



Analysis of Canon 573 §§1&2: A Canonical and Theological Foundation for the Theology of Consecrated Life

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Abstract

This work, titled “Analysis of Canon 573 §§1&2: A Canonical and Theological Foundation for The Theology of Consecrated Life”, examines the canonical and theological foundations of consecrated life as articulated in the Code of Canon Law. Rooted in the Church’s long-standing tradition, the study highlights consecrated life as a vital expression of Christian discipleship and total self-gift to God. The purpose of this study is to explore the theological meaning embedded in Canon 573 §§1–2 and to present it as fundamental to understanding the nature, identity, and mission of consecrated persons within the Church. The study addresses the growing misunderstanding of consecrated life in contemporary society, where secularism, materialism, and individualism often obscure its spiritual and ecclesial value. Many people view it merely as an institutional structure rather than a divine vocation grounded in baptism and expressed through evangelical witness. This misconception weakens vocational response and affects the vitality of consecrated communities. The methodology adopted is analytical and theological. It employs textual and canonical analysis of Canon 573 §§ 1–2, supported by Scripture, patristic sources, ecclesiastical tradition, and magisterial documents. This interdisciplinary approach enables a holistic interpretation of the canon within its historical, theological, and juridical contexts. The study finds that Canon 573 §§1–2 encapsulates the essence of consecrated life as a

stable form of following Christ more closely under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It emphasizes total dedication to God, service to the Church, and the perfection of charity. The profession of the evangelical counsels emerges as the spiritual and ontological core of consecration, effecting a radical transformation of the believer's life.

Keywords: Consecrated life, evangelical counsels, Christian discipleship, vocation, canonical theology, ecclesial mission.

1. Introduction

Consecrated life has always held a privileged place in the Church as a visible sign of radical discipleship, evangelical witness, and total dedication to God. Rooted in the very life of the Trinity and the call to follow Christ more closely, it represents a distinctive form of Christian existence shaped by the evangelical counsels and animated by the Holy Spirit. At the heart of the Church's self-understanding of this vocation lies Canon 573 §§1–2, which articulates the essential theological and juridical elements that constitute consecrated life. Although frequently referenced in canonical and theological literature, this canon's deeper doctrinal significance remains insufficiently explored. Many scholarly approaches treat the canon as descriptive rather than as a foundational theological statement, producing inconsistent hermeneutical approaches. Also, Many scholarly approaches treat it simply as a legal definition rather than as a profound theological synthesis with Trinitarian, Christological, pneumatological, ecclesiological, and eschatological dimensions.

This gap has created a significant problem in the contemporary Church. Pastoral writings and formation programs often reduce

consecrated life to institutional membership or functional activity, obscuring its baptismal roots and its orientation toward the perfection of charity. As a result, the doctrinal meaning of the evangelical counsels is weakened, and phenomena such as declining vocations, blurred communal identity, and widespread misunderstanding of consecration have become increasingly evident. Existing canonical commentaries rarely integrate the juridical text of Canon 573 with its broader theological and sacramental implications, leaving theologians, formators, and pastoral agents without a coherent interpretative framework.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by undertaking a rigorous canonical-theological analysis of Canon 573 §§1–2. Its purpose is to demonstrate that this canon serves as a solid foundation for the Church's theology of consecrated life, clarifying its nature, identity, and mission within the ecclesial community. The research is significant because it provides a more unified understanding of consecrated life that can support vocation promotion, enrich formation, and strengthen the Church's witness in an increasingly secularized world.

The study is delimited to a close reading of Canon 573 §§1–2 within the 1983 Code of Canon Law, while drawing on Scripture, patristic thought, magisterial teaching, and theological tradition to interpret the canon in its full doctrinal richness. Methodologically, it employs textual, analytical, and theological approaches to integrate the canonical formulation with its historical and ecclesiological contexts. Through this synthesis, the work aims to offer a renewed appreciation of consecrated life as a divine vocation deeply rooted in the mystery of the Church and the life of God.

2. Theological Meaning of Consecrated Life

Consecrated life is a profound theological reality rooted in the mystery of the Trinity, the life of Christ, and the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit. Its meaning cannot be understood merely as an institutional or disciplinary construct; rather, it arises from the Church's understanding of the divine initiative that calls certain Christians to follow Christ more closely through a stable form of life. Canon 573 §§1–2 provides a foundational canonical-theological definition, identifying consecrated life as *“a stable form of living by which the faithful, following Christ more closely... are totally dedicated to God... for the perfection of charity through the profession of the evangelical counsels.”* This juridical description reflects an underlying theological structure that integrates baptismal consecration, ecclesial mediation, Trinitarian identity, and eschatological witness.

John P. Beal: In his *authoritative commentary on canon 573 within the New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, explains that consecrated life possesses a juridical structure that is inseparably rooted in a theological reality. He defines the canonical dimension of consecrated life not merely as a legal classification but as an expression of the Church's understanding of a state of life established by God and publicly recognized by ecclesiastical authority. Again, he adds that the public profession of the evangelical counsels creates a “stable and binding canonical bond” between the individual and the Church. Through this profession, the consecrated person is incorporated into a recognized institute and receives a distinct juridic

status, which differs from informal or private forms of dedication to God.¹

Jean Beyer, S. J, argues that canon 573 provides a unified framework for all forms of consecrated life by grounding them in the public profession of the evangelical counsels. He defines the juridical meaning of "stable form of life" (*forma vitae stabilis*) as a publicly established, enduring, and ecclesially recognized pattern of living the evangelical counsels, rather than a mere temporary intention or private commitment.²

Canon 573 §§1&2 serves as the cornerstone definition of consecrated life, synthesizing Vatican II's vision from *Lumen Gentium* while providing a stable, normative framework for its theology. This canon articulates consecrated life as a stable form of living marked by total dedication to God through the evangelical counsels, under the Holy Spirit's impulse, as an eschatological sign within the Church's mission. It integrates Christocentric imitation, Trinitarian dynamics, ecclesial authentication, and prophetic witness, addressing post-conciliar developments and guiding contemporary formation and renewal.

Consecrated people make a self-donation in response to Jesus' love. They strive to live in Christ with one heart and soul. Their living in Christ, proclaims the Father who desires to make of all humanity one family; it proclaims the Incarnate Son, who gathers the redeemed into unity. It proclaims the Spirit as the principle of unity

¹ John P. Beal, Canon 573: The Definition of Consecrated Life," in *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*. ed. John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 731.

² Jean Beyer, "CIC 573-606: The Consecrated Life," in *Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, ed. Ernest Caparros .(Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 440.

in the church. Consecrated life is a special gift given to some. It enriches the church with its varied gifts and prophetic witness.

2.1 *Baptismal Roots of Consecrated Life*

Theologically, consecrated life emerges from the grace of baptism, which configures the Christian to Christ and incorporates him or her into the life of the Church. Vatican II teaches that through baptism, the faithful die to sin and live for God; however, those who embrace the evangelical counsels seek to “*derive more abundant fruit from this baptismal grace*” by removing obstacles to perfect charity (LG 44).³ The profession of the counsels, therefore, does not create a new consecration *parallel* to baptism; rather, it intensifies and manifests baptismal consecration in a distinctive form.⁴ This deepening of baptismal grace is an ecclesial act: the Church receives the individual’s profession and consecrates the person to God in a public and stable state of life.

It is obviously very important to note basically the effects of baptismal consecration on every Christian, to understand appropriately the theological import of Consecrated Life in the Church. In order to understand deeply Can.573, it is pertinent to reflect on Can 849, 96, 204-231. According to can. 849, Baptism, the gateway to the sacraments and necessary for salvation, frees one from sin, both original and personal.⁵ Baptism gives one a new birth

³ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), November 21, 1964, in *The Basic Sixteen Documents of Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, no.44

⁴ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996), no. 30.

⁵ Trent, sess. VI de instificatione, c.4; CCC 1213, 1226 and with regard to infants who die without baptism, CCC 1261

as a child of God,⁶ configures one to Christ by an indelible character, and incorporates one into the Church. This summarizes the most important dogmatic and theological elements of baptism, together with some of its juridical elements. Can 96 deals with baptism as the means by which one is incorporated into the Church and constituted as a person in it. Hence, the juridical effects of incorporation into Christ and the Church, the constitution of juridical personality in the Church, with the duties and rights proper to Christians in keeping with their status and condition.⁷ Can. 204 §1, talks about baptism as the means by which one is incorporated into Christ and thereby participates in the threefold office of priest, prophet, and king.⁸

Lumen Gentium 40 affirmed that the followers of Christ have been made “children of God in the baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature.” This baptismal regeneration in Christ also recalls that the baptized possess the “spirit of adoption” (Rom 8:15) and have become “sharers of the divine nature” (2Pet.1:4).

Baptism configures one to Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-13:27) because through it one becomes a participant in the salvific mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. The indelible mark of Christ mentioned in can. 849 stresses the permanence of this configuration. Configuration to Christ also has ecclesial effects: the baptized are made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ and his Mission as seen in can. 204. Incorporation into the Church is an effect of incorporation into Christ.

Lumen Gentium 11 is the source from which we can. 849 draws these theological elements of baptism: “Incorporated into the Church

⁶ CCC 1214

⁷ John P. Beal, et al., eds., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, Paulist Press, NY, 2000, p.1035

⁸ John P. Beal, et al., eds., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, p.1034

by Baptism, the faithful are appointed by their baptismal character to Christian religious worship; reborn as children of God, they must profess before all the faith they have received from God through the Church.”

Canon 207 §1 terminologically distinguishes the different groups among the faithful that “by divine institution, there are among the Christian faithful in the Church sacred ministers who in law are also called clerics; the other members of the Christian faithful are called lay persons.” Canon 207 §2, without using specific terminology, describes some of Christ’s faithful who are distinguished by their ‘profession of the evangelical counsels.’ These persons profess the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience through vows or other bonds recognized as such by the Church, and they thereby further specify their participation in the mission derived from baptism.⁹ Further, this specification determines their “state” in the Church: they do not form part of the hierarchical constitution of the Church but rather belong “to its life and holiness.”¹⁰ This state is neither clerical nor lay.¹¹ The Code of Canon Law maintains the qualification found in *Lumen Gentium* 43: Consecrated Life is not “an intermediate condition between the clerical and the lay” states. Many members of the Church still tend to view consecrated persons as either belonging to the clerical state because of their ministry, or as lay persons because they are not

⁹ Cf. can. 573 for the general description of Consecrated Life. Can. 607 §2 for vows in Religious Institutes; Can. 712 for bonds in Secular Institutes; Can. 731 §2 for bonds in some Societies of Apostolic Life and Can. 603 §2 for the vows or bonds professed by hermits

¹⁰ Cf. Can. 210

¹¹ Cf. Can. 588 §1

ordained, leading to the misconception that consecrated life forms an “intermediate state” between the clerical and lay states.

3. Theological Dimensions of Consecrated Life: A Canonical Synthesis in Canon 573 §§1&2

Life consecrated through the profession of evangelical counsels is a stable form of living in which the faithful follow Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, and are totally dedicated to God, who is supremely loved. By a new and special title, they are dedicated to seek the perfection of charity in the service of God's Kingdom, for the honour of God, the building up of the Church, and the salvation of the world. They are a splendid sign in the Church as they foretell the heavenly glory. Can. 573 §1

A close examination of this can. 573§1 text show that most of the elements refer to Christian life as such. It is baptismal spirituality that is presented in a way that applies especially to consecrated life. The canon brings out its Christological, pneumatic, Trinitarian, ecclesial, and eschatological dimensions.

Following the precedent of Vatican II, the Code of Canon Law in can. 573 §1, provides a description so rich as to provide ample matter for reflection and meditation. Canon 573 employs both spiritual and juridical norms in describing the vocation to Consecrated Life. Inspired by the Spirit, some of the faithful deepen their baptismal consecration through a free and total self-donation to God, who is loved above all through a new and special title or commitment.¹² This vocation is rooted in and more fully expresses the radical consecration of baptism.¹³ Through profession of the

¹² John P. Beal, et al., *Op. Cit.*, p. 743

¹³ Second Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, PC. 5

evangelical counsels, both clerics and laity¹⁴ seek a closer imitation of the chaste, poor, and obedient Christ and strive for the perfection of charity in a permanent form of life.¹⁵ Consecrated Life manifests prophetic, apostolic, and eschatological elements. It witnesses to the very nature of the Church, contributes to its salvific mission, and anticipates eternal life.¹⁶

Key Elements: Life consecrated, profession, evangelical counsels, stable form of living, following Christ more closely, under the action of the Holy Spirit, total dedication to God, new and special title, service of God's Kingdom, honour of God, building up of the Church, salvation of the world, perfection of charity, splendid sign in the church, foretelling heavenly glory. This canon provides a theological framework for the understanding of the consecrated life, which is a vital aspect of the Church's life and mission. This canon has a theological implication which deals with one's self-donation to God through deepening of one's baptismal commitment. Moved by the love of God, one abandons all to follow him. It is a consecration to God for a mission in the Church.

Analysis of these Key Elements

3.1 Life: Dynamic and healthy human life, with all its characteristics, is what is offered to God as an oblation. Life, though offered to God in consecration, is still a human life with all its dignity and respect. It is ultimately accountable to God.

3.2 Consecration: Consecration entails a setting apart from the profane for God. One freely, without any form of force or coercion, offers his life for the use of the divine or the sacred. This

¹⁴ Cf. Can. 207 §1&2

¹⁵ Cf. Second Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, 39

¹⁶ Second Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* 3; VC. 14-22; Cann 673, 713

consecration brings about an ontological change in the substance, in the being of the person. Life consecrated through the profession of evangelical counsels can be seen as a means of deepening one's baptismal commitment to God in order to become closer to God and more committed by imitating the way of life by which Jesus lived while on earth, doing his Father's will. So that by imitating Christ more closely, they also can learn to do the will of God and love him better.¹⁷ Hence, hope in eternal life with God is the horizon of consecrated life. The catechism of the Catholic Church, therefore, emphasizes that the purpose of our being created is to love, serve God, and be happy with him ever after. Consecrated life, therefore, is the fulfilment of this purpose; hence it is described as a pointer to heaven, assuring all that eternal life does exist and is worth renouncing everything.

3.3 Profession: By Religious profession, one becomes a member of the religious institute with rights and obligations.¹⁸ Religious profession is a supremely important moment, not as an isolated temporal act but as the culmination of a long process of questioning, testing, and choosing, and as the initiating moment of the rest of life fulfilling that choice. Because of the misunderstanding that follows the profession of vows, either as a terrifying act or casual celebration, care is needed in considering all its gravity and glory. It is an act of definitive self-consecration to Christ. When consecration by profession of the counsels is affirmed as a definitive response to God in a public commitment taken before the Church, it belongs to

¹⁷ Augustin, George, ed. *The Joy of Consecrated Life: Living for God and for Others*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023.

¹⁸ Cf., Can. 654, "By religious profession members make a public vow to observe the three evangelical counsels. Through the ministry of the Church they are consecrated to God, and are incorporated into the institute, with the rights and duties defined by law."

the life and holiness of the Church (cf. LG 44). It is the Church which authenticates the gift and which mediates the consecration. Christians so consecrated strive to live now what will be in the afterlife. Such a life “more fully manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below” (LG 44). In this manner, these Christians “give outstanding and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes. (LG 31).

For a religious profession to affect this desired consecration, it has to follow a three stages process, there has to be three stages. It has to be capable of bringing about the transformative change in the ontology of the person. These processes of profession include: the Stage of the inner yes, the public pronouncement or verbalization of the vows, and the witnessing in the community.

- i. The First Stage of the INNER YES: This stage is the foundation of the profession. It is the fundamental stage of the profession that actually determines the effectiveness of the religious profession, because “*foundation once destroyed, what can the just do?*” This is the initial stage where the individual suddenly perceives God calling him/her by name and assuring him/her of all His love and trust. The individual then, in loving response to God’s call and invitation, exodus from himself/herself to encounter God who calls him and has a mission for him/her. This stage of the inner yes is very fundamental. It is what makes all the difference in one’s religious commitment and understanding/meaning of one’s vocation. Otherwise, one may be building a castle in the air. At this point, it is very crucial that any religious that has not given Jesus this inner yes should endeavour to take out time to exodus from

himself/herself to encounter Jesus to give this inner response of the inner yes, because that is where the religious profession starts. And the difference is always very clear.

- ii. The Second Stage of the Public Pronouncement or Verbalization of the Vows: This second stage comes right after the first stage, when the individual goes in search of a religious institute to join. The individual patiently goes through all the rigorous processes of getting admitted into a particular religious institute. At the end of the Novitiate programme, the individual is permitted and admitted to make a first religious profession or public pronouncement of the vows. This is the second stage of the profession. This stage is also very vital because of its juridical and canonical implications. By this public pronouncement, one is officially incorporated as a member of the religious institute with all the rights and obligations of a religious.¹⁹ Hence, the subsequent change of name and title.²⁰
- iii. The third Stage of Witnessing in the Community: This third stage kicks in immediately with the living out every day in the community the evangelical counsels of Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience. This comes with enormous challenges and tests. That is why canon 573 §1 insists that Consecrated Life is a life lived under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Father, Pope Francis, says that

¹⁹ Cf., Canon 654: By religious profession members assume the observance of the three evangelical counsels by public vow, are consecrated to God through the ministry of the Church, and are incorporated into the institute with the rights and duties defined by law.

²⁰ Cf., canon 573 §1: ... having been dedicated by a new and special title....

the life of a religious is like the story of the Exodus of the Israelites.²¹

Therefore, for a true religious profession to create the desired consecration in the individual religious, there must be the interior reflection of the inner yes to Jesus, the public pronouncement, and the daily conscientious witnessing through living out the vows in concrete situations of the community and apostolate.

3.4 Evangelical Counsels: At the profession, one commits oneself to a life of dedication to God through the evangelical vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Through the profession of the vow of chastity, one vows to consecrate their whole being, heart, mind and body to God through the practice of celibacy. In professing poverty, one vows to renounce all material possessions and to embrace simplicity of life. In professing the vow of obedience, one vows to surrender to the will of God and to the community through the direction of the superior.

3.5 Stable Form of Living: Although Christian perfection is a dynamic process, the permanent commitment gives a definite direction of life. Stable form of life: Canon 573 explains the

²¹ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Keep Watch! To Consecrated Men and Women Journeying in the Footsteps of God*, 2014, p. 11; Ex.40:36-38: "At every stage of their journey whenever the cloud rose from the tabernacle the sons of Israel would resume their march. If the cloud did not rise, they waited and would not march until it did. For the cloud of the Lord rested on the tabernacle by day, and a fire shone within the cloud by night for all the House of Israel to see. And so, it was for every stage of their journey." Num. 9:22: "Sometimes it stayed there for two days, a month, or a year; however long the Cloud stayed above the tabernacle, the sons of Israel remained in camp in the same place, and when it lifted they set out."

consecrated life as a stable form of life.²² In another canon, it went further to explain that the stability of religious consecration is reflected in the fact that it is a commitment that is made for life, and not just for a limited period of time. Thus, Canon 654 §1 states, “Religious consecration is a lifelong commitment, which is made through the profession of vows. This commitment is a stable one, and it is characterized by a permanent dedication to God and to a particular way of life”.²³ This lifelong profession establishes a stable orientation of life, shaping the consecrated person’s identity, mission, and daily choices. As B. E. Etafo in his *Consecrated Life in the Structure of the Church* (1989) explains, consecrated life constitutes a “stable ecclesial state,” since perpetual profession creates a lasting public bond with the Church, rooted in the canonical erection of the institute and the ecclesial approval of its constitutions.²⁴ Through this approval, the institute acquires juridical personality, with corresponding rights and obligations, while its members commit themselves to live according to its proper law. The religious life is characterized by a permanent commitment to God and to a particular way of life. This stability does not mean staying in one place, but that one makes the vows with the intention to live according to its bindings forever. The Vatican II document *Perfectae Caritatis* makes it abundantly clear that Religious consecration is a stable form of life, which, by the profession of the

²² Code of Canon Law 573

²³ Code of Canon Law, Can. 654

²⁴ B. E. Etafo, *Consecrated Life in the Structure of the Church* (Ibadan: ACJOL Publications, 1989), 4.

evangelical counsels, is characterized by a permanent commitment to God and to a particular way of life (PC, 5).²⁵

3.6 Following of Christ More Closely; Following of Christ Is Imitation of Christ to Become Christ: God comes to us in Christ, we can go back to Him only in Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). Although we cannot reproduce the historical existence of Jesus, we can relive each in his or her way, the pattern of his life in our own situation today. “Have this mind among you, which was in Jesus” (Phil 2:5). Christian living is to ‘put on Christ’ (cf., Rom 13:14). The consecrated state enables one to experience closer intimacy with Christ in order to manifest in one's life his attitudes. This was indeed the basic motivation of the first hermits and coenobites who left all and went to the desert to follow Christ. Thereby, the genuine ones among them were not really cut off from the common people within the Church, but became shining examples of the evangelical way of life centered on Christ. The consecrated life is a vocation in which individuals dedicate themselves to following Christ more closely, through a life of prayer, service, and sacrifice.

3.7 Under the Action of The Spirit: Christian life is not so much the exercise of virtue as a response to the action of the Spirit, who is the initiator, guide, and executor of the action. Different religious families arise as a result of the impulses of the Spirit. Their members are called to live a spiritual life or a life wholly inspired and moved by the Spirit in its personal and corporate dimensions. Otherwise,

²⁵ Second Vatican Council II, *Perfectae Caritatis*. 5

one may be running well but out of track. Hence, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, in “Keep Watch!” describes the life of the Religious as the Exodus of the Israelites (cf. Ex. 40: 36-38). Life of a Religious is a journey of faith, lived constantly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

3.8 Total Dedication to God Who is Supremely Loved: While baptismal consecration already constitutes a call to total dedication to the service of God, the profession of the evangelical counsels is directed toward living out this dedication in a more radical and visible manner. This profession gives concrete form to a life entirely oriented toward God, manifesting a deeper participation in the self-gift initiated by God in Christ. Such self-donation represents the highest value the human person can offer to God, expressing a filial and loving desire to offer oneself forever—one’s entire personal reality, with all its dimensions, capacities, and ongoing human development. God has gratuitously offered Himself in Christ; in response to this divine self-gift corresponds the self-gift of the human person. As *Perfectae Caritatis* teaches, those who profess the evangelical counsels “have handed over their entire lives to the service of God in an act of special consecration which is deeply rooted in their baptismal consecration and which constitutes a fuller expression of it.” Through this total self-offering, members of institutes of consecrated life eloquently proclaim that the ultimate fulfillment of both the individual and human society is found in God alone.

This understanding of consecrated life as total dedication finds strong support in contemporary theological literature. Hans Urs von

Balthasar, in *A Life Held in Readiness for God* (2003), describes consecrated life as the definitive “yes” of a bride to her Bridegroom (Christ), a total giving of oneself in love. For von Balthasar, this dedication is not merely juridical or functional but existential: the consecrated person lives in a permanent orientation toward God, not only through the profession of vows but through an entire way of being. Moreover, this total dedication is not self-enclosed; it is profoundly ecclesial, ordered toward the service of the Church’s mission and the building up of communion.²⁶

3.9 To Seek Perfection of Charity: While freedom belongs essentially to the Christian life, the profession of the evangelical counsels intensifies it in a distinctive way by liberating the consecrated person from whatever binds or enslaves the human heart. This evangelical freedom underscores the religious person’s total availability for charity, unencumbered by personal interests or worldly attachments. Freed in this manner, religious men and women are able to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the service of love wherever it is most needed. Thus, the vocation of the religious is fundamentally oriented toward the perfection of charity, which stands as both its source and its ultimate goal.

This theological orientation finds firm grounding in the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, who explains in the *Summa Theologiae* that the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience are ordered toward the removal of obstacles that impede charity.

²⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “*A Life Held in Readiness for God*,” in *The Laity and the Life of the Counsels: The Church' Mission in the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 23.

According to Aquinas, the vows signify a radical turning of one's goods, affections, and will toward God, thereby disposing the consecrated person to love with greater purity and disinterestedness. By renouncing possessiveness, exclusive attachments, and self-will, the religious becomes more capable of loving both God and neighbour with an undivided heart.²⁷

3.10 In the Service of The Kingdom, For the Honour of God, the Building Up of The Church and The Salvation of The World: The evangelical counsels are an outstanding charism in the Church. Those who live out their profession contribute especially to the upbuilding of the Church, which is the Sacrament of the salvation of the world (cf., LG, 44). The essentially apostolic dimension of religious life is brought out in this element: the building up of the local, particular, and universal Church.

3.11 Splendid Sign in The Church: This underscores the prophetic value of religious life. Vatican II develops this point thus: The profession of the evangelical counsels, then, appears as a sign, which can and ought to attract all the members of the church to an effective and prompt fulfilment of the duties of their Christian vocation. The people of God have no lasting city here below, but look forward to one which is to come. This being so, the religious state, by giving its members greater freedom from earthly cares, more adequately manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below (LG,44).

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q 184, a. 4-5, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros.. 1947).

The Christian has the earthly task of transforming this world and, hence, is involved deeply in the affairs of this world. The consecrated life gives witness to the fact that the world cannot be transfigured without the spirit of the beatitudes. To the extent that the gospel calls to radical values, religious life symbolizes radical discipleship to which all Christians are called according to their particular status in life. As G. Soares-Prabhu writes, that Religious live out in an institutionalized, socially structured and therefore public way the radical demands of the following of Christ... It is in this sense that religious life is a 'sign'; it is a living out publicly, professionally, of the gospel values implicit in all Christian life.

3.12 Foretelling the Heavenly Glory: All earthly realities find their ultimate meaning and fulfilment in the heavenly consummation, which has already begun through the presence and saving action of the Risen Lord in history. Christian existence is thus lived within the eschatological tension of the “already” and the “not yet,” wherein the Kingdom of God is inaugurated but awaits its definitive fulfilment. Earthly concerns are therefore not rejected but ordered toward their final transfiguration in glory.

Within this horizon, the vocation of consecrated life assumes a distinctive prophetic significance. It is noteworthy that the Second Vatican Council, in its Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, while strongly affirming the Christian’s responsibility for active engagement in the world, also acknowledges a particular call within the Church. As *Gaudium et Spes* teaches, the Spirit “calls some to give clear witness to the desire for a heavenly home and to keep that desire alive among the human family” (GS, 38).

Consecrated persons, by their very mode of life, serve as visible signs that the ultimate destiny of humanity lies beyond the limits of the present world.

4. Consecrated Life within the Economy of Salvation

Consecrated life is best understood within the broader economy of salvation, that is, within God's unified and progressive plan to draw humanity into communion with the divine life. Situated within this salvific economy, consecrated life manifests a convergence of Christological, Pneumatological, Trinitarian, Ecclesiological, and Eschatological dimensions. Configured to Christ through the profession of the evangelical counsels, animated by the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit, grounded in participation in the Trinitarian life of God, inserted into the life and mission of the Church, and oriented toward the fulfilment of the Kingdom, consecrated life serves as both sign and instrument of salvation.

4.1 Christological Foundation: Following Christ More Closely

Consecrated life is fundamentally Christological. It is patterned on the life of Jesus Christ, who lived in perfect chastity, poverty, and obedience to the Father. Scripture presents Christ inviting His disciples to radical discipleship: *"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor... then come, follow me"* (Mt 19:21). Similarly, the demand to take up one's cross and renounce self (Mt 16:24) articulates the deep interior freedom required for authentic discipleship. Paul's exhortation to an undivided heart (1

Cor 7:32–34) further illuminates how consecration fosters exclusive dedication to the Lord’s service.

The early Christian tradition elaborated these scriptural themes and recognized in them the basis for a form of life that mirrors Christ’s own. St. Basil taught that the counsels constitute a tangible expression of the Gospel and a coherent path toward communion with Christ.²⁸ Likewise, St. Augustine interpreted the renunciations of consecrated life as a participation in Christ’s *kenosis*, His obedient self-emptying described in Philippians 2:6–8.²⁹ Through such theological reflections, the Fathers affirmed that the evangelical counsels are not arbitrary disciplines; they are rooted in the person, mission, and salvific path of Jesus.

Consecrated persons, therefore, do not merely imitate Christ externally but make present His form of life within the Church. Their vocation reflects Christ’s own way of relating to the Father—with undivided love, total obedience, and radical availability for the Kingdom. This embodiment of Christ’s life is why *Lumen Gentium* asserts that those who profess the counsels “devote themselves to God in a new and special way,” making manifest within the People of God the intimate bond between Christ and His Bride, the Church.³⁰ Through the profession of the counsels, consecrated persons become living signs that Christ’s manner of existence remains operative, fruitful, and visible in the world. Pope John Paul II, in *Vita Consecrata*, portrays consecrated persons as living icons

²⁸ Basil of Caesarea, *The Longer Rules*, trans. Anna M. Silvas (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), nos. 2–7.

²⁹ Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1999), chaps. 24–27; see also Phil 2:6–8.

³⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 44.

of Christ, instruments of the Spirit, and prophetic witnesses to the eschatological kingdom.³¹

4.2 Pneumatological Dimension: Consecration by the Spirit

The pneumatological dimension of consecrated life underscores the centrality of the Holy Spirit as the principal agent of Christian consecration. Consecrated life is not the product of human effort or ascetical discipline alone; rather, it emerges from the Spirit's initiative, which awakens the desire for perfection, strengthens the capacity for self-gift, and configures the consecrated person to Christ. In this sense, the Holy Spirit is the internal principle of transformation that enables the believer to live fully according to the evangelical counsels. As Vatican II affirms, those who embrace consecrated life do so "under the impulse of the Holy Spirit," thereby receiving the grace necessary to persevere in chastity, poverty, and obedience (LG 43).³²

The canonical articulation of consecrated life in Canon 573 §§1–2 implicitly affirms this pneumatological reality by presenting the profession of the counsels as both a human act of will and an ecclesial act empowered by divine grace. It is the Spirit who shapes the consecrated individual, aligning personal freedom and vocational fidelity with Christological imitation. Through this Spirit-infused formation, consecrated persons become living instruments of Christ's presence within the Church, manifesting both holiness and ecclesial service.

Scripture provides abundant testimony to this Spirit-filled vocation. The Spirit equips the faithful with charisms for the

³¹ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, nos. 26–29.

³² Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 43

building up of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:4–7), strengthens the heart in holiness (Rom 8:9–11), and enables believers to live the life of love and obedience exemplified by Christ (Gal 5:22–23). Consecrated life is therefore an ecclesial and spiritual reality in which the Spirit works intimately to shape the individual's character, conduct, and relational disposition toward God and neighbor.

4.3 Trinitarian Foundation: Participation in the Life of God

Consecrated life, while deeply Christological and Pneumatological, is ultimately rooted in the Trinitarian life of God, which forms the ontological and relational foundation of the vocation. Canon 573 §§1–2 presents consecrated life as total dedication to God, a consecration that presupposes participation in the life of the Triune God. The Father calls the faithful to holiness, the Son provides the model of radical obedience and self-gift, and the Holy Spirit actualizes the believer's participation in divine life. In this sense, consecrated life is not merely a human response to a religious ideal but an ecclesial and divine reality enabled by grace and grounded in the mystery of the Trinity.

The counsels are an expression of the love of the Son for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Love for Christ leads to closeness with him; love for the Holy Spirit opens our hearts to his inspiration and love for the Father, the first origin and supreme goal of the consecrated life. Chastity is love 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit', which evokes a response of total love for God and the brethren. Poverty proclaims that God is man's only real treasure. It is an expression of that total gift of self which the three Divine Persons make to one another. Obedience shows the liberating beauty of a dependence which is not servile but filial, which is a

reflection of the loving harmony between the three Divine Persons. Life in common or fraternal life, where consecrated persons strive to live in Christ with “one heart and soul,” is put forward as an eloquent witness to the Trinity.

4.4 Ecclesiological Meaning: A Sign and Service within the Church

Consecrated life belongs inseparably to the life and holiness of the Church. It is not a private initiative but an ecclesial vocation publicly recognized and regulated by the Church. Canon 573 situates consecrated life within the Church’s juridic structure, indicating that the public profession of the evangelical counsels is received by the competent ecclesiastical authority and establishes a stable form of life.³³ This ecclesial mediation ensures that consecration serves the Church’s mission. *Lumen Gentium* affirms that those who practice the counsels are united to the Church in a special way and are called to contribute to the building up of the Kingdom of Christ in the world (LG 44).³⁴

Can. 573 §2 brings out clearly the ecclesial dimension of Consecrated Life:

Christ's faithful freely assume this manner of life in institutes of consecrated life which are canonically established by the competent ecclesiastical authority. By vows or other sacred bonds, in accordance with the laws of their own institutes, they profess the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Because of the charity

³³ Code of Canon Law 573 §1

³⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 44

to which these councils lead, they are linked in a special way to the church and its mystery.³⁵

The Canon declares, on the one hand, the freedom in assuming such a life; and, on the other, the role of competent ecclesiastical authority in establishing institutes of consecrated life. One may ask how an essentially charismatic call can be regulated. The answer is in recognizing the tension between the charismatic and institutional aspects of the church. In fact, from the earliest times, St. Paul, for instance, found the need for regulating the charismatic manifestations among the Christians in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 12).

By His call itself, God consecrates. By the individual response of self-consecration, there is a total, life-long gift effected through the profession of the evangelical counsels and made secure by some form of sacred bond. All this takes place within an institute approved by a competent Church authority, because the charism is a gift of the Spirit and for the whole church.

Vatican II had made it clear:

From the point of view of the divine and hierarchical structure of the church, the religious state of life is not an intermediate one between the clerical and lay states. Rather, God calls the faithful of Christ from both these latter states of life so that they may enjoy this particular gift in the life of the Church and thus each in his own way can advance the saving mission of the church (LG, 43; cf.C.207 §§1&2).

Here, Vatican II clarifies that the religious state of life or the life of consecrated persons is not simply a halfway point between the lay

³⁵ Code of Canon Law 573 §2

and clerical states. Instead, it is a distinct vocation, directly instituted by God, that can be embraced by anyone, whether lay or clerical. This vocation allows the faithful to experience a unique gift of the Spirit, dedicating themselves fully to God through the evangelical counsels, and enables them to contribute uniquely to the Church's saving mission according to their specific calling. Essentially, consecrated life is a special path within the Church's divine and hierarchical structure, complementary to, but independent of, lay or clerical states.

4.5 Eschatological Witness

Consecrated life serves as a profound eschatological sign, vividly anticipating the heavenly Kingdom and orienting the entire People of God toward eternal fulfillment. By professing the evangelical counsels—chastity, poverty, and obedience—consecrated persons renounce earthly attachments, embodying the “new and eternal life” inaugurated by Christ's resurrection. This witness echoes the Second Vatican Council's teaching in *Lumen Gentium* 44, as reaffirmed in subsequent magisterium: consecrated life “foretells the resurrected state and the glory of the heavenly Kingdom,” particularly through the vow of virginity, which symbolizes the total transformation of humanity in the world to come.³⁶

This renunciation reminds the faithful that “here we have no lasting city” (Heb 13:14), directing hearts to the “Kingdom and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33). Consecrated persons, immersed in the things of the Lord, bear witness to the primacy of God, fostering hope amid discouragement: “Those who vigilantly await the

³⁶ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*. N.26

fulfilment of Christ's promises can bring hope to their brothers and sisters who are often discouraged and pessimistic about the future.”³⁷ Pope Benedict XVI deepens this in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, linking the Eucharist to consecrated virginity as an expression of the Church's fidelity to Christ her Bridegroom:

Finally, by its specific witness, consecrated life becomes an objective sign and foreshadowing of the "wedding-feast of the Lamb" (Rev 19:7-9), which is the goal of all salvation history. In this sense, it points to that eschatological horizon against which the choices and life decisions of every man and woman should be situated.³⁸

Here, the eschatological dimension is nourished by the Eucharist, transforming consecrated life into a prophetic sign of God's fruitful love, urging all to situate earthly decisions against the horizon of eternity.

Recent papal teaching reinforces this vocation's timeliness. In his homily for the Jubilee of Consecrated Life (October 9, 2025), Pope Leo XIV invokes Malachi's "sun of righteousness" (Mal 4:2) to highlight the balance of worldly engagement and eternal striving:

This is a reference to the eschatological dimension of Christian life, which calls us to be engaged in the world, while at the same time constantly striving towards eternity... In this regard, the Second Vatican Council entrusts you with a specific task when it says that consecrated persons are called in a special way to bear witness to “future goods” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 44).

³⁷ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*. N.27

³⁸ Benedict XVI. *Sacramentum caritatis: Sacrament of Charity*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007, p.92.

Pope Leo XIV portrays consecrated persons as “flourishing trees” (Ps 1:3), spreading the “fresh air” of authentic love, countering modern “paralysis of the soul” from fleeting pursuits. Their lives proclaim a “Sunday without sunset,” when humanity enters God's rest.³⁹

5. Conclusion

This study has examined Canon 573 §§1–2 as a foundational text for the theology of consecrated life within the Church. Through a careful theological and canonical analysis, it has been demonstrated that this canon is not merely a juridical definition but a profound synthesis of the Church's understanding of consecrated life as rooted in baptismal consecration, animated by the Holy Spirit, and oriented toward a radical following of Christ. Canon 573 encloses the essential elements of consecrated life: total self-dedication to God, public profession of the evangelical counsels, stable commitment, and service to the Kingdom of God for the building up of the Church and the salvation of the world.

The research has shown that consecrated life is best understood as a deepening of baptismal grace, rather than a departure from it. While all the faithful share in the call to holiness, those who profess the evangelical counsels respond to a divine initiative that invites them to a more intense form of discipleship. Vatican II's teaching, especially in *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis*, provides the theological background against which Canon 573 must be read, highlighting the Trinitarian, Christological, Pneumatological, Ecclesial, Apostolic, and Eschatological dimensions of consecrated

³⁹ Leo XIV, “Holy Mass for the Jubilee of Consecrated Life” (St. Peter's Square, Vatican City, October 9, 2025), 1.

life. These dimensions confirm that consecrated life belongs intrinsically to the life and holiness of the Church and is not an intermediate or secondary state within her structure.

Canon 573 establishes that consecration through profession of evangelical counsels brings about an “ontological transformation” rather than mere functional service.⁴⁰ This consecration begins with God’s call. The Holy Spirit continues to raise new expressions of this noble vocation and guides and directs the life and apostolates of the consecrated. Hence, guarantees the future of Consecrated Life in the Church despite changing cultural conditions. The living witness of consecrated persons remains a ‘splendid sign’ pointing to transcendent realities within the Church and world.

In conclusion, this research affirms that Canon 573 §§1–2 provides a solid and enduring foundation for the theology of consecrated life. Properly interpreted and lived, it reveals consecrated life as a gift of God to the Church, a sign of the coming Kingdom, and a powerful witness to the primacy of God in human life. By reclaiming the theological richness embedded in this canon, the Church can foster a renewed appreciation of consecrated life and strengthen its witness in the modern world, ensuring that this vocation continues to flourish as a vital expression of Christian holiness and mission.

⁴⁰ Okonkwo, Peter, *Theological Foundations of Consecrated Life*, 2018

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