

## THE NONVOWED FORM OF THE LAY STATE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

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*The nonvowed “secular single lay state” claims many of today’s Catholics, yet is little noticed, even though it was validated by Vatican II and was arguably the first Christian form of life given explicit theological articulation. Insufficient attention and appreciation may prevent the Catholic Church from realizing the full benefits of this form of the lay state. Patricia Sullivan finds in the thought of several renowned theologians guidance for a theological exposition of the nonvowed life whose central feature may be stewardship.*

**T**WENTIETH-CENTURY CATHOLIC THEOLOGIANS Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Häring demonstrated a keen sensitivity to the important role that the laity would play in the Catholic Church as it headed toward and into the third millennium of Christianity. Yet their work only nominally recognized the form of the lay state that is the nonvowed life as it is lived today.<sup>1</sup> They could not have foreseen the importance for a future generation of more concerted reflection. More curious, then, is the near-invisibility in theological reflection and the near-dismissal from pastoral and popular consciousness today of this form of Christian life, while Catholic demographics show that the “secular single lay state” embraces a significant portion of the Catholic faithful.<sup>2</sup> The lack of general

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “nonvowed” to refer to persons consecrated by baptism who do not take vows of marriage, the counsels, or holy orders—lay persons whose distinctive style of Christian life is characterized by the very absence of vows beyond those of baptism. I use “secular single(s)” to distinguish the same church members from other singles who do make the vows of the counsels, as well as from celibate clerics. Occasionally I refer to the “nonvowed state,” to the “secular single state,” to the “married state,” or to the “state” of religious life. I do so simply for ease of reference; I am not unmindful of the fact that, properly speaking, all these terms designate forms of the “lay state.”

<sup>2</sup> A notable exception to this observation is in the Catholic “models” validated

recognition and developed theological exposition for this type of Christian life may prevent nonvowed individuals in the Church, as well as the Church as a whole, from deriving the full benefits of the presence of this form of the lay state, when the very fact that so many current Catholics live their lay status as “secular singles” may mean that this life has particular significance for the life of the Church in our time.

To some extent it is of the very nature of the nonvowed state that its members remain virtually anonymous in their “mission.” And the suggestion of some is not without merit, that secular singles, by living their state well, will create requisite notice for it. But nonvowed singles cannot gain proper attention for their form of the lay state on their own, any more than married people were able to assert fully, by word or example, the importance of their state until the Second Vatican Council pointedly validated it, or any more than the crisis in vocations to the priesthood and to religious life will be solved without public elucidations about the importance of these states for the life of the Church.

This article has a modest ambition. After looking at the concrete situation of the secular single person in the Church today, it will attend to three fundamental issues connected to this form of the lay state: (1) the basis for the distinction of the secular single state from other states and forms of Christian life considered within the unity of all Christians conferred by baptism; (2) a theological interpretation of the value of the nonvowed lay state as vocation and its implications for discernment; and (3) the importance of attention to the nonvowed lay state for the life of the Church today. The conclusion will underscore how particular attention to a basic Christian principle might catalyze new theological reflection especially on vocation to the secular single lay life. A contrived dialogue of sorts with Balthasar, Rahner, and Häring, especially in the section on theology and discernment, will be the manner of discourse for this project, with Balthasar serving as the primary interlocutor. Balthasar’s *The Christian State of Life*<sup>3</sup> acknowledged nonvowed life as at best a collection of “borderline cases” of legitimate Christian life<sup>4</sup> and as at worst a form of

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for the faithful’s edification through beatification and/or canonization under the papacy of John Paul II. Even when not clergy or of religious orders, the blessed and saints of the late pope were more often single than married, reflecting a pattern in the Church’s history.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983; orig. pub. 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 237. Balthasar acknowledged two sets of circumstances for single, never married women—those in which “because entrance into a community is impossible for serious reasons, a woman is allowed, within the context of her life in the world, to make a vow of virginity under the guidance of the Church,” and those in which a woman “remains unmarried for reasons beyond her control.”

self-delusion.<sup>5</sup> Yet his thought offers unexpected, albeit perhaps unintentional, guidance for interpreting this form of the lay state. Häring and Rahner's thought will complement and develop Balthasar's in a theological exploration that aims at providing an identity and a style of mission for Catholics called to the nonvowed life.

### THE SITUATION OF SINGLE CATHOLICS

A survey conducted in the year 2000 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), showed that 27 percent of U.S. Catholics were single, never married.<sup>6</sup> This was an increase over the 24 percent of single, never married, Catholics reported by CARA's 1997 survey.<sup>7</sup> In 2000, 46 percent of "young adult Catholics" of 18 to 39 years of age were single.<sup>8</sup> Extracting the Catholics in this group from the total number of single Catholics—since these younger members of the Church have a greater probability of marrying than more mature single Catholics who are more likely to consider their state permanent—approximately one in eight middle-aged and "senior" Catholics were single, never married. This means that in the year 2000 approximately 12 percent of Catholics 40 years of age or older were single, never married.<sup>9</sup> If added to this are the 7 percent of the Catholic population that was widowed by 2000 and the 13 percent of Catholics who were divorced or separated, more than 40 percent of Catholics were "single."<sup>10</sup> But this article will concern itself primarily with the 12 percent of the "mature" Catholic population that occupies the never-married single state, since it is here that "vocation" to the single state is most likely to be found.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these statistics at a time when the number of vowed religious has dwindled, many Catholics do not seem to recognize the nonvowed lay life

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 235–36. Balthasar claimed that if one adopts celibacy "as an *ecclesial* state of life," even a state involving "useful philanthropic and social work," one "is deceived if he thinks of himself as a Christian, for he has not attained even that degree of self-giving that is demanded by the indissoluble 'yes' of Christian marriage. He has not given his soul to God and neighbor in such a way that he cannot demand it back again."

<sup>6</sup> Mary E. Bendyna and Paul M. Perl, "Young Adult Catholics in the Context of Other Catholic Generations: Living with Diversity, Seeking Service, Waiting to Be Welcomed," CARA Working Paper 1 (June 2000) 12, [http://cara.georgetown.edu/pdfs/Young\\_Adult.pdf](http://cara.georgetown.edu/pdfs/Young_Adult.pdf) (accessed March 15, 2007). Data in this article were the latest available at the time of this writing.

<sup>7</sup> Bryan T. Froehle and Mary L. Gautier, ed., *Catholicism USA: A Portrait of the Catholic Church in the United States*, CARA (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000) 14.

<sup>8</sup> Bendyna and Perl, *Young Adult Catholics* 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>11</sup> The trend toward a greater number of single Catholics suggests that those age 40 and above who married after 2000 will have been replaced by at least as many of the previously young adult population that will not have married.

as a form of Christian vocation, even though Vatican II validated it,<sup>12</sup> the 1983 Code of Canon Law codified it,<sup>13</sup> and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledged it.<sup>14</sup> Even most Catholic singles are not likely to be aware of the opportunity for consecration to the “order of virgins”<sup>15</sup> offered by a revised form of the early church’s solemn rite rendering the single a “sacred person,”<sup>16</sup> although the very presence of this rite in the Church’s ritual today implicitly affirms the contribution made to the Church’s mission by lay singles unattached to religious orders.

There is no small irony here, for the single lay state is arguably the first vocation for which an explicit theology was clearly and enthusiastically articulated when Paul advised the Corinthians: “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do” (1 Cor 7:8).<sup>17</sup> Some today dismiss these words as either the residue of dualistic thought that the church battled in its infancy or merely the anxious musings of one incited by his personal mission for the church in anticipation of an imminent parousia; but these explanations cannot sweep away Jesus’ own teaching recorded in Matthew that some are called to live a celibate life “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:12).<sup>18</sup> When Paul’s words about the single Christian life are not dismissed, they are usually subsumed into the theological framework of monasticism. Certainly this application of the

<sup>12</sup> See particularly *Lumen gentium*, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html), and *Apostolicam actuositatem*, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html) (accessed March 14, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> See *Code of Canon Law Annotated*, ed. Ernest Caparros, Michel Thériault, and Jean Thorn (Montréal: Wilson & Lafleur, 1993) c. 207 with annotation.

<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) no. 2231.

<sup>15</sup> *Code of Canon Law Annotated* c. 604.

<sup>16</sup> *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, Latin-English ed., ed. John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green (New York: Paulist, 2000) c. 604 commentary. For a brief history of consecrated virginity, see n. 259. N. 260 allows that “the revised rite provides only for women, but par. 34 of the *instrumentum laboris* for the 1994 synod of bishops raised the possibility of this form of life for men” (see Vatican II’s constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium* no. 80, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 66 [1964] 97–134; Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 62 [1970] 650; *Canon Law Digest* 7 [1975–1986] 421–425).

<sup>17</sup> Unless part of a quotation from another’s work, all biblical citations are from the RSV. The explanation of Paul’s words is given in 1 Cor 7:32–34: “I want you to be free from anxieties.” See also 1 Cor 7:1–3.

<sup>18</sup> See Mt 19:10–12 for the entirety of this pericope. See also Mt 22:23–33, Mk 12:18–27, and Lk 20:27–40, where Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees’ question about resurrection suggests that celibacy no less than marriage can point to the kingdom. The relationship in heaven of the seven brothers to the woman that each married is not based on the marital bond: “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mt 22:30).

apostle's remarks is valid since, as Balthasar emphasized, the life of the monk is the life of the evangelical counsels, and the life of the evangelical counsels is the life of Paul. But Paul predates monasticism. The fact that many singles after the time of Paul were called to religious life and to holy orders does not completely erase the significance for other single Christians of the basic distinction Paul made. Balthasar recalled that Paul "does not break off his relationships with the working world; he remains a tentmaker in spite of the fact that he would be entitled to be supported by the communities."<sup>19</sup> In Balthasar's estimation, the secular institutes are the closest current approximation to the form of life that is the "radical discipleship" of the New Testament, since their members "follow the radicalism of the counsels but do not wish to live separated from the world."<sup>20</sup> Yet he did not fail to notice that the secular institutes "have an institution according to canon law" that "was not present in the fluidity of the Church's beginnings."<sup>21</sup> Since the early church's zeal for virginity—viewed "as almost sufficient for the establishment of a state of its own"—rightly grew into the realization that "virginity in the Church can never be anything but a partial aspect of the one and only state that exists in the Church along with marriage—the state that Christ on the Cross brought into the world as a new form of divine fecundity through the unity of poverty, virginity and obedience," Balthasar claimed that a life of celibacy does not constitute its own state without the observance of other counsels.<sup>22</sup> But, even if this point is accepted, it must be admitted that there

<sup>19</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *New Elucidations*, trans. Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986; orig. pub. 1979) 177. Balthasar further explained: Paul "lives as an official minister of Christ, but in evangelical poverty—which he does not interpret in the sense of a flight from the world. And of course he lives as a virgin, doubtless in imitation of the Lord, who lived eschatologically, only for his good news of the kingdom."

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 172–73.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 173.

<sup>22</sup> Balthasar, *Christian State of Life* 236. Balthasar was concerned to show the invalidity of conceiving of the secular single lay Christian life as a "'third state' between the married state and the state of election" (*ibid.* 238). This tendency might be more pronounced today than in his lifetime, as the number of nonvowed Catholics has grown while the number of religious has declined. And the nature of religious life has changed for many: some religious live singly when professional work or other ministries draw them away from community life, or when numbers are too small to support a community house. It is interesting to note also, given discussion about a married priesthood, that, in a time when priests were not required to be celibate, the secular single lay state more closely resembled religious life than did the priesthood in this one counsel. For Balthasar's review of the history and theology of the development of the concrete life of the evangelical counsels, see his *The Laity and the Life of the Counsels: The Church's Mission in the World*, trans. Brian McNeil with D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003; orig. pub. 1993) 162–232.

is something about the secular single lay life significantly different from married life. And, indeed, this difference is a counsel, not simply a charism. If any are meant to live only this one counsel, as the Church teaches, then this “partial aspect” of the life of the evangelical counsels cannot be devoid of meaning. Secular singles, like those in other forms of Christian life, must have a recognizably positive dimension to their role. Discovery of such a dimension will be aided by a brief study of the various Christian states of life.

### THE STATE(S) OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

The starting point of Balthasar’s *The Christian State of Life*, a post-Vatican II work dealing specifically with the Christian vocation and its myriad forms, mirrors the early development of the states recorded in the New Testament. Thus, the distinction among the states is not first between clerics and lay people, and second between these and persons living the evangelical counsels—the latter division creating yet further variation within the clerical and lay states, which is the juridical approach of the 1983 Code of Canon Law on the developed states in the Church.<sup>23</sup> The initial distinction is between the secular state and the state of the evangelical counsels. The apostles were called out of the general Christian population to live their vocation in a particular way oriented toward the eschaton. Other Christians comprise two instances within the secular state, priestly and lay.<sup>24</sup> The priestly state is “between lay state and evangelical state” since it shares the lay state by “the retention of earthly possessions and the relative personal autonomy required by the pastoral vocation,” and it shares the evangelical state “through celibacy and obedience to the bishop, although it is not required to practice poverty.”<sup>25</sup> So the “first division of the states of life,”<sup>26</sup> according to Balthasar, is between the state of election—the life of the evangelical counsels—and that which has no “differentiated call” within the basic Christian vocation.<sup>27</sup> In the second division, priesthood has the differentiated call of Christ to a special mode of fol-

<sup>23</sup> *Code of Canon Law Annotated*, cc. 204–7 and 588. Cc. 204–7 find correspondence with cc. 7–9 and 323.2 of *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, Latin–English ed., trans. Canon Law Society of America (Washington: Canon Law Society of America, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> Balthasar, *Christian State of Life* 142. See 251–387 for Balthasar’s discussion of the “second division of states of life.” Balthasar recognized that some priests will have professed the vows of the evangelical counsels.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 367.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 133–81.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 148. According to Balthasar, the “differentiated call” to the state of election is “a qualitative, special” call. He claimed that “there is no similarly qualitative call to the secular state, which is characterized by the absence of any such call.”

lowing him,<sup>28</sup> although the priestly call is one to office rather than essentially to a “way of life.”<sup>29</sup> All Christian states of life are based on *the* Christian state of life. This state involves, first, “a call into the church, which . . . antedates the vocation of the individual insofar as it is a place of community” and, second, “a summons to leave one’s selfish and isolated self and to enter a state that is, by definition, the end of all isolation.”<sup>30</sup> The lay state, then—which in Balthasar’s analysis does not include religious life—is the “primary” and “*the fundamental state in the church.*” And the other two states—evangelical and priestly, which “stand in a relationship of service” to the lay state—are further demarcations of this basic state conferred by baptism,<sup>31</sup> wherein “the Christian, in whatever state he finds himself, must always take his stand in a concentric relationship to Christ.”<sup>32</sup>

Common Catholic parlance, in its discussion of “vocations,” sometimes obscures the fundamental point that all Christians are called to the same one vocation of discipleship of Christ, which is a calling to absolute love of God and radical love of neighbor. All Christians stand not only in a concentric relationship to Christ, but by their relationship to Christ they stand ipso facto in graced relationship to each other and to all human beings. “The single and the married, the voluntarily poor and obedient as well as those serving with their possession, their initiative and power, can only in their mutual relationship with one another bear valid witness to the breaking off of the old era and the beginning of the new,” Häring observed.<sup>33</sup> “Under the law of grace there cannot in justice be a separation into a class of elite who follow the special gifts, and minimal Christians who commit themselves only to the restrictive commandments. Everyone owes God the full response of love in proportion to the talents bestowed on him.”<sup>34</sup> Häring presented the life of the evangelical counsels, the “more blessed”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 371.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 368.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 224.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 333.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 212. The relationship between *the* Christian state of life and a particular Christian’s state of life is “based on the Christian’s election and vocation by God to leave the fallen world—a process of division that continued to operate within the Church in the division into the state of election, which has its origin in God’s calling to a qualitatively higher state of life, and the secular state, which is the state of those called to live a Christian life within the ordinary round of daily duties” (ibid. 210–11).

The texts cited in this article were published long before authors and publishers became aware of the problem of noninclusive language. So as not to impede the flow of the text, I have resisted editorial insertions, hoping that readers will silently make the necessary corrections.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Häring, *Christian Maturity*, trans. Arlene Swidler (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967; orig. pub. 1964) 136–37.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 132.

way,<sup>35</sup> as an “invitation of special love” to witness radically to the eschatological reality of human existence won by Christ.<sup>36</sup> Yet Häring claimed that “the Christian life in the world and marriage partake of the excellence and blessedness of the evangelical counsels whenever someone in inner freedom and believing obedience follows his own vocation and fulfills the admonition of the apostle: ‘The appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none . . . ; and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it’ (1 Cor 7, 29 ff.).”<sup>37</sup>

The unity of all Christians and its expression in a diversity of interrelated forms of graced life is reflected in Balthasar’s attention to the fluidity of the various “vocations.” Priests may be called to live the evangelical counsels,<sup>38</sup> some lay persons and priests are called to live at least the spirit of the evangelical counsels as members of secular institutes,<sup>39</sup> and some lay persons may be called to live not only the spirit but the full reality of one or two or all of the evangelical counsels. In *Razing the Bastions*, Balthasar called readers’ attention to the worker priest and to the consecrated lay person as examples of visible confluences of states of life for the sake of the work of all Christians toward “the salvation of the world in the world.”<sup>40</sup> In this convergence tending more and more toward Christian transformation of the world rather than Christian separation from the world, the lay person especially has received the prominent role of a mediator, bringing gospel values to the world while attuning the Church to the world.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, according to Balthasar, “the future of the church . . . depends on whether laymen can be found who live out of the unbroken power of the Gospel and are willing to shape the world. . . . The emergence of a new form of Christian apostolate is a foregone conclusion.”<sup>42</sup> This new apostolate is not without variety; it is not the case that a homogenous group of persons is always engaged by references to and ministries of and to families

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 136–137; see c. 10 of the Council of Trent, in *Enchiridion symbolorum: definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Henricus Denzinger and Adolfus Schönmetzer (Barcelona: Herder, 1976) no. 980.

<sup>36</sup> Häring, *Christian Maturity* 134, 139–48. Häring explained: “Those who follow the evangelical counsels . . . have chosen this way because they have recognized obedience to the call of grace as the universal law of Christians. And thus they become witnesses for it” (ibid. 144–45).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>38</sup> Balthasar, *Christian State of Life* 373 and passim.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 359–62. As founder of the secular institute *Johannes Gemeinschaft*, Balthasar’s attention to this style of life went beyond mere theological reflection.

<sup>40</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions: On the Church in This Age*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993; orig. pub. 1952) 43.

<sup>41</sup> Balthasar, *Layity and the Life of the Counsels* 259 and *Christian State of Life* 353.

<sup>42</sup> Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions* 42–43.

and communal life.<sup>43</sup> As Vatican II's Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People teaches, the "lay spirituality" derived from the unity of lay Christians with Christ "take[s] its particular character from the circumstances of one's state in life—married and family life, celibacy, widowhood—from one's state of health and from one's professional and social activity."<sup>44</sup> Surely, then, any counsels underlying or attendant to such factors are a primary basis for lay diversity. Balthasar's own words would seem to support this view.

In the context of a discussion of secular institutes, Balthasar cited virginity as the counsel that serves as "the link between the state of the counsels and the lay state," for virginity is "*the seed* from which springs the whole life of the counsels and *a way of life* that enables Christians to live in the world without being separated from their families, their communities and their fellow workers."<sup>45</sup> If it is the case that a celibate life is the seed of the life of the counsels, even celibate persons who do not observe the evangelical counsel of poverty as do members of religious orders necessarily would live a life markedly distinct from that of their married lay brothers and sisters. (It must be taken as a given that all Christians are called to live a life of obedience, albeit this obedience is manifested uniquely in religious orders.) Despite Balthasar's insistence that the observance of this one counsel is not sufficient to establish a separate state of life, certainly it is sufficient to establish a fundamental demarcation within the secular lay state that gives rise to distinct ways of lay discipleship. This means, moreover, that even the secular lay person has within the general call to Christian life a determination to be made by the prompting of God. Balthasar, while acknowledging this, gave it little importance, even as he

<sup>43</sup> Balthasar made a similar point in his contention that "while matrimony is the basis of the 'married state' as a special potential within the lay state, it is not the basis of the lay state itself" (*Christian State of Life* 330).

<sup>44</sup> *Apostolicam actuositatem* no. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Balthasar, *Christian State of Life* 361. Balthasar recognized that, in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, poverty would seem to be the first precept for the apostles, with celibacy as second, and obedience as the "core" of the new state to which some are called (ibid. 154–55). The priority of poverty over celibacy was due to the fact that "the Lord called his apostles from the Israel of the Old Testament, where marriage was itself a state of promise. He who came to fulfill the law, not to destroy it (Mt 5:17), did not want to build his Church on men who had not lived in the true messianic tradition. In the beginning, therefore, celibacy had to be by way of exception, although . . . so much emphasis was placed on this exception . . . that . . . it had already become the rule for the generations to be born under the New Testament. Indeed, from the Lord's command to his apostles to be always at the service of the brethren, of which Paul gave the eleven apostles such an illustrious example, it is obvious that renunciation of a wife is no less required than renunciation of house and lands and familial ties. Nevertheless, the New Testament explicitly calls virginity a 'counsel'" (ibid. 155).

recognized “the limitless variety and contingency of human destinies” that “have their place within the universal Christian state of redemption and share in the grace won for this state upon the Cross.”<sup>46</sup> While those not called to the priesthood or to religious life are given “more freedom of initiative in following the divine will,”<sup>47</sup> marriage is the normal path for the lay person unattached to religious life; the “exceptions” are those who for one reason or another *cannot* marry.<sup>48</sup> Balthasar’s presentation of the secular single form of the lay state, then, would seem wholly negative. Granted that the purposes of marriage—procreation of children and “mutual self-surrender”<sup>49</sup>—are undeniably important, if God means any secular lay persons not to marry, the similarly positive purpose(s) for God’s prompting in this direction must be pursued.

This pursuit, Rahner argued against Balthasar (near the time of Vatican II), cannot occur simply by reference to secular institutes, which are not representative of the “ordinary lay Christian.”<sup>50</sup> The secular institutes’ “combination of the evangelical counsels with a secular profession,” Rahner asserted, is “not a primary thing in their lives but a tactical method in the service of an apostolate which is, basically, part of the church’s hierarchical apostolate.” For “all the ‘secularity’ of the secular institutes is merely secondary” to the “radical renunciation” of the evangelical counsels, whereas secularity is the primary sphere of concentration for the ordinary lay Christian who has “the task of the Christian penetration of the world; . . . to sanctify the secular professions and practise them as the representatives of Christianity.” Unfortunately, in his reflections on those whose Christian mission is essentially in the world, Rahner was as yet thinking only of married persons; in the early essay in which these comments appeared he did not advert, as he would later, to the nonvowed.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 236–37.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 456.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 236. Balthasar noted “those who because of some illness of soul or body are not suited for marriage,” “those who want to remain true to a love for another person that cannot be realized on this earth,” and “those who belong in the state of election but for some exterior reason—such as the care of someone close to them—cannot enter it.”

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 246.

<sup>50</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Layman and the Religious Life,” in *Theology for Renewal: Bishops, Priests, Laity*, trans. Cecily Hastings and Richard Strachan (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964; orig. pub. 1961) 147–83, at 182. Rahner’s essay answered Balthasar’s “Wesen und Tragweite der Säkularinstitute,” *Civitas* 11 (1955–1956) 196–210.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 179, 173. Rahner argued that “when one considers that regular religious also conduct schools and do every sort of thing to earn their livings, . . . it is by no means easy to say what the secular institutes can and may do that is impossible or forbidden to the religious orders” (ibid. 173). Further, “the institute is home for its members; . . . they are no longer related in the same way as normal lay people to

Perhaps those called to the nonvowed life may not initially, if ever, be aware of its positive dimension because they may experience it as a “default”; this form of the lay state may, indeed, occur because of the absence of an opportunity for marriage and only later be recognized as providential. Yet, if the majority experience is considered, since most lay persons do marry, married life may be viewed as a default just as easily as the single life. How many Catholics today actively consider any other life than the married? What is a matter of course for most Catholics—marriage—sometimes is a path not early taken by the one who becomes a lifelong “single” because he or she is open to the possibilities of all “callings.” Even nonvowed Catholics who discerned early in life that they should remain in their state should not be assumed to have done so for a purpose rightly criticized by Balthasar—“to achieve important secular goals or a fortiori to carve out a pleasant life according to his own design.”<sup>52</sup> While Balthasar’s presumption would seem to be that, in the absence of a call to religious life, it is God’s will that one marry, it may be in the secular single form of the lay state that one uncertain about God’s will can best cultivate what Balthasar described as “the inner readiness of an indifference that is prepared to heed the call of the Lord whatever it may be, and the inner disposition of a love that bears in itself *the spirit of the counsels* and with it the spirit of perfection.” Balthasar asserted:

As long as the Lord has not made known his will, the best disposition one can have is not the anticipation of God’s election by entering uninvited upon the way of the vows, but indifference, in the form of readiness for every indication of the divine will. Until one knows the Lord’s will, such indifference is the expression of a love than which no greater love is conceivable. And should the Lord choose not to call one to the external state of the counsels, it follows that this inner disposition of love, which contains in itself the spirit of the counsels, will require one to persist wholeheartedly in the attitude of indifference. This is what it means to possess full love for God and man.<sup>53</sup>

For some, the “inner readiness” to respond to God’s call may be maintained more effectively by external observance of the counsel of celibacy than by marriage. Even in a “default” experience, the nonvowed life may be understood as the opportunity to live a form of discipleship that other states or forms of Christian life do not offer, a form that embodies the spirit of Vatican II in a particularly effective way, when one is truly called to it. Balthasar contended that “those who offer themselves as apostles . . . ready to believe in him and to follow him where he wills” must be prepared, if he

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their families and to their natural bodily and spiritual origin and home. . . . There is no real, essential difference to be seen between members of religious orders and of secular institutes” (ibid. 174 n. 24).

<sup>52</sup> Balthasar, *Christian State of Life* 235.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 166.

does not call them to join a religious order, “to remain in their secular state in the world, to step back into the crowd, to resume the insignificant place assigned to them by the Lord, in order to serve him there with their whole hearts and all their strength.”<sup>54</sup> Certainly, then, the nonvowed single person, especially in the virtually anonymous role he or she assumes today, may be as obedient as the married person. Absent vows, the single person has a perhaps uniquely uncertain future to place at the service of God’s will by virtue of the real and varied possibilities that may yet present themselves as requests for obedience. Balthasar noted that a unique contribution to the building up of the Church by the lay person not called to the life of the evangelical counsels is the embrace of “*the lasting autonomy* of retaining his right to choose . . . , under the law of the ‘once for all’ of Christ (Heb 7:27; 9:12 and elsewhere) by which he was sealed at baptism.”<sup>55</sup> Balthasar went on to explain: “‘Year after year’ (Heb 9:25–28), the lay person must offer his freedom again in sacrifice, being always as unable to make the final renunciation of it that the religious makes as he is to make the final renunciation of marriage or possessions.”<sup>56</sup> While Balthasar did not acknowledge it, the secular single person experiences the lay “call” to continual renunciation in a perhaps especially acute way, since there is not even the marriage vow to provide a lifestyle framework within which the sacrifice is to be made. Interestingly, within Balthasar’s reflections is an example of a secular single lay life that supplies not only a way of renunciation in this form of life, but a suggestion of the very purpose of this form.

### THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION AND VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT FOR THE SINGLE LAY STATE

Balthasar gave the secular single form of the lay state perhaps unintentionally high recommendation in mentioning the special role of Bezalel, maker of the ark of the covenant, who was possessed of “the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship” (Exod 31:3). He explained the case of Bezalel thus:

This grace-filled perfecting and appropriating of secular skills by God can manifest itself in a variety of forms and degrees. It can be a restrained and, as it were, indirect irradiation of a person’s lifework on earth by the blessing of grace, as, for instance, in the case of a pure scientist; it can be the external employment of one in a secular profession to accomplish the work of God’s kingdom, as in the case of a doctor, a lawyer, or a journalist; but it can also be an interior laying claim to an individual’s whole natural ability, as it was in the case of Bezalel, who is here the prototype of all those called to greatness in the realm of Christian art. In appropriations such as these, which possess the individual in a kind of holy madness, which consume his

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 165.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 354–55.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 355.

whole life and all his senses in the service of an art that is itself a service of God—*so that the individual may remain unmarried*, and the ordinary routine of his life may become a chain of unbearable situations and suffering—in such ‘vocations’, which undoubtedly have their origin in a natural gift, but which develop manifestly and inevitably under the guidance of ‘divine wisdom’, no one will fail to see a genuine analogy to vocations to the priesthood or the religious life within the Church.<sup>57</sup>

Balthasar argued that such a divine invitation or “‘divine’ calling” to “personal discipleship”<sup>58</sup> belongs to the realm of charism, not counsel, since it is “the perfecting by grace and the appropriating for the service of God of man’s natural talents and abilities,” but it does not “provide a model for the community and the individual believer in it” as does the call establishing a state of life.<sup>59</sup> And yet this personal discipleship is “an analogous representation of the actual call that is the basis of a state of life.”<sup>60</sup> He explained that “a vocation may come into existence from the concurrence of a number of elements: a natural component of native endowment, inclination and the impulse to develop one’s natural gifts and powers; the purely supernatural component of a direct call from God; and, between the two, a concatenation of secondary components: help or hindrance from one’s surroundings and the external conditions of one’s life; evaluation and, in the case of the priesthood or religious life, acceptance or rejection by Church authorities.”<sup>61</sup> In the case of “holy madness,” one’s natural talents and abilities developed as charisms for the service of God, Church, and world can be called into service by God in a way that persuades one to see that the only or best way to offer them is as a secular single person. This is the case despite Balthasar’s equally important point taken from Paul that charisms resulting in ministries “are certainly more than just temporary

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 424 (emphasis added). Balthasar observed: “The specifically Christian mission . . . is no different for one in the secular state than for one in the state of election: renunciation and sacrifice on the way of redemption to a hoped-for final state. Thus, while the state of election, by reason of God’s special call, allows one to anticipate the world to come even in this world, . . . the secular state embodies life in transition from this world to the world to come. . . . In the transitoriness of the Christian’s life in the world is to be found a kind of surrogate for the special vocation not accorded him. By reason of his baptism and with or without his awareness, *the spirit of the vows* pervades his life with increasing clarity and, in a mysterious manner, enables him to participate interiorly in the essence of the other state of life, in the spirit of undivided love in the forms of poverty, virginity and obedience. As long as the Christian does not withdraw himself from God’s guidance, he is assured that these forms will be realized in his life without an explicit severance from the world. If the elect live a priori in the Cross, the Christian in the world lives always toward the Cross, and a part of the burden he must bear lies in the fact that he will remain to the end in a state of tension—a stranger in this world, but not yet a citizen of heaven” (ibid. 170–71).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 432, 433, and passim.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 422.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 425.

occupations; they depend on the dispensation of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:11) and confer on the Christian a genuine function in the total economy of the Mystical Body,” but “the very differences in the descriptions and classifications of the gifts show that they contain for the most part something transitory that cannot be the foundation of a state of life.”<sup>62</sup>

### **Balthasar: Charisms and Callings**

Balthasar’s reflection upon Bezalel shows that, while in and of themselves charisms may not be the foundation for a state of life, the “personal mission”<sup>63</sup> that charisms bestow can, by divine providence, be exercised more faithfully and effectively in one state of life than in another and, in the case of the secular lay state, in one form of a state than in another. Such gifts can point to a mission that will consume much time and energy, demanding a single life rather than a married life. Whether or not one succeeds in acquiescing to God so fully that every activity is transparent to Christ, a goal that any Christian in any state or form of life can fail to reach, the secular single Catholic Christian has accepted circumstances or made a significant decision that distinguishes his or her life from that of those who also devote their talents and abilities to God but do so through the more regular path of Christian secular lay life that includes marriage. The partitioning within the secular lay state between the married and the single may be more pronounced than that between, say, different religious orders with their different charisms; the partitioning may be more akin to the difference between the consecrated celibate priesthood within a religious order and that outside it. If, following the example of Bezalel, one takes the secular single path, one should seek to be consumed by the service rendered to God. This goal establishes a principle: The single nonvowed Catholic who has renounced marriage in the style of Bezalel should have done so because his or her gifts would fail to be used fully in God’s service if the individual possessing them is not fully devoted to a personal mission to which they point. The ideal of the secular single life of Bezalel also establishes a corollary principle: The single nonvowed Catholic who did not deliberately renounce marriage might examine whether or not divine providence placed him or her in the secular single life because his or her gifts could be employed in God’s service more completely there than elsewhere.

Balthasar cautioned that Paul’s reference to the “gift (*charisma*)” from

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 330.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 331. “The personal mission bestowed by the Holy Spirit is linked to the sacrament of confirmation by which the Christian is raised from a life that was predominantly the receptive and irresponsible life of a child to one that has voice and responsibility within the ecclesial community,” Balthasar remarked.

God given to each for either the married or the unmarried life (1 Cor 7:7) should be taken “*very broadly*,” as the general call referenced in 1 Corinthians 7:17:<sup>64</sup> “Only, let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.” In Balthasar’s understanding, then, there is no “particular call” to marriage (or to the single nonvowed life, for that matter), as there is to (consecrated) celibacy. But this means that the lay “calling,” influenced by charism, must be to a form of life in which a particular lay individual can best live the basic Christian vocation. And if charism factors into one’s prayerful decision to remain single and nonvowed, or is responsible for the providential circumstances of one’s life that seem to lead to one’s secular single state of life, then there is a religiously significant meaning to one’s status as a nonvowed Catholic Christian, whether or not one’s talents are on a par with Bezalel’s.

That a nonvowed person might come to the divinely-led conclusion that celibate life “calls” but religious life does not in no way diminishes the importance of the “state of election.”<sup>65</sup> It does suggest that within Balthasar’s own theology of states of life there is something more significant about the secular single life—or the married life, for that matter—than simply the absence of a “differentiated call.” Vatican II, of course, said as much, although the theological underpinning of this affirmation was not made explicit there. So even if Balthasar’s contention is accepted that “being placed in the secular state can be described only as a not-having-been-called to a qualitatively higher state,” his characteristically ready observation that “the decision to marry is usually a consequence” of this does not do honor to his other highly important observation that one could be directed by God to use one’s gifts in such a way that the single nonvowed life might be the best form of the lay state for a particular individual.<sup>66</sup> In

<sup>64</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Paul Struggles with His Congregation: The Pastoral Message of the Letters to the Corinthians*, trans. Brigitte L. Bojarska (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992; orig. pub. 1988) 47–48.

<sup>65</sup> Many in the Church today would be surprised by Balthasar’s comments that, one, “no sound and balanced Christian will ever say of himself that he chose marriage by virtue of a divine election, an election comparable to the election and vocation experienced or even only perceived by those called to the priesthood or to the personal following of Christ in religious life. . . . He does not . . . claim that he is following a way specially chosen for him by God” (*Christian State of Life* 421) and, two, “there is no similarly qualitative call [such as that to ‘the state of election,’ which has ‘a qualitative, special, differentiated call’] to the secular state, which is characterized by the absence of any such call” (ibid. 148). Balthasar’s refrain in *The Christian State of Life* that the life of the evangelical counsels is a “higher state of life” is tempered in later works such as *New Elucidations* and *Layty and the Life of the Counsels*.

<sup>66</sup> Balthasar, *Christian State of Life* 168, 421.

other words, one might have a decision to make about which form of the secular lay state one will adopt, and this decision must be more significant than Balthasar expressly recognized, or there would be no reason for any lay person ever to remain single and nonvowed. At least in the case of one like Bezalel, there is such a reason.

The import of Balthasar's comments about Bezalel is this: While respecting his insistence that Bezalel does not provide a model for the foundation of a state of Christian life, Balthasar's theology of Bezalel implicitly suggests that the basic Christian principle of stewardship is a guide for the process of discernment about how one should live the Christian vocation in one's particular, personal way. Therefore, Balthasar's theology offers a vocational guide that can be especially valuable for lay persons who believe that they may be suited to nonvowed single Christian life. Lacking the "differentiated call" to religious life, and without clear providential direction toward any other particular state or form of life, the story of Bezalel challenges those contemplating life as lay persons to consider which form of the lay state will allow them best to put their gifts to use for the service of God, Church, and world. In the pews today, reflection on stewardship often is on what one can contribute from within one's concrete life circumstances, not on how one might create the prism, via an inspired "choice" of state or form of Christian life, through which one can be the best steward of one's gifts. Even the *Catechism* focuses explicitly on practical circumstances for which individuals might choose to remain single—"to care for their parents or brothers and sisters, to give themselves more completely to a profession, or to serve other honorable ends" for "the good of the human family"<sup>67</sup>—and not upon the gifts that would make certain members of the Church suitable candidates to respond to such circumstances by remaining single and nonvowed. Yet certainly the implication of the *Catechism's* guidance is that those who serve these ends have discerned that they can and should meet given needs through the secular single vocation. So those ostensibly divinely guided to the secular single life, in particular, may need to be especially attuned to gifts that would render them of greatest service to Church and world through this vocation. Such an approach to discernment of the "call" is not unique to this state. The presence of particular gifts may be an indication for any call. And just as the lack of certain gifts can be the cause of rejection for the priesthood or for religious life, so it can prohibit or recommend against marriage.

<sup>67</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2231. Words about the secular single life appear in a discussion of the fourth commandment and parental duties. No. 2230 notes that children, on becoming adults, have the right to choose their state of life and profession freely but with help from their parents.

Balthasar's assertion that the secular lay state "achieves its fulfillment in the married state"<sup>68</sup> is born of his view that in the married lay state (as well as in the life of the evangelical counsels) the Christian is living the life of self-giving and sacrifice demanded and empowered by the Cross,<sup>69</sup> offering "one's soul in the Church for God and neighbor so completely and irrevocably that the gift cannot be rescinded."<sup>70</sup> Might it be that from his vantage point Balthasar failed to see fully the renunciation involved in the life of the nonvowed Christian? The secular single Christian life can mean long periods of solitude and lack of support from an immediate social network; at the same time it can mean rich relationships with those whom one serves through one's career or official ministry and with family and friends. The challenge is great: "The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord" (1 Cor 7:32) and "the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit . . ." (1 Cor 7:34). Paul's enthusiasm for his state of life is not remembered here with prejudice against married lay persons; on the contrary, one point of my article is to show that a choice for marriage or for the single nonvowed life is significant for living out one's specific Christian vocation. I invoke Paul's words to explore again the inherently positive function of the single Christian life, vowed or nonvowed, whenever it is embraced in response to God's will. Symbolically and practically, a value of the secular single lay Christian life is not unlike a value of the celibate priesthood: relinquishment of a vowed relationship to a spouse creates "space" for charisms to be put to use as and where needed for all. As Häring observed shortly after Vatican II, the celibate Christian life "implies undivided service and is interested in love for all men, without distinction, in the measure in which they have a need for kindness and love."<sup>71</sup>

### Häring: Renunciation and Love

In *Christian Maturity*, Häring wrote that service of neighbor in consuming love of Christ is the very point of the single state as vocation. While such a vocation is to be found chiefly and exemplarily in religious orders, the secular single lay state is not necessarily or even logically excluded: "Christian virginity and any single state entered into for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is nourished by a passionate love of Jesus Christ."<sup>72</sup> This is the case for the single lay Catholic who does not become a "sour old

<sup>68</sup> Balthasar, *Christian State of Life* 249.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 243-49.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 238.

<sup>71</sup> Bernard Häring, *Bernard Häring Replies: Answers to 50 Moral and Religious Questions* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1967; orig. pub. n.d.) 59.

<sup>72</sup> Häring, *Christian Maturity* 177.

maid,” as well as for the “religious sister.”<sup>73</sup> The defining characteristic of this form of life is not renunciation, even though this certainly is involved and it may be experienced intensely by some singles—perhaps especially by those who hoped for marriage. No, “the hallmark or essence of the single state” is “a participation in the self-sacrificing love of the Son for the Father, a gift of the risen Lord.”<sup>74</sup> Such love is the source and purpose of the single state. Indeed, in its way, the committed single state transcends the married state, pointing to the fullness of Christian love, which is not based essentially on sexuality. Wrote Häring: “The single state lived joyfully for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is a witness confirmed by God that man is essentially more than a mere sexual being and that he is not primarily a sexual being. He is a person in a way that far surpasses the sexual, his personality develops in subordination to the Thou of God and to the Thou of his neighbor, whom he serves for the sake of God.”<sup>75</sup> For “just as marital chastity receives its sincerity from the force of love, so too and still much more does unmarried chastity chosen ‘for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’ live out of the riches of an experienced and requited love, out of love of Christ. The person who has not married for the sake of the kingdom of heaven has realized that God is his only love. He is enraptured by the heavenly love which God has given us in Christ.”<sup>76</sup> Häring offered this unreserved affirmation of the value of the Christian single life without diminishment of “the high sacramental and human excellence of marriage, for marital sexual love is the love of persons who ‘as the image and likeness of God’ are called in every dimension to a truly personal love, which is always to say, love of God and love of neighbor.”<sup>77</sup> The presence of the single state alongside the married state is productive of a deeply beneficial, mutually conditioning relationship whereby Catholics in both forms of life find their inspiration in the other. Häring continued: “Every human ability to love has its source in exemplary marital love, in the marital love of one’s parents especially, which gave one life and cherished him by the power of their conjugal love.” But “the glowing witness of undivided virgin devotion to God and His kingdom helps Christian married

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 180. “Virginity prepared for ultimate resignation to Christ and for selfless service of the neighbor, the enforced single state endured in faith, the devoted endurance of the woman deserted or divorced against her will, the sorrow of the widow transfigured by loyal love—these all, with the grace of God, are ways of salvation,” Häring contended (ibid. 169).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 178.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 180. This assertion is placed in proper perspective by Häring’s comment that “the voluntary renunciation of marriage is good only if it is accompanied by a true esteem for married love” (ibid. 179).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 177.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 180–81.

people to overcome the natural divisiveness of their sexually oriented love so much that this very love becomes a way to God for them.”<sup>78</sup>

Often nonvowed lay singles have been told that their “exceptional” status should be shouldered with patient endurance, as the cross they must carry. As Häring attested, this renunciation must be present in the life of a Christian, and he was conscious of its weight on contemporary secular single Christians whose state “presents more psychological and sociological problems than in those days when an unmarried person was fully incorporated into a stable family in a relatively static community.”<sup>79</sup> He noted that the economic and cultural changes that occurred with industrialization included the rise of the nuclear family and, with it, a certain displacement of extended family members who formerly played recognizably critical support roles in community and especially family networks. Among these are single persons who “often . . . live alone and . . . do not possess full social and family status. They are confronted in their society with an anonymous, or at least a largely de-humanized, labor world on one hand, and on the other—as a sort of counterbalance—a world where the intimate life of marriage and family is valued more highly than ever.”<sup>80</sup> The focus on the nuclear family tends to marginalize secular singles even in their local faith communities. Most parish ministries are designed to serve families and it is family life most often addressed in homilies; ministries to singles are typically “singles events” to facilitate meetings that lead to marriage and family rather than activities supporting the nonvowed life. Lacking the natural connections that result from family networking, nonvowed singles are seldom tapped for work within the parish or they are relegated to tasks that do not draw on their natural talents, training, or, indeed, charisms.<sup>81</sup> But the attitude of cross-bearing alone does not in any age seem a worthy response to God’s call to a particular style of life and certainly not to the single life lived as true vocation. Is there a truly Christian attitude of endurance that does not also include gratitude and joy in the confidence of Christ’s salvific work in the life of each individual, whatever his or her circumstances may be?

Whether or not the single secular Catholic expected this state, if he or she is meant to reside in it, he or she must not just endure it but embrace

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 179. Häring noted: “In its sacramental celebration, marriage is elevated to the level of the virgin love between Christ and the Church” (ibid. 180).

<sup>79</sup> Bernard Häring, *What Does Christ Want?* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1968) 173.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 172–73.

<sup>81</sup> The bulk of parish resources is devoted to families, and families may contribute most to the functioning of the parish. Parents of underage children are often among the most active members of their parishes.

it. Häring observed that, for the unmarried who fervently desire marriage, “the great question of their life is whether they are able to maintain and develop all the powers of their love in a sincerely mastered renunciation because they understand their situation of being unmarried as a call to another kind of love. . . . They need to discover that there are people who need their kindness.”<sup>82</sup> Discernment of the question why one ought to or might go unmarried even if not called to a religious order could lead one to embrace a secular single vocation, when one sees that loving service to God and neighbor might be offered uniquely in this state by reason of one’s particular gifts. If the current large number of middle-aged and senior never-married Catholics is simply a sociological phenomenon rather than a new movement of the Spirit for the Church and the world, surely this may be known if secular single lay Catholics cannot “choose” their form of life in a grateful and giving spirit. And is this not the spirit of true Christian stewardship, which has not only the sense of official oversight or legal transaction but of sharing what has been given and received in love? The calls to love and to good stewardship of gifts of grace appear together in 1 Peter 4:8–10: “Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

The magnitude of the Christian responsibility of loving stewardship is reflected in Häring’s emphasis on Vatican II’s teaching about the “genuine Catholic,” “all-embracing attitude” of the lay apostolate. While family and the parish have a “privileged position” in the life of the Church, the lay apostolate “must know how to dedicate itself, according to its abilities, even to action on a . . . regional, national scale and even to the great missionary tasks of the Church.”<sup>83</sup> In his *The Christian Existentialist*, Häring cast loving Christian service in terms of a “personalism” that demands not “an ethics of self-perfection” but a “fellowship in word and love.”<sup>84</sup> This fellowship, lived truly, even “humanizes the sphere of material things” by its “attention to interpersonal relations”<sup>85</sup> throughout “the whole area of man’s existence”<sup>86</sup> in the consciousness of response to God’s presence in

<sup>82</sup> Häring, *Christian Maturity* 176–77. Häring continued: “But the ultimate question is always one of existence, whether they have had or are coming to the all pervading experience that they are ‘God’s beloved’ and that God desires and accepts all their love” (ibid. 177).

<sup>83</sup> Bernard Häring, *Road to Renewal: Perspectives of Vatican II* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Image, 1986; orig. pub. 1966) 116.

<sup>84</sup> Bernard Häring, *The Christian Existentialist: The Philosophy and Theology of Self-Fulfillment in Modern Society* (New York: New York University, 1968) 21.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 27.

and love for all creation.<sup>87</sup> Sharing Häring's sensibility was Rahner, whose reflections on the laity's important role in the practical life of the Church were explicitly teleological.

### Rahner: Church and Lay Witness

In *The Practice of Faith*, a summary collection of spiritual and pastoral writings published near the end of his life, Rahner explained that, because "absolutely every reality, and each and every human activity, must be embraced by the human being's salvific activity directed toward his or her single, last end—toward that immediate community with God into which all things, each of course in its own way, are swept and absorbed," there is "no area of reality not meaningful for salvation."<sup>88</sup> In an increasingly secular world, "lay people should be encouraged and educated much more than formerly to discern the will of God even in spheres where the Church cannot tell them what it is in its actual individual detail."<sup>89</sup>

There may be a distinctive style of stewardship for nonvowed Catholics that can be sketched from Rahner's thought on the outreach of the laity to the world. In "The Sacramental Basis for the Role of the Layman in the Church,"<sup>90</sup> an essay Rahner published shortly after Vatican II, he explored the meaning of the lay state in general, but his exploration might also illuminate the unique place of nonvowed Christians within that state. Demonstrating his characteristically profound sense of the historical nature of Christianity, Rahner developed his reflection from the insight that "the grace of God in Christ is present in the world as an event, and an event which is manifest and enduring in history"<sup>91</sup> through the Church, whose unique function is to be "the historical concretisation of the grace of God in the world."<sup>92</sup> For "grace must be embodied, must be an historical and social reality,"<sup>93</sup> because God "willed to bestow himself as salvation and forgiveness . . . only in the incarnation of his Logos."<sup>94</sup> Truly "the Church is the Body of Christ, the enduring presence in history and in the world of his truth and grace, the effects wrought by the incarnate Word made abiding in the flesh, and . . . every baptised individual shares in these [effects]

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>88</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*, ed. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1986; orig. pub. 1982) 217.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 228.

<sup>90</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Sacramental Basis for the Role of the Layman in the Church," *Theological Investigations* 8, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1977; orig. pub. 1966) 51–74.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

because he is a member of this Body.”<sup>95</sup> This means that “the Christian, from his position in the world, and in the power he receives from . . . baptism, has to render present the victory of grace, of love and of faith, of the fact that the kingdom of God has arrived. And he has the responsibility of being a sign in the world and to the world of the eternal reality of salvation.”<sup>96</sup> All the baptized are “active participator[s]”<sup>97</sup> in the incarnational reality that is at the same time a task of “witness to the event in which the victory of God’s eschatological grace has arrived, in which God himself becomes the salvation of the world.”<sup>98</sup> But the character of this task is distinctive for the lay person; it “consists in establishing the dominion of God in truth, in selflessness and in love, and thereby making what is truly essential to the Church’s nature present in the setting in which he is placed, from the position which only he can occupy, in which he cannot be replaced by any other, not even by the clergy, and where, nevertheless, the Church must be.”<sup>99</sup> The weight of these last words is immense for any theology of the laity. The distinguishing feature of the witness of the lay person is that he usually “continues in that secular sphere of life which he previously occupied in the world before he was baptized.” Yet he “acquires through baptism another and a fresh task to be discharged precisely in this position in which he finds himself at the purely human level. For it is because of him that the Church is present precisely *there*.”<sup>100</sup>

Rahner’s insight leads to this conclusion: it is impossible not to recognize that the manifestation of the Church in the individual, in grace, in a particular space and time, must occur through the prism of an individual’s particular sphere of life. The “there” of the Church manifested in the nonvowed single person is not precisely the same location as the “there” of

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 63.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 64–65.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 62. Rahner explained the sense of “Church” to which he referred: “When we use the term ‘Church’ here and in *this* context what we mean by it is the grace of God, the power of God as faith, hope and charity, trust in the meaning of existence and its further projections into infinity in the deed of God. ‘Church’ here, therefore, is intended to signify truth, that liberating truth which alone can open up all human truth to the infinite and dazzling mystery of God. ‘Church’ in this context signifies the courage to commit oneself to eternity, the daring of that love in which man uncalculatingly and finally lets his entire existence fall into the incomprehensibility which we call God” (ibid. 61).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 61. Rahner remarked that all Christians have the “task and duty” to “uphold and preserve the truth that the whole world in all its dimensions is that which has been brought into being by God’s own creative act, and that we shall make his redemptive act effective in it too.” The separate clerical and lay tasks “mutually complement and condition one another.” Clerics have responsibility “of organisation and leadership in the Church in virtue of having received the sacrament of priestly consecration or order” (ibid. 73–74).

the Church manifested in those in other states and forms of life. The pull of communal life or of domestic duties away from “worldly” concerns is not usually had by the nonvowed person. In this secular age, such witness may have especial value. For the “profane sphere” is not beyond the purview of Christians. Rahner insisted: “The worldly itself as such constitutes a truly Christian task. For in it salvation is worked out and the grace of God with its power to save and to liberate is lived and attempted.”<sup>101</sup> Secular singles might project the Church into the world even in seemingly unlikely locations, hoping to serve as a special conduit for communication and transformation. And the indeterminacy of their state might allow this to happen at moments they do not always foresee, especially given the rapidly changing world in our time.

How the grace of God might be “lived and attempted” in the contemporary world is a matter to which Rahner gave thought in an essay about the changing circumstances of women in the second half of the 20th century. There he observed the necessity of development of “a whole range of constructive patterns and models for the life of contemporary woman in the world . . . of various kinds.”<sup>102</sup> Some of these must show “how women should live in those states of life which seem to be purely worldly in character in all their dimensions . . . how the life of woman today in the world both can and must be lived in faith and in the Spirit.”<sup>103</sup> For “in her preaching and in her cure of souls the Church must take into account the unmarried, independent and professional woman no less than the mother and the housewife.”<sup>104</sup> Driving the need for new models of the Christian vocation for women was “the altered structures of contemporary life in the purely profane sphere.”<sup>105</sup> Changing societal structures during the 40 years since Rahner made this observation have also impacted men, so, in the interest of women’s “equal value and equal rights with men” espoused by him, new Christian models for men must also be considered.<sup>106</sup>

In the years immediately following Vatican II, styles of religious orders received much attention. Nothing similar has occurred for the secular laity, although Vatican II’s explicit mention of single as well as married lay Catholics pointed the way to reflection on diversity within the lay state. The nonvowed life certainly could benefit from reflection on suitable con-

<sup>101</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Position of Woman in the New Situation in Which the Church Finds Herself,” in *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life, Theological Investigations* 8, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1977; orig. pub. 1966) 75–93, at 89.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 89–90.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* 83. See 86–93 for a discussion of the task given to women themselves of developing new models, with the guidance of the Church.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

temporary models of witness, especially given the large number of secular single lay Catholics whose very goal it is to live “in faith and in the Spirit.”<sup>107</sup> Focus on the unique brand of loving stewardship that nonvowed Catholics might offer even beyond the visible boundaries of the Church, as well as how such stewardship could nurture and be more fully nurtured by the Church, would be a start. As Christian stewards in the world, how can single secular Catholics strive to serve in unique ways as channels of the “eschatological hope” that is given by God? Rahner stressed that society and its institutions require the “constant transformation” that occurs when Christians exercise their “duty to impregnate the structures of secular life” with this eschatological hope.<sup>108</sup>

### THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTENTION TO THE SINGLE FORM OF THE LAY STATE

“The call to the kingdom is the radicalism that embraces all forms of Christian life,” wrote Balthasar in his *New Elucidations*, first published in 1979. “All Christians are first of all simply Christians. All have to strive from now on for the ‘more’ of this new love,” which is “perfection in the love of God and love of neighbor” in “the perfect spirit of the divine Father’s love” now in Christ “to make its home on earth.”<sup>109</sup> In his *Truth Is Symphonic*, Balthasar recommended that the Church should present clearly “the Christian perfection of love”<sup>110</sup> as a “spiritual norm”<sup>111</sup> for all, for this “selfless and perfect love that applied to all without distinction”<sup>112</sup> in the New Testament “can be lived out in its wholeness in the various Christian forms of life (for example, virginity, marriage), even if a greater entanglement in the determinisms of the world can make it harder to practice pure Christian love.”<sup>113</sup> He asserted: “The most necessary thing to proclaim and take to heart is that Christian truth is symphonic. . . . The Church’s reservoir, which lies at its core, is ‘the depth of the riches of God’ in Jesus Christ. The Church exhibits this fullness in an inexhaustible multiplicity, which keeps flowing, irresistibly, from its unity.”<sup>114</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>108</sup> Karl Rahner, *Grace in Freedom*, trans. Hilda Graef (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969; orig. pub. 1968) 74; see *Lumen gentium* no. 35 and *Gaudium et spes* no. 38.

<sup>109</sup> Balthasar, *New Elucidations* 183, 170.

<sup>110</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987; orig. pub. 1972) 84.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 84–85.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 15. In this later work Balthasar decried elevation of one form of life or charism at the expense of another: “Is there no other way of exalting marriage but

The guiding object of this article has been to discover why and how the Christian vocation, which is to perfect love, can be lived in the secular single lay state and indeed must be so lived when one is divinely prompted to it. I have suggested that the answer may be found in the principle of stewardship, which invites all Christians but perhaps secular lay Christians in particular—owing to their lack of a “differentiated call” to the “state of election,” in the words of Balthasar—to discern in which form of life their natural gifts may ripen to charisms for service of Church and world. Using this principle, those called to the single form of the secular lay state may discern that God is asking them to give up the possibility of married and family life for a personal mission serving “honorable ends”<sup>115</sup> that might be neglected if there is not some freedom from other obligations or allegiances. And such persons may come to understand that their witness to our eschatological reality wrought by the love of God for us in Christ is to be located in the world—in the ordinary circumstances but not the values of secular life. These secular singles will live the celibate life of love of God and neighbor in a manner indispensably distinct from that of their married counterparts in the lay state and not the province of the other celibate vocations, clerical or lay. I offer this simple thought as a rudimentary theology of the secular single lay state. Left to be considered are the concrete, specific, and practical reasons for giving equal attention to the secular single lay state alongside all the other forms of Christian life—reasons why inattention to it in this era when so many Catholics are living it can prevent this vocation from achieving its full possibilities in the Church and in the world.

First, many Catholics may find themselves single by circumstance (family obligations, illness, sexual orientation, etc.) and fail to live this state joyfully because they do not understand it as a vocation. Second, greater recognition of the nonvowed lay state as a vocation would increase the likelihood that more Catholics will find their true vocation. Prominent

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by devaluing celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven? And if one wants to commend political action on the part of ‘the Church’ (and such action can never be anything other than the action of particular members of the Church), is it necessary to say that the contemplative life of penance is useless and obsolete and to alienate it from the love of believers? And does the rediscovery of brotherly love as the central Christian commandment mean that interiority has become taboo, and that every direct relationship between man and God has to be dismissed as evasion or alienation? And when we exalt orthopraxy, right action, which is demanded clearly enough by Jesus himself (‘he who does the will of my Father’, Mt 7:21), do we have to lose all sense of what the New Testament equally emphatically calls right belief, orthodoxy (‘anyone who . . . does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God’, 2 Jn 9)?” (ibid. 13).

<sup>115</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2231.

acknowledgement of the secular single lay life as a vocation is especially important because, in vocational discernment, this life lacks the given exterior guidance afforded those contemplating vowed vocations. Might some choose the wrong vocation due to a lack of knowledge about the full range of legitimate Christian forms of life? Might the “un-vowed” who take new vows—such as divorced Catholics who remarry—not do so if they were aware of the secular single life as an authentic Christian lay vocation? Third, more vocational guidance on the secular single state could counter society’s messages about single life that are incompatible with the Christian vocation. Fourth, fuller inclusion of nonvowed single persons in the life of the Church at the local level—via recognition of the services that they offer because of their professional training, education, and background—would provide parishes with perhaps untapped expertise and offer these singles a greater sense of connection to their local church. Fifth, given that the Church still requires—except in rare cases—a celibate priesthood, possibly more individuals would hear a call to holy orders if they first of all accepted a celibate life. I do not mean to suggest the single nonvowed lay life as fundamentally a prelude to the priesthood or to religious life. Such a notion is counter to my aim to validate the secular single lay life as an ecclesial vocation significant in its own right. Rather, I simply want to recognize that, in the present era, since most Catholics do not know of the single nonvowed state as a vocation within the lay state, they might be unlikely to take the step across the great divide of celibacy to holy orders and/or to religious life. It may be that Vatican II’s message that marriage is a worthy and treasured means of discipleship has had the unintended effect of dimming the perception of the value of celibate life.<sup>116</sup> Sixth, in the current dearth of healthy vocations to the priesthood, secular single Catholics, who may have time, inclinations, and charisms, might be able to contribute to the lay apostolate through engagement in some administrative and ministerial tasks traditionally handled by priests. Seventh, secular single lay

<sup>116</sup> Häring noted that celibacy for the kingdom is placed rightly in discussion of values rather than of legalities: “Widespread legalistic thinking partly explains why many in the present circumstances feel that they are incapable of celibacy. If we clearly see what a sense of responsibility married people must exercise in order to realize in a decisive way the moral-religious values which their state requires, priests too and religious—they even more—must be personalities in the true sense of the word. Moreover, . . . the Church is in fact very much aware that she is still on the way, that many of her members still allow themselves to be led by external regulations instead of being open to the gifts of the Spirit. Freely chosen virginity is a sign that the Church is really on the way to the heavenly Jerusalem whose rule is love. It presupposes the whole-hearted and free surrender of oneself to the Lord” (*Celebrating Joy*, trans. Edward Quinn [New York: Herder & Herder, 1970; orig. pub. n.d.] 68).

Catholics are characteristically devoted to careers and often to careers of service, which frequently is the primary reason for their status as nonvowed singles. This distinctive style of discipleship—immersion in the “work” of life—places these lay singles emphatically “in the world” where they can serve as an important and transformative link between the Church and the larger culture. But this will be the case only when nonvowed singles understand their status as vocation. “To die to the world in Christ means to give oneself, along with Christ, for the world and for its benefit,” wrote Balthasar.<sup>117</sup> Nonvowed single Catholics have a unique contribution to make to the essential “secular life” to which Balthasar referred in his vivid description of the Church in its splendid diversity:

The way in which Christians are to emerge from the love that surrounds them in the Church, stepping out into the world in order to bear witness in their lives to the love of Christ, is not something that can be reduced to a simple formula. It exhibits a whole spectrum. . . . Testimony to the Church’s love can be borne by the individual, who seeks to spread to those around him the *communio* that is lived in the Church, and also by groups that collaborate to try to make its reality take root in the world. . . . Witness to the Spirit who inhabits the Church can be given through collaboration in cool, deliberate, expert planning in all departments of secular life just as much as through the unpredictable eruption of prophetic energies, bursting forth from the hidden regions where man communes with God.<sup>118</sup>

The particular ways in which individual lay Christians, single and married alike, witness in secular life to “the Spirit who inhabits the Church” will depend on the specific gifts they have been given to offer in service of the Church and the world. Balthasar was supremely conscious of lay Catholics’ desire to offer such gifts and, indeed, their very selves, for the good of the Church and the world.

## CONCLUSION

In *Razing the Bastions*, first published in 1952 to announce a vision of the Church that would be realized with Vatican II’s openness to the world for its transformation, Balthasar observed:

Many are ready today to give their life for the Church and the world (and not at all for their own perfection). They would stand in need of a theology that describes Christian existence from the perspective of service, of the commission received, of sharing both in the shining and radiating and in the being consumed. If such a theology were once clearly thought out and popularized so that it too could take its place in Christian instruction, new power could radiate forth from the Christian communities into the world.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Balthasar, *New Elucidations* 178. Balthasar noted that this is a “point which was pushed too far into the background in official monastic theology” (ibid. 178–79).

<sup>118</sup> Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic* 104–5.

<sup>119</sup> Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions* 69.

I contend that a beginning of such a theology can be found in a deliberate, primary focus on stewardship to include, especially on the pastoral and popular level, an assessment of gifts that may be charisms best put into service in a particular state or form of Christian life. While the gifts themselves may be insufficient to function as the basis of a state of life, they may recommend the acceptance of a counsel, such as celibacy, for their fruition in a personal mission prompted by God. Such a theology as fully developed could truly recognize all states and forms of Christian life equally, leaving it to the mystery of grace working upon nature to determine how the Catholic Christian faithful will be diversified. With the fundamental call to love of God and neighbor as its base, such a theology could help ensure that shifts in the Catholic population, such as today's increased number of secular lay singles, are providential.