extent I try to abstract the flourishing promised by a particular good from the sacrifice it demands, I will invert the good I seek and the flourishing it promises into something other than that to which I had originally aspired.

This may become more concrete if we give an example. We can take the inclinations, and the goods to which they point, on which Thomas bases natural law.³⁰ Among these is that of union with a member of the opposite sex for the sake of procreation. That there is a natural inclination to union and procreation indicates that it is in itself a good for the person and therefore an enrichment of his being. But it is only such an enrichment, and therefore not only an aspect of the “good of the person” but also a genuine “good for the person,” insofar as it also demands a kind of death or kenosis. In order to give birth adequately, to give to this good—precisely as a good for me—what it demands as a good, I have to abase myself before new human life. I must understand that the inner meaning of really giving birth is that I must decrease so that this new person may increase.

Each of the other inclinations/goods cited by Thomas, it seems to me, could be given a similar construction. Thus, for example, the fundamental good of life itself is not simply the good of existence for myself but—at the same time—the good of existence for another. To live only for oneself is not to have achieved a genuine “human value” or “good.” If love alone offers us the explanation of human existence (if love alone is credible), then it is because life and being finally mean the welcoming of another, which in itself is to have achieved the fullness of life and of being. Anything less is to have failed to have adequately achieved the good of existence and life, precisely as such. Thus, if we think once again of martyrdom, we realize that the genuine sacrifice represented in this witness is not the sacrifice of the good of life per se (to speak in this way is to abstract the good for the person from the good of the person), it is rather to have realized the interior meaning of that good. Again, therefore, implied in the very good of personal life is the reality of “death” for another. Similar statements could be made

³⁰STI-II, q. 94, a. 2.

regarding the human goods of life in society and knowledge of the truth (which is most fully the knowledge of God), although each case of course would naturally take different and analogous forms. To strive for goods in abstraction from this necessary sacrifice that they entail is, in fact, to shy away from the fullest meaning of those goods. Thus, the theme of sacrifice is not a supererogatory addition to the main subject of moral theology in its consideration of human acts.

The implication of this point, then, is that the good of the person (the inner form of a vow as commitment to a vision of reality as a whole) is both contained within and yet exceeds each particular good for the person.

4. *Implications for action as elaboration of states of life.* A final implication, whose full elaboration exceeds the scope of our present task, follows from what has just been said about the fulfillment-in-sacrifice implied in human goods. We have seen that the explicit vows of a state of life offer a matrix from which all human action takes its particular and explicit direction. All action therefore implicitly takes up the prior reality of the vows of a state of life, and all actions therefore relate directly to that state of life. All of the goods to be striven for in action are goods in relation to the vows of a state of life. The states of life themselves shape human action from the inside, and determine the structure and meaning of moral action from the beginning. Because the states of life constitute different modalities of the actualization of love, and because as such they take up particular human goods differently, the different states of life result in different moral-theological “styles.” These “styles” are determined by the relation of the states to the meaning of the necessary commitment and sacrifice entailed in goods for the person as ends in relation to the good of the person. Thus, for example, the good of union with the opposite sex and procreation is not simply lost in virginity, but it is realized in a different and higher modality and, as Balthasar reminds us, in a way that exceeds the limited bounds and particularity of the natural family. As such, then, we have a basis for saying that the whole of moral action in its relation to virtues and obligations takes on differing meanings and significance given different states of life. □

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