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The Theology of Religious Life
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Religious function within the Church according to the theology of religious life. This theology is Christocentric.\(^1\) An important aspect of life as a religious in the Church is their commitment to following the evangelical counsels. The evangelical counsels are poverty, chastity, and obedience.\(^2\) These evangelical counsels are based on Christ himself, and shape how religious function within the Church.

**The Evangelical Counsels**

The evangelical counsels are related to Christ himself. Christ himself exemplified the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience (LG 43–44). For example, Jesus Christ “‘assuming the nature of a slave’ (Phil. 2:7) learned obedience in the school of suffering (cf. Heb. 5:8).”\(^3\) By following the perfect example of Christ and adhering to the evangelical counsels, religious in the Church are imitating Christ.

The religious life (professing and living out the evangelical counsels) is “rooted in Christ” (RD 7). The vocation to the religious life begins with a personal, individualized call by Christ (RD 3). Christ specifically chooses that person, touching them with His “redeeming love”

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(RD 3). The taking of the religious vows is to die with Christ, and to be blessed with a new life in Christ (RD 7).

In addition, the evangelical counsels are related to Christ himself in that the redemption of Christ enables us to follow them. The religious state of life, living in poverty, chastity, and obedience, is a testament of the new life in Christ brought about through the redemption (LG 44). The evangelical counsels and the ability to follow them “are a divine gift” that flows pursuant to and from the “redemption of Christ” (LG 43–44).

The evangelical counsels order the interior lives of religious in imitation of Jesus Christ Himself. Through the evangelical counsel of poverty, religious purge their attachment to worldly things (LG 42). Chastity enables religious to love God and their fellow man with an “undivided heart” (PC 12). Through living out the evangelical counsel of obedience, religious sacrifice their lives to God (PC 14), and divorce themselves from that which is related to “the pride of life.” (RD 9).

**Religious Life Within the Church**

There are two diagrams that each show how people living the life of the counsels are components of the Church of Jesus Christ. The first diagram brings out the idea that living in poverty, chastity, and obedience exemplify the life of Jesus Christ to others.

*Diagram 1.*
Religious show and bring Jesus Christ to people in the present moment (LG 46). Religious also witness and provide a model to the laity and clergy, reminding the laity and clergy how they are called to live as Christians (LG 44). Through their state of life, religious help spread the Gospel and contribute to the Church’s “salvific mission” (LG 43; cf. PC 14). Moreover, by living out the evangelical counsels, religious point towards and identify for the laity and clergy “heavenly goods” that are already present and enjoyed in this world through a life in Christ; while at the same time they act as a sign of “the life of the world to come”⁴ (LG 44; PC 12; RD 11).

Religious act as a sign for both the clergy and the laity, teaching and reminding them how to live out the evangelical counsels in this life.

The second diagram touches on several ideas concerning the relationship between the different states of life.

“The religious state of life is not an intermediate state between the clerical and lay states” (LG 43). The clergy, religious, and laity each have their own individual roles to play within the Church, which is shown by each of the arrows pointing in a different direction. In addition, religious are drawn from both the clerical state and the lay state (LG 43), which is shown in the diagram by the proximity and placement of the arrows representing the three states of life. The

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diagram also shows how the laity should look up to and learn from both clergy and religious. The clergy, through their external disposition, educate the laity on worship and sacrifice, whereas religious teach the laity how their interior life should be ordered. 

Within the diagram, the clergy and religious are on the same level of the diagram, apart from the laity. This signifies that both the clerical state and the religious state do not share in the “secular nature” of the lay state (LG 31). Clergy and religious are both separate and distinct from the laity. In contrast, placing the clergy and religious on the same level in the diagram alludes to that fact that some clergy are also religious.

Conclusion

Through living out the evangelical counsels, religious further the mission of the Church (LG 43) and participate in the apostolate of the Church (RD 15). By imitating Jesus Christ through their commitment to poverty, chastity, and obedience (LG 43), religious act as a sign of Christ to others (LG 46), and provide an eschatological vision to those in the present age (LG 44). Through their various unique charisms, gifts, and apostolates (RD 15), religious bring to the world the different aspects of the life of Jesus Christ, such as preaching, caring for the sick, and contemplative prayer (LG 46).
References

Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text

