

# Vows

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“I make the vow of **chastity, poverty and obedience...**” So says our profession formula, by which we join the Congregation.

The entire second chapter of the **Constitutions** is dedicated to the vows: chastity, poverty and obedience. Read and meditate on what the Constitutions say to us. Also, I invite you to read the chapter of the **Rule of Life** titled “Leave All to Follow Christ”, which speaks about obedience, poverty and celibacy.

This past February, the two **General Governments**, of brothers and sisters, devoted four days to reflecting together on the religious vows; their meaning and how they are lived in the Congregation today. Now I briefly present you with some of the many ideas that have remained with me after those days of study.

## The beauty of our life

The vows constitute “**a total form of life**” (Const. 14). “We, therefore, embrace them with faith as a way of life and freedom” (Const. 16). They are our “way of living out one's Baptism” (Rule of Life 75).

Why do we agree to live this way: without marrying, putting all in common, allowing others to arrange our lives? It is difficult to give an answer, because the most decisive things cannot be completely explained. Spiritual and theological arguments can be used to lay the foundations of something and the contrary. The circumstances of each one's life (family, childhood, social conditions, etc.) are capricious and varied, and could have led us to very different life choices.

But, the fact is we are here and something makes this way of life appear to you to be "the only possible way for you to faithfully respond to your Lord" (Rule of Life 73).

**What is most beautiful** in our life as SSCC religious is precisely that which inspires these three vows: the desire to live like Jesus and like Mary, the fascination with the Reign of God, the exciting feeling that God can love other people through us, the enchantment of becoming a brother to everyone, the joy of serving the poor, the smile that is drawn on the soul at the moment of adoring our Lord...

The vows "**break" us inside**. Who does not miss the intimacy of a wife, having children and forming one's own family, organizing one's life autonomously, individually managing one's own money and resources! This life choice is so shocking that many see us as castrated, repressed, childish men... Something of Christ's cross wounds us in the vows we profess. But in the same wound the power of his resurrection appears (Const. 16), as an eschatological sigh for the Reign of God, in which everything passes and only love remains.

There is something unique and touching about belonging to this **community** of brothers who meet regularly to talk about their stuff, pray together every day, organize themselves -one way or another- to work for the Gospel, and untiringly accompany each other -with more or less warm affections according to their characters and circumstances- until the end of their days. All of this happens precisely because we professed the same vows in the bosom of the Congregation. If it were not so, most of us would not even have met.

There is, then, much beauty in this being companions on the way. How beautiful it is when the community becomes a refuge, comfort and source of encouragement even in the driest moments of our journey! Where will we find a group like this, who remind us each day how the reparative love of God works? As Pope Francis would say, do not let us take away the joy of being SSCC religious!

## **Forgotten?**

I recently participated in a meeting of local superiors, men and women, whom I asked for their opinion on the vows. Many answered that the vows are a **forgotten topic**,

or –at least- silenced. They hardly ever talk about them. There are other topics that usually occupy our formation sessions, such as community, apostolate, human relations, commitment in this or that field of action... But chastity, poverty and obedience seem to be very personal matters that each lives in his or her way, and that are left to the conscience of each one.

It may be that **the routine** of life ends up extinguishing the evocative power of the vows. It may be that, with time, I no longer remember why I live in such a peculiar way. It may even be that, at the time of profession, I count on the fact of being accepted in the group and presenting myself with a new “dignity” before others, rather than the commitment of total surrender, through the vows, to configure myself to Jesus Christ.

It could also happen that, as we age, the vows stop being a way of “leaving all to follow Christ” (Rule of Life) and, on the contrary, the Congregation becomes the institution that guarantees me security and wellbeing for the rest of my days. “Where would I go at this age?” some would say.

The vows become news when some newsworthy conflict appears. One speaks of chastity when one falls in love or when there are sexual scandals; of poverty when hidden monies or excessive luxuries appear; of obedience, when there are brothers who refuse to go where they are sent. Then personal tensions arise and confrontations between the different ways of interpreting the vows.

But more commonly and evasively, the vows are forgotten when they remain buried under the weight of what we consider our “rights”. **“I have a right to be happy”** you hear one say. From that principle, everything is relativized, one puts one’s self at the center, and things are valued as a function of what they bring to my personal fulfillment, that is, if they make me feel good, appreciated and comfortable. In fact, in some provinces the organizational principle is that each brother be happy, in a place that pleases him and doing that which interests him. But, when all is said and done, what do we mean by “happiness”?

One should not forget that religious profession is also a **“contract”** with the Congregation and the Church (Const. 12.3). The vows define the concrete way in which the Congregation and the Church can count on me. Others have a right to expect from me that which I have promised, that is, to live “consecrated celibate chastity” (Const. 20), “not to dispose of or use material goods, without the authorization of the legitimate Superiors” and place all in common (Const. 26), and to accept all that our legitimate Superiors command (Const. 36).

When those commitments, inherent in the “contract” of profession, cease to be obligatory for us our religious life dies, we disconnect ourselves from the “body” that

is the community, and the discourse about the values that inspire us is emptied of content. The vows that we have made "for Jesus" cease to have an influence on real life and we fall into a kind of practical unbelief.

## A single vow

Chastity, poverty and obedience form one single vow, a single gift of self. The nucleus of this vow is the **total surrender of one's life**. It is as if the basic instincts of preservation and pleasure go crazy, dazzled by the mystery of Christ. It is a vow of radical dispossession, possessing neither goods, nor persons, nor even one's own free will. "*You have already surrendered your life by becoming a monk*", said the superior to the brother who struggled with the fear of death, in the film "Of Gods and Men". In order to follow Jesus, one has to "*deny one's self*" (Lk 9:23). What a shocking expression! Who would dare to use it as a slogan in a vocational campaign?

As I told you before, it is not possible to explain everything in this crazy life that we adopt through religious profession. Its roots are in the mystery of life and death expressed by baptism. It is something God himself uses –in his way– to give his grace to others. It is a path of holiness for us and **for others**. "*Consider the good that your religious consecration will produce, as much for your own sanctification as for the sanctification of a great number of people*", said the Good Father to a candidate (December 27, 1822).

It is a school of love and a way of service. That is why the Good Father said, "*they will be breaking their most essential vow from the moment that you want to live for them alone and not work for the salvation of their brothers*" (Memory of the title of Zealots, December 6, 1816).

If this deep root of religious consecration dies, it is not surprising that sadness settles into our heart and we go through life dragging our feet, cranky and bitter. It is then better to ask for a dispensation and leave.

The beauty of the vows is something that **is desired** in the heart, **is asked** in prayer, and **is cultivated** with charity. We are all poor and weak facing such a big call; but we rely on the love of God, the intercession of the Church, and the support of the brothers.

