

Towards a Sacralization of Religious Vows? Religious Consecration and the Solemnity of the Vow in Thomas Aquinas's Works

AGNÈS DESMAZIÈRES

Thomas Aquinas most likely took the Dominican cloth in 1244, in Naples, against the will of his parents who had destined him to the well-established Benedictine convent of the Monte Cassino, where he had been schooled. Kidnapped by his brothers, he spent two years imprisoned in the family castles of Montesangiovanni and Roccasecca, before being released and joining again the Dominicans. The various biographers of Thomas Aquinas granted importance to this episode, relating it with lively and epic details.

Marika Räsänen has skillfully demonstrated how the episode of Thomas's change of clothing was crucial in the construction of the 'Dominican identity' in a time when the Order of Preachers was struggling recruiting new candidates.¹ Yet, I would highlight in this article a complementary issue: when Thomas Aquinas entered the Dominican Order, the doctrine and rites of incorporation to a religious order were still in a phase of elaboration. Thomas's doctrine itself evolved significantly, moving from a juridical conception of religious vows, characteristic of his early writings, to a sacral one, inspired by a return to patristic and monastic traditions, in his later works.

In the first centuries after Christ, the monk accomplished his integration to the monastery through a simple change of clothing, which intervened after a period of probation, lasting from a few days to a full year. At first, the commitment to a monastic rule was only tacit. The entrance into monastic life progressively became more ritualized. In the early fifth century, John Cassian's *Institutes* described for the first time an admission ceremony, called *professio*.² In the *Rule of St. Benedict*, which represented a decisive step in the ritualization of monastic profession in the sixth century, the change of clothing turned into the final rite of the *professio*, following an 'oral promise' of stability, conversion and obedience.³ After having made profession orally, the nun or the monk placed a written version of it, the *petitio*, on the altar of the monastery church. The profession was thus called *professio super altare*. Through this rite, a strong connection between the monastic profession and the eucharist, between the monastic oblation and Christ's oblation, was signified. By placing his or her petition on the altar, the nun or the monk who made profession was achieving the sacrifice of his own person to God.

¹ Marika Räsänen, 'Family vs. Order: Saint Thomas Aquinas' Dominican Habit in the Narrative Tradition of the Order', in Ana Marinković and Trpimir Vedriš eds., *Identity and Alterity in Hagiography and Cult of Saints: Proceedings of the 2nd Hagiography conference organised by Croatian Hagiography Association 'Hagiotheca' held in Split, 28-31 May 2008* (Series Colloquia 1) Bibliotheca Hagiotheca: Zagreb 2010, 201–18, at 216–17.

² A. de Vogüé, 'Professione VII. I riti di professione in Occidente (sec. IV-IX)', *Dizionario degli Istituti di perfezione* 7 (1983), 904–16, at 905–08.

³ *Ibid.*, 912.

In the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth century, some important changes occurred under the influence of the appearance of new religious orders. Mendicant orders renounced to the traditional *professio super altare* and embraced a new rite of profession, the *professio in manibus* which had some similarities to the feudal ceremony of allegiance. The main gesture of the rite was the *immixtio manuum*: the religious, kneeling, placed her hand in those of the superior and promised obedience.⁴ Then, the superior gave her the kiss of peace (*osculum*) and the religious would receive a new clothing.

Theologians' and canonists' emphasis moved from the liturgical notion of *professio* to a recently-forged concept of *votum*. The use of the word 'vow' in place of (or together with) the word 'profession' coincided with the apparition of the feudal pledge, also called 'vow'. In fact, it was rarely employed during the patristic period. Even if the vocabulary of the vow started to spread at the end of the eighth century under the Carolingian influence,⁵ it was not only before the twelfth century that doctrines of the religious vows began to be formulated. At first, the word 'vow', in a singular form, had a broad meaning and referred to a commitment to virginity, matrimony or priesthood. Under the influence of the mendicant orders, and, especially, the Franciscans, it was increasingly used at the plural form and designated the three religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, defined by Francis of Assisi.

In this paper, I will explore how Thomas Aquinas's own conception of religious vows moved from a juridical and material perspective, in the *Commentary of the Sentences*, to a sacral and spiritual one in his ultimate *Summa theologiae*. I will, more specifically, highlight how the controversies between the mendicant orders and the secular clergy influenced this evolution. Thomas's understanding of the *professio* as *consecratio* emerged in the context of the disputed issue of the solemnity of the vow. I will also show how this move depended greatly on Thomas's deeper understanding of the theology of grace. The increasing use of the word 'consecration' reveals Thomas's new insistence on the primacy of God's initiative in religious vocation.

A Legal Conception of the vow in the *Commentary of the Sentences* (c. 1254–55)

In the fourth book of his *Sentences*, dedicated to the sacraments, Peter Lombard (c. 1100–60) examined the nature of the vow from the perspective of matrimonial impediments. In the first decades of the thirteenth century, the commentary of the Lombard's *Sentences* became a decisive step in a theologian's education. Every young bachelor in theology was supposed to comment on it to the students. Thomas Aquinas was no exception: he commented on the *Sentences* in the first years of his teaching in Paris (around 1252–55). The *Commentary of the Sentences* is thus one of his earliest works. Depending on Lombard, Thomas was primarily interested in defining which kind of vow would prohibit a marriage.

⁴ Matias Augé, 'Professione. VII. I riti di professione in Occidente', *Dizionario degli Istituti di perfezione* 7 (1983), 916–21 at 919–20.

⁵ Catherine Capelle, *Le voeu d'obéissance des origines au XIIIe siècle: Etude juridique*, R. Pichon & R. Durand-Auzias: Paris 1959, 3.

Until the tenth century, no juridical consideration had been given to the validity of marriages made subsequent to a vow. At first, the problem was only addressed in disciplinary terms: the married monk was supposed to return to his monastery. At the local Synod of Trosle (France), in 909, the invalidity of the subsequent marriage was first asserted.⁶ This decision took a universal dimension when it was confirmed by the Second Lateran Council in 1139. The *Decretum Gratiani* (around 1140), taking on the legacy of the Lateran Council, indicated explicitly that a vow could create an obligation. By doing so, it was assuming the Roman juridical conception of the vow. The *Decretum* distinction between the simple vow – which did not oblige – and the *benedictio consecrationis* (consecratory benediction) or *propositum* (purpose) – which obliged – represented an important breakthrough.⁷

Lombard offered to clarify the distinction by differentiating the simple vow, which did not oblige, from the solemn vow which constituted an absolute impediment. Although the new distinction enjoyed success among canonists and theologians, the nature of the solemnity of the vow remained a highly debated topic. From this time on, the debate moved to the definition of the solemnity of the vow. A vow was considered as solemn when it was pronounced publicly. It was its public character that made it solemn. Canonists and theologians endeavored to precise the conditions in which the vow would be public, concentrating on the circumstances in which it was enunciated: the sacramental ordination, the religious profession and the change of clothing.⁸ The *Glossa ordinaria* (c. 1215–17) added new elements of its publicity: ‘a formal declaration of the terms of the vow’ and the presence of witnesses.⁹

Following Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas proposed a definition of the vow, based on the canonistic tradition.¹⁰ The vow, he said, was ‘an obligation’ which was willingly done for God.¹¹ Thomas insisted on the fact that the vow was a promise, made after a deliberation expressed with a free will in presence of witnesses. He based his conception of the vow upon an analogy with the human contract borrowed from the canonists. In fact, for him, the vow was a contract between a man and God.¹² As the human contract obliged both parts to observe the contractual terms, all the more the man who pronounced a vow was obliged to observe it since it was addressed to God. Moreover, to confirm the promise done to God, the vow required the presence of men who could testify. This first definition of the vow, with its insistence on the witnesses, appears very much dependent with the *Glossa ordinaria*.

⁶ Giancarlo Rocca, ‘Voto II. In Occidente: visione storico-giuridica generale del voto solenne e del voto semplice’, *Dizionario degli Istituti di perfezione* 10 (2003), 553–64, at 554.

⁷ *Decretum*, D. 27 c. 8, http://geschichte.digital-sammlungen.de/decretum-gratiani/kapitel/dc_chapter_0_0261 (18 August 2017).

⁸ Rocca 2003, 555.

⁹ James A. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law and the Crusader*, The University of Wisconsin Press: Madison 1969, 62.

¹⁰ Jean-Marie Aubert, *Le droit romain dans l'oeuvre de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Vrin: Paris 1955, 53.

¹¹ *Super. Sent. IV, d. 38, q. 1, a. 1, q. 1.* Author’s translation from Latin: Thomas Aquinas, *Commento alle “Sentenze” di Pietro Lombardo e testo integrale di Pietro Lombardo. Libro quarto. Distinzioni 24–42, L’ordine, il matrimonio*, Bologna: Studio domenicano 2001, 638–39.

¹² *Super Sent. IV, d. 38, q. 1, a. 3, q. 1* (ibid., 658–59.).

Thomas Aquinas grounded his distinction between simple and solemn vow on the key notion of obligation, first found in Gratian's *Decretum*. The simple vow was a simple promise (*promissio*), whereas the solemn vow was characterized by the obligation to execute this promise.¹³ In the case of religious vows, the man donated himself effectively to God. In the *Quodlibet* III, which dates from Thomas's second stay in Paris (1268–72) and where he used an argumentation, similar to the one used in the *Commentary of Sentences*, the solemn vow was identified as 'a promise with some donation (*traditio*)'.¹⁴

To explain his conception of the solemn vow, Thomas used the analogy of a specific human contract, that is, a contract of sale. A sale was effective when the buyer entered in 'corporal possession of a certain thing of which one [could] have what he [promised]'.¹⁵ When a religious person pronounced a solemn vow, she no longer belonged to herself or to her family, but became God's *dominium* or 'property'.¹⁶ By contrast, the simple vow was assimilated to the *nuda promissio* (nude promise) of the Roman law.¹⁷

Refining his analogy, Aquinas referred to a Roman legal contract, dating back probably from the Etruscan period and called the *mancipatio*, which allowed a father to sell his male children.¹⁸ In the context of an agrarian economy, a son was in a state of 'patrimonial incapacity, as long as he was under [his] father's power'.¹⁹ The Roman jurist Gaius, in his *Institutes* (second century AD), explained that *mancipatio* came from the fact that 'the thing [was] taken (*capitur*) by hand (*manu*)'.²⁰ During the sale, the male child who was sold, like the slaves or the cattle and unlike real estate property, could be taken by hand.

Thomas Aquinas probably received the terminology of the *mancipatio* from the canonists. However, earlier occurrences can be found in the Patristic literature. In Tertullian's *Apologeticus*, as well as in saint Augustin's *Contra Cresconium*, the *mancipatio* was associated with the sacrament of baptism.²¹ Christian faithfuls distinguished themselves from pagans by the fact that they were associated to Christ by the rite of baptism. Isidore of Seville, in the *De Ecclesiasticis officiis*, used the vocabulary of the *mancipatio* regarding the clerics. Presumably inspired by the *Vulgata* translation of Numbers 4:27, he defined clerics as persons who were 'mancipated in divine cults' (*in divinis cultibus mancipati*).²²

¹³ Cf. Aubert 1955, 54.

¹⁴ *Quodlibet* III, q. 7, a. 1, co. Author's translation from Latin: Thomas Aquinas, *Le questioni disputate*, vol. 11, *Questioni su argomenti vari. Secondo tomo, Quodlibet 1-6, 12*, Bologna: Studio domenicano, 2003, 300-1.

¹⁵ *Super Sent.* IV, d. 38, q. 1, a. 2, q. 3, Thomas Aquinas, *Commento alle "Sentenze" di Pietro Lombardo e testo integrale di Pietro Lombardo. Libro quarto. Distinzioni 24-42, L'ordine, il matrimonio*, 650–51.

¹⁶ *Super Sent.* IV, d. 38, q. 1, a. 3, q. 2 (ibid., 660–61.).

¹⁷ cf. *Super Sent.* IV, d. 38, q. 1, a. 1, q. 1 (ibid., 638–39; Aubert 1955, 54.).

¹⁸ Carlos Felipe Amunátegui Perello, 'Origen y función de la "mancipatio"', *Revista de Estudios Histórico-Jurídicos* 33 (2011), 37–63, at 38.

¹⁹ Gennaro Franciosi, *La famiglia romana: Società e diritto*, Turin: G. Giappichelli 2003, 96.

²⁰ Gaius, *Institutes* I.121, *The Institutes of Gaius*, W.M. Gordon & O.F. Robinson transl., Cornell University Press: Ithaca 1988, 81.

²¹ Tertullian, *Apologeticus* XXI.2; XXIV.1; Augustin, *Contra Cresconium* III.64.71.

²² Isidore of Seville, *De Ecclesiasticis officiis* V.31. Author's translation from Latin: Isidore of Seville, *De Ecclesiasticis officiis* (CCSL 113), Brepols: Turnhout 1989, 55.

With Gratian's *Decretum*, the utilization of such vocabulary was further extended to the monks who, like the clerics, were 'given up entirely to the divine cult' (*divino cultui mancipatis*).²³ This wider use of the *mancipatio*, which was later taken over by Peter Lombard, reflects an antique conception of ecclesiastical hierarchy, such as the one developed by the Pseudo-Dionysius. It was also a time when the theology of sacraments was not yet clearly settled and the distinction between ministerial priesthood and religious vocations was somewhat blurred. The sacrament of Order was also considered from a contractual perspective and assimilated to a vow.²⁴

By employing this analogy, the Dominican also wished to stress the realism of the offering of oneself through the vow. The offering was done 'presently',²⁵ as to say 'effectively'.²⁶ For Thomas Aquinas, influenced here by Roman law, the 'simple meeting of the minds' was not sufficient to create an obligation and a 'material or formalist element' was necessary.²⁷ In the case of the religious vows, it was the profession in the hands of the religious superior, as to say the *professio in manibus*, which was typical of the Dominican order.

In the *Commentary of the Sentences*, Thomas examined the controversial issue of the dispensation of the vow primarily from a legal perspective. Acknowledging the diversity of solutions proposed by canonists and theologians, he took stance in favour of the possibility of a dispensation. The solemn vow was 'only a human act of donation',²⁸ established unilaterally. For this reason, the pope or a prelate could dispense with the vow for a legitimate cause, which consisted in a 'better good' for the Church or for a kingdom or a province.²⁹ Aquinas referred there to the principle of the superiority of the common good over the private good. In certain cases, he explained, it could be preferable to renounce religious vows and the correlative obligation of contemplation for the motive of helping his neighbour.

The Influence of Parisian Academic Controversies

Thomas Aquinas's conception of religious vows notably evolved during the period that separated the *Summa* from the *Commentary of the Sentences*, under the influence of academic controversies around the status and function of the religious life in the Church and in the society. Like other theologians belonging to the mendicant orders, such as the Franciscans Bonaventure or John Peckham, he answered, in several *disputationes* and polemical opuscles, to the attacks of the secular clergy who dominated the teaching of theology at the Sorbonne and was hostile to the new presence of religious masters inside the university.

²³ *Decretum*, D. 86 c. 25.

²⁴ Alain Boureau, 'Pour une histoire comparée du voeu', *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, no. 16 (1996), 1–5, at 2. <http://ccrh.revues.org/2637> (30.9.2016).

²⁵ *Super Sent.* IV, d. 38, q. 1, a. 2, q1a. 3, Thomas Aquinas, *Commento alle "Sentenze" di Pietro Lombardo e testo integrale di Pietro Lombardo. Libro quarto. Distinzioni 24-42, L'ordine, il matrimonio*, 650–51.).

²⁶ *Quodlibet* III, q. 7, a. 1 co, Thomas Aquinas, *Le questioni disputate*, vol. 11, *Questioni su argomenti vari. Secondo tomo, Quodlibet 1–6, 12*, pp. 298–99.

²⁷ Aubert 1955, 56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁹ *Super Sent.* IV, d. 38, q. 1, a. 4, q1a. 1, ad. 3, Thomas Aquinas, *Commento alle "Sentenze" di Pietro Lombardo e testo integrale di Pietro Lombardo. Libro quarto. Distinzioni 24-42, L'ordine, il matrimonio*, 670–71.

Thomas's first public stance in the dispute with the secular clergy dates from his first period of teaching in Paris (1251–59). The quarrel had some strong incidence for the Dominican's career since he had to wait till 1257 to get appointed, along with Bonaventure, master of theology in Paris. While Thomas was finishing his fourth book of the *Commentary of the Sentences*, a secular master, William of Saint-Amour, published a *Tractatus de periculis novissimorum temporum* (1256), where he denounced the danger represented by religious orders whose mission was preaching and teaching, instead of doing manual labor.

Shortly after, Thomas Aquinas published an answer to the *Tractatus*, the *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionum* (1256), where he examined, for the first time, the vow in relation to the notion of religion. His view was notably influenced by the Roman understanding of *religio* as Cicero defined it in the *De inventione* II.53: it 'consists in offering service and ceremonial rites or worship to "some superior nature that men call divine"'.³⁰ Complementing Cicero's definition, Thomas added that God's service did not consist only of rites, but also of charitable activity.

Referring to this double definition of the religion, the Dominican linked religious vows to baptism. Willing to demonstrate, against Saint-Amour, the perfection of the religious life, he defined it as the fact 'to oblige oneself to some charitable activity by which one would serve God in a special manner, renouncing secular life'.³¹ Such renunciation liberated the religious person from worldly worries and made her freer to God's service through works of mercy. Using an analogy, he highlighted how the religious vocation originated from and deepened the baptismal vocation: as one dies to sin when baptised, one dies to the world when she vows herself to God only.³²

In this light, the Dominican considered the religious vows from a new, sacrificial perspective. He highlighted how the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience represented three different kinds of sacrifices: sacrifice of the body, sacrifice of the exterior goods and sacrifice of the spirit. This view was notably influenced by Gregorius the Great who, in the *Moralia in Iob* as well as in the *Homelies on Ezekiel*, highlighted the 'sacrificial character of Christian existence'.³³ Among the various kind of sacrifices, the Pope distinguished the holocaust which expressed one's total surrender to God in a life of penance. In the *Contra impugnantes*, Thomas Aquinas, for the first time, identified the religious life to a holocaust. In fact, by pronouncing the three vows, the religious person offered everything she possessed to God. This emphasis on the sacrificial character of religious life announced a new understanding of the religious *mancipatio* as total surrender, which would be later developed in the *Summa*.

During the second stage of the controversy, which coincided with Thomas Aquinas's second teaching in Paris and preceded the writing of the second part of the *Summa*, his doctrine of the vow showed further developments in line with a more spiritualized conception of the vow. A few

³⁰ *Summa theol.* II-II, q. 80 co.

³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Contra impugnantes* cap. I [3]. Author's translation from Latin: Thomas Aquinas, "La perfection, c'est la charité": *Vie chrétienne et vie religieuse dans l'Eglise du Christ*. Jean-Pierre Torrell ed. and transl., Cerf: Paris 2010, 74–75.

³² *Contra impugnantes* cap. I [4] (Ibid.).

³³ Pier Angelo Gramaglia, 'Linguaggio sacrificiale ed eucaristia in Gregorio Magno', in *Gregorio Magno e il suo tempo: XIX Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana in collaborazione con l'Ecole française de Rome*. Roma, 9-12 maggio 1990. II. *Questioni letterarie e dottrinali* (Studia ephemeridis Augustinianum 33) Institutum patristicum Augustinianum: Roma 1991, 223–65, at 246.

months before Thomas's return to Paris, the secular master Gerard of Abbeville had launched a new offensive against the mendicant orders. In various *quodlibets* and in a later book, *Contra adversarium perfectionis christianae* (1269), Gerard criticized their poverty and argued in favour of the superiority of the parish priests and archdeacons over the religious. Gerard of Abbeville was himself a wealthy and powerful archdeacon.³⁴ Archdeacons, who were the bishops' right arm, had reached a peak of their influence at that time.

The theological debate regarded the interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius's ecclesiology which was becoming increasingly influential in theological circles in the second half of the thirteenth century.³⁵ William of Saint-Amour had referred to Pseudo-Dionysius' *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* in his *De Periculis* to distinguish the *ordo perficientium* (order of those who perfect), which was superior and included the bishops, priests and deacons, and the *ordo perficiendorum* (order of those who are perfected), composed of the religious, the baptized and the catechumens.³⁶ The parish priests and archdeacons were thus part of the *ordo perficientium* while the mendicant orders belonged to the *ordo perficiendorum*.

Thomas's reply was commensurate to Gerard of Abbeville's attack. He answered to the secular master and his followers in several *quodlibets* and two opuscles, the *De Perfectione vitae spiritualis* (1270) and the *Contra doctrinam retrahentium a religione* [Contra retrahentes] (1271). In the first opuscle, the Dominican introduced the key-notion of consecration which had remote liturgical origins. In fact, since the end of the fourth century, the *consecratio virginis* designated the ceremony that marked the entering in the order of the virgins.³⁷ The expression was first used in North Africa, before spreading in Rome and in the Western Church. In the medieval sacramentaries, the word *consecratio* coexisted with the term *benedictio* or blessing. Furthermore, the two expressions were also used for the liturgical introduction of an abbot or an abbess to their office, after their election by the monastic community.

The word 'consecration' took on a theological meaning in scholastic theology under the Pseudo-Dionysius's influence. Like his contemporaries, Thomas thought that the Pseudo-Dionysius was describing, in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the rite of monastic profession as it was practiced in the apostolic Church and therefore granted it a special authority. Significantly, John Scotus Eriugena and Robert Grosseteste, in their translations of the book, highlighted the consecratory dimension of the rite of monastic profession by referring to a *consecrativa invocatio*, i.e. a 'consecratory invocation'.³⁸

³⁴ Philippe Grand, 'Le Quodlibet XIV de Gérard d'Abbeville. La vie de Gérard d'Abbeville', *Archives d'histoire de la littérature du Moyen-Age* 39 (1964), 207–69, at 211.

³⁵ Yves-Marie Congar, 'Aspects ecclésiologiques de la querelle entre les mendiants et les séculiers dans la moitié du XIIIe siècle et le début du XIVe', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen-Age* 28 (1961), 35–151, at 114.

³⁶ William of Saint-Amour, *De Periculis Novissimorum Temporum*. G. Geltner ed. and transl., Peeters: Leuven 2008, 56–57.

³⁷ Roland Metz, *La consécration des vierges: Hier, aujourd'hui, demain*, Cerf: Paris 2001, 42; 54–55.

³⁸ Translation of the expression ἀφιερωτικῆς ἐπικλήσεως, Philippe Chevallier, *Dionysiaca: Recueil donnant l'ensemble des traductions latines des ouvrages attribués au Denys de l'Aréopage et synopse marquant la valeur de citations presque innombrables allant seules depuis trop longtemps remises enfin dans leur contexte au moyen d'une nomenclature rendue d'un usage très facile*, Desclée de Brouwer: Paris 1937, 1387.).

In the *De Perfectione*, Thomas referred specifically to this section from the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* to confirm his thesis seconding which one could not enter a *status* without a ‘benediction or a solemn consecration’.³⁹ Therefore, parish priests and archdeacons who received their office without benediction or consecration could not be part of the *status* of perfection. Only bishops and religious, who both were consecrated, could belong to it. The first ones belonged to it as perfecting, the religious as perfected.

Thomas introduced here the notion of *status* which he substituted to the one of *order*, which was characteristic of Pseudo-Dionysius’s thought and related more closely to the sacrament of orders (and, for this reason, taken over by the secular masters). As Jean-Marie Aubert correctly pointed out, the word *status*, borrowed from Roman law, meant for Aquinas a ‘total commitment’, a ‘permanent state of life’.⁴⁰ A change of status, such as committing to a religious order or marrying, required a religious solemnity analogous to the civil solemnity, typical of slave’s emancipation.⁴¹ Thomas did not however, in this opuscle, refer explicitly to the *mancipatio*.

In the later *Contra retrahentes*, Thomas Aquinas developed another argument in favour of the spiritualization of the vow. Against Nicholas of Lisieux, another secular master, Thomas showed that a prolonged deliberation and the advices of various persons were not required to decide to answer God’s call to become a religious person. In fact, this decision relied, on the candidate’s side, on a divine instinct, the ‘instinct of the Holy Spirit’,⁴² which was identified to an ‘impulse’⁴³ moving freely, from the inside, a man to choose the religious life. The candidate should not resist it for he guides her ‘to the best’.⁴⁴ In this way, Thomas emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in the formation of a religious vocation since its birth.

Toward a Sacralization of Religious Vows in the *Summa theologiae* (c. 1271–72)

A few months after the publication of the *Contra retrahentes*, Thomas Aquinas examined anew the vow in the *Summa theologiae*. Distancing himself from the sacramental perspective developed in his early Commentary on the Sentences, he examined the vow, using ethical lenses, in the context of the virtue of religion. Through the vow, a person offered herself ‘to the worship or service (*obsequium*) of God’.⁴⁵ The person who pronounced the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, was called a ‘religious’ by antonomasia, said Thomas, because her surrender represented the highest degree of the religion.⁴⁶

³⁹ *De perfectione* XXVIII.1, Author’s translation from Latin: Thomas Aquinas, “*La perfection, c’est la charité*”: *Vie chrétienne et vie religieuse dans l’Eglise du Christ*, Jean-Pierre Torrell ed. and transl., 680–81.

⁴⁰ Aubert 1955, 29.

⁴¹ *De Perfectione* XXVIII.1, Thomas Aquinas, “*La perfection, c’est la charité*”: *Vie chrétienne et vie religieuse dans l’Eglise du Christ*, Jean-Pierre Torrell ed. and transl., 680–81.

⁴² *Contra retrahentes* IX.8. Author’s translation from Latin: *ibid.*, 772–73.

⁴³ *Contra retrahentes* IX.8, *ibid.*, 770–71.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Summa theologiae* [hereafter *Summa theol.*] II-II q. 88, a. 5 co. The quotations of the *Summa* are borrowed from the translation by the fathers of the English Dominican province, available online: <http://www.logic-museum.com/authors/aquinas/Summa-index.htm>, (25 July 2017).

⁴⁶ *Summa theol.* II-II q. 186, a. 1 co.

His conception of the vow became more spiritual. The presence of witnesses was no longer a required element of the vow. The Dominican rather insisted on the element of the promise, which was, for him, the ‘definitive element’ of the vow.⁴⁷ Thomas meant to stress more strongly that the vow was primarily addressed to God. For it was spiritual rather than human, the solemnity of the vow did not depend any more on its publicity.⁴⁸ It consisted thus ‘in something spiritual pertaining to God’.⁴⁹ The action of a man who obliged himself could not make a vow solemn, only God’s action could. In the religious profession, God acted in.

The solemnity was caused not so much through a total surrender (*mancipatio*) as in the *Commentary of the Sentences*, but rather through a ‘spiritual blessing or consecration’ (*benedictionem et consecrationem*).⁵⁰ Thomas Aquinas was more likely influenced by his master, Albertus Magnus who, following John Scotus Eriugena’s translation, identified the monastic profession in his commentary of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* to a ‘rite hiding something spiritual’ (μυστήριον) and to a ‘consecration’ (τελειώσεως).⁵¹

However, the Dominican did not abandon the notion of *mancipatio*. He still considered that the surrender was a necessary condition for the solemnity. Without such a surrender no consecration could be indeed conceived. In the *Summa*, Aquinas no longer insisted on the effectiveness of the donation, but on its universality. The comparison he established between religious vows and the holocaust was decisive: when a religious made profession, he gave herself ‘up entirely to the divine service (*servitio*)’.⁵² The *mancipatio* ‘properly [regarded] a condition of freedom or servitude’.⁵³ This metaphor highlighted accurately how the religious entered, through his profession, in a state of servitude, characterized by a dedication to God’s *servitium*.

In Thomas’s works, the notions of *mancipatio* and of *consecratio* are clearly connected. By a *mancipatio*, a thing (priests’ clothes), a place (Jerusalem) or a person do not belong any more to the profane world, but, being consecrated, becomes God’s property. In this line, Thomas compared the three sacraments of character (baptism, confirmation, sacred orders) that conferred a sacramental character, that is, a mark or sign of Christ that was imprinted permanently on the soul, to a ‘surrender to something sacred’.⁵⁴ The verb *mancipare* was in this case in the passive voice. Dealing with religious vows, the Dominican usually employed the active voice to distinguish the religious profession from the sacraments for the surrender achieved there implied a personal initiative. The spiritual consecration represented God’s ratification of the act of surrender by the religious.

In the *Summa*, Thomas adopted also a more rigorous position on the dispensation of religious vows. Canonists and theologians discussed whether it was possible to dispense with religious vows

⁴⁷ *Summa theol.* II-II, q. 88, a. 1 co.

⁴⁸ *Summa theol.* II-II, q. 88, a. 7 ad 3.

⁴⁹ *Summa theol.* II-II q. 88, a. 7 co.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Albertus Magnus, *Opera omnia*, vol. 36.2, *Super Dionysium De Ecclesiastica hierarchica*, Monasterii Westfalorum: Aschendorff 1999, 139.

⁵² *Summa theol.* II-II, q. 186, a. 1 co

⁵³ *Summa theol.* II-II q. 184, a. 4 co.

⁵⁴ *Comm. Sent.* IV, d. 4, q. 1 a. 4, q. 2, Thomas Aquinas, *Commento alle “Sentenze” di Pietro Lombardo e testo integrale di Pietro Lombardo. Libro quarto. Distinzioni 1-13, I sacramenti in generale, il battesimo, la confermazione, l’eucaristia*, Bologna: Studio domenicano 1999, 294-95.

and, if so, who could dispense with it. As Thomas abandoned the judicial conception of the vow as a contract, he came to consider that religious vows, unlike other vows, could not be dispensed. He based his opinion upon the authority of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) who, in a letter to the abbot of the Benedictine abbey of Subiaco, took a clear stand against any possibility of dispensation: even the pope could not dispense with religious vows.⁵⁵ While, in his *Commentary of the Sentences*, Thomas did not quote the pope's decretal, which he most likely knew,⁵⁶ he cited it in the *Summa*, justifying the pope's decision by the fact that no consecrated person or thing could return to the profane sphere.⁵⁷ No one could undo what God had done.

Thomas based his argument on the authority of the Scriptures and the liturgical practice, using an analogy with the consecration of animals in the Old Testament and the consecration of vases in present liturgies. Answering to an objection according to which, basing on Leviticus 27:9–10, even a commutation of the vow was not allowed, Thomas specified that such commutation was possible if no consecration intervened.⁵⁸ In fact, the animals which were not considered proper to the sacrifice could be exchanged. In this very context, the change achieved by the consecration appears only negatively. The case of the consecrated chalice highlights the contribution of the liturgical tradition to the solution proposed by Aquinas regarding dispensation.⁵⁹ Interestingly, the terms *benedictio* and *consecratio* were also employed in medieval sacramentaries for the blessing of chalices, churches or altars. If consecrated objects or places could not be used for a profane matter, furthermore a professed religious could not be dispensed.

Conclusions

How can we explain Thomas's move from a legal to a sacral conception of religious vows? Academic controversies seem to have played a decisive role. The notions of holocaust as total donation, and of consecration appeared for the first time in his opuscles in defense of the religious. The comparison between the solemn vow and the holocaust highlighted the sacrificial character of religious life. The religious person was consecrated when pronouncing a solemn vow. The consecration indicated a change of state, the entering the religious state.

In this context, the Aquinas turned toward the patristic monastic legacy, Gregory the Great and the Pseudo-Dionysius especially. This casts a new light on the liturgical emphasis on the religious consecration. In fact, the positions taken by Thomas in the *Summa* suggest a return to a monastic tradition that he knew very well thanks to his stay at the Monte Cassino abbey. Aquinas reinterpreted the monastic tradition in the light of the new situation of competition between the mendicant orders and the seculars.

Moreover, the Dominican gave, at the end of his life, an increasing importance to grace, which justified his new insistence on God's action in religious vows. This primacy of God's initiative

⁵⁵ Alain Boureau, 'Le voeu monastique et l'émergence de la notion de puissance absolue du pape (vers 1270)', *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques* 21 (1998): 1–2. <http://ccrh.revues.org/2508> (30 September 2016).

⁵⁶ Aubert 1955, 55.

⁵⁷ *Summa theol.* II-II q. 88, a. 11 co.

⁵⁸ *Summa theol.* II-II q. 88, a. 10 ad 3.

⁵⁹ *Summa theol.* II-II q. 88, a. 11 co.

had already appeared in the *Contra retrahentes*, regarding the call to religious life. The religious candidate was moved by the divine instinct, the instinct of the Holy Spirit, to embrace effectively, without delay, the religious life. Thomas applied here the Benedictine discernment of the spirit to the discernment of the religious vocation. In the *Summa*, he characterized, from the first time, the solemnity of the vow as spiritual since God was the ‘author’⁶⁰ of the consecration.

Aquinas’s doctrine of the vow, even though not completely articulated, represents a decisive breakthrough. Thomas gave to the traditional notion of consecration, which originally appeared in a liturgical context, a new theological meaning. The comparisons with the consecration of objects and places, which lead to conceiving religious consecration from an ontological perspective, should not however be overestimated. In fact, Aquinas referred to these comparisons only regarding the dispensation of the vow (not when he dealt with its solemnity as such).⁶¹

The religious consecration should rather be understood in relation to the baptismal consecration. The influence of patristic and monastic traditions, which identified the religious profession to a ‘second baptism’, was also there decisive. Interestingly enough, the *Contra impugnantes* inspired the Second Vatican Council’s conception of the religious consecration. The religious consecration perfects the baptismal consecration through a more intimate union with Christ, by committing to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience.⁶² It is the same Spirit, given at baptism, which moves to enter a religious order and consecrates the religious on the occasion of her profession. As Joseph de Finance rightly pointed out, ‘When a Christian gives herself to God, it is always [--] by a motion of this Spirit that she has received when baptized.’⁶³

Following this line of thought, the ‘spiritual consecration’ of the religious profession can be linked to the ‘spiritual priesthood’ of the faithful. Spiritual priesthood, which is distinct from the sacramental priesthood of the clerics, regards the service of God through a life of sanctity, of charity. Its proper activity is to give a spiritual sacrifice, an interior sacrifice through which one offers her soul to God.⁶⁴ For the holocaust of the religious life is the ‘spiritual sacrifice’ *par excellence*, it ‘eminently achieves the priesthood of the faithful’.⁶⁵

Agnès Desmazières

Centre Sèvres-Facultés jésuites de Paris – Institut catholique de Paris

Desmazieres.agnes@gmail.com

⁶⁰ *Summa theol.* II-II q. 88, a. 7 ad. 1.

⁶¹ It is interesting to point out that Thomas, in his *Summa* articles on the dispensation, used the word ‘consecration’ without precisating that this consecration is “spiritual,” adjective that was actually crucial in his explanation of the solemnity of the vow.

⁶² Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* (1964), n. 44 http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed 26 January 2018).

⁶³ Finance 1953, 1579.

⁶⁴ *Summa theol.* II II q. 182 a. 2 ad 3 ; cf. *Summa theol.* II II, q. 85 a. 3 ad 2.

⁶⁵ Gilles Emery, ‘Le sacerdoce spirituel des fidèles chez saint Thomas d’Aquin’, *Revue thomiste* 99 (1999), 211-43 at 238.