

SPIRITUAL PERFECTION IN THE DIOCESAN PRIESTHOOD

It is an incontestable theological truth that a diocesan priest must possess a high degree of Christian perfection in order to do his work as God wills it should be done. This is the basic guiding principle for the spirituality of the secular priesthood. Unfortunately, however, the teachings about the need for and the place of spiritual perfection in the vocation and the life of the diocesan priest have all too frequently been obscured by reason of debates about the applicability of the term "state of perfection" to the secular priesthood itself.

St. Thomas Aquinas taught that a man is in a state of perfection, in the strict sense of the term, only when he has obligated himself perpetually and in a solemn and public manner to the life of perfection.¹ Holding to this definition, he taught that only bishops and religious were properly in this state.² The Angelic Doctor insisted very strongly that secular priests are not in a state of perfection.³ Unlike religious, he said, secular priests are not bound by vow to the work of acquiring perfection through the following of the evangelical counsels. Moreover, he held that the secular priest is not bound entirely with absolute permanence and solemnity to the spiritual care of the people after the manner of the bishop. Thus he established his conclusion that the diocesan priest could not be considered as living in a state of perfection.

Distinguishing very sedulously between the *status* and the *ordo*, St. Thomas taught that the Eucharistic ministry demanded a higher degree of holiness in the priest and the deacon than the religious state required of a religious not in Holy Orders.⁴ Yet he refused to see in this obligation the type of *servitus* that characterized a *status perfectionis*.

In view of his own description of a *status perfectionis*, the Angelic Doctor's conclusions with reference to diocesan priests can hardly be considered as being of the same excellence as his other teachings. If any solemn, perpetual, and publicly expressed *servitus* of perfection should be designated as a state of per-

¹ Cf. *Sum. theol.*, II-II, q. 184, a. 4, 5, 6.

² Cf. *ibid.*, a. 5, 6.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, a. 6.

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, a. 8.

fection, it is hard to see how this designation can accurately be refused to the condition of a man who enters a brotherhood or society essentially and necessarily devoted to the spiritual welfare of a local Church through the solemn and public process of sacerdotal ordination. Yet, this is precisely the case of the diocesan priest. By his ordination, he publicly and solemnly enters the *presbyterium* of his own bishop and thus begins a life-long activity of perfecting the faithful of his local Church as a member of the priestly society over which his bishop presides.⁵ The fact that the diocesan priest must act under the direction of the bishop and the further point that the activity of the individual secular priest does not, like that of his bishop, deal with all the concerns of the entire local Church have no direct reference to the description of a state of perfection in the *Summa*. Thus they would seem to constitute no valid reasons why this designation should, on his principles at least, have been denied to the diocesan priesthood.

The Thomistic school, as a whole, followed the teaching of St. Thomas on this point with absolute fidelity. Interestingly enough, no Thomist showed greater enthusiasm and higher controversial skill in developing the thesis that secular priests are not in a state of perfection than the doughty Francis Sylvius, himself a secular priest of Douai.⁶ Nevertheless, by reason of the latitude given to the term "state of perfection," there were some authors who did not choose to adopt the Thomistic attitude and terminology. Thus Francis Suarez said that priests "*merito dici possunt aliquo modo, inchoative saltem, in statu perfectionis.*"⁷

⁵ In denying that prelates other than bishops and that pastors were in a state of perfection, St. Thomas made much of the fact that these men could resign their charges or be relieved of their *cura animarum* without having recourse to the Holy Father himself. Thus, he reasoned, they are not permanently and perfectly consecrated to the care of souls. He does not take account of the fact that the *presbyterium* as an organization remains always devoted to its task of aiding the bishop and that the individual diocesan priest remains a member of this organization, even though the individual assignment from his bishop may be changed from time to time. It is by virtue of his membership in his own *presbyterium* that the individual secular priest, in whatever work he may be called upon to do, may be said to be actually always laboring for the care of souls in the local Church.

⁶ Cf. his Commentaries on the articles mentioned above, in the *Opera omnia* (Antwerp, 1698), III, 899 ff.

⁷ *De virtute et statu religionis*, lib. 1, cap. 17.

Cardinal Manning taught that the priesthood is "the state of perfection instituted by our Divine Lord to be the light of the world, and the salt of the earth."⁸

In the dispute on this point, two unfortunate tendencies arose. One was the lamentable and erroneous effort on the part of some secular priests to minimize the worth of the religious life altogether. It is a fact, of course, that the religious life is indubitably a state of perfection, and that the condition of those who devote their lives to the acquisition of perfection through the publicly vowed following of the evangelical counsels is, in itself, better than the condition of those who do not. Thus, from the point of view of the canonical state of perfection, it is perfectly certain that the religious state is more perfect than that of the non-religious, and that the religious priest is in a more perfect state than the secular priest. To deny or to misrepresent this is to be guilty of a serious theological error.

Nevertheless, it is also a fact that in order to do the work of the diocesan priesthood as God wills it should be done a man must possess a high degree of Christian spiritual perfection. Moreover, by the very constitution of the Catholic Church, the secular priesthood is a necessary element in Our Lord's society. According to St. Ignatius of Antioch, there is no such thing as a local Church without a bishop and a *presbyterium*, a society of priests directly under his rule.⁹ The *presbyterium*, normally at least, could not be a religious order or congregation, since the religious brotherhood is organized primarily to achieve the spiritual perfection of its own members, while the *presbyterium* is formed to labor for the sanctification and the salvation of souls in the local Church. Unfortunately, there have been some religious writers so intent upon their task of showing the superiority of the religious life that they have seriously misrepresented the nature and the function of the diocesan priesthood.

The new Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, issued by the Holy Father on Feb. 11, 1947, has done a tremendously important service to the students of sacred theology by offering an official and clear-cut description of a canonical state of perfection. The new Constitution makes it clear that, according to the law of

⁸ *The Eternal Priesthood* (Baltimore: John Murphy Company, no date), p. 45.

⁹ Cf. *Ad Trallianos*, III, 1.

the *Codex*, "in no case, not even by way of exception, is a canonical state of perfection admitted except where the profession of that state of perfection has been made in a *Religio* approved by the Church."¹⁰ The Holy Father has thus settled any controversy about the use of a name, and has definitely imposed the thesis that only religious in the strict sense of the term could be considered as being completely in a canonical state of perfection, *as this state of perfection is strictly defined in the Provida Mater Ecclesia*. The declaration of the new Apostolic Constitution has, of course, no reference to the broader description of the state of perfection contained in the *Summa theologica*.¹¹

The *Provida Mater Ecclesia* speaks of the persons in a state of perfection as those who "devoting their entire life to Christ the Lord, follow Him freely by the difficult way of the counsels."¹² It speaks of public vows (both solemn and simple) as "necessary for a complete canonical state of perfection."¹³ Although the Secular Institutes, newly associated with the *Religiones* have not the completeness of these latter as states of perfections, they constitute nevertheless "a new canonical state in the strict sense of the term, consecrated *unice et ex integro* to the acquisition of perfection."¹⁴

Thus, according to the Holy Father, it appears that the *Institutum saeculare*, and of course by way of consequence, the *Religio*, within which alone the canonical profession of the state of perfection is to be found, must necessarily be an organization geared *unice et ex integro* to the acquisition of spiritual perfection on the part of the members of such societies. The diocesan priest is definitely not in a *status perfectionis adquirendae* because the *Religio*, within which alone the complete canonical state of perfection is to be found is clearly described by the *Provida Mater Ecclesia* as something quite distinct from the *presbyterium*.

Like the religious, the diocesan priest is essentially a member

¹⁰ *L'Osservatore Romano* (LXXXVII, 61), p. 1.

¹¹ The Constitution contributes to the development of theology by making it clear that the *Religio* and the Secular Institute, despite their orientations towards apostolic work, remain societies devoted *unice et ex integro* to the acquisition of spiritual perfection by their own members. There was a marked tendency to neglect, and even to deny, this truth prior to the issuance of the *Provida Mater Ecclesia*.

¹² *Loc. cit.*

¹³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴ *Loc. cit.*

of an individual society or household within the larger unity of the Catholic Church. The fellowship or brotherhood to which the diocesan priest belongs is the *presbyterium* of his own diocese, the company of priests organized under the paternal rule of the diocesan bishop to co-operate with the bishop and to serve as his instrument in his apostolic care of the local Church over which he presides. The *presbyterium*, then, by its very nature, is not an organization consecrated *unice et ex integro* to the acquisition of spiritual perfection by its own members. It is a real society dedicated to the Church's essential purpose, that of working for the sanctification and the salvation of Christ's flock.

The difference between the *Religio* or the true and complete canonical *status perfectionis acquirendae* and the diocesan *presbyterium* can be explained by this statement about the orientations of the diocesan ministry and the religious life.

The diocesan ministry is a work which a man is privileged and called upon to accept in order to continue and to apply the sacerdotal labors of our Lord among His people. The religious life, even in clerical communities, is geared to produce, as its immediate effect, an increase in personal holiness among those who have the vocation to enter it.¹⁵

By the divine constitution of the Catholic Church, the *presbyterium* is, of course, organized in such a way as to demand a high degree of Christian perfection from its members. At the same time both the essential work of the *presbyterium* and the divine and ecclesiastical laws that govern it are of a nature to inculcate and to increase the life of charity within the diocesan priesthood. Thus the *presbyterium* is truly a school and a nursery of perfection, though it can lay no claim to the designation of a canonical *status perfectionis acquirendae* ultimately because this society is not organized and consecrated *unice et ex integro* to the acquisition of spiritual perfection by its members. The ruler of a *Religio*, the man to whom religious priests promise their sacerdotal obedience on the day of ordination, is a prelate charged with the primary responsibility of seeing that his subjects grow in holiness through their fidelity to their vows. The head of the *presbyterium*, on the other hand, is the ruler of a diocese, a bishop whose primary obligation has to do with the care of his people. To this end the

¹⁵ Fenton, *The Calling of a Diocesan Priest* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Bookshop, 1944), p. 12.

works of the bishop and of his *presbyterium* must be directed, *unice et ex integro*.

The essential work of the diocesan priesthood consists in the performance of those functions enumerated in the admonition prefixed to the rite of sacerdotal ordination in the *Pontificale Romanum*. "Sacerdotem etenim oportet offerre, benedicere, praeesse, praedicare, et baptizare." Every one of these activities not only demands holiness on the part of the man who performs it, but incites to personal spiritual perfection and offers instruction and spiritual aid for growing in the divine life of charity. The man who offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass worthily day by day will necessarily derive from the Mass abundant treasures of divine grace and will certainly achieve the holiness requisite for the proper performance of all his sacerdotal duties. The man who strives to bring his own life into harmony with the blessings he calls down upon his people through his priestly prayers will find that a life so ordered is one of high spiritual perfection. The priest presides over his people in their corporate worship of God. This presidency offers to the man who undertakes it from proper motives the opportunity of living ever more perfectly within himself the life of grace of which the Christian *ecclesia* is the corporate exponent. In preaching the word of God to the people of the local Church, the member of the *presbyterium* sets forth the truth from which all perfection in the spiritual life originates. A priest preaches worthily only when he has made every requisite effort to understand the doctrine he is privileged to teach, and thus the process of preaching is both an incentive to Christian perfection and an enlightenment of the intelligence in the direction of holiness. The administration of baptism and of the other sacraments of the New Law likewise tends to bring the priest to love God with an affection ever more ardent and perfect.

Besides the offering of the Holy Sacrifice, the prayers, the meditations, the teaching of God's message and the administration of the sacraments, there are other agencies which the law of God and of the Church place at the disposition of the priest for the acquisition of that perfection demanded by his position in the diocesan *presbyterium*. The first of these is the absolute obedience to the bishop, as the head and the father of the *pres-*

byterium, made incumbent upon the diocesan priest by the divine law itself.

With respect to obedience in the Church, there are unfortunately many lamentable errors current in our own day. Some among the cruder sort of anti-clerical writers seem to imagine that no obedience whatsoever is due to Church authority on the part of those who have taken no religious vows or who do not belong to a diocesan *presbyterium*. As a matter of fact, of course, the divinely constituted rulers of the Church, the Holy Father and the residential bishops, and all of those who hold authority in their name, have the God-given power to give commands to the faithful, and to exact obedience to their orders. Every Christian lay as well as clerical, secular as well as religious, is bound to give obedience to Church law and to the commands of his legitimate ecclesiastical superiors. The case of the diocesan priest (and, for that matter, of the religious), differs, in the matter of obedience, from that of the layman in the Church only by reason of the fact that the diocesan priest and the religious have voluntarily entered distinct supernatural families or brotherhoods within the Church. They owe the obedience of children to the fathers of these supernatural households within the *ecclesia*. The diocesan priest owes a true and filial obedience to the bishop who is the father and the head of the *presbyterium*, the brotherhood or organization of his own diocesan priests. The religious owes his filial obedience, by virtue of a special and explicit vow, to his abbot or superior who becomes his true spiritual father when he enters the monastery or community.

The diocesan priest finds in this filial and perfect obedience to his bishop a tremendous means for sanctification. In submitting himself freely and reverently to the rule of his spiritual father, the member of the *presbyterium* truly follows the evangelical counsel of obedience. The purpose of this obedience, like the purpose of all the other evangelical counsels, is, in the last analysis, the plenitude of spiritual perfection, the perfection of divine charity.¹⁶ The diocesan priest is consecrated to the task of using this charity, within the fellowship of his own *presbyterium*, and under the direction of his own bishop, for the spiritual welfare of the local Church.

¹⁶ Cf. *Sum. theol.*, II-II, q. 184, a. 3.

The eminent Claretian writer, Fr. Antoine Peinador, has seriously misrepresented the nature and the purpose of the obedience demanded of and given by diocesan priests to their bishops when he taught that the Church wills to have this obedience "imitate" that which religious tender their own superiors.

Obedience in seculars [diocesan priests] cannot be called as complete and perfect as that of the religious. Undoubtedly the Church asks from clerics an obedience which imitates the perfection of the obedience of religious.¹⁷

The fact of the matter is that the obedience of the *presbyterium* and of its members to the bishop of the local Church is not an imitation of anything. It is a factor intrinsic in the divine constitution of the Catholic Church. The fully developed local Church needs not only a bishop but a *presbyterium*, a brotherhood of priests organized under the bishop's leadership to aid him in the accomplishment of the local Church's purpose. The *presbyterium* could obviously never work as God wills that it should unless the brotherhood as a whole and each member of the priestly fraternity be joined to the bishop in bonds of the most perfect and complete filial obedience.

The obedience which the secular priest in any modern diocese is expected to give to his bishop is exactly the same as the obedience which St. Ignatius of Antioch demanded that the presbyters of his own time should give to the heads of their local Churches.¹⁸ The true and visible Church of Jesus Christ could not operate in the world as God formed it to operate unless the head of each local Church had subject to him a *collegium* of priests individually and corporately consecrated to the task of the local Church itself. Thus it is utterly untheological to imagine that the obedience which the Church demands that secular priests extend to their bishops is an imitation of or an approach to the obedience incumbent upon religious.

It is impossible to understand the nature of and the need for this obedience in the *presbyterium* unless we realize the necessity of the diocesan priesthood in the Catholic Church. Fr. Peinador

¹⁷ *Sacerdotium saeculare et status religiosus* (Rome: Typographia polyglotta "Cuore di Maria," 1940), p. 60n.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ad Ephesios*, IV, 1.

has given utterance to a view, unfortunately all-too-prevalent among certain writers who seem to believe that the dignity of the religious life can be explained only by instituting a rather invidious and unscientific comparison between it and the diocesan priesthood, that the diocesan or secular priesthood as now constituted is not a necessary part of the divine organization of the Catholic Church. The question is so important that an examination of Fr. Peinador's argument in behalf of his own position should be helpful.

Secular priests are not absolutely necessary. This does not mean that the Church can do without bishops, pastors, etc., but it means that those who are required for giving the faithful their spiritual nourishment could all be religious. As a matter of fact, what is there to prevent the same situation which now prevails and which has prevailed in definite portions of the Christian flock (for there are vicariates prefectures, and the like in which the sole spiritual ministrations are given by religious) from existing for the universal Church? Therefore secular priests, *as seculars*, are not necessary in the Church.¹⁹

The principles contained in the *Provida Mater Ecclesia* make it quite easy to recognize the error in Fr. Peinador's teaching. The individual *Religio*, according to the Apostolic Constitution, is a society organized *unice et ex integro* for the attainment of spiritual perfection on the part of the members of that society. The bishop, according to perfectly certain theological teaching, acts as the *perfector* of the diocese. He is not in a position to devote himself *unice et ex integro* to the advancement of his own perfection. Now it is also perfectly certain that the fully formed local Church (as distinct from the vicariate or the prefecture apostolic which is a local Church in the process of formation), demands a society or organization of priests subject to the diocesan bishop and formed to be his instrument in caring for the local Church. Thus the immediate purpose of the *presbyterium* in the fully formed local Church must be, according to the actual constitution of the Church itself, the salvation and the sanctification of the people. A society consecrated *unice et ex integro* to the attainment of spiritual perfection by its own members could not serve properly as the *presbyterium* of a fully formed local Church.

For this reason it is quite apparent that the *presbyterium* as a

¹⁹ Peinador, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

society distinct specifically from a *Religio* is not in any way a disadvantage or a lesser good within the Catholic Church. The secular or diocesan priest as such is distinctly necessary within the society of the disciples. Neither the *presbyterium* nor its individual members can correctly be described as "imitations" of or as approaches to any *Religio* whatsoever. The spirituality of the diocesan priest is thus the apostolic spirituality of the bishop and of his *presbyterium*, rather than that of the *Religiones* or any imitations thereof.

This, of course, has a tremendously important repercussion in the practical training of a seminarian who is preparing for a call to the diocesan priesthood. Like that of the bishop, the state of the diocesan priest is essentially and necessarily one of *perfectionis acquisitae* rather than of *perfectionis acquirendae*. In other words, the seminarian is not properly prepared to accept a call to the diocesan priesthood unless he has acquired and has shown evidence of the high degree of spiritual perfection he will need for the performance of his sacerdotal duties in the *presbyterium*. He must have the love of charity for God in the ardent and fervent degree that will enable him to devote all of his energy and talent to the spiritual well-being of the local Church under the direction of his bishop. He must be prepared, not only to administer the divine sacraments to the people, but also to give those same people accurate instruction in the Church's divinely revealed truth, and real edification through the perfection of his own living example.

The laws of the Western Church make incumbent upon the diocesan priest the following of another evangelical counsel, that of perfect chastity in the life of celibacy. This, like the other evangelical counsels, is geared to produce a more fervent life of charity in the man who follows it. However, in this instance as in the case of obedience to the bishop, the perfection resulting in the member of the *presbyterium* is something meant to be utilized in the service of Christ through the apostolic activity of the *presbyterium*.

Thus, in all truth, the motive and the direction of the spiritual perfection in the diocesan priesthood can best be expressed in the burning words of Our Lord's sacerdotal prayer: "And for them do I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth."²⁸

²⁸ John 17:19.

The Christians of the local Church are the beneficiaries, directly and immediately, of the perfection within their own *presbyterium*. The truth in which they are sanctified is the truth of Christ.

In order to speak accurately about the perfection of the diocesan priesthood, however, we must not forget that when we say that the diocesan priest is in a *status perfectionis acquisitae* in contradistinction to the religious who is in a *status perfectionis acquirendae*, we do not hold or infer that the perfection of the secular is superior to that of the religious. As far as the canonical state of perfection is concerned, quite the opposite is the case. The person in the state of perfection by reason of vows made within a religious order is, from a canonical point of view, in a state superior to that of the person who has not made such vows.

The *status perfectionis acquirendae* of the religious is a definite canonical reality. The person in this status belongs to an organization which is constructed and geared *unice et ex integro* to the acquisition of spiritual perfection on the part of its own members. On the contrary, when we say that the diocesan priest is in a *status perfectionis acquisitae*, we merely take cognizance of the manifest and tremendously important fact that the member of the *presbyterium* is devoted to a work which demands a high degree of spiritual perfection on the part of the man who is called upon to perform it. That, after all, is the one basic fact about the spirituality of the diocesan priesthood.

Before the publication of the *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, with its clear-cut description of the canonical *status perfectionis acquirendae*, much of the discussion about the spirituality of the diocesan priesthood bogged down on what was, in the last analysis, a none-too-important question of words. The definition of the *status perfectionis* in general, as this was to be found on the pages of the *Summa theologica*, might well have been considered broad enough to apply to the secular or the diocesan priesthood, even though, for one reason or another, the Angelic Doctor himself was quite insistent that the secular priests should not be considered as being in a *status perfectionis*.

Now that the magnificent clarity of the *Provida Mater Ecclesia* is at the disposal of the theologian, there is little excuse for any attempt to allocate the diocesan priesthood within the *status perfectionis acquirendae*. The document has shown, once and for

all time, that this title should be reserved exclusively for *Religiones* and for the more recent Secular Institutes.

On the other hand, however, the appearance of the *Provida Mater Ecclesia* should obviate for all time the danger of errors which characterize the diocesan priesthood as something of an imitation of the religious life. By virtue of its more perfect description of the *Religio* and of the *status perfectionis acquirendae*, the new Apostolic Constitution has made it perfectly clear that the *Religio* is not and, by the very nature of the Church can not be, an organization upon which the *presbyterium* is modeled, or a thing which should or could replace the secular or diocesan *presbyterium*.

The theologians interested in the spirituality of the diocesan priesthood can be extremely grateful for the appearance of the *Provida Mater Ecclesia*. A study of this document should put an end to the unfortunate discussions which were primarily concerned with the applicability of a term to the secular priesthood as such, and which were prone to overlook the more important matter of the content and the direction of the spirituality of the *presbyterium*. In the light of this masterly Constitution, we can see clearly the implications of the fact that the diocesan priesthood is not a *status perfectionis acquirendae*, a brotherhood devoted essentially and intrinsically to the attainment of perfection by its members. The *presbyterium* is a priestly fraternity that demands perfection in its own members, and at the same time offers them the means for advancing in the love of God, in order that, through the sanctification of these diocesan priests, the people of God may have eternal life.

As the head of the local Church, the bishop is the *perfector* of his people by the will of God. As the head of the *presbyterium*, he is the divinely appointed *perfector* of his own diocesan priests. The fullness of charity the secular priest needs for the proper performance of his own duties in the Church will be his only in the measure of his filial loyalty to the head of his sacerdotal brotherhood.

JOSEPH CLIFFORD FENTON

*The Catholic University of America,
Washington, D. C.*