

St. Thomas Aquinas

The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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SERVICE BY PROMISE (Question [88])

OF VOWS (TWELVE ARTICLES)

We must now consider vows, whereby something is promised to God. Under this head there are twelve points of inquiry:

- [\(1\)](#) What is a vow?
 - [\(2\)](#) What is the matter of a vow?
 - [\(3\)](#) Of the obligation of vows;
 - [\(4\)](#) Of the use of taking vows;
 - [\(5\)](#) Of what virtue is it an act?
 - [\(6\)](#) Whether it is more meritorious to do a thing from a vow, than without a vow?
 - [\(7\)](#) Of the solemnizing of a vow;
 - [\(8\)](#) Whether those who are under another's power can take vows?
 - [\(9\)](#) Whether children may be bound by vow to enter religion?
 - [\(10\)](#) Whether a vow is subject to dispensation or commutation?
 - [\(11\)](#) Whether a dispensation can be granted in a solemn vow of continence?
 - [\(12\)](#) Whether the authority of a superior is required in a dispensation from a vow?
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Whether a vow consists in a mere purpose of the will?

Objection 1: It would seem that a vow consists in nothing but a purpose of the will. According to some [*William of Auxerre, Sum. Aur. III, xxviii, qu. 1; Albertus Magnus, Sent. iv, D, 38], "a vow is a conception of a good purpose after a firm deliberation of the mind, whereby a man binds himself before God to do or not to do a certain thing." But the conception of a good purpose and so forth, may consist in a mere movement of the will. Therefore a vow consists in a mere purpose of the will.

Objection 2: Further, the very word vow seems to be derived from "voluntas" [will], for one is said to do a thing "proprio voto" [by one's own vow] when one does it voluntarily. Now to "purpose" is an act of the will, while to "promise" is an act of the reason. Therefore a vow consists in a mere act of the will.

Objection 3: Further, our Lord said ([Lk. 9:62](#)): "No man putting his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." Now from the very fact that a man has a purpose of doing good, he puts his hand to the plough. Consequently, if he look back by desisting from his good purpose, he is not fit for the kingdom of God. Therefore by a mere good purpose a man is bound before God, even without making a promise; and consequently it would seem that a vow consists in a mere purpose of the will.

On the contrary, It is written ([Eccles. 5:3](#)): "If thou hast vowed anything to God, defer not to pay it, for an unfaithful and foolish promise displeaseth Him." Therefore to vow is to promise, and a vow is a promise.

I answer that, A vow denotes a binding to do or omit some particular thing. Now one man binds himself to another by means of a promise, which is an act of the reason to which faculty it belongs to direct. For just as a man by commanding or praying, directs, in a fashion, what others are to do for him, so by promising he directs what he himself is to do for another. Now a promise between man and man can only be expressed in words or any other outward signs; whereas a promise can be made to God by the mere inward thought, since according to 1 Kgs. 16:7, "Man seeth those things that appear, but the Lord beholdeth the heart." Yet we express words outwardly sometimes, either to arouse ourselves, as was stated above with regard to prayer ([Question \[83\]](#), [Article \[12\]](#)), or to call others to witness, so that one may refrain from breaking the vow, not only through fear of God, but also through respect of men. Now a promise is the outcome from a purpose of doing something: and a purpose presupposes deliberation, since it is the act of a deliberate will. Accordingly three things are essential to a vow: the first is deliberation. the second is a purpose of the will; and the third is a promise, wherein is completed the nature of a vow. Sometimes, however, two other things are added as a sort of confirmation of the vow, namely, pronouncement by word of mouth, according to Ps. 65:13, "I will pay Thee my vows which my lips have uttered"; and the witnessing of others. Hence the Master says (Sent. iv, D, 38) that a vow is "the witnessing of a spontaneous promise and ought to be made to God and about things relating to God": although the "witnessing" may strictly refer to the inward protestation.

Reply to Objection 1: The conceiving of a good purpose is not confirmed by the deliberation of the mind, unless the deliberation lead to a promise.

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subject to his will, and a vow takes its name from the will forasmuch as it proceeds from the will as first mover.

Reply to Objection 3: He that puts his hand to the plough does something already; while he that merely purposes to do something does nothing so far. When, however, he promises, he already sets about doing, although he does not yet fulfil his promise: even so, he that puts his hand to the plough does not plough yet, nevertheless he stretches out his hand for the purpose of ploughing.

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Whether a vow should always be about a better good?

Objection 1: It would seem that a vow need not be always about a better good. A greater good is one that pertains to supererogation. But vows are not only about matters of supererogation, but also about matters of salvation: thus in Baptism men vow to renounce the devil and his pomps, and to keep the faith, as a gloss observes on Ps. 75:12, "Vow ye, and pay to the Lord your God"; and Jacob vowed ([Gn. 28:21](#)) that the Lord should be his God. Now this above all is necessary for salvation. Therefore vows are not only about a better good.

Objection 2: Further, Jephte is included among the saints ([Heb. 11:32](#)). Yet he killed his innocent daughter on account of his vow (Judges 11). Since, then, the slaying of an innocent person is not a better good, but is in itself unlawful, it seems that a vow may be made not only about a better good, but also about something unlawful.

Objection 3: Further, things that tend to be harmful to the person, or that are quite useless, do not come under the head of a better good. Yet sometimes vows are made about immoderate vigils or fasts which tend to injure the person: and sometimes vows are about indifferent matters and such as are useful to no purpose. Therefore a vow is not always about a better good.

On the contrary, It is written ([Dt. 23:22](#)): "If thou wilt not promise thou shalt be without sin."

I answer that, As stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), a vow is a promise made to God. Now a promise is about something that one does voluntarily for someone else: since it would be not a promise but a threat to say that one would do something against someone. In like manner it would be futile to promise anyone something unacceptable to him. Wherefore, as every sin is against God, and since no work is acceptable to God unless it be virtuous, it follows that nothing unlawful or indifferent, but only some act of virtue, should be the matter of a vow. But as a vow denotes a voluntary promise, while necessity excludes voluntariness, whatever is absolutely necessary, whether to be or not to be, can nowise be the matter of a vow. For it would be foolish to vow that one would die or that one would not fly.

[Donate bitcoin.](#) St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS088.html](#) for instance if salvation be unattainable without it---it may be the matter of a vow in so far as it is done voluntarily, but not in so far as there is a necessity for doing it. But that which is not necessary, neither absolutely, nor on the supposition of an end, is altogether voluntary, and therefore is most properly the matter of a vow. And this is said to be a greater good in comparison with that which is universally necessary for salvation. Therefore, properly speaking, a vow is said to be about a better good.

Reply to Objection 1: Renouncing the devil's pomps and keeping the faith of Christ are the matter of baptismal vows, in so far as these things are done voluntarily, although they are necessary for salvation. The same answer applies to Jacob's vow: although it may also be explained that Jacob vowed that he would have the Lord for his God, by giving Him a special form of worship to which he was not bound, for instance by offering tithes and so forth as mentioned further on in the same passage.

Reply to Objection 2: Certain things are good, whatever be their result; such are acts of virtue, and these can be, absolutely speaking, the matter of a vow: some are evil, whatever their result may be; as those things which are sins in themselves, and these can nowise be the matter of a vow: while some, considered in themselves, are good, and as such may be the matter of a vow, yet they may have an evil result, in which case the vow must not be kept. It was thus with the vow of Jephthe, who as related in Judges 11:30,31, "made a vow to the Lord, saying: If Thou wilt deliver the children of Ammon into my hands, whosoever shall first come forth out of the doors of my house, and shall meet me when I return in peace... the same will I offer a holocaust to the Lord." For this could have an evil result if, as indeed happened, he were to be met by some animal which it would be unlawful to sacrifice, such as an ass or a human being. Hence Jerome says [*Implicitly 1 Contra Jovin.: Comment. in Micheam vi, viii: Comment. in Jerem. vii. The quotation is from Peter Comestor, Hist. Scholast.]: "In vowing he was foolish, through lack of discretion, and in keeping his vow he was wicked." Yet it is premised (Judges 11:29) that "the Spirit of the Lord came upon him," because his faith and devotion, which moved him to make that vow, were from the Holy Ghost; and for this reason he is reckoned among the saints, as also by reason of the victory which he obtained, and because it is probable that he repented of his sinful deed, which nevertheless foreshadowed something good.

Reply to Objection 3: The mortification of one's own body, for instance by vigils and fasting, is not acceptable to God except in so far as it is an act of virtue; and this depends on its being done with due discretion, namely, that concupiscence be curbed without overburdening nature. on this condition such things may be the matter of a vow. Hence the Apostle after saying ([Rm. 12:1](#)), "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God," adds, "your reasonable service." Since, however, man is easily mistaken in judging of matters concerning himself, such vows as these are more fittingly kept or disregarded according to the judgment of a superior, yet so that, should a man find that without doubt he is seriously burdened by keeping such a vow, and should he be unable to appeal to his superior, he ought not to keep it. As to vows about vain and useless things they should be ridiculed rather than kept.

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Objection 1: It would seem that vows are not all binding. For man needs things that are done by another, more than God does, since He has no need for our goods ([Ps. 15:2](#)). Now according to the prescription of human laws [*Dig. L. xii, de pollicitat., i] a simple promise made to a man is not binding; and this seems to be prescribed on account of the changeableness of the human will. Much less binding therefore is a simple promise made to God, which we call a vow.

Objection 2: Further, no one is bound to do what is impossible. Now sometimes that which a man has vowed becomes impossible to him, either because it depends on another's decision, as when, for instance, a man vows to enter a monastery, the monks of which refuse to receive him: or on account of some defect arising, for instance when a woman vows virginity, and afterwards is deflowered; or when a man vows to give a sum of money, and afterwards loses it. Therefore a vow is not always binding.

Objection 3: Further, if a man is bound to pay something, he must do so at once. But a man is not bound to pay his vow at once, especially if it be taken under a condition to be fulfilled in the future. Therefore a vow is not always binding.

On the contrary, It is written ([Eccles. 5:3,4](#)): "Whatsoever thou hast vowed, pay it; and it is much better not to vow, than after a vow not to perform the things promised."

I answer that, For one to be accounted faithful one must keep one's promises. Wherefore, according to Augustine [*Ep. xxxii, 2: De Mendac. xx] faith takes its name "from a man's deed agreeing with his word" [*'Fides... fiunt dicta' Cicero gives the same etymology (De Offic. i, 7)]. Now man ought to be faithful to God above all, both on account of God's sovereignty, and on account of the favors he has received from God. Hence man is obliged before all to fulfill the vows he has made to God, since this is part of the fidelity he owes to God. On the other hand, the breaking of a vow is a kind of infidelity. Wherefore Solomon gives the reason why vows should be paid to God, because "an unfaithful... promise displeaseth Him" [*Eccles. 5:3].

Reply to Objection 1: Honesty demands that a man should keep any promise he makes to another man, and this obligation is based on the natural law. But for a man to be under a civil obligation through a promise he has made, other conditions are requisite. And although God needs not our goods, we are under a very great obligation to Him: so that a vow made to Him is most binding.

Reply to Objection 2: If that which a man has vowed becomes impossible to him through any cause whatsoever, he must do what he can, so that he have at least a will ready to do what he can. Hence if a man has vowed to enter a monastery, he must endeavor to the best of his power to be received there. And if his intention was chiefly to bind himself to enter the religious life, so that, in consequence, he chose this particular form of religious life, or this place, as being most agreeable to him, he is bound, should he be unable to be received there, to enter the religious life elsewhere. But if his principal intention is to bind himself to this particular kind of religious life, or to this particular place, because the one or the other pleases him in some special way, he is not bound to enter another religious house, if they are unwilling to receive him into this particular one. on the other hand, if he be rendered incapable of fulfilling his vow through his own fault, he is bound over and above to do penance for his past fault: thus if a woman has vowed virginity and is afterwards violated, she is bound not only to

Reply to Objection 3: The obligation of a vow is caused by our own will and intention, wherefore it is written ([Dt. 23:23](#)): "That which is once gone out of thy lips, thou shalt observe, and shalt do as thou hast promised to the Lord thy God, and hast spoken with thy own will and with thy own mouth." Wherefore if in taking a vow, it is one's intention and will to bind oneself to fulfil it at once, one is bound to fulfil it immediately. But if one intend to fulfil it at a certain time, or under a certain condition, one is not bound to immediate fulfilment. And yet one ought not to delay longer than one intended to bind oneself, for it is written ([Dt. 23:21](#)): "When thou hast made a vow to the Lord thy God thou shalt not delay to pay it: because the Lord thy God will require it; and if thou delay, it shall be imputed to thee for a sin."

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Whether it is expedient to take vows?

Objection 1: It would seem that it is not expedient to take vows. It is not expedient to anyone to deprive himself of the good that God has given him. Now one of the greatest goods that God has given man is liberty whereof he seems to be deprived by the necessity implicated in a vow. Therefore it would seem inexpedient for man to take vows.

Objection 2: Further, no one should expose himself to danger. But whoever takes a vow exposes himself to danger, since that which, before taking a vow, he could omit without danger, becomes a source of danger to him if he should not fulfil it after taking the vow. Hence Augustine says (Ep. cxxvii, ad Arment. et Paulin.): "Since thou hast vowed, thou hast bound thyself, thou canst not do otherwise. If thou dost not what thou hast vowed thou wilt not be as thou wouldst have been hadst thou not vowed. For then thou wouldst have been less great, not less good: whereas now if thou breakest faith with God (which God forbid) thou art the more unhappy, as thou wouldst have been happier, hadst thou kept thy vow." Therefore it is not expedient to take vows.

Objection 3: Further, the Apostle says ([1 Cor. 4:16](#)): "Be ye followers of me, as I also am of Christ." But we do not read that either Christ or the Apostles took any vows. Therefore it would seem inexpedient to take vows.

On the contrary, It is written ([Ps. 75:12](#)): "Vow ye and pay to the Lord your God."

I answer that, As stated above ([Articles \[1\],2](#)), a vow is a promise made to God. Now one makes a promise to a man under one aspect, and to God under another. Because we promise something to a man for his own profit; since it profits him that we should be of service to him, and that we should at first assure him of the future fulfilment of that service: whereas we make promises to God not for His but for our own profit. Hence Augustine says (Ep. cxxvii, ad Arment. et Paulin.): "He is a kind and not a needy exactor, for he does not grow rich on our payments, but makes those who pay Him grow rich in Him." And just as what we give God is

[Donate bitcoin.](#) St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS088.html](#)/s (Ep. cxxvii, ad Arment. et Paulin.), so also a promise whereby we vow something to God, does not conduce to His profit, nor does He need to be assured by us, but it conduces to our profit, in so far as by vowing we fix our wills immovably on that which it is expedient to do. Hence it is expedient to take vows.

Reply to Objection 1: Even as one's liberty is not lessened by one being unable to sin, so, too, the necessity resulting from a will firmly fixed to good does not lessen the liberty, as instanced in God and the blessed. Such is the necessity implied by a vow, bearing a certain resemblance to the confirmation of the blessed. Hence, Augustine says (Ep. cxxvii, ad Arment. et Paulin.) that "happy is the necessity that compels us to do the better things."

Reply to Objection 2: When danger arises from the deed itself, this deed is not expedient, for instance that one cross a river by a tottering bridge: but if the danger arise through man's failure in the deed, the latter does not cease to be expedient: thus it is expedient to mount on horseback, though there be the danger of a fall from the horse: else it would behoove one to desist from all good things, that may become dangerous accidentally. Wherefore it is written ([Eccles. 11:4](#)): "He that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that considereth the clouds shall never reap." Now a man incurs danger, not from the vow itself, but from his fault, when he changes his mind by breaking his vow. Hence, Augustine says (Ep. cxxvii, ad Arment. et Paulin.): "Repent not of thy vow: thou shouldst rather rejoice that thou canst no longer do what thou mightest lawfully have done to thy detriment."

Reply to Objection 3: It was incompetent for Christ, by His very nature, to take a vow, both because He was God, and because, as man, His will was firmly fixed on the good, since He was a "comprehensor." By a kind of similitude, however, He is represented as saying ([Ps. 21:26](#)): "I will pay my vows in the sight of them that fear Him," when He is speaking of His body, which is the Church.

The apostles are understood to have vowed things pertaining to the state of perfection when "they left all things and followed Christ."

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Whether a vow is an act of latria or religion?

Objection 1: It would seem that a vow is not an act of latria or religion. Every act of virtue is matter for a vow. Now it would seem to pertain to the same virtue to promise a thing and to do it. Therefore a vow pertains to any virtue and not to religion especially.

Objection 2: Further, according to Tully (De Invent. ii, 53) it belongs to religion to offer God worship and ceremonial rites. But he who takes a vow does not yet offer something to God, but only promises it. Therefore, a vow is not an act of religion.

[Donate bitcoin.](#) St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS088.html](#) de not only to God, but also to the saints and to one's superiors, to whom religious vow obedience when they make their profession. Therefore, a vow is not an act of religion.

On the contrary, It is written ([Is. 19:21](#)): "(The Egyptians) shall worship Him with sacrifices and offerings and they shall make vows to the Lord, and perform them." Now, the worship of God is properly the act of religion or latria. Therefore, a vow is an act of latria or religion.

I answer that, As stated above ([Question \[81\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#), ad 1), every act of virtue belongs to religion or latria by way of command, in so far as it is directed to the reverence of God which is the proper end of latria. Now the direction of other actions to their end belongs to the commanding virtue, not to those which are commanded. Therefore the direction of the acts of any virtue to the service of God is the proper act of latria.

Now, it is evident from what has been said above ([Articles \[1\]](#),2) that a vow is a promise made to God, and that a promise is nothing else than a directing of the thing promised to the person to whom the promise is made. Hence a vow is a directing of the thing vowed to the worship or service of God. And thus it is clear that to take a vow is properly an act of latria or religion.

Reply to Objection 1: The matter of a vow is sometimes the act of another virtue, as, for instance, keeping the fast or observing continency; while sometimes it is an act of religion, as offering a sacrifice or praying. But promising either of them to God belongs to religion, for the reason given above. Hence it is evident that some vows belong to religion by reason only of the promise made to God, which is the essence of a vow, while others belong thereto by reason also of the thing promised, which is the matter of the vow.

Reply to Objection 2: He who promises something gives it already in as far as he binds himself to give it: even as a thing is said to be made when its cause is made, because the effect is contained virtually in its cause. This is why we thank not only a giver, but also one who promises to give.

Reply to Objection 3: A vow is made to God alone, whereas a promise may be made to a man also: and this very promise of good, which is fore made to a man, may be the matter of a vow, and in so far as it is a virtuous act. This is how we are to understand vows whereby we vow something to the saints or to one's superiors: so that the promise made to the saints or to one's superiors is the matter of the vow, in so far as one vows to God to fulfil what one has promised to the saints or one's superiors.

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Whether it is more praiseworthy and meritorious to do something in fulfilment of a vow, than without a vow?

Objection 1: It would seem that it is more praiseworthy and meritorious to do a thing without a vow than in fulfilment of a vow. Prosper says (*De Vita Contempl. ii*): "We should abstain or

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be done without devotion and unwillingly." Now he who vows to fast puts himself under the
necessity of fasting. Therefore it would be better for him to fast without taking the vow.

Objection 2: Further, the Apostle says ([2 Cor. 9:7](#)): "Everyone as he hath determined in his heart, not with sadness, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver." Now some fulfil sorrowfully what they have vowed: and this seems to be due to the necessity arising from the vow, for necessity is a cause of sorrow according to Metaph. v [*Ed. Did. iv, 5]. Therefore, it is better to do something without a vow, than in fulfilment of a vow.

Objection 3: Further, a vow is necessary for the purpose of fixing the will on that which is vowed, as stated above ([Article \[4\]](#)). But the will cannot be more fixed on a thing than when it actually does that thing. Therefore it is no better to do a thing in fulfilment of a vow than without a vow.

On the contrary, A gloss on the words of Ps. 75:12, "Vow ye and pay," says: "Vows are counseled to the will." But a counsel is about none but a better good. Therefore it is better to do a deed in fulfilment of a vow than without a vow: since he that does it without a vow fulfils only one counsel, viz. the counsel to do it, whereas he that does it with a vow, fulfils two counsels, viz. the counsel to vow and the counsel to do it.

I answer that, For three reasons it is better and more meritorious to do one and the same deed with a vow than without. First, because to vow, as stated above ([Article \[5\]](#)) is an act of religion which is the chief of the moral virtues. Now the more excellent the virtue the better and more meritorious the deed. Wherefore the act of an inferior virtue is the better the more meritorious for being commanded by a superior virtue, whose act it becomes through being commanded by it, just as the act of faith or hope is better if it be commanded by charity. Hence the works of the other moral virtues (for instance, fasting, which is an act of abstinence; and being continent, which is an act of chastity) are better and more meritorious, if they be done in fulfilment of a vow, since thus they belong to the divine worship, being like sacrifices to God. Wherefore Augustine says (De Virg. viii) that "not even is virginity honorable as such, but only when it is consecrated to God, and cherished by godly continence."

Secondly, because he that vows something and does it, subjects himself to God more than he that only does it; for he subjects himself to God not only as to the act, but also as to the power, since in future he cannot do something else. Even so he gives more who gives the tree with its fruit, than he that gives the fruit only, as Anselm [*Eadmer] observes (De Simil. viii). For this reason, we thank even those who promise, as stated above ([Article \[5\]](#), ad 2).

Thirdly, because a vow fixes the will on the good immovably and to do anything of a will that is fixed on the good belongs to the perfection of virtue, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. ii, 4), just as to sin with an obstinate mind aggravates the sin, and is called a sin against the Holy Ghost, as stated above ([Question \[14\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)).

Reply to Objection 1: The passage quoted should be understood as referring to necessity of coercion which causes an act to be involuntary and excludes devotion. Hence he says pointedly: "Lest that which we are free to do be done without devotion and unwillingly." On the other hand the necessity resulting from a vow is caused by the immobility of the will, wherefore it strengthens the will and increases devotion. Hence the argument does not conclude.

opposed to the will, causes sorrow. But the necessity resulting from a vow, in those who are well disposed, in so far as it strengthens the will, causes not sorrow but joy. Hence Augustine says (Ep. ad Arment. et Paulin. cxxcii): "Repent not of thy vow: thou shouldst rather rejoice that thou canst no longer do what thou mightest lawfully have done to thy detriment." If, however, the very deed, considered in itself, were to become disagreeable and involuntary after one has taken the vow, the will to fulfil it remaining withal, it is still more meritorious than if it were done without the vow, since the fulfilment of a vow is an act of religion which is a greater virtue than abstinence, of which fasting is an act.

Reply to Objection 3: He who does something without having vowed it has an immovable will as regards the individual deed which he does and at the time when he does it; but his will does not remain altogether fixed for the time to come, as does the will of one who makes a vow: for the latter has bound his will to do something, both before he did that particular deed, and perchance to do it many times.

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Whether a vow is solemnized by the reception of holy orders, and by the profession of a certain rule?

Objection 1: It would seem that a vow is not solemnized by the reception of holy orders and by the profession of a certain rule. As stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), a vow is a promise made to God. Now external actions pertaining to solemnity seem to be directed, not to God, but to men. Therefore they are related to vows accidentally: and consequently a solemnization of this kind is not a proper circumstance of a vow.

Objection 2: Further, whatever belongs to the condition of a thing, would seem to be applicable to all in which that thing is found. Now many things may be the subject of a vow, which have no connection either with holy orders, or to any particular rule: as when a man vows a pilgrimage, or something of the kind. Therefore the solemnization that takes place in the reception of holy orders or in the profession of a certain rule does not belong to the condition of a vow.

Objection 3: Further, a solemn vow seems to be the same as a public vow. Now many other vows may be made in public besides that which is pronounced in receiving holy orders or in professing a certain rule; which latter, moreover, may be made in private. Therefore not only these vows are solemn.

On the contrary, These vows alone are an impediment to the contract of marriage, and annul marriage if it be contracted, which is the effect of a solemn vow, as we shall state further on in the Third Part of this work [*XP, Question [53], Article [2]].

I answer that, The manner in which a thing is solemnized depends on its nature [conditio]: thus when a man takes up arms he solemnizes the fact in one way, namely, with a certain

another way, namely, the array of the bridegroom and bride and the gathering of their kindred. Now a vow is a promise made to God: wherefore, the solemnization of a vow consists in something spiritual pertaining to God; i.e. in some spiritual blessing or consecration which, in accordance with the institution of the apostles, is given when a man makes profession of observing a certain rule, in the second degree after the reception of holy orders, as Dionysius states (Eccl. Hier. vi). The reason of this is that solemnization is not wont to be employed, save when a man gives himself up entirely to some particular thing. For the nuptial solemnization takes place only when the marriage is celebrated, and when the bride and bridegroom mutually deliver the power over their bodies to one another. In like manner a vow is solemnized when a man devotes himself to the divine ministry by receiving holy orders, or embraces the state of perfection by renouncing the world and his own will by the profession of a certain rule.

Reply to Objection 1: This kind of solemnization regards not only men but also God in so far as it is accompanied by a spiritual consecration or blessing, of which God is the author, though man is the minister, according to Num. 6:27, "They shall invoke My name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them." Hence a solemn vow is more binding with God than a simple vow, and he who breaks a solemn vow sins more grievously. When it is said that a simple vow is no less binding than a solemn vow, this refers to the fact that the transgressor of either commits a mortal sin.

Reply to Objection 2: It is not customary to solemnize particular acts, but the embracing of a new state, as we have said above. Hence when a man vows particular deeds, such as a pilgrimage, or some special fast, such a vow is not competent to be solemnized, but only such as the vow whereby a man entirely devotes himself to the divine ministry or service: and yet many particular works are included under this vow as under a universal.

Reply to Objection 3: Through being pronounced in public vows may have a certain human solemnity, but not a spiritual and divine solemnity, as the aforesaid vows have, even when they are pronounced before a few persons. Hence the publicity of a vow differs from its solemnization.

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Whether those who are subject to another's power are hindered from taking vows?

Objection 1: It would seem that those who are subject to another's power are not hindered from taking vows. The lesser bond is surpassed by the greater. Now the obligation of one man subject to another is a lesser bond than a vow whereby one is under an obligation to God. Therefore those who are subject to another's power are not hindered from taking vows.

Objection 2: Further, children are under their parents' power. Yet children may make religious profession even without the consent of their parents. Therefore one is not hindered

Objection 3: Further, to do is more than to promise. But religious who are under the power of their superiors can do certain things such as to say some psalms, or abstain from certain things. Much more therefore seemingly can they promise such things to God by means of vows.

Objection 4: Further, whoever does what he cannot do lawfully sins. But subjects do not sin by taking vows, since nowhere do we find this forbidden. Therefore it would seem that they can lawfully take vows.

On the contrary, It is commanded ([Num. 30:4-6](#)) that "if a woman vow any thing... being in her father's house, and yet but a girl in age," she is not bound by the vow, unless her father consent: and the same is said there ([Num. 30:7-9](#)) of the woman that has a husband. Therefore in like manner other persons that are subject to another's power cannot bind themselves by vow.

I answer that, As stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), a vow is a promise made to God. Now no man can firmly bind himself by a promise to do what is in another's power, but only to that which is entirely in his own power. Now whoever is subject to another, as to the matter wherein he is subject to him, it does not lie in his power to do as he will, but it depends on the will of the other. And therefore without the consent of his superior he cannot bind himself firmly by a vow in those matters wherein he is subject to another.

Reply to Objection 1: Nothing but what is virtuous can be the subject of a promise made to God, as stated above ([Article \[2\]](#)). Now it is contrary to virtue for a man to offer to God that which belongs to another, as stated above ([Question \[86\]](#), [Article \[3\]](#)). Hence the conditions necessary for a vow are not altogether ensured, when a man who is under another's power vows that which is in that other's power, except under the condition that he whose power it concerns does not gainsay it.

Reply to Objection 2: As soon as a man comes of age, if he be a freeman he is in his own power in all matters concerning his person, for instance with regard to binding himself by vow to enter religion, or with regard to contracting marriage. But he is not in his own power as regards the arrangements of the household, so that in these matters he cannot vow anything that shall be valid without the consent of his father.

A slave, through being in his master's power, even as regards his personal deeds, cannot bind himself by vow to enter religion, since this would withdraw him from his master's service.

Reply to Objection 3: A religious is subject to his superior as to his actions connected with his profession of his rule. Wherefore even though one may be able to do something now and then, when one is not being occupied with other things by one's superior, yet since there is no time when his superior cannot occupy him with something, no vow of a religious stands without the consent of his superior, as neither does the vow of a girl while in (her father's) house without his consent; nor of a wife, without the consent of her husband.

Reply to Objection 4: Although the vow of one who is subject to another's power does not stand without the consent of the one to whom he is subject, he does not sin by vowing; because his vow is understood to contain the requisite condition, providing, namely, that his superior approve or do not gainsay it.

Whether children can bind themselves by vow to enter religion?

Objection 1: It would seem that children cannot bind themselves by vow to enter religion. Since a vow requires deliberation of the mind, it is fitting that those alone should vow who have the use of reason. But this is lacking in children just as in imbeciles and madmen. Therefore just as imbeciles and madmen cannot bind themselves to anything by vow, so neither, seemingly, can children bind themselves by vow to enter religion.

Objection 2: Further, that which can be validly done by one cannot be annulled by another. Now a vow to enter religion made by a boy or girl before the age of puberty can be revoked by the parents or guardian (20, qu. ii, cap. Puella). Therefore it seems that a boy or girl cannot validly make a vow before the age of fourteen.

Objection 3: Further, according to the rule of Blessed Benedict [*Ch. 58] and a statute of Innocent IV, a year's probation is granted to those who enter religion, so that probation may precede the obligation of the vow. Therefore it seems unlawful, before the year of probation, for children to be bound by vow to enter religion.

On the contrary, That which is not done aright is invalid without being annulled by anyone. But the vow pronounced by a maiden, even before attaining the age of puberty, is valid, unless it be annulled by her parents within a year (20, qu. ii, cap. Puella). Therefore even before attaining to puberty children can lawfully and validly be bound by a vow to enter religion.

I answer that, As may be gathered from what has been said above ([Article \[7\]](#)), vows are of two kinds, simple and solemn. And since, as stated in the same article, the solemnization of a vow consists in a spiritual blessing and consecration bestowed through the ministry of the Church, it follows that it comes under the Church's dispensation. Now a simple vow takes its efficacy from the deliberation of the mind, whereby one intends to put oneself under an obligation. That such an obligation be of no force may happen in two ways. First, through defect of reason, as in madmen and imbeciles, who cannot bind themselves by vow so long as they remain in a state of madness or imbecility. Secondly, through the maker of a vow being subject to another's power, as stated above ([Article \[8\]](#)). Now these two circumstances concur in children before the age of puberty, because in most instances they are lacking in reason, and besides are naturally under the care of their parents, or guardians in place of their parents: wherefore in both events their vows are without force. It happens, however, through a natural disposition which is not subject to human laws, that the use of reason is accelerated in some, albeit few, who on this account are said to be capable of guile: and yet they are not, for this reason, exempt in any way from the care of their parents; for this care is subject to human law, which takes into account that which is of most frequent occurrence.

Accordingly we must say that boys or girls who have not reached the years of puberty and have not attained the use of reason can nowise bind themselves to anything by vow. If, however, they attain the use of reason, before reaching the years of puberty, they can for their

Yet no matter how much they be capable of guile before the years of puberty, they cannot be bound by a solemn religious vow, on account of the Church's decree [*Sext. Decret. cap. Is qui, de Reg. et transeunt. ad Relig.] which considers the majority of cases. But after the years of puberty have been reached, they can bind themselves by religious vows, simple or solemn, without the consent of their parents.

Reply to Objection 1: This argument avails in the case of children who have not yet reached the use of reason: for their vows then are invalid, as stated above.

Reply to Objection 2: The vows of persons subject to another's power contain an implied condition, namely, that they be not annulled by the superior. This condition renders them licit and valid if it be fulfilled, as stated above.

Reply to Objection 3: This argument avails in the case of solemn vows which are taken in profession.

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Whether vows admit of dispensation?

Objection 1: It would seem that vows are not subject to dispensation. It is less to have a vow commuted than to be dispensed from keeping it. But a vow cannot be commuted, according to Lev. 27:9,10, "A beast that may be sacrificed to the Lord, if anyone shall vow, shall be holy, and cannot be changed, neither a better for a worse, nor a worse for a better." Much less, therefore, do vows admit of dispensation.

Objection 2: Further, no man can grant a dispensation in matters concerning the natural law and in the Divine precepts, especially those of the First Table, since these aim directly at the love of God, which is the last end of the precepts. Now the fulfilment of a vow is a matter of the natural law, and is commanded by the Divine law, as shown above ([Article \[3\]](#)), and belongs to the precepts of the First Table since it is an act of religion. Therefore vows do not admit of dispensation.

Objection 3: Further, the obligation of a vow is based on the fidelity which a man owes to God, as stated above ([Article \[3\]](#)). But no man can dispense in such a matter as this. Neither, therefore, can any one grant a dispensation from a vow.

On the contrary, That which proceeds from the common will of many has apparently greater stability than that which proceeds from the individual will of some one person. Now the law which derives its force from the common will admits of dispensation by a man. Therefore it seems that vows also admit of dispensation by a man.

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS088.html](#)ion given in the observance of a law because, as stated above ([FS, Question \[96\]](#), [Article \[6\]](#); [FS, Question \[97\]](#), [Article \[4\]](#)), a law is made with an eye to that which is good in the majority of instances. But since, in certain cases this is not good, there is need for someone to decide that in that particular case the law is not to be observed. This is properly speaking to dispense in the law: for a dispensation would seem to denote a commensurate distribution or application of some common thing to those that are contained under it, in the same way as a person is said to dispense food to a household.

In like manner a person who takes a vow makes a law for himself as it were, and binds himself to do something which in itself and in the majority of cases is a good. But it may happen that in some particular case this is simply evil, or useless, or a hindrance to a greater good: and this is essentially contrary to that which is the matter of a vow, as is clear from what has been said above ([Article \[2\]](#)). Therefore it is necessary, in such a case, to decide that the vow is not to be observed. And if it be decided absolutely that a particular vow is not to be observed, this is called a "dispensation" from that vow; but if some other obligation be imposed in lieu of that which was to have been observed, the vow is said to be "commuted." Hence it is less to commute a vow than to dispense from a vow: both, however, are in the power of the Church.

Reply to Objection 1: An animal that could be lawfully sacrificed was deemed holy from the very moment that it was the subject of a vow, being, as it were, dedicated to the worship of God: and for this reason it could not be changed: even so neither may one now exchange for something better, or worse, that which one has vowed, if it be already consecrated, e.g. a chalice or a house. On the other hand, an animal that could not be sacrificed, through not being the lawful matter of a sacrifice, could and had to be bought back, as the law requires. Even so, vows can be commuted now, if no consecration has intervened.

Reply to Objection 2: Even as man is bound by natural law and Divine precept to fulfil his vow, so, too, is he bound under the same heads to obey the law or commands of his superiors. And yet when he is dispensed from keeping a human law, this does not involve disobedience to that human law, for this would be contrary to the natural law and the Divine command; but it amounts to this---that what was law is not law in this particular case. Even so, when a superior grants a dispensation, that which was contained under a vow is by his authority no longer so contained, in so far as he decides that in this case such and such a thing is not fitting matter for a vow. Consequently when an ecclesiastical superior dispenses someone from a vow, he does not dispense him from keeping a precept of the natural or of the Divine law, but he pronounces a decision on a matter to which a man had bound himself of his own accord, and of which he was unable to consider every circumstance.

Reply to Objection 3: The fidelity we owe to God does not require that we fulfil that which it would be wrong or useless to vow, or which would be an obstacle to the greater good whereunto the dispensation from that vow would conduce. Hence the dispensation from a vow is not contrary to the fidelity due to God.

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Whether it is possible to be dispensed from a solemn vow of continency?

Objection 1: It would seem that it is possible to be dispensed from a solemn vow of continency. As stated above, one reason for granting a dispensation from a vow is if it be an obstacle to a greater good. But a vow of continency, even though it be solemn, may be an obstacle to a greater good, since the common good is more God-like than the good of an individual. Now one man's continency may be an obstacle to the good of the whole community, for instance, in the case where, if certain persons who have vowed continency were to marry, the peace of their country might be procured. Therefore it seems that it is possible to be dispensed even from a solemn vow of continency.

Objection 2: Further, religion is a more excellent virtue than chastity. Now if a man vows an act of religion, e.g. to offer sacrifice to God he can be dispensed from that vow. Much more, therefore, can he be dispensed from the vow of continency which is about an act of chastity.

Objection 3: Further, just as the observance of a vow of abstinence may be a source of danger to the person, so too may be the observance of a vow of continency. Now one who takes a vow of abstinence can be dispensed from that vow if it prove a source of danger to his body. Therefore for the same reason one may be dispensed from a vow of continency.

Objection 4: Further, just as the vow of continency is part of the religious profession, whereby the vow is solemnized, so also are the vows of poverty and obedience. But it is possible to be dispensed from the vows of poverty and obedience, as in the case of those who are appointed bishops after making profession. Therefore it seems that it is possible to be dispensed from a solemn vow of continency.

On the contrary, It is written (Ecclus. 26:20): "No price is worthy of a continent soul."

Further, (Extra, De Statu Monach.) at the end of the Decretal, Cum ad Monasterium it is stated that the "renouncing of property, like the keeping of chastity, is so bound up with the monastic rule, that not even the Sovereign Pontiff can dispense from its observance."

I answer that, Three things may be considered in a solemn vow of continency: first, the matter of the vow, namely, continency; secondly, the perpetuity of the vow, namely, when a person binds himself by vow to the perpetual observance of chastity; thirdly, the solemnity of the vow. Accordingly, some [*William of Auxerre, Sum. Aur. III. vii. 1, qu. 5] say that the solemn vow cannot be a matter of dispensation, on account of the continency itself for which no worthy price can be found, as is stated by the authority quoted above. The reason for this is assigned by some to the fact that by continency man overcomes a foe within himself, or to the fact that by continency man is perfectly conformed to Christ in respect of purity of both body and soul. But this reason does not seem to be cogent since the goods of the soul, such as contemplation and prayer, far surpass the goods of the body and still more conform us to God, and yet one may be dispensed from a vow of prayer or contemplation. Therefore, continency itself absolutely considered seems no reason why the solemn vow thereof cannot be a matter of dispensation; especially seeing that the Apostle ([1 Cor. 7:34](#)) exhorts us to be continent on account of contemplation, when he says that the unmarried woman... "thinketh on the things of God [Vulg.: 'the Lord']," and since the end is of more account than the means.

Consequently others [*Albertus Magnus, Sent. iv, D, 38] find the reason for this in the perpetuity and universality of this vow. For they assert that the vow of continency cannot be canceled, save by something altogether contrary thereto, which is never lawful in any vow. But this is evidently false, because just as the practice of carnal intercourse is contrary to

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS088.html](#) yet these latter vows may be a matter for dispensation.

For this reason others [*Innocent IV, on the above decretal] maintain that one may be dispensed even from a solemn vow of continency, for the sake of some common good or common need, as in the case of the example given above (Objection [1]), of a country being restored to peace through a certain marriage to be contracted. Yet since the Decretal quoted says explicitly that "not even the Sovereign Pontiff can dispense a monk from keeping chastity," it follows seemingly, that we must maintain that, as stated above ([Article \[10\]](#), ad 1; cf. Lev. 27:9,10,28), whatsoever has once been sanctified to the Lord cannot be put to any other use. For no ecclesiastical prelate can make that which is sanctified to lose its consecration, not even though it be something inanimate, for instance a consecrated chalice to be not consecrated, so long as it remains entire. Much less, therefore, can a prelate make a man that is consecrated to God cease to be consecrated, so long as he lives. Now the solemnity of a vow consists in a kind of consecration or blessing of the person who takes the vow, as stated above ([Article \[7\]](#)). Hence no prelate of the Church can make a man, who has pronounced a solemn vow, to be quit of that to which he was consecrated, e.g. one who is a priest, to be a priest no more, although a prelate may, for some particular reason, inhibit him from exercising his order. In like manner the Pope cannot make a man who has made his religious profession cease to be a religious, although certain jurists have ignorantly held the contrary.

We must therefore consider whether continency is essentially bound up with the purpose for which the vow is solemnized. because if not, the solemnity of the consecration can remain without the obligation of continency, but not if continency is essentially bound up with that for which the vow is solemnized. Now the obligation of observing continency is connected with Holy orders, not essentially but by the institution of the Church; wherefore it seems that the Church can grant a dispensation from the vow of continency solemnized by the reception of Holy Orders. on the other hand the obligation of observing; continency is an essential condition of the religious state, whereby a man renounces the world and binds himself wholly to God's service, for this is incompatible with matrimony, in which state a man is under the obligation of taking to himself a wife, of begetting children, of looking after his household, and of procuring whatever is necessary for these purposes. Wherefore the Apostle says ([1 Cor. 7:33](#)) that "he that is with a wife, is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife; and he is divided." Hence the "monk" takes his name from "unity" [*The Greek {monos}] in contrast with this division. For this reason the Church cannot dispense from a vow solemnized by the religious profession; and the reason assigned by the Decretal is because "chastity is bound up with the monastic rule."

Reply to Objection 1: Perils occasioned by human affairs should be obviated by human means, not by turning divine things to a human use. Now a professed religious is dead to the world and lives to God, and so he must not be called back to the human life on the pretext of any human contingency.

Reply to Objection 2: A vow of temporal continency can be a matter of dispensation, as also a vow of temporal prayer or of temporal abstinence. But the fact that no dispensation can be granted from a vow of continency solemnized by profession is due, not to its being an act of chastity, but because through the religious profession it is already an act of religion.

Reply to Objection 3: Food is directly ordered to the upkeep of the person, therefore abstinence from food may be a direct source of danger to the person: and so on this count a vow of abstinence is a matter of dispensation. On the other hand sexual intercourse is directly ordered to the upkeep not of the person but of the species, wherefore to abstain from such

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS088.html](#) is a source of danger to the person, this danger may be obviated by some other means, for instance by abstinence, or other corporal remedies.

Reply to Objection 4: A religious who is made a bishop is no more absolved from his vow of poverty than from his vow of continency, since he must have nothing of his own and must hold himself as being the dispenser of the common goods of the Church. In like manner neither is he dispensed from his vow of obedience; it is an accident that he is not bound to obey if he have no superior; just as the abbot of a monastery, who nevertheless is not dispensed from his vow of obedience.

The passage of Ecclesiasticus, which is put forward in the contrary sense, should be taken as meaning that neither fruitfulness of the of the flesh nor any bodily good is to be compared with continency, which is reckoned one of the goods of the soul, as Augustine declares (De Sanct. Virg. viii). Wherefore it is said pointedly "of a continent soul," not "of a continent body."

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Whether the authority of a prelate is required for commutation or the dispensation of a vow?

Objection 1: It would seem that the authority of a prelate is not required for the commutation or dispensation of a vow. A person may enter religion without the authority of a superior prelate. Now by entering religion one is absolved from the vows he made in the world, even from the vow of making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land [*Cap. Scripturae, de Voto et Voti redempt.]. Therefore the commutation or dispensation of a vow is possible without the authority of a superior prelate.

Objection 2: Further, to dispense anyone from a vow seems to consist in deciding in what circumstances he need not keep that vow. But if the prelate is at fault in his decision, the person who took the vow does not seem to be absolved from his vow, since no prelate can grant a dispensation contrary to the divine precept about keeping one's vows, as stated above ([Article \[10\]](#), ad 2; [Article \[11\]](#)). Likewise, when anyone rightly determines of his own authority that in his case a vow is not to be kept, he would seem not to be bound; since a vow need not be kept if it have an evil result ([Article \[2\]](#), ad 2). Therefore the Authority of a prelate is not required that one may be dispensed from a vow.

Objection 3: Further, if it belongs to a prelate's power to grant dispensations from vows, on the same count it is competent to all prelates, but it does not belong to all to dispense from every vow. Therefore it does not belong to the power of a prelate to dispense from vows.

On the contrary, A vow binds one to do something, even as a law does. Now the superior's authority is requisite for a dispensation from a precept of the law, as stated above ([FS, Question \[96\]](#), [Article \[6\]](#); [FS, Question \[97\]](#), [Article \[4\]](#)). Therefore it is likewise required in a dispensation from a vow.

something acceptable to Him. Now if you promise something to anyone it depends on his decision whether he accept what you promise. Again in the Church a prelate stands in God's place. Therefore a commutation or dispensation of vows requires the authority of a prelate who in God's stead declares what is acceptable to God, according to 2 Cor. 2:10: "For... have pardoned... for your sakes... in the person of Christ." And he says significantly "for your sakes," since whenever we ask a prelate for a dispensation we should do so to honor Christ in Whose person he dispenses, or to promote the interests of the Church which is His Body.

Reply to Objection 1: All other vows are about some particular works, whereas by the religious life a man consecrates his whole life to God's service. Now the particular is included in the universal, wherefore a Decretal [*Cap. Scripturae, de Voto et Voti redempt.] says that "a man is not deemed a vow-breaker if he exchange a temporal service for the perpetual service of religion." And yet a man who enters religion is not bound to fulfil the vows, whether of fasting or of praying or the like, which he made when in the world, because by entering religion he dies to his former life, and it is unsuitable to the religious life that each one should have his own observances, and because the burden of religion is onerous enough without requiring the addition of other burdens.

Reply to Objection 2: Some have held that prelates can dispense from vows at their will, for the reason that every vow supposes as a condition that the superior prelate be willing; thus it was stated above ([Article \[8\]](#)) that the vow of a subject, e.g. of a slave or a son, supposes this condition, if "the father or master consent," or "does not dissent." And thus a subject might break his vow without any remorse of conscience, whenever his superior tells him to.

But this opinion is based on a false supposition: because a spiritual prelate being, not a master, but a dispenser, his power is given "unto edification, not for destruction" ([2 Cor. 10:8](#)), and consequently, just as he cannot command that which is in itself displeasing to God, namely, sin, so neither can he forbid what is in itself pleasing to God, namely, works of virtue. Therefore absolutely speaking man can vow them. But it does belong to a prelate to decide what is the more virtuous and the more acceptable to God. Consequently in matters presenting no difficulty, the prelate's dispensation would not excuse one from sin: for instance, if a prelate were to dispense a person from a vow to enter the religious life, without any apparent cause to prevent him from fulfilling his vow. But if some cause were to appear, giving rise, at least, to doubt, he could hold to the prelate's decision whether of commutation or of dispensation. He could not, however, follow his own judgment in the matter, because he does not stand in the place of God; except perhaps in the case when the thing he has vowed is clearly unlawful, and he is unable to have recourse to the prelate.

Reply to Objection 3: Since the Sovereign Pontiff holds the place of Christ throughout the whole Church, he exercises absolute power of dispensing from all vows that admit of dispensation. To other and inferior prelates is the power committed of dispensing from those vows that are commonly made and frequently require dispensation, in order that men may easily have recourse to someone; such are the vows of pilgrimage (Cap. de Peregrin., de Voto et Voti redempt.), fasting and the like, and of pilgrimage to the Holy Land, are reserved to the Sovereign Pontiff [*Cap. Ex multa].