

SERVING THE VOCATION OF CONSECRATED VIRGINITY



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INFORMATION PACKET

*- regarding the vocation of
Consecrated Virginity Lived in the World*



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Information Packet on the Vocation to
Consecrated Virginity for Women Living in the World

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Introductory Remarks

This Information Packet is designed to aid spiritual directors/preparation coordinators in their guidance of consecrated virgins and candidates for the Consecration of a Virgin living in the world, according to Canon 604.

It is understood that candidates for the Consecration of a Virgin would have a sound knowledge of the Catholic faith as expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as a foundation and accept and live their Catholic faith daily.

An understanding and healthy growth throughout the process of human development from infancy to adulthood is fundamental to maturity. Only mature women should be considered for the Consecration of a Virgin living in the world. Growth in the spiritual life, especially in prayer, has its foundation in psychological maturity.

To have a clear idea of what the Consecration of a Virgin is, implies a study of its basis in Sacred Scripture, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, historical studies of the Rite itself and of virgin and virgin/martyr saints, theology, papal documents and the teaching of the Magisterium. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Virginité," can be read as an introduction to this study. This Information Packet is merely a teaching/study aid in which to start a thorough preparation for the Consecration of a Virgin living in the World.

*Definition
of
Consecrated Virginity
according to Canon 604*

What is the Consecration of a Virgin?

The Consecration of a Virgin is one of the oldest sacramentals in the Church, and one of the fruits of Vatican II was the restoration of this profound blessing on virgins living in the world. The promulgation of this restored Rite for laywomen was on 31 May 1970.

Through this sacramental, the virgin, after renewing her resolve of perpetual virginity to God, is set aside as a sacred person who belongs only to Christ. The acting agent in the Consecration is God Himself who accepts the virgin's promise and spiritually fructifies it through the action of the Holy Spirit.

This sacramental is reserved to the bishop of the diocese. The consecrated virgin shares intimately in the nature and mission of the Church--she is a living image of the Church's love for her Spouse while sharing in His redemptive mission.

The consecrated virgin living in the world embodies a definitive vocation in itself. She is not a quasi-Religious, nor is she in a vocation that is in the process of becoming a Religious institute or congregation. Nevertheless, she is a consecrated person, with her bishop as her guide. By virtue of the Consecration, she is responsible to pray for her diocese and clergy. At no time is her diocese responsible for her financial support.

The consecrated virgin living in the world, as expressed in Canon 604, is irrevocably "consecrated to God, mystically espoused to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church, when the diocesan bishop consecrates [her] according to the approved liturgical rite." The consecrated virgin attends Mass daily (if possible), prays the Divine Office, and spends much time in private prayer. She can choose the Church-approved spirituality she prefers to follow.

Supporting herself by earning her own living, the consecrated virgin is not obliged to take on any particular work or apostolate. Usually, consecrated virgins in the United States volunteer their time to their local parish, diocese, or Church-sponsored association. Some volunteer their time also in civic responsibilities.

Who can be consecrated?

A woman living in the world who has never married or lived in open violation of chastity, and who by age, prudence, and good character is deemed suitable for dedicating herself to a life of chastity in the service of the Church and of her neighbor may petition her bishop to receive the Consecration. She must be admitted to this Consecration by her local Bishop; it is he who determines the conditions under which the candidate is to undertake a life of perpetual virginity lived in the world. Usually, a woman who aspires to the Consecration works with a spiritual director and has lived a private resolve of perpetual virginity for some years before seeking the Consecration of a Virgin. It is understood that this consecrated state of life cannot be dispensed.

In addition, the Church has never stated an upper age limit for a virgin to receive the Consecration.

It is understood that a woman aspiring to the Consecration of a Virgin is able to support herself by work or pension or independent means and has provided financially for her medical care.

A woman aspiring to the Consecration should be practicing her faith. She accepts the teaching of the Church and Sacred Scripture, with a readiness and capacity for personal growth. She should be able to give herself totally to God and the Church.

Approved by Most Rev. Raymond L. Burke, Archbishop of St. Louis and
Episcopal Moderator of the Consecrated Virgins in the United States

WHAT IS THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS?

[reprinted with permission From the Archives of St. Benedict's Convent,
St. Joseph, Minnesota -- no author given]

The word "consecrate" in the English *language* has many meanings, but its most proper meaning is the technical *and* theological one employed by the Catholic Church to designate a person, place, or thing dedicated to God forever by special rites and ceremonies performed by a person who has the power and jurisdiction to consecrate. The power to consecrate (outside the Consecration at Mass) is proper only to bishops, who have the fullness of the priestly office and who enjoy ecclesiastical jurisdiction. For some consecrations minor prelates and priests may be delegated, but the jurisdiction belongs to the Holy Father and the bishops. . . . When Tertullian, St. Ambrose, and others wrote of virgins consecrated to God, they meant those who had formally been consecrated by the bishop and there was no ambiguity in what they wrote, for the Rite itself was often described in detail.

Effect of Consecration

It is a Rite which, of itself gives the consecrated virgin the character of a sacred person. The ceremony of Consecration is one of the Church's greatest and most beautiful and at the same time most significant sacramental rites, comparable to the consecration of a sovereign or the blessing of an abbot or an abbess. Because of its great solemnity, because of the great care with which the administration of this great sacramental has been surrounded, there have even been those who mistakenly thought it was a sacrament. It imprints no new character upon the soul; but we may be pardoned, I am sure, for saying that it comes nearer to doing so than any of the other sacramentals, and the ceremony itself is proof of the fact that, while it is not a sacrament, it comes nearest of all the sacramentals, with no exception, to partaking of the nature of a sacrament, for in it is exemplified the mystical marriage of the virgin with Christ who is her Spouse.

The state of consecrated virginity is the highest state which a Christian woman can attain. She cooperates with God in the supernatural order. She has answered the call of the heavenly Bridegroom to be His spouse in preference to becoming the spouse of an earthly husband to whom she would be bound in many things. The consecrated virgins have attained the freedom of being bound by no earthly ties. Her bonds are those of supernatural charity which bind her to God alone. Yet her charity is great enough to embrace all men and strong enough to bring with her to God many souls of whom she becomes the spiritual mother.

THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT SHOULD DO

[Excerpts from a talk given 22 July 1954 in Minnesota--reprinted with permission of the author]

— by Fr. Paschal Botz, OSB

What is the Consecration of Virgins?

The Rite itself is not a short, simple blessing, but a very elaborate liturgical drama whereby the greatest possible blessing comes to an unmarried woman. . . It is a sacramental given to virgins in the Church and by the Church. It is a reserved blessing, that is, a special kind that is reserved to the bishops. I think at one time, in the early centuries of the Church, it was reserved to the Pope. And so it takes special jurisdiction to confer this Consecration. We speak of this as a constitutive Sacramental; therefore, as a permanent Sacramental. It is one that inheres and does not diminish as the years go by. . .

The Consecration of Virgins is not an act of making vows; [a resolution of perpetual virginity is] presupposed. However, at the beginning of the Rite there is a renewal of the promise of virginity, but that is not a necessary part of it; it is only a presupposition, an introduction.

Then comes the Litany of the Saints, which is also used in Ordination, and at the end of it the bishop rises and gives the blessing. . . . And there it is that the real grace of this Sacramental is indicated, for which the Litany of All Saints was prayed. The Litany of All the Saints is always a sign of a very solemn act, like the calling down of the Holy Spirit.

The Consecratory Prayer is the heart of the Consecration. It is a great hymn of praise of the sacred nuptials. I think it would be a good topic to meditate on because it is the heart of the Consecration, and it is patterned after the Rite of Ordination. So, it is very closely modeled after the Sacrament of Holy Orders. After that comes the conferring of the ring and the presentation of the Book of the Hours.

There are antiphons, hymns, and other sung parts and prayers; it is altogether a very rich liturgical rite produced in the golden era of the liturgical origins. Some go back to the third century for sure. . . There is another prayer that seems to go back to the time of St. Matthew, the blessing of St. Matthew. The prayer cannot be traced back beyond the tenth century--it is from that time on we have these full pontifical books with the prayers in them--but in this prayer there is a very ancient part which begins with "Sit quae in eis casta Virginitas." which some authors claim goes back many, many centuries, perhaps even to the time of the Apostle St. Matthew who is recorded as having consecrated . . . a virgin to God. While the actual prayer may be lost, the tradition remains. [editor's note: This Latin prayer that Fr. Paschal mentions here was in the older form of the Consecration of Virgins used before its revision in the 1970s.]

What the Consecration of Virgins Does.

First of all, it brings a renewal of the will to dedicate one's self to God. . . . But this is not the specific contribution or the spiritual achievement of this Rite that it brings a renewal of your will. I think it is essentially a crowning of your will by Divine Grace, by Divine Grace in the Church of course. And so it makes a difference. . . . there is a spiritual difference. It would be strange if

such a beautiful and elaborate Rite would achieve nothing. It is not an empty ritual; there is no empty ritual in the Catholic Church. It is not the same, then, as vows. In the early centuries there were consecrated persons who were not in religious vows. But the difference that it makes is the giving expression to the nuptials in the Church. The Church is by her very nature in spiritual nuptials with Christ, and if that is part of the Church's nature, then it must be expressed because the Church always wants to express her nature. We can see it makes a great difference in terms of new graces, exceeding new graces, that we could never have without this Consecration; a new great power of meriting. I would say an instrument, a principle, a meriting, a kind of spiritual equipment by which your love is incorporated anew into Christ and gives you a new power or efficiency, and that means in the end a new glory. You can well belong to the "one hundred and forty-four thousand Virgins who follow the Lamb," that constitute a special heavenly group. It is all of a new sanctity, a new grace, a new power, new Godliness conferred. Therefore it does do something to you.

There are two kinds of espousals in the Church--two pictures of the espousals of Christ with His Church. First of all, there is that of the more natural order which is between married spouses; and secondly, the nuptials in the Church of this CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS in the supernatural order which is a much better picture, a closer reproduction of the original which is Christ with His Church..

What Should It Do.

It should make you Church conscious. I think it is essential for a grasp of this Rite and its doings to know that it makes one more Church conscious. A spouse who gets married steps into a new social circle, so to say. And we, too, step into a new position in the Mystical Body. Guardini says that our age is a time when the Church is going to live in the hearts of men. And so your soul grows from individualism into Church consciousness--you become greater women of the Church, like St. Gertrude. And this fits you for the work of the Church. All prayer and work that you do receives a higher efficiency in the Church. So you have not only a position of honor, but a power of function even though you remain hidden. . . . Our Holy Father says in his encyclical *Mediator Dei* that Christ is present in every liturgical rite, every liturgical function and this is a liturgical function. Therefore, Christ becomes present to you mystically. You await the Bridegroom and the Church presents you to Christ visibly. The virgin concerns herself with the things of the Lord. There is a new function in the Mystical Body.

Another thing that it does, or another fact, is that it gives you spiritual fruitfulness. Christ in the world is there for redemption and that goes beyond personal sanctification. He becomes the spouse of the perpetual virgin in order to become the son of the perpetual virgin just as it was in the life of the blessed Mother. He became her spouse in Faith first of all, and in grace, and then He became the son by perpetual virginity. And so it must be in that apostolate in the world. We do not subscribe to a narrow concept of virtue, for instance virginity, but all this must be taken up into charity, a great flaming and fruitful charity where by you become public servants for the Church, become new mediators of the Church. All prayer and work is now more official in the Church. And so, I say, designedly there is a higher position in the Mystical Body. All efficiency comes to us not through natural means, not through flesh and blood, but through the Holy Spirit

Who distributes the gifts, and therefore, wherever He distributes such an abundance of gifts, as in the Consecration of Virgins, there must also be a new efficiency, a new apostolate in the world for the redemption of souls. And St. Augustine says in commenting on Christ's words in the Gospel, "He is My mother, brother, and sister who does the will of My Father," he says "She is my mother who gives birth to Me daily in the hearts of men." I think that is a magnificent text to express this apostolic aspect of this Consecration of Virgins, that one who gives birth to Christ daily in the hearts of men is truly a mother and brother and sister of Christ.

Why We Should Want the Consecration of Virgins.

As I studied a little bit of the history of this Rite of Consecration, I found that the Rite seemed to thrive in different periods of history and then relapsed again; but the times when it thrived were always times of great revival, of great new life in the Church, and especially of an appreciation of the great realities like the Mystical Body. We should want the Consecration because it isn't an empty ritual, it isn't like supplying ceremonies--as, for instance, in Baptism: after an emergency Baptism, the ceremonies have to be supplied, and that isn't considered superfluous. Even that confers grace. It is not what we call a mere Sacramental. Somebody who would call it "just a mere Sacramental," it seems to me, would need a little brushing up on the theology of the Sacramentals. Sacramentals are very great. I would hesitate to say to my abbot, "You are abbot by a mere Sacramental." . . . The sacramental of the Consecration of Virgins works, as we see, through the efficacy of the Church. It requires our faith united with our obligations, devotion, and love; and then comes God's crowning act, in the work of the Church, with those special graces and gifts, and that is more than my own subjective willing. As I said before, you become constituted in a new state in the Mystical Body.

I recall that famous event of several years ago when the present queen of England was crowned, that there were twenty-six steps in the ceremonies. There are many fewer in the Consecration of Virgins. I think the crowning of the queen of England is very empty in comparison to yours. (I hope no one will mention that to Her Majesty that it was an empty ceremony.)

An important obligation of the Consecrated Virgin is to love God more. I don't think that it should be given unless there were thorough preparation, I mean spiritual preparation. . . . Otherwise, there will not be the corresponding love which it should produce.

I think that if the privilege of the Consecration of Virgins is available, it should be accepted as a privilege under all conditions of the privilege, because it is a great spiritual thing. I would imagine that [a virgin who had been faithful to her duties for many years] would find this a tremendous boost spiritually. And it would even give the basis for a very intense interior and mystical life. I am convinced that in the ancient Church that was the basis for mysticism. When anyone talks about the mystic state, the mystic marriage, which is the highest of all mystical experiences, it always seems to match this Consecration of Virgins. Now, don't think that it is just a Rite which is performed and then one packs his grip and goes again. It is something that is lived out. And certainly the graces there would mean a great deal for one's life of love. And I think we all need that. We can never say that we have reached the heights of that charity. So, would say that even if we are busy and active and have a lot of assignments, that this would be a

wonderful way of uniting prayer with action. Or, to put it the old way, by letting our action be the overflow of our contemplation. . .

That's the doctrine of St. Thomas, i.e., that there are many crowns for the spiritual life. We don't go to heaven with just one crown. . . . You have already given yourself to God as completely as you knew how, and this is not a new giving, in that sense, but God is giving anew. God is crowning that offering of yourself in a way that has not been done before. You see, there are always new blessings of God, new approaches to God, new sacramentals by which God can guarantee perseverance of that will which He sustains And so, when we first offered ourselves to God, His was the greater part; ours was a token gift. . . . I think we should also bring the people, the world, back to this concept of virginity, of Consecration, as incorporating something--an objective incorporation into Christ in the Church. So, we have a special position then in the Mystical Body, that is, visible only to the eyes of faith because many times we have to retire, we have to drop out of the picture, we have to do our work in a hidden way. So it isn't a kind of pedestal in the Church, but it is a spiritual concept, a gift of the Holy Spirit. . . . And virgins are called the glory of the Church; and the Church has always wanted to deck them with graces. The Church has always wanted to show her appreciation of virgins in the Church. And so the solemnity is not a luxury but a necessity, like heaven itself. Heaven is ALL solemnity.

This Consecration expresses the very essence of Christianity. From the Old Testament on, this was prefigured as the spiritual nuptials of God with His people, Christ with His Church, and here comes the most perfect picture of it. The most perfect thing the Church has worked out in two thousand years is that Consecration of Virgins. And, as I say, it makes you a mother of the redeemed. It isn't just an honor whereby you enjoy your position; but it is a vital function in the Church. It makes you the mother of the redeemed; you become the mother of God on earth, and a mother of divine grace, so you are that much closer to the blessed Virgin too; and certainly it is a sign of great flaming love, and that love is incorporated, is glorified.

There is no rite, as far as I know, that so brings out the dignity of womankind. I think we should not merely have these things for ourselves, but also make them known to the world so that people learn what was the great factor of raising the status of woman in the world [Fr. Paschal then explains historically that to let women assert their own right to determine their own vocation was the great factor in bringing out the dignity of a woman as a person. The Consecration of a Virgin is the crowning of this great dignity of womankind.--Editor's note]

CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS, excerpts
by Fr. Paschal Botz, O.S.B., November 11, 1954
[reprinted with permission of the author]

The Consecration of Virgins is a sign of spiritual renewal. Always in times when the doctrine of the Mystical Body was appreciated, it seems was there a return to this rite. It surely takes the right kind of total faith. A return to “this most lovely of” the records of ancient liturgy” should correspond with a spiritual renewal, an inward clarification and intensification of the means to perfection.

In our preparation, there should be a two-fold consideration.

1. We should consider and clarify the problems, the history of the rite, and its legal elements. This kind of study, however, is likely to predominate to the neglect of the spiritual. Theologians and canonists both must study the whole subject further.
2. We must consider and meditate on the mystical elements, the contemplative character and power of the rite, the meaning of the prayers and symbols for our spiritual life (ascetic and mystical). Truly, it serves a retreat purpose, inward renewal in Christ, with all the new awakening, new attachment to Christ.

Look out for your spiritual welfare! Much of our time and energy goes to making a success of teaching; of our apostolate, our credits, our nursing, etc. That is all good, but it presupposes that our interior life is rich. How much time [does a consecrated virgin] for developing her interior life, for making real progress? Does she bear fruits of sanctity in the enclosed garden of [the spiritual life]? Or is it a wild garden of brambles and weeds? Does she adorn herself daily for loving communion with her Spouse? Does she adorn the Church for all the world to admire in faith? Does she grow in the power of prayer and recollection, in the use of personal sacramentals, in the contemplative ideal?

Did you ever realize that the Apostolate of Virginity is one way of restoring all things in Christ? It gives the world the highest picture of woman’s vocation on earth, the virginal state? We must be in love with the ideals of Christ. Today married life tends to displace the ideal of virginity in the eyes of many, but our true Christian emphasis ought to be on dignity, beauty, charm of spirit.

1. The Apostolate of Virginity, through the rite of Consecration. The consecration, performed in church, publicly, where the faithful and especially the young see it, is a way of exerting your true calling in the Church. You show forth your special position in the Mystical Body. You show forth the excellence of spiritual marriage and virginity, its pre-eminence over Family life in the sacrament of marriage. Therefore, you are serving the best interests of the Church in receiving the Consecration and living it out.

2. You do not lessen your works performed for the Church, but give them a great source of inspiration and contemplation and merit. You serve the needs of the Church better, praying the Divine Office for the Church's universal, redemptive, mission intentions. You exercise an influence for good on other Orders in the Church. You help to bring the Christ-ideal to other[s]. . . , in all humility.

3. There would be an opportunity to give to Christians and non-Catholics and pagans alike a perfect and hitherto concealed glory of your state, by speaking about the consecration, by writing out it, and spreading the good news far and wide. Let the world know that this rite is not "obsolete," as some thought, but-alive and effective to regenerate souls. You could make it clear what the Church has done for womankind, how the Church has raised the status of women in society against all paganism and secularism. The consecration must have been a powerful weapon to spiritualize men's concept of woman, to give her the exercise of her rights, given by God.

* * *

Spiritual nuptials are a mystery of faith.

Only faith can see the hidden "sacramentum," the hidden mystery. This is the heart of the rite, the "visible sign," the grace described. All the glory of the King's daughter is within (Ps. 44). The world cannot see the reality, but only a rich drama, colorful rites and prayers.

Pius XII, in Sacra Virginitas, (1954) says, quoting St. Augustine, that "Virginity is not honored because it is bodily integrity, but because it is something dedicated to God . . . nor do we extol virgins because they are virgins, but because they are virgins dedicated to God in loving continence."

Pius XII, in the same encyclical, gives the official interpretation of perfect chastity. In speaking of Spiritual marriage, he says, "Moreover, the Fathers of the Church considered this obligation of perfect chastity as a kind of spiritual marriage, in which the soul is wedded to Christ so that some go so far as to compare breaking of the vow with adultery (St. Cyprian, PL 4,459). Thus St. Athanasius writes that the Catholic Church has been accustomed to call those who have the virtue of virginity the spouses of Christ. And St. Ambrose, writing succinctly of the consecrated virgin says, "She is a virgin who is married to God." In fact, as is clear from the writings of this same doctor of Milan, as early as the fourth century the rite of consecration of a virgin was very like the rite the Church uses in our own day in the marriage blessing.

"For the same reason, the Fathers exhort virgins to love their Divine Spouse more ardently than they would love a husband had they married, and always in their thoughts and actions to fulfill His will.

"It is nothing else but love of Him that sweetly constrains the virgin to consecrate her body and soul entirely to her divine Redeemer. Thus, St. Methodius, bishop of Olympus, places these beautiful words on her lips: 'You, yourself, O Christ, art my all. For you I keep myself chaste, and holding aloft my shining lamp, I run to meet you, my Spouse.' "

* * *

THE GRACE OF MYSTICAL MARRIAGE

Spiritual espousals with your divine Bridegroom is a high grace. It is, in fact, the highest, specific grace of this sacramental. There are many other graces given, which are described in the rite. What the words and ceremonies of the bishop describe, that is the grace which the Church intends for you, prays for. Many actual graces are given, but there is also an increase of sanctifying grace. By the invocation of the Holy Spirit, a special communication of that Spirit comes to you. The rite is ratified in heaven; nothing is done in vain. You become a strong, living center where the Holy Spirit wants to unfold His gifts. Hence there is also an increase of Gifts. Your state of grace and cooperation in faith and charity are needed so that the tremendous graces are realized. It is no empty ceremony!

How real is this to you? The grace of spiritual (mystical) marriage with the Divine Bridegroom sounds remote and unreal to the world of unbelief. But to faith it is most real, the most lasting reality. Virginity of body and soul, approved by the Church, undertaken for love of Christ, puts you into a state of spiritual union. That union with Christ in grace is more real than human marriage. In fact, human espousals are only a faint echo, a passing and disappointing image of the spiritual reality that is yours. Pray for light.

Compare it with the coronation of a queen (of England). That was a long spectacle that drew the attention of millions. Great and long preparation was required. For what? For a legal ceremony, once a Catholic ritual. There were 26 steps in that coronation ceremony. Was grace given? Was it ratified in heaven? Your espousals the angels are watching as a distinct joy in heaven. "Into these things the angels desire to look." (1 Peter 1:12)

Your espousals are a crowning act of divine love. God comes down, singles you out, prepares you, takes you up into a union so sublime that all the high romance of man is empty and cheap by comparison. . . . [God] claims you as His own in a unique sense. This cannot be said of human beings in the same way. God loves you with a jealous love as a man loves his bride, according to St. Paul. Your will to virginity becomes fixed in the Church, and God raises you up to a sublime supernatural dignity.

In facie Ecclesiae. . . . The Church is virginal (and mother, as Mary is also the Virgin-Mother), and the Church needs other virgins to picture to the world her sublime union with Christ. That must become visible in persons like you. You have the high honor and calling to be visible symbols of that exclusive, flaming love of Christ, waiting for Him till He comes. You are not private individuals. . . ., but shining lights in the kingdom of Christ. You must let your light shine, and God will do the rest. The rite must allow you to sink in contemplation to the heart of this mystery, the greatest in your life.

Application of all this to you. It is a long way from original sin to Baptism and now into a new realm of the Church's mystic life. You should rise to the heights of prayer through humility and obedience. The Saviour looks on you with love and invites you to the intimacy of His

special gifts. “Rise, thou that sleepest and arise from the dead, and Christ shall enlighten you” (Eph. 5:14). You pass from glory to glory. As Esther, you go from door to door of the King’s palace until you enter into His Throne Room Presence. You sing the “new canticle” which only the 144,000 signed know (Apoc.). I would like to think that you received new desires, mounting ever higher in the sight of God. . . .

Analogy

The American Astronomical Society met in 1951 at Haverford College. There Dr. Shapley of Harvard estimated that there are 200,000,000,000 galaxies (like our Milky Way system). New worlds remain discoverable within our universe. How small all that is in comparison to grace, to the supernatural world, its possibilities, its discoveries, its adventures. At consecration, our faith opens up new worlds in the rite, unexpected heavenly constellations of grace. . . .

St. Paul says, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him.” The closer we approach the Divine Majesty, the less we need words, the more is our soul detached, the more recollected in the simple gaze and act of love of the Godhead. . . . “Your life is hidden with Christ in God.” There you spend your energies in prayer and sacrificial love and obedience and abandonment. Your activity becomes the outward fruit of that inward union. All is the overflow of love of the Triune Godhead who has deigned to make you hear His voice, to take you into a closer union.

Also, there is a new and supernatural fecundity. . . . The grace of the consecration will work out new offspring in the Church, unless one renders that grace sterile by lack of love, or by selfishness.

The mystical life can well have its fountainhead in this new consecration. Who should be more disposed for the higher interior life than the spouse of the Heart of Christ? Who should sense His every thought, sentiment and desire more than the beloved of His heart? Who should be the recipient of His favors more than she? By your very state of intimacy and unity you should tend to more perfect prayer and be better disposed for the more perfect gifts.

Should you cultivate the higher mystical gifts? They are and remain free gifts which the Holy Spirit distributes as He wills. You can dispose yourselves, but you cannot force them. That is the advice of St. Teresa, to cultivate the best dispositions, but not to force yourselves into such a way as the transforming union (Interior Castle, Mansion VII). You may desire these gifts, and pray for them, all in accordance with God’s Will.

Mystical Theology speaks of the “Spiritual Marriage,” which is the highest kind of infused contemplation. It is also called “Transforming Union.” After many purifications, works and penances, the soul is lifted into a state of calm union, the final goal in this life that the soul can reach, the Immediate preparation for the Beatific Vision. As one looks at its characteristics there are many similarities with the liturgical consecration you receive, namely:

1. Intimacy (hence the name “spiritual marriage”) There are no secrets, but sharing, a common destiny, blended lives. All is in common, joys and sorrows. One’s whole life is spent in mutual care and guarding.

2. Serenity (that is beyond raptures and ecstasies)
This reminds one of the Benedictine *pax, summa quies*. Being sure of one's love for each other, there is a peaceful possession and undivided pursuit of a common aim.
3. Indissolubility. This is no passing caprice. This follows from the marriage bond.

All this we can cultivate with trust, humility and love, by

1. Thinking only of God, of our Divine Spouse. Please Him in all things. Forget self (Ps. 44). Be indifferent to everything that is not of Christ or God.
2. Abandoning oneself to God in life and death. By being intent on His will, nothing else, having no other desire.
3. Having an ardent zeal for the sanctification of souls. Knowing Christ as you do, you act, work, suffer in all with Him. Have an ardent zeal for humility especially, for humility is Benedict's way to the highest love.

In all this, you must depend not only on your own will, but look to God, Christ's arm, to the sacramental graces. You must often, always revert to this grace, and make it operative by prayer and love. Let it become a springboard of highest personal states of prayer. Your mystical life of union with God has a visible start and guarantee in this incomparable consecration. Therefore, we set no limits to God's grace and working in our spiritual lives. The transforming principle and power is our sacramental in the Church. Constantly repeat: "Of myself, I can do nothing. In and with You, I can do all things."

* * *

SHARING IN THE EASTER MYSTERIES

The heavenly Lamb (Apoc. 5:6)

The Bride of the Lamb is the Church, the heavenly Jerusalem, come down into the world of men (Apoc. 21:1 ff.; Apoc. 22; Hebrews 12:18, 22 ff.).

Jesus took His bridal intentions to the Cross. What are these intentions?

1. That He Himself is the Bridegroom. He dealt with virginity, not in a detached and impersonal way, but in intimate relation with His own divine Person. (Matt. 9:15; Matt. 25:1-10; John 3:28 ff.)
2. That the soul in virginal chastity is especially His Bride. The parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins shows that the wise virgins are welcomed into the marriage banquet. Virginity is a higher law in His kingdom than marriage. Marriage, too, received special graces, and was restored to the idea of monogamy, to the status of a sacrament. But

higher is the ideal and state of virginity. Virginal souls are souls of His special predilection.

Virginity is a special gift. “Not you have chosen me, but I have chosen you.” (Jn. 15:16) “His disciples said to Him: ‘If the case of a man with his wife is so, it is not expedient to marry.’ And He said: ‘Not all can accept this teaching, but those to whom it has been given. . . . Let him accept it who can.’ (Matt. 19:10-12)

3. That He would remain a virgin. The Son of the ever-Virgin Himself remained a virgin. That is His teaching by example. It is meant to attract souls to the same mode of life. Along with His words, it gives us the divine thought and will, ideal and practice.
4. That He would die for His virginal bride, the Church. He gave His life in redemption for all the truths He taught, for all the example He had given. His love went even unto death, not just unto speaking words that are ideal. This thought is found in St. Paul to the Ephesians. He died to cleanse and purify His spouse.

Fulfillment of the Old Testament: God taught in the Old Testament. He chose His spouse out of Egypt, led her through the desert of penance and purgation, into the Promised Land. His People are His faithful spouse. The prophets stressed this theme of the spouse Israel. All this is fulfilled in Christ and the Church.

This of that when you are invited. . . . Go out to meet your Bridegroom! All is fulfilled in the bishop at the altar, when you go up with lighted candles. Think of what you are; think of Jesus Christ!

The ripe, rich, rare fruit of the Cross.

All graces, personal and social, derive from the death of Jesus on Calvary. Every single grace distributed in the world to pagan or Christian is merited by His Passion and Death, was paid for by His Precious Blood. Think of the sacraments. Or vocations, miracles, gifts, charisms. . . Think of the conversion of sinners, fallen-away Catholics, death-bed conversions. . . Think of missions, the spread of the Church. . . Of the priesthood, preaching, authority. . . Of the graces of the hierarchy. . . Of Religious founders, other saints, martyrs. . . Of family graces, corporal and spiritual works of mercy . . . Of the innocence of children . . . Of the prayer life of mystics. . . All the ritual and liturgy where Christ is present. . .

And now think of your Consecration, your mystic espousals to the God-man Jesus Christ as exquisite Passion-flower fruit. He died to purchase your soul, to lead you to perfection in this state. He bought the grace of your consecration by His Agony and Silence and Patience and Weariness and Words and Deeds, His Passion and His Death. The graces that flow so abundantly and gloriously in the sacred ceremonies of the Church, originally flowed in the bitterness of His suffering and dying. (Note Eph. 5:25-32)

You have come a long way from original sin! Like the Chosen People in the Old Testament [from Abraham, to Egypt, to the miraculous passage through the Red Sea, He led them.]

Then came the Promised Land, of milk and honey. It meant homeland, altar, temple, stability, peace, God's permanent presence, victory, truth of God, His Law, rewards, future hopes, His Presence!

The "oil of preparation". . . . [like] virgins with lighted lamps [who] await Him with the oil of preparation, and are not frightened by His sudden coming. Spouses are prepared for His final coming in glory. How to prepare? There are two points to be considered:

- a) the bride considers her Spouse
 - b) the bride considers herself
- a) The bride considers her divine Spouse: His nature, character, virtues, desires. How attract Him? What sacrifices can she bring for Him? This includes prayer, meditation, reading the Gospels, study. Where can she find Him? Where does He want to find her? She must grasp clearly His sacrificial nature and intentions
 - b) The bride considers herself: She must conform to the ideal of the Bridegroom. The basis of love is in the image of the ideal. What is her nature? What qualities has she? What imperfections? What blemishes? She must adorn herself for Christ and for Him only. And she must adorn her soul, not her body. That means virtues--the seal will be in grace.

She must be without spot or wrinkle. This means purification from sin, from faults, all kinds of stains and remains of sin. This requires confession and penance and renuncements. It implies a new rejection of the world and its attractions, of the flesh, and its sensuality, of all the passions, of selfishness, of the devil . . . and a mortification of desires for present pleasure, comforts, power, honors.

Chastity, especially, according to the Rite. This means more than not sinning. It means putting the power of emotions and senses into the service of grace. It means solitude of heart. Control your affections and bestow them on God's children and sinners. Chastity demands maturity of personality. Eliminate what is offensive to your Divine Spouse in the use of the eyes, the smile, praise.

Greater love than this no one has. . . . You must exercise yourself in all discipline, virtues, [and] especially in divine and fraternal charity. Humility is the rock-bottom of charity . . . be not exalted by pride with the "better-than-thou spirit."

Love the Person and Nature of Christ ardently, intimately. Let there be more fervent love. Love His will by doing it. Let there be a greater measure of charity. More perfect love by giving out of supernatural faith. Exercise the theological virtue of charity. Let there be readiness to give all in sacrifice for Him, just so you know He wants it. Learn to run on the way, rather than amble along leisurely. See that there is more perfect

cooperation . . . BE A GREAT LOVER. Victim love is the final test. Pius XII (Encycl. On Virginity) quotes St. Paul (1 Cor. 7:33) “The heart of married persons will always remain more or less divided.” Your heart is undivided. Abandonment into the arms of your Bridegroom should be your ideal. Your love must be spiritual. Be always a true and spiritual spouse.

Community of life with Jesus Christ. St. Paul says: (1 Cor. 7:34) “And the virgin thinks about the things of the Lord that she may be holy in body and in spirit.” In marriage there must be one common standard of living for success. Common thinking, common goods, common striving. Different economic standards destroy happiness and success of holy wedlock. There must be the same poverty. If you are His loved one, then you will suffer for His intentions. Then you will welcome persecution. Then you will be victims with Him. If He died for you, then you must die for love of Him. You must not look for happiness outside the mystic marriage circle. Your giving will be different: joyful, inspired, without measure, without considering yourselves. You will want to go to die with Him, for Him. There will be one will, one desire, totally His.

Great love and zeal for the Mass: There on the altar you bring your all. There are you united to Him with your whole being. That is the beginning and end of your existence this side of heaven. You learn all, get all strength; you tend to the altar, pine for the altar, regard it as your greatest symbol in life. The living, sacrificial Christ comes to you in death, to purchase you daily. His spouse came Forth from the opened Side of the Saviour. There you see your origin, your all.

Zeal for the [Divine Office], the canonical Prayer. As a Spouse of Christ, the virgin must perfect herself in prayer. Now you pray more officially in the name of the Church, in the voice of the Church, that is, united with Christ your Head and Bridegroom. There is a greater intimacy, more tenderness, more community of life. You will study what you can do for Him, always striving for, tending to higher prayer. Feasts and seasons, hours and days will be your total joy if lived with your praying Spouse. You identify yourself with the *Ecclesia Orans*, the praying Bride of Christ. Every thought and emotion of His Sacred Heart registers in your life. Nothing is too much: nothing is too small to be done out of total and perfect love. (Read Gertrude von le Fort, *The Hymns to the Church*).

Increase in faith, develop more perfect faith. After all questions and doubts have been settled, throw yourselves into this great heavenly union. To you is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom. You will pray for clearer faith and freedom, more single and deeper penetration of your mind into the mystery of His love. You will want to know better what you can do, and perfect your motives. You will pray for light very intensely. *Domine ut videani!* O Lord, that I may see! You will not want to be a blind bride. You will not want to be a mechanical bride, but the bride of His heart. You want to be free with inner freedom give more and more, to contemplate and lose yourself. You will want discernment of spirit and values, to live a truly spiritual life. You will want more loyalty, and the distinctive mark of a bride, fidelity.

[The late Fr. Paschal Botz; O.S.B., was a monk of St. John’s Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota.

Consecrated virgins owe very much to him for his encouragement and effort to see this sacramental restored in the Church, especially in the United States in the 20th century.]

SOME ELEMENTS OF CONSECRATED VIRGINITY

{Excerpted and adapted from a conference on Consecrated Virginity, 28 October 1954,
by Father Harold, OSB. Used with permission.}

The woman, who gives herself entirely to God and eventually receives the Consecration of a Virgin, is welcoming the invitation to the wedding feast and goes there to be one with the Master of the wedding; she is answering an invitation to permanent and undivided love. Like a bride in marriage, the consecrated virgin's love must be total and undivided; all other things are to be considered in the light of her Spouse. Note what St. Paul says--that a virgin can give herself to God without hindrance. The spouse of God is able to give all her attention to God.

Does that exclude the love of fellow man? No one ever said that consecrated virginity interfered with fraternal charity. It is a law of God that we must love our neighbor as ourselves, but we must love them in the proper way.

God is not to be loved just for Himself in heaven, but He shows Himself concretely in our fellow man. We must love our fellow man, but are we taking anything of the "first-placeness" of God away when we love our fellow man? Not if we love in that other person. That love of God in our fellow creatures, in our fellow man, actually emphasizes the "first-placeness" of God. We must not stop just at the creature's own beauty or charm, but see beyond those characteristics to God Himself in that creature.

Those who live consecrated virginity often show that love for God in others by their help of the sick, the poor, the uneducated. Actually, consecrated virginity, then, fosters love for our fellow man and the whole world we live in.

The second element in consecrated virginity is its permanency. Just as marriage is intended to be permanent because it is an image of Christ and the Church, so the virgin espoused to Christ in the Consecration of a Virgin is in a permanent bond of love and fidelity.

It is true that a person in perpetual vows has taken upon herself a permanency, but the Church has allowed Religious to be dispensed from even perpetual vows. However, history has shown us that it has always been the practice of the Church from the earliest centuries, from the beginning of this Consecration to Virginity, that the Church has not dispensed a virgin from the obligation of virginity. The Consecration is not the same as a vow, not even the same as a solemn vow. The Consecration of a Virgin is a distinct sacramental of the Church meant to make of the person a blessed, sacred individual, and through this sacramental the virgin receives the graces to live forever in this state in life. By making a vow, the person herself is the active agent; but in the Consecration of a Virgin, the Church does the consecrating of the person.

If there is any obligation that the consecrated virgin takes upon herself, it is to grow distinctly in love. What would be the sense of the Church in establishing a great sacramental to set aside a person distinctly for the service of God unless it were that she grow in the love of God very distinctly? When the virgin petitions for the Consecration, she is asking for a sacramental which is given her by the Church with the graces necessary to be a bride. She is therefore certainly to

grow in love. It means, too, that the consecrated virgin is certainly to decrease in the commission of sin and defects. That again needs grace. So, one who wishes to be a consecrated virgin, set aside as a sacred person for God alone, needs special help. The Church makes ready the graces necessary for her to live as a person wholly dedicated to the service of God through this sacramental.

It only follows, then, that anyone who foresees or who feels that her vocation to a life of virginity is unstable and that she may likely at some time be desirous of marrying should never ask for the Consecration of Virgins. The Church asks for maturity of character; most often one who petitions for the Consecration of Virgins should have been living some form of committed virginity for some time.

CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS

[Excerpts]

by Fr. Bernard Sause, OSB, 1 May 1954

— [reprinted by permission]

The Consecration of Virgins has been restored in our age with the intent that it will increase the spiritual life of the Church in its modern circumstances. . . . An analogy may help to clarify:

On the battlefield a soldier, in heroic action, far beyond the line of duty, performs an act of outstanding bravery. That is something he did for his country, and, we hope out of love for God. Now he is called to Washington, and at the President's hands receives the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest military honor his country can bestow.

Does this recognition—change his status? Of course it does! He goes back into the ranks, prompted to greater zeal because of the recognition and pride of his country; his presence stimulates the confidence of his fellow soldiers; he champions the cause of defense of his fatherland as few other persons can possibly do; he is the symbol of courage and assurance to a whole nation.

MARY IN OUR LIVES AS CONSECRATED VIRGINS

[As we study the Rite of the Consecration of Virgins, we can reflect on Mary as the Virgin of all virgins.] –

Mary is a mystery. Initiation into this mystery can come only through Christ and His Church. Mary is a unique revelation of the wisdom of God. With no other creature did God share the depths of His wisdom as with Mary. As the Immaculately Conceived, as Mother of God yet ever Virgin, as the one assumed into heaven, and as powerful intercessor, she constitutes an unique praise of the splendor of Christ. No creature was so irradiated by, so steeped into, and was so transformed by Christ's glory as was Mary. The configurative powers of the Incarnation, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of the Son of God and His outpouring of the Holy Spirit were prodigally realized in Mary. She is Bride and ever Virgin and Mother because of the inexhaustible riches of Christ, which fill her and overflow from her. She is more of Him than He is of her. In Mary is made clear to what a high degree a creature can become as a vessel of God through the power of Jesus Christ. How the grace of God brings forth a new creation is revealed by the way Mary was privileged to conceive of the Holy Spirit, becoming the Mother of the Word, and with this, the Father's pleasure remaining as a heavenly light over her.

Mary is a creature like to Christ and united to Him in a unique way. As such she was not without struggle and suffering during her earthly life. Although nearest to the mysteries of God, she lived in the obscurest darkness of faith. All her meetings and experiences with God veiled Him from her. In humble, docile listening to God she became the knowing one but remained the unknowing one in the silence of her Son. She was called into the broad noonday light of Christ as no other creature, yet she suffered in the constant darkness of sacrifice.

Christ possessed her utterly. With the sword in heart she remained erect in faith and love. In her one sees not only what absolute tranquility can and may be, but also how praise becomes prophesy and surrender. Her most profound knowledge of Christ she poured out in song--in her "Magnificat." The splendor of the cross of Christ operating in her from the beginning gave birth to this exultant lyric. Mary was completely dedicated to the cross of her Son, therefore, she had performed both to keep her silence and sing her song.

Mary is mother and virgin. In this she is a picture of the Church. Motherhood in perpetual virginity can be understood only through the Church, who is the Bride of Christ, chosen and loved by Him. He gives Himself to her. Through Him and in Him she is also a mother, bringing Him to birth in mankind and in the entire creation through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church brings Christ to the ends of the earth, being in travail until the end of time. Then, when His Mystical Body has reached its fullness, she will rejoice like a mother who gave birth while remaining a spouse dedicated to Christ in virginal love, made one with Him forever. This happiness can never be lost or dimmed.

Virgins should ever remain inviolate under the protection of holy Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. What this means, a text From the Office of the Assumption of our Lady into

heaven will clarify: “Who is she that comes forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army in battle array?” In Mary, rises the morning of the new creation. She is beautiful as the moon. Like that of the moon her light is reflected. Out of her burst forth the rays of Christ, the divine Sun. In her the Light of Life and Love begins His victorious course, extending to the ends of the earth. Mary is clothed in the enveloping Light of the Christ-Sun.

She is the bearer of salvation. But--what is the meaning of “Terrible as an army in battle array”? In Mary there never was opposition to grace. In her grace is most mighty life, a recapitulation of all power of good. Sanctity can bring its power to complete fruition in Mary’s soul, for she said: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.” Mary received the love of God unconditionally, and she herself loved unreservedly in His love. Because of this, the powers of darkness find her terrible and unassailable. In Mary, Christ has revealed His power of salvation through the Redemption. He leaves this power in her and in this world as a sign of His judgment of the world.

Virgins, in fact the entire Mystical Body, are under the protection of Mary and form with her the “terrible army set in battle array.” We may picture this army under the form of the cross. All the powers of the evil spirits cannot withstand it.

[Excerpted from a manuscript in the Archives of St. Benedict’s Convent, St. Joseph, Minnesota. No author given. Reprinted with permission.]

BRIDAL SPIRITUALITY OF THE CONSECRATED VIRGIN

St Bruno writes:

. . . The living exclusively of the one thing necessary — that is, the “better part” of sitting at the Lord’s feet entirely absorbed in Him alone. In this we discover the spirit of Spiritual Virginité which is the deliberate entrance into the mystery of the Eternal repose and Sabbath rest that is in God Himself. . . In this lies the secret apostolic fecundity of . . . contemplative prayer and sacrifice in the Church, cooperating in her redemptive mission through the sanctity of [her] life “hidden with Christ in God”. Clearly, this is the function of Virginité in the heart of the Church, the Virginal Body and Bride of Christ, which is her most essential characteristic in her relationship with her Lord and Divine Spouse. In this she is disengaged from every created concern and temporal care so as to attend in loving receptivity to His glorious, deifying, transcendent, immanence ever present in her heart, where He, in perfect love of her, brings her to birth by enabling her to love Him with the very Divine Love with which He infinitely and eternally loves Himself. Thus are His nuptials with her consummated as she joins Him in His Eternal Living Sacrifice of Love in the Holy Spirit for the Father. (taken from *The Life of St Bruno*, condensed from Vol. 1 of *Aux Sources des la Vie Cartusienne* by Dom Maurice la Porte, pp. 80-81)

Fr. Romano Guardini writes:

The consecration of virgins from the *Roman Pontifical* is a liturgical action of very great solemnity; it has a high rank. . .

A great fullness stands beneath the words and actions of the ceremony of the consecration of virgins. Calm, objective examinations take place. Decisions are pronounced; binding actions are completed; truths are taught.

The spoken or sung texts are surrounded by exact rubrical directives: they are the constant — reminders which decide what is to happen. The careful manner of the ceremonial bespeaks a sacred action. Following the objective questions and their respective answers are the formulas in which the binding action takes place; then follow the prayers with clearly developed thoughts; then hymns of praise in the style of the preface in which thoughts and prayers become one; then the psalm-like soarings in which the religious experience bursts forth. . .

Calm moderation reigns in the liturgy. The liturgy is in no haste; it does not want to “edify” in the ordinary sense of the word; it does not take pains to train and to teach; it asks not whether the men of haste are bored; it is not there for men at all, but for God; and thus it is there for man, but in a deeper sense; and ready souls are strongly edified by it rather than by a pedagogical over-zeal. The liturgy builds up (“edifies”) something which is much more powerful: viz. The mystery of the holy world about which St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and the Colossians speak. In deep moderation the holy action is accomplished.

Everything is clear and perfect. The action slowly falls into a pattern: the series of events that form it keep coming back and ascending rhythmically and thus develop the basic theme in all its

extent. We carry the restlessness of our times in our nerves; it is not easy for us to enter into this solemn rhythm, but we have no right to judge the possibilities and the calm of such an event according to our restlessness. Buddha's speeches are read with patience and found dignified. Should not we approach our own heritage with similar respect and receptivity? The soul must quiet down and step out of the chase, place itself calmly into the present, gather itself in alertness and attention. Here sacred action is going on. It has a different measure of time, a different sense and a different structure than anything else.

Neither should we forget that those who enter into this action have been enlightened through long preparation. The personal questions have been solved—should have been at least. The inner decisions have been made. Here a life which has been clearly understood inwardly finds its determined expression. Maybe it is distasteful for us to hear such intimacies of the soul displayed with such calm minuteness. However, if we examine it carefully, we note that word and action are so transformed and purified that whatever is intimate remains untouched and that nothing is surrendered.

What happens in the consecration of virgins? There human beings enter on a special way—the way of virginity. One is not led to virginity by a rule, but by a call; it is an extraordinary way which is chosen only with an extraordinary call and responded to with an extraordinary religious power; a breath of the *charismata* is working here.

From the earliest times on, this way was holy for Christians; the one who chose it stood very high. The virgin was, for the Christian communities, something especially holy and precious; respectful love surrounded the virgin.

The consecration sanctifies those who are ready for such a way in a deep, intimate sense of being set-apart for God. This sense of belonging to God enfolds in a special way their whole being and is the foundation of their state. This is why they yearn for this final form of consecration. The human being gives to God [her] word, offers [herself] to Him and is consecrated by the Church which has the power to bind and to loose. [She] is filled with the power which is necessary for such a life of dedication, of sacrifice and of magnanimity.

At the same time, the Church knows that all energy tending towards the extraordinary, that all mentality moving in an extraordinary sphere, can be either creative or destructive. The whole of history shows this. So the Church binds such human beings, gives them a state in her organization. It is a state because of its essence; the Church binds this state according to its inward essence into an expression, a form and a law; the Church transforms this state into a sacred and lawful one, so that one might remain in fruitful discipline while one is carried along by an extraordinary impulse, which though ever so weak carries in itself something of the charismatic.

What does virginity mean? It is not rooted in a utilitarian aim, so that through it a task might be better fulfilled and so that energies might be freed for a richer activity and a more selfless work. Virginity, in the real sense of the word, knows no utilitarian aim; it is essentially a state of life; it is a personal life in its whole fullness and intimacy turned in a special way to God.

Virginity in the Christian sense is also more than austerity of extraordinary [women]: in whom austerity frees and elevates them above everything and makes it possible for them to rest in themselves. That is a precious disposition, but only a psychological one. Christian virginity is more: it is a life coming from God, flowering out of Christ, given and founded by Him. Virginity is being centered in God with a total decision and a total exclusion, in a love and sacrifice capable and willing of receiving the mystery coming from Him; of keeping it and carrying it to maturity.

In this way living humanity comes to fulfillment, not through others, not through given and receiving from other human beings or from the other sex, but in a wide, special virginal freedom and intimacy. This is a human fulfillment, but one only of the redeemed Christian personality tending towards God which first of all is a tending of God towards [her.] This is a life essentially free from any utilitarian aim: a state; a plane on which one stands, a starting point from which one thinks, judges, and acts.

In her being the virgin is free from any aim; that is why she is free for every task which is offered to her by circumstances and by her call. Virginity really lived and centered only on God is capable of consecrating in its selfless dedication a great power to any task: it is capable also of accomplishing this task with special freedom and selflessness. This state is dissolved and its essential power is maimed as soon as such a task were to become primary, so that effectively it becomes the essence and the aim of the virgin state both in the consciousness of the individual and of the society, in such a way that it takes first place in the order of life and in the distribution of time and energy. Such virginity is no longer a Christian state of life but is utilitarian in its effects in the inward living mentality of the person.

In its depth the basis of virginity can only be contemplative, which however does not mean inactivity. It would be a manifestation of activism if one were to see activity only in outward action. The contemplative state is more genuine life and one of purer act: it is a purification, a gathering, an awakening, an illumination, a trans-flowing of the being in the movement toward God. However, it is an act directed differently from that of the active life.” It is directly turned towards God in loneliness and in silence; this compartment—in the midst of all outward activities—must be the basis of the virginal life; otherwise, activity will be supreme and will choke everything.

A pure call must lead one toward it. It is not yet a call to virginity when a human being, in the shyness of her untouched youth, shuns marriage or a call for virginity when a refined soul is repulsed by the running wild of sex in our age. It is not yet a call to virginity when in the vague and fluctuating feelings of puberty there is a longing for dedication, fulfillment and inward fertility that fuses with a religious feeling and longing; nor when a longing after purer atmosphere makes the world repulsive. It is not yet a call to virginity when one feels oneself drawn to the service of one's neighbor in social work, nursing, and teaching; nor when one thinks that that could be done best within an Order. One is led to virginity only by a completely calm and long experience, in which one recognizes, from experiences in different situations in life, that this way in itself is really one's choice. Neither is it a sign of a call to virginity if one is without passions and if one knows nothing about struggle. The virginal vocation originates not from the fact that one cannot find one's place in life nor from a weak vitality, but from a personal

decision. It does not originate from a psychological experience; nor from some sort of suggestion, not even from a religious suggestion; nor from an inrooted idea that one may not live but must be sacrificed. Rather it is a decision which originates from an inward calm and deliberation.

It is a readiness for being bound. The Church knows what is within a human being; she mistrusts enthusiasm. Would she not mistrust it, she would have been destroyed by idealists a long time ago. Therefore, she binds the will of the virgin into discipline.

The consecration of a virgin points to a way of vocation, a special meaningful state of life, not a utilitarian arrangement, but a state which in the last analysis comes from God and whose essence consists in an immediate relation between the inner personality of the virgin and God. This relation is of such exclusiveness, depth, and supernatural fertility that the only symbol for it seems to be the ring of espousals. Thus consecration of a virgin becomes the expression of a special dedication to God, of an offering, of a taking into possession, and of a holy seal of inward action made permanent through the [resolution] of the individual and the action of the Church.

If such is the case, then consecration is also an expression of a binding and of a discipline. We live in a time of rising religious enthusiasm. A friend wrote to me saying: "An unhealthy atmosphere is growing around us. To sick people, ordinary food is tasteless. A ridiculous stilted ethical rigorism wants to become the fashion." Not only is an ethical rigorism becoming fashionable, but also a religious one. The gift which was wished for by St. Paul for his followers is ore necessary now than ever: namely, discernment of spirits. Virginité is free and daring. Man puts himself outside the natural order in respect to the most sensitive point of his being. In the state of the counsels he puts himself in a different priority of values. Somehow he takes the charisma into himself. When this determination of the will is genuine, he receives within simultaneously a readiness for being bound. The form this binding might take may vary. The tenor of the time and the variety of individual dispositions influence it. But whatever the form, it always involves being bound to the Church.

Virginité and the Church belong together in their utmost depth, like marriage and the Church do. Virginité in its essence of religious freedom and immediate divine intimacy is in its essence directed towards the Church in a very special manner. It is directed towards the Church not so much in that aspect which is expressed in her law and order but rather towards the Church as a mystery. It is directed to the Church as a living continuation of the great Christian manifestation: of the entering of God into this mystery . . . from the Father, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. It is directed to the Church as a mystery in which the womb of grace lies and always newly gives birth to the kingdom of God, and which is a spring of life and an order of life at the same time: a gushing forth of a life and a discipline. It is not by chance that historically considered the breaking with the Church and with virginité took place at the same time. This reality of the Church stands out strongly in the consecration.

The manner in which the virginal life is related to the Church has changed in the course of time. . . It does not mean, however, a change in the essence of virginité. Rather a new understanding of the nature of the virginal [commitment] seems to be expressed by them in the Church, which is more austere, simple and more hidden in the depth of the person. Maybe—some signs seem

to point in that direction—a form of virginal life which has absolutely no outward signs is winning a greater importance: the virgin who stands amidst the world in a worldly garment in the life style of her profession and of her society is bound only through an inward decision and comportment. However, she too has a special relation to the Church. She too has that peculiar discipline of the virginal state in which a higher freedom is counterbalanced by a more complete binding and the giving up of the earthly creates space for a more direct union with the supernatural life of the kingdom of God.

We cannot say much more about that, for these are things which emerge from the heart of the age and are caused by God.

Probably it has seemed that this reality which we have discussed, together with the questions awakened by it, concern only women. This impression could be caused by the fact that the name virginity is taken from the feminine sphere; other things could emphasize this opinion too.

In the whole structure of her life, a woman seems to be more unified than a man. This is not only a gradual unification, but there is constructive unity in her acts, and between her acts and her being. This seems to be the starting point for her special manner of being. On the other hand, a man is so constituted that he stands in separated spheres (his being, his activity, his life, his achievement, etc.) and his behavior is determined through this division of spheres-and orders; he can and often does lead different lives along the side of one another; and thus whatever he does in one-sphere does not psychologically determine that he does the same in the other spheres. At the heart of the feminine character belong a unity and unification of being and of life, and of the different spheres of life subordinated to one another; whatever the woman is and does is more revealing of herself than is the case with man. Man's activity and the direction of his intellectual life tend towards things and work; whereas that of woman, on the contrary, is directed to life itself and to living beings. Granting the questionableness of such generalizations, it does seem that such a transformation of life style as is in virginity is more deeply expressed in the character and being of a woman than in that of man. Since a woman puts more in it than a man, it is understandable that the state should be named after the woman as its representative. One could go much more deeply into this question. . . (from a translation made for private use from *Ehe und Jungfräulichkeit* by Romano Guardini, translated by Sr. Antonio Foder, S.Ch.K., and Sr. Mary Anthony, O.S.B. Reprinted by permission from the Archives of St. Benedict's Convent, St. Joseph, Minnesota.

A COMPARISON OF THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS LIVING IN THE WORLD WITH RELIGIOUS PROFESSION

[Courtesy of Archives, St. Benedict's Convent, St. Joseph, Minnesota]

THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS

1. The virgin is consecrated (dedicated by the bishop to God); passive; is open to and surrenders to God's action.
2. The bishop receives the virgin in the name of Christ for the Church.
3. Presupposes the promise (resolve) of virginity.
4. The virgin lives in the world in a lifestyle that does not endanger or hinder her fulfillment of her role and position in the Church.
5. As the Church is Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:23-33), the consecrated virgin is the visible sign of this brideship and becomes in a special way an open channel of blessings for the whole Church.
6. She is morally obliged to live in accord with the graces received at Consecration. She is to live in the state of one espoused to Christ; i.e., to make action in union with Christ the substance of her daily living.

RELIGIOUS PROFESSION

1. The virgin consecrates (dedicates) herself to God; active; a binding of oneself to certain actions, a legal contract.
2. Vows are received by the superior or bishop in the name of the Church.
3. The vow of chastity is made.
4. By vows of obedience and poverty the religious binds herself to live in community.
5. The religious becomes a special servant of the Church according to the purpose of her Order or Congregation.
6. She is morally obliged to fulfill the promises of her vows according to their interpretation by her Order or Congregation.

INFORMATIONAL RETREAT, CONSECRATED VIRGINITY LIVED IN THE WORLD

Holy Cross Diocesan Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin, U.S.A.

Saturday, 14 June 1997

1. It is my purpose to reflect upon some of the fundamental questions regarding the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world.

Consecrated virginity lived in the world has been inspired by the Holy Spirit in the Church from its very beginnings. It is a most esteemed and delicate gift which is to be fostered and safeguarded in its integrity. Only by understanding clearly the foundations of the vocation can we truly respect fully and foster the vocation of consecrated virginity.

2. As you know, the Church distinguishes three states of life: laypersons, consecrated persons, and the clergy. Within the states of life, there are the various vocations. The laity are called to the married life or to the dedicated single life. Consecrated persons are called to the monastic life, the eremitic life, consecrated virginity, apostolic religious life, contemplative religious life, or consecrated secularity. Within the consecrated life, there is taking place the development of new forms which are yet to be tested and more clearly defined. The clergy are called to the diaconate, the priesthood, or the episcopate.

The state in life defines the form of the individual Christian disciple's life. In that sense, each state in life is founded upon a consecration, the gift of the Holy Spirit who configures the Christian life to Christ. In his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, our Holy Father Pope John Paul II gives the following summary of the distinct form of each state of life in the Church:

For the mission of the *lay faithful*, whose proper task is to "seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God," the consecration of Baptism and Confirmation common to all members of the People of God is a sufficient foundation. In addition to this basic consecration, *ordained ministers* receive the consecration of ordination in order to carry out the apostolic ministry in time. *Consecrated persons*, who embrace the evangelical counsels, receive a new and special consecration which, without being sacramental, commits them to making their own--in chastity, poverty, and obedience--the way of life practised personally by Jesus and proposed by him to his disciples. Although these different categories are a manifestation of the one mystery of Christ, the lay faithful have as their specific but not exclusive characteristic, activity in the world; the clergy, ministry; consecrated men and women, special conformity to Christ, chaste, poor, and obedient. (No. 31d)

The form of life of the consecrated virgin living in the world is a deeper adherence to the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the most intimate union with Him which is reflected in the ancient title given to the consecrated virgin: "bride of Christ." We hear it echoed in the beautiful refrain from the Rite of Consecration:

I am espoused to him whom the angels serve;
sun and moon stand in wonder at his glory. (No. 29)

In our time, the vocation to consecrated virginity has experienced a new vitality as more and more women have come forward to their diocesan Bishop for assistance in understanding and embracing their vocation in life. It is a phenomenon which brings new vitality, renewed faith, hope, and charity to the whole Church. Regarding the new appreciation of consecrated virginity, the Holy Father wrote the following in *Vita consecrata*:

It is a source of joy and hope to witness in our time a new flowering of the *ancient Order of Virgins*, known in Christian communities ever since apostolic times. Consecrated by the diocesan Bishop, these women acquire a particular link with the Church, which they are committed to serve while remaining in the world. Either alone or in association with others, they constitute a *special eschatological image of the Heavenly Bride and of the life to come*, when the Church will at last fully live her love for Christ the Bridegroom. (No. 7a)

3. As in the first centuries of the Church's life, when the order of virgins had its beginnings, so also today the life of consecrated virginity is lived principally in the world.

While consecrated religious may also receive the consecration to the life of virginity, their consecration is intimately connected with their religious profession and is lived within the primary call for them which is to the religious life. (cf. *Consecration To a Life of Virginity*, no. 7) Consecrated virginity constitutes also a distinct and proper vocation which is lived as the primary vocation for the consecrated virgin living in the world.

The consecrated virgin living in the world loves God and neighbor with the undivided heart of one who anticipates the life which is to come: Universal Church law tells us:

Through their pledge to follow Christ more closely, virgins are consecrated to God, mystically espoused to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church, when the diocesan Bishop consecrates them according to the approved liturgical rite. (Can. 604.1)

For the consecrated virgin, the closer adherence to our Lord Jesus Christ is expressed in her day-to-day activities.

The proper insignia of the consecration point to the esteem in which the Church holds the consecration of a virgin living in the world. While both the veil and the ring may be given, the ring must be given. Both veil and ring signify the espousal of the consecrated virgin to Christ, but it is the ring which most clearly signifies the union of one heart of the consecrated virgin with the Most Sacred Heart of the Savior.

The veil which may be imposed during the liturgy is not part of a habit proper to those consecrated persons who are religious or hermits and, therefore, separated from the world. Rather, it is like the veil of the bride in the Rite of Marriage, symbolizing the unity and fidelity of the love of the bride of Christ for her Spouse.

At times, there has been confusion between the life of the consecrated virgin living in the world and the consecrated hermit who separates himself or herself from the world. Because the

consecrated virgin lives in the world, the habit is not proper to her vocation, neither is the religious title, Sister. The hermit, on the other hand, wears a simple habit defined in his or her plan of life, and takes the title of Sister or Brother.

With regard to the use of a title or initials for a title after one's name, often hermits will identify themselves by the title of their hermitage or, if a group of hermits have chosen to live nearby one another in a type of anchoritic life, by the title of their community. For the consecrated virgin, however, the use of the title or initials is improper, since her consecration is lived fully in the world.

This is not to say that the consecration of the virgin living in the world is hidden, like the consecration of members of secular institutes. The consecration of the virgin living in the world is clearly public. The consecrated virgin is identified as such by the celebration of the Rite of Consecration and by the ring given her during the Rite of Consecration, much as are the married.

The presentation of the Liturgy of the Hours during the Rite of Consecration signifies the profound significance of the life of the consecrated virgin for the whole Church. The consecrated virgin makes her own the Church's daily prayer for the salvation of the world. Because of her intimate union with the Savior, the consecrated virgin is naturally led to serve His Body which is the Church, first and foremost by her prayer, but also by special service given to the diocesan Bishop who received her consecration or in whose diocese she lives. The praying of the Liturgy of the Hours and the special service given to the Church in no way take the consecrated virgin out of the world but rather unite her more and more to the world in her desire for its salvation, according to God's plan.

The special service to the Church is offered from within the world. While it certainly can take on the form of a paid service, it is usually given in the form of some particular service to the diocesan Bishop or Diocese which is given freely by the consecrated virgin as an expression of her total union with Christ whose Body is the Church.

In this regard, it is good to reflect upon the temporal condition of the consecrated virgin. Because consecrated virginity as a vocation is lived in the world, the consecrated virgin must, with the possible assistance of an advisor, provide for her own livelihood and social benefits. Before the consecration, the diocesan Bishop should be certain that the candidate has a plan for her temporal needs. While the consecrated virgin certainly strives to imitate the poverty of Christ because of her closer identification with the Savior, she does not take the vow of poverty within a religious institute which assumes responsibility for her livelihood and social benefits. Neither does she cede the administration of her temporal goods, as does the consecrated hermit. It is important that the diocesan Bishop and the spiritual director insist with the consecrated virgin on the prudent use of her temporal means.

With regard to her service to the whole Church, the consecrated virgin has a particular relationship with both the married and priests. Regarding the relationship of consecrated virginity to marriage, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us:

Esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable, and they reinforce each other. . . . (No. 2349)

In the life of the consecrated virgin, the married find strength and support for living chastely within their own vocation, observing the unity and fidelity characteristic of married love. They

also see in the life of the consecrated virgin the finality of the love lived according to their married vocation, the salvation of the spouse, full communion with God in the eternal life in Heaven.

Because of her spiritual bond with the diocesan Bishop, the consecrated virgin has a special rapport also with the priests who are the diocesan Bishop's co-workers. The consecrated virgin will see in the priest the sacramental figure of Christ the Good Shepherd, Head of His Body the Church. Her union of heart with the Savior will, therefore, express itself in a union of heart with the vocation of the ordained priest. The ordained priest for his part will see in the consecrated virgin the figure of the Church for which he gives his life and the finality of his ministry, the salvation of souls.

4. Since the consecration to a life of virginity is a true vocation in the Church, belonging to the state of life of consecrated persons, it is definitive, the purpose and plan of a life of perfect continence offered to God for His glory and for the salvation of the world. The suggested homily for the Rite of Consecration states:

Their consecration is a call to greater fervor in spreading the kingdom of God and in giving to the world the spirit of Christ.

The preparation for the consecration must, therefore, be analogous to the preparation for the assumption of any state of life in the Church.

The candidate for the consecration should be under the care of a spiritual director for a significant period of time, so that, with the assistance of the spiritual director, the truth of the call to the life of virginity may be tested. Likewise, too, the consecrated virgin will need the continued help of a spiritual director lest the beautiful treasure which she has received be corrupted by pride.

What are the elements of the spiritual formation of the consecrated virgin? The suggested homily for the Rite of Consecration indicates them:

Nourish your love of God by feeding on the body of Christ; strengthen it by self-denial; build it up by the study of the Scriptures, by untiring prayer, by works of mercy.

The suggested homily goes on to recommend prayer for the spread of the Gospel and for the unity of all Christians, for the welfare of the married, and for the abandoned.

The consecration to a life of virginity includes within it the notion of perpetuity, of faithful love of God and of the Church. Therefore, the instruction before the Rite states regarding the requirements of the candidate for consecration:

In the case of women living in the world it is required: . . . b) that by their age, prudence, and universally approved character they give assurance of perseverance in a life of chastity dedicated to the service of the Church and of their neighbor. (no. 5)

Before consecration, the candidate should have lived tranquilly several years of the celibate life. Chastity or perfect continence can only be embraced by a candidate who has matured over some years.

One of the particular areas which needs attention is education regarding the formation prior to and subsequent to the consecration to a life of virginity lived in the world. Only through

proper formation prior to the consecration will the candidate come to understand and embrace the vocation to which God is calling her. Likewise, ongoing formation, similar to what you are doing as a group today, keeps the consecration renewed and strong in the individual virgin's life.

5. The consecration to the life of virginity lived in the world does not require the plan of life proper to religious institutes or hermits who are separated from the world through their consecration. Sometimes in canonical commentaries on consecrated virginity, the vocation to consecrated virginity is treated together with the vocation to the eremitical life. Then, unthinkingly, the requirement of the plan of life which is essential to the hermit is attributed also to the consecrated virgin. Because consecrated virginity is lived in the circumstances of everyday life in the world, a plan of life as such is not appropriate.

The virgin must follow a schedule which respects her secular duties connected with her work and with her home. Her day, in that respect, resembles much more that of a married person or dedicated single person. Her consecration, however, leads her to sanctify each moment of the day by a following of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Poor, the Chaste, and the Obedient.

The virgin must be attentive to the nurture of her consecration through daily prayer, especially the Liturgy of the Hours, and, if possible, daily time spent in prayer before the Most Blessed Sacrament. The praying of the Rosary is likewise an important element of the daily schedule of the consecrated virgin. Living in the world, the consecrated virgin may need to change the exact times for these spiritual exercises from day to day, but she will give them prominence in her life, for they are the source of inspiration and strength for the living out of the obligations of her consecrated state in life and her particular vocation as a virgin living in the world.

6. The petition of the virgin for consecration is received by the diocesan Bishop. The diocesan Bishop celebrates the solemn Rite of Consecration. The required participation of the diocesan Bishop indicates the particular esteem in which consecrated virginity is held in the Church and the special relationship of service of the consecrated virgin to the diocesan Church.

The special relationship of the consecrated virgin to the diocesan Church is seen also in the presentation of the candidate for consecration to the diocesan Bishop before the day of the consecration. The Introduction to the Consecration To a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World states:

On a day scheduled close to the day of the rite of consecration, or at least on the day before the consecration, the candidate is presented to the bishop, so that the father of the diocese may begin a pastoral dialogue with his spiritual daughter.

After the consecration, the consecrated virgin should strive to meet with her diocesan Bishop on a regular basis, perhaps every six months or at least once a year, so that the diocesan Bishop may foster and nourish the sacred plan and purpose of the consecrated virgin.

The spiritual conversation between the consecrated virgin and the diocesan Bishop should touch upon the essential elements of the consecration, and the fostering and safeguarding of the grace of the consecration. A good point of reference will be the Rite of Consecration itself; it will provide the point of departure for the important spiritual conversation of

consecrated virgin with her Bishop.

It will be important that the diocesan Bishop understand well the spiritual relationship which the Rite of Consecration establishes between the consecrated virgin and himself. From the earliest days of the Church, the Order of Virgins has always had a particular relationship with the diocesan Bishop. Saint John Chrysostom writes at some length about the relationship of the diocesan Bishop with the virgin in his *Six Books on the Priesthood*.

When questions arise, it would be good to refer them to the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins so that Loretta Matulich or I may assist your diocesan Bishop and you.

7. Most diocesan Bishops have a vicar or delegate for religious. The purpose of the office of vicar or delegate is to assist the diocesan Bishop in his mutual relationships with members of institutes of the consecrated life. In the past, the vicar or delegate dealt almost exclusively with men and women religious. In some dioceses, like my own, there is a director of the office for the consecrated life who assists me in my relationship with all members of the various institutes of the consecrated life. It is, I believe, a better approach, given the recognition which is now given to the various forms of consecrated life with their distinctive elements.

The question arises regarding whether the relationship of the consecrated virgin to her diocesan Bishop should take place through the vicar or delegate for religious. If the vicar or delegate has knowledge only of the apostolic and contemplative religious life, he or she will be unable to give proper counsel to the consecrated virgin who is not a religious. If, however, the vicar or delegate has knowledge of the variety of forms of the consecrated life, then it will be appropriate to address questions and concerns about consecrated virginity to him or her.

In any case, the spiritual conversation with the Bishop every six months should be personal and direct, that is, not mediated through a third party. It is the diocesan Bishop's obligation to know the person and situation of those whom God has consecrated for the life of perpetual continence in love of Christ and of His Church. The knowledge will only come through regular meetings with the diocesan Bishop. It will be good for the consecrated virgin to suggest an agenda of matters to be discussed. Certainly, it will include the essential elements of the vocation to the consecrated life, particularly to consecrated virginity lived in the world.

In this regard, it is important, should a consecrated virgin change her diocese of residence, that she inform her diocesan Bishop and also the Bishop of the Diocese in which she will be resident. It is a courtesy to present a copy of the important documents pertaining to your consecration to the Bishop of your new diocese.

8. The association of the order of virgins, which is referred to in the Code of Canon Law (cf. Can. 604.2), does not refer to the life in community, although there is nothing to forbid that two or more consecrated virgins live together. However, because the life is lived in the world, the monastic common life is not suited to the life of the individual consecrated virgin.

The association of virgins refers to the forming of an association in the sense in which you who are the consecrated virgins living in the world in the United States have formed your association. The purpose of the association is stated in the Code of Canon Law:

to fulfill their pledge more faithfully, and to assist each other to serve the Church in a way that befits their state. (Can. 604.2)

The kind of activities and services which the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins has organized and provided are aimed precisely at helping consecrated virgins living in the world to understand more fully the integrity of their vocation in life and to serve the Church, in accord with the integrity of their vocation. It is my hope that your association will continue to grow and so provide the important service of information and support.

In your local areas, the consecrated virgins living in the world may wish to gather from time to time for communal prayer and mutual support. It will be good for any local group to keep in contact with the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins so that better communication may be promoted and greater unity among us may be fostered.

Work is in progress to have the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins living in the world listed in the Official Catholic Directory. Such a listing will give the civil status which your association certainly merits.

9. Since consecrated virginity lived in the world is a public state in the life in the Church, the Rite of Consecration should be duly documented by an official pronouncement of the Diocesan Bishop, with a proper certificate for the consecrated virgin. It will be important, too, that the Diocesan Bishop retain the original petition of consecration. Notification would fittingly be forwarded to the church of Baptism, in recognition of the distinct state in life of the consecrated virgin living in the world.

10. As I mentioned earlier, consecrated virginity lived in the world is a public witness in the Church. Especially in today's world, in which there are so many confused ideas about human sexuality and the human body, it is important for consecrated virgins to share with others, as they are able, the beauty of their state of life and vocation. There is a great hunger among young people for such a witness, for many of them see the emptiness of the world's approach to human sexuality and the human body.

Likewise, too, I believe that consecrated virgins can be particularly effective agents of a deeper understanding and unity among men and women in the Church and in the world. As you know, today's society is marked by a certain stridency, if not division, between man and woman. It shows itself in various ways and has even entered into the liturgy which is the font of our unity and communion in the Church. By the prayer and example of the consecrated virgin living in the world, witness will be given to the deepest meaning and reality of the vocation and mission of woman in the Church.

11. Our Blessed Mother is the Virgin of Virgins. In her virginal maternity the consecrated virgin finds the meaning of her vocation in life and the model for living the demands of her vocation in life. Through the intercession of the ever-virgin Mary, the consecrated virgin finds both inspiration and strength to embrace each day her vocation of undivided love of God and of neighbor.

Rome 2008 International Congress-Pilgrimage of Consecrated Virgins
May 14-20, 2008
Rome, Italy
May 16, 2008

LEX ORANDI, LEX CREDENDI:
THE RITE OF CONSECRATION AND
THE VOCATION OF CONSECRATED VIRGINITY LIVED IN THE WORLD

Introduction

1. The reflection upon the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world requires a careful study of the liturgical rite by which a virgin living in the world is consecrated in the Church. According to the ancient wisdom of the Church, the Sacred Liturgy is a “privileged witness of the apostolic tradition.”¹ The Church’s wisdom is expressed in an adage of Prosper of Aquitaine: “The law of praying establishes the law of believing.”² The Sacred Liturgy is the highest expression of our life in Christ. Rightly, we turn to the rites of the Sacred Liturgy, in order to understand more deeply each aspect of the Christian life. The Sacred Liturgy remains an essential source of our understanding of the faith and its practice.

2. In order to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the gift of consecrated virginity in the Church, it is necessary to study the liturgical rite by which a virgin presents herself for consecration and is consecrated as a Bride of Christ. Both for the virgin who is discerning the call to consecration and for the virgin who is already consecrated, the Rite of Consecration provides a fundamental and essential meditation by which the distinct vocation of consecrated virginity is correctly identified, so that the virgin may discern her vocation and its distinct beauty in the Church.

¹ “un témoin privilégié de la tradition apostolique.” A. G. Martimort, *L’Église en prière: Introduction à la Liturgie*, 3rd edition, Paris: Desclée, 1965, p. 231.

3. From her earliest days, the Church recognized the call given to the virgin to offer her virginity to Christ for ever, in imitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Like Mary Immaculate, the Virgin responds to her vocation in the world, drawing the world to Heaven and offering to the world a sign of the presence of its heavenly destiny. The Order of Virgins has its origins in Apostolic times.³ The consecration of virgins living in the world goes back to the earliest centuries of the Church's life.⁴

4. The virgin, who heard the call to give her virginity to Christ in a mystical espousal, presented herself and her holy resolve to the Church, in the person of the Bishop, a successor to the Apostles. After careful examination, the Church responded by consecrating the virgin, setting her apart as a sacred person, calling down upon her the grace of the Holy Spirit for the faithful and enduring response to her vocation. The rite of consecration has a rich history which has been documented and studied in a most accessible manner by the late Father René Metz. In 1954, he published his masterwork on the subject: *La Consécration des vierges dans l'Église romaine: Étude d'histoire de la liturgie*. Then, in 2001, he published a second magisterial treatment of the subject: *La consécration des vierges: Hier, aujourd'hui, demain*, completing his original work with the history of consecrated virginity since the restoration of the Rite by the Decree of the Sacred Congregation of Divine Worship of May 31, 1970, with the publication of the *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum*.

5. There are two forms of the rite of consecration to a life of virginity, one for women living in

² “Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi.” Quoted in Martimort, p. 231.

³ Gabriel Ramis, *La consagración de la mujer en las liturgias occidentales*, Roma: C.L.V. – Edizioni Liturgiche, 1990, pp. 17-28.

⁴ Gabriel Ramis, *La consagración*, pp. 29-34.

the world, and one for nuns, which, in some way, is to include perpetual religious profession.⁵ I am limiting my reflection to the first form which corresponds to the most ancient form of the vocation, namely, the call to virginity lived in the world. It is also the most commonly celebrated form of the rite.

***Praenotanda* or Preliminary Notes**

6. For the full understanding of any liturgical rite, it is important to study, first, the *Praenotanda* or Preliminary Notes, in which the Church expresses the nature of the rite and the requirements for its fitting and valid celebration. The Preliminary Notes are integral to the rite itself.

7. The Preliminary Notes to the Order of the Consecration of Virgins, with its two rites, the Rite of Consecration of Virgins and the Rite of Consecration of Virgins United to the Profession of Nuns, accordingly, treat six subjects: 1) The Nature and Force of the Consecration; 2) Principal Duties of Virgins; 3) Those Women to Whom the Consecration of Virgins Can Be Imparted; 4) The Minister of the Rite; 5) The Form of the Rite; and 6) The Mass to be Employed in the Rite of Consecration of Virgins.⁶

Nature and Force of the Rite

8. Regarding the nature and force of the Rite, the Introduction recalls that “the custom of consecrating virgins, which flourished even in the early Christian Church,” made it necessary to establish a “solemn rite by which the virgin is constituted a sacred person, a transcendent sign of the love of the Church towards Christ, the eschatological image of the heavenly Bride and future

⁵ Pontificale Romanum ex Decreto Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Pauli Pp. VI promulgatum, *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum*, 31 May 1970, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 9th printing, 1978, *Praenotanda*, p. 7, no. 4b. Hereafter, *OCV*.

⁶ *OCV*, pp. 7-9, nos. 1-10.

life.”⁷ The Introduction continues: “By the Rite of Consecration, the Church manifests her love of virginity, implores the supreme grace of God upon virgins, and, with insistence, asks for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”⁸

9. The Introduction makes clear that the Rite effects the consecration of the virgin who presents herself and, thereby, constitutes her a sacred person in the Church. Once consecrated, once constituted a sacred person, the virgin has the grace of manifesting the love of the Church, the Bride, for her Bridegroom, Christ, and the grace of foreshadowing the heavenly wedding feast of Christ and the Church. The virgin does not consecrate herself as the religious does through the profession of the evangelical counsels. Rather, she presents herself to be consecrated by the Church.

10. How does the Church constitute the virgin a sacred person? The Introduction makes it clear that the consecration is accomplished by the supreme grace of God, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which the Church implores and for which she asks with insistence.

11. The description of the nature of the Consecration of Virgins uncovers an analogy with the

⁷ “Mos virgines consecrandi, qui et in prisca viguit christianorum Ecclesia, effecit ut conderetur sollemnis ritus, quo virgo constitueretur persona sacrata, signum transcendens amoris Ecclesiae erga Christum, imago eschatologica Sponsae caelestis vitaeque futurae.” *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 7, no. 1. The author has made his own English translation of the Latin texts of the *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum*, in order to provide a fuller and more accurate rendering of the Latin original than is found in the official English translation which follows the principle of dynamic equivalence. The official English translation is found in: International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *The Roman Pontifical* revised by decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and published by authority of Pope Paul VI, 1978. The author has not studied the translations into other modern languages.

⁸ “Consecrationis ritu Ecclesia suum erga virginitatem amorem patefacit, supernam Dei gratiam in virgines implorat Sanctique Spiritus effusionem instanter rogat.” *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 7, no. 1.

Ordination of Priests, which is also reflected in certain aspects of the Rite of Consecration.⁹ While the Consecration of Virgins and the Ordination of Priests are essentially different, they are similar in the basic form of the two rites. In both rites, the candidate presents himself for ordination or herself for consecration, and the Church consecrates the candidate. In both cases, the whole person is consecrated. The priest is consecrated to act in the person of Christ the Shepherd and Head of the flock, above all, in the celebration of the Sacraments. The consecration of the priest is a sacrament which imprints an indelible character upon his soul. The consecration of the virgin is a sacramental with the force of conferring the lasting identity of a Bride of Christ, a living sign of the love of the Church for her Bridegroom, Christ, and of the destiny of the Heavenly Wedding Feast. The consecration sets the virgin apart as a sacred person in the Church, as a member of a distinct portion of the faithful, the Order of Virgins, not in the sense of a religious congregation but in the sense of a distinct group of faithful in the Church, for example, the Order of Widows, the Order of Bishops, the Order of Priests, and the Order of Deacons.¹⁰ Once the consecration has been conferred, it cannot be taken back. From the early centuries of the Church, the difficulty of the unfaithful consecrated virgin was confronted.¹¹ The virgin once consecrated remains consecrated. Hence, the Bishop should not proceed with the consecration of a virgin, until he is assured that she is firm in her resolve to give her virginity to Christ for the rest of her life.

Principal Duties of the Virgin

⁹ René Metz, *La consécration des vierges: Hier, aujourd'hui, demain*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2001, pp. 91, 108, and 188-189.

¹⁰ René Metz, *La consécration*, pp. 17-18, and 29-30.

¹¹ René Metz, *La consécration*, p. 39. At the Council of Elvira in the early years of the Fourth Century, the following discipline was adopted: the consecrated virgin who would violate her covenant of virginity (*pactum virginitatis*) by sexual commerce with a man should be denied Holy Communion; if she would repent and leave the man with whom she had sexual relations, she could be admitted again to receive Holy Communion "at the end of her days." Cf. Gabriel Ramis, *La consagración*, pp. 31-32.

12. The Introduction describes the principal responsibility of the sacred virgin in these words: “[S]acred virgins, urged by the Holy Spirit, dedicate their chastity by which they love Christ more ardently and, thereby, serve more effectively their brothers and sisters.”¹² By the virtue of chastity, the virgin preserves her virginal state, so that she may be totally for Christ and, in Christ, totally for others.

13. Consecrated as a bride of Christ, the virgin, in accord with her state and her gifts, should devote time to penance, works of mercy, apostolic engagement, and holy prayer.¹³ Regarding the duty to pray, consecrated virgins are most strongly urged to recite daily the Divine Office, above all, Morning Prayer (Lauds) and Evening Prayer (Vespers). By so doing, “they, uniting their voices with Christ, the High Priest, and holy Church, they will praise the heavenly Father unceasingly, and they will intercede for the salvation of the whole world.”¹⁴ The relationship of the virginal state to the priestly office is seen in the requirement of the praying of the Liturgy of the Hours with the priests and for the sake of the priestly mission of Christ.

Those to Whom the Consecration Can Be Imparted

14. To whom may the Church impart the virginal consecration? There are two categories of candidates: nuns and women carrying out a secular life. The first requirement is the same for both: the candidate must “never have been married and must never have lived publicly or manifestly in a state contrary to chastity.”¹⁵ In some places, at least in North America, there has been a confusion about the second part of the requirement. Some further explanation will be

¹² “virgines sacrae, Spiritu Sancto impulsae, suam castitatem devovent quo Christum ardentius diligant fratribusque expeditius deserviant.” *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 7, no. 2.

¹³ *OCV*, p. 7, no. 2.

¹⁴ “vocem suam cum Christo summo Sacerdote sanctaque Ecclesia, caelestem Patrem sine intermissione laudabunt et pro totius mundi salute intercedent.” *OCV*, p. 7, no. 2.

¹⁵ “numquam nuptias celebraverint neque publice seu manifeste in statu castitati contrario vixerint.” *OCV*, pp. 7-8, nos. 4a and 5a.

helpful.

15. The requirement of never living publicly or manifestly in a state contrary to chastity guarantees the integrity of the consecration. In other words, the consecration is for a woman who has preserved her virginity and offers her virginity to Christ and His Church for consecration. Public or manifest acts are committed with another and, therefore, are clearly known by another, even if by only one individual. An act contrary to chastity in what pertains to the state of virginity is the conscious and deliberate giving of one's body for sexual union by which the state of virginity is lost. Once the virgin has knowingly and willingly given up her virginity, even by a single act, she no longer has the gift of virginity to offer to Christ and the Church. In the case of rape or involuntary incest, one can rightly say that the woman still has the gift of her virginity to offer, for she has not knowingly and willingly given it up.

16. What about the woman who sadly has given up her virginity but now wants to offer to Christ a totally chaste life, even though she does not hear the call to another form of consecrated life, for example, religious life or consecrated secularity? While she does not have virginity to offer for consecration, she certainly can consecrate herself totally to Christ by a private vow of chastity, which is recognized by the Church and is made before the Bishop or priest, also within the celebration of the Holy Mass.

17. Virgins living in the world also “must offer confidence that they will persevere in a chaste life and in a life dedicated to the service of the Church and neighbor.”¹⁶ Such confidence is manifested by age, by prudence, and by proven morals to the agreement of all. A minimum age is no longer given.¹⁷ Age must be understood to constitute living in the state of virginity for a

¹⁶ “f idem praebeant in vita ca sta atque Ecc lesiae p roximique servitio dic ata se perseveraturas.” *OCV*, p. 8, no. 5b.

¹⁷ René Metz, *La consécration*, pp. 58-60.

number of years, after attaining adulthood. The virgin who presents herself for consecration must have reached the age at which she is serene in the practice of the chastity by which she is able to fulfill her resolve to remain in the virginal state for her lifetime.

18. The final condition is the admission for the consecration by the Bishop who is the Ordinary of the place, that is, in the language of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, the Diocesan Bishop.¹⁸ The listing of the requirements for the imparting of the consecration concludes by noting that it is for the Bishop to establish “by what manner and rationale the virgins living in the world are to oblige themselves to embrace perpetually the virginal life.”¹⁹ Here, the question arises regarding the right of a virgin who is fully disposed for the consecration to receive the consecration. Some Bishops have refused to celebrate the Rite of Consecration for various reasons which have nothing to do with the virgin who is requesting the consecration. Some, for instance, fear that they will become civilly liable for any misdeed of the virgin, once she has been consecrated. In any case, it does not seem just to deny the vocation to consecrated virginity in a person without good reason.

The Minister of the Consecration

19. The fourth subject is the minister of the Consecration. The Introduction indicates one only minister of the consecration of virgins, namely, the Bishop who is Ordinary of the place, that is, the Diocesan Bishop. Such is the ancient discipline of the Church. In the United States of America, at least, there has been a significant confusion or inattention regarding the proper minister of the Rite of Consecration. Some Diocesan Bishops insist that the consecration of virgins living in the world be carried out by a priest or auxiliary bishop. Because it is the Diocesan Bishop who admits the virgin for consecration and to whom she responds as her sole superior in the consecrated life, it is clear that the Diocesan Bishop should impart the

¹⁸ *OCV*, p. 8, no. 5c.

¹⁹ “statuere quo modo ac ratione virgines vitam saecularem agentes se obligent ad vitam virginalem perpetuo amplectendam.” *OCV*, p. 8, no. 5.

consecration.

20. What about the validity of the consecration imparted by a priest or bishop other than the Diocesan Bishop? I have learned only today of an official response from the Holy See, indicating that the consecration is not validly imparted by a priest and that, in the case of a virgin who was consecrated by a priest, the situation must be sanated by the private imparting of the consecration by the Diocesan Bishop. I do not have in hand the response and, therefore, cannot comment further. I do not believe that there has been any other official response to the question. It would seem to me that the consecration carried out by a priest or auxiliary Bishop, at the explicit direction of the Diocesan Bishop, is validly imparted, even though the full sign of the consecration by the Diocesan Bishop is not rightly respected. In other words, in the case of the consecration imparted by a priest or auxiliary Bishop, at the direction of the Diocesan Bishop, it seems clear that the Church intended to consecrate the virgin. It must be observed, nevertheless, that liturgical law indicates one only minister of the Consecration of Virgins Living in the World, namely, the Diocesan Bishop. I note the commentary of the late Father René Metz on the question:

It is then, indeed, the bishop who is competent, and he alone, in principle, to consecrate virgins. The ritual (Preliminary Notes, no. 6), furthermore, makes clear that the true minister is not just any bishop but the bishop who has the actual charge of a diocese: “the Bishop ordinary of the place” (*episcopus ordinarius loci*). That means that the role which falls to the minister of the consecration is not that of a simple executor, notably when the candidate for the consecration has decided to lead the independent life in the world. The Church confides to the Bishop the effective responsibility for this woman and for the life which she will lead subsequently as a consecrated virgin.²⁰

²⁰ “C’est donc bien l’évêque qui est com pétent, et lui seul en principe, pour consacrer les vierges. Cependant le rituel (Notes préliminaires, n. 6) précise que le véritable ministre n’est pas n’importe quel évêque, mais l’évêque qui a la charge actuelle d’un diocèse: « l’évêque ordinaire

21. To further underline the particular relationship between the Bishop and the consecrated virgin, the first part of the rite specifies that on a day near the day of the celebration or, at least, on the day before the celebration of the rite, the virgin to be consecrated meets with the Diocesan Bishop to begin a pastoral conversation between herself and “the Father of the diocese.”²¹ The conversation with the Diocesan Bishop, which begins in the days before the consecration is to continue regularly throughout the years of life of the consecrated virgin.

22. Regarding the form of the Rite of Consecration, I note one observation regarding the consecration of nuns, for seemingly, by error, it has been introduced into the Rite of Consecration for Virgins living in the world. The Preliminary Notes state that the rite of religious profession and the rite of consecration to virginity, which are usually united, can be separated, but with the caution that parts of the rite not be duplicated.²² In the Rite of Consecration for virgins living in the world, the option of not giving the veil, which is among the most ancient of the insignia of the consecration, seems to have come from the situation of the professed nun who would already have received the veil and for whom it would not make sense to repeat that part of the rite.²³

Form of the Rite

23. The form of the Rite of Consecration is sevenfold. First, the virgin is called forward, similar to the call of the candidate in the Rite of Ordination of Priests, and she presents herself, together

du lieu » (*episcopus ordinarius loci*). Cela signifie bien que le rôle qui revient au ministre de la consécration n'est pas celui d'un simple exécutant, notamment quand la candidate à la consécration est décidée à mener la vie indépendante dans le monde. L'Église confie à l'évêque la responsabilité effective de cette femme et de la vie qu'elle mènera par la suite en tant que vierge consacrée.” René Metz, *La consécration*, pp. 166-167.

²¹ “dioeceseos Patrem.” *OCV*, Caput I, no. 2.

²² *OCV*, Praenotanda, no. 7.

with two companions, either already consecrated virgins or lay women, before the Bishop.²⁴ Secondly, the Bishop gives the homily or instruction regarding consecrated virginity. Thirdly, the Bishop questions the virgin, asking whether she wishes to persevere in her resolve of remaining in the virginal state forever and to receive the consecration. In the fourth place is the Litany of the Saints by which prayer is directed to God the Father, and the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the Saints is sought. In the fifth place, the virgin declares again her resolve of chastity in the virginal state. The sixth and the central part is the solemn consecration of the virgin by which “Mother Church prays to the heavenly Father, in order that he pour out abundantly upon the virgin the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵ Lastly, the insignia of the consecration are handed over to the newly consecrated virgin. The insignia express externally what has happened to the virgin internally.²⁶

The Mass To Be Employed

24. The last part of the Preliminary Notes treats the Mass within which the Rite of Consecration is to be celebrated. The first and most fitting possibility is the Ritual Mass, “On the Day of Consecration of Virgins.” If, however, the consecration is to take place on a solemnity or on a Sunday of Advent, Lent or Easter, the Mass of the Day must be used, with, however, the addition of the special formularies in the Eucharistic Prayer and the Final Blessing.²⁷

25. Because the Liturgy of the Word, adopted for the Consecration of Virgins, is strong in illustrating the good of virginity and its service in the Church, when it is not possible to celebrate the Ritual Mass, one of the particular readings from the Lectionary for the Consecration of

²³ *OCV*, Caput I, no. 26; and Caput II, no. 66.

²⁴ *OCV*, Caput I, no. 13.

²⁵ “qua Mater Ecclesia Patrem caelestem exorat ut Sancti Spiritus dona super virgines abundanter effundat.” *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 9, no. 7f.

²⁶ *OCV*, Praenotanda, pp. 8-9, no. 7.

²⁷ *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 9, no. 8.

Virgins may be used, except during the Sacred Triduum, on the Solemnities of the Nativity of Our Lord, the Epiphany, the Ascension, Pentecost and Corpus Christi, and on other holy days of obligation.²⁸ In the first chapter of the Rite, it is further indicated that it is fitting to celebrate the consecration of virgins during the Octave of Easter, on solemnities, above all, which have reference to the Incarnation of our Lord, on Sundays, on the feast days of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the virgin saints.²⁹

26. Finally, the Introduction establishes that white is the proper liturgical color for the Ritual Mass.³⁰

Place of the Celebration of the Consecration

27. The relationship of the consecrated virgin to the diocese and the Diocesan Bishop makes it very fitting that the Rite of Consecration take place in the Cathedral church, unless local circumstances or customs suggest otherwise.³¹ Also, given the profound spiritual significance of the consecration of virgins, the notice of the day, time, and place of the consecration should be given to the whole diocese, “most of all to foster the praise of chastity itself, the ecclesial sense, and the edification and participation of the people of God.”³²

The Rite Itself

28. The custom is for the Bishop to consecrate the virgin at the cathedra or chair of the Bishop. A faldstool for the Bishop, placed before the altar, can be used if it helps the participation of the

²⁸ *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 9, no. 9.

²⁹ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 10, no. 1.

³⁰ *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 9, no. 10.

³¹ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 10, no. 3.

³² “Maxim e ad castitatis laudem, sensum ecclesialem, aedificationem concursus que populi Dei fovendum.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 10, no. 4.

faithful. A seat for the virgin to be consecrated is also placed in the sanctuary.³³

29. Fittingly, the virgin to be consecrated is part of the procession at the beginning of the celebration of the Mass. The virgin is to be accompanied by two already consecrated virgins or by two women chosen from the laity. They also lead the virgin to the altar, when she is called to present herself before the Bishop.³⁴

30. At the beginning of the Mass, the virgin to be consecrated remains in the pews or body of the church.³⁵ The same practice occurs in the ordination of priests; the candidate for ordination remains in the pews until he is called to present himself before the Bishop.

31. The Liturgy of the Word takes place in the usual manner, with attention to the special readings which illustrate the gift of consecrated virginity in the Church. The Profession of Faith is not said, even if the rubrics call for it to be said. Since there is the Litany of the Saints, the General Intercessions are also omitted.³⁶

32. Following the reading of the Gospel, the Bishop is seated at the Cathedra or faldstool prepared for him. When the virgin to be consecrated is called, she approaches, with lighted candle and in the company of her two companions. Like the candle, like Christ, she is to be consumed by pure and selfless love. The lighted candle symbolizes her following of Christ the Bridegroom in purity and chastity. At the call, the virgin comes to the entrance of the sanctuary, with her two companions, but remains outside the sanctuary.³⁷ The Bishop then calls the virgin to be consecrated, and she responds with the singing of a beautiful text, and, while she is singing,

³³ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 10, no. 6.

³⁴ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 11, no. 10.

³⁵ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 11, no. 11.

³⁶ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 11, no. 12a-c.

she enters into the sanctuary. The text which the virgin sings speaks of following Christ and implores from God the fulfillment of her hope of consecration.³⁸ There is also an alternative rite of calling, if the lighted candle is not used.³⁹ Once the virgin has entered the sanctuary, the candle is placed in a stand, in which it remains until it is restored to her, at the end of the Mass, for the recessional.⁴⁰

Homily or Instruction

33. The Bishop then gives the homily or instruction. The rite contains a suggested text which expresses the supreme good of consecrated virginity for the Church. Some phrases of the text are particularly illustrative. It speaks of the virgin receiving the virginal consecration from “Mother Church.”⁴¹ It recalls that the consecration is a call to greater fervor “in spreading the kingdom of God and more ardently informing the temporal order with the Christian spirit.”⁴² The text glories in the good which the consecration represents for the Church. The text reminds the virgin that God Himself is the source of her virginity which is an image of “the divine and eternal incorruptibility.”⁴³

34. The suggested homily underlines the great good of virginity for the Church as it is reflected in God’s choice of the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the Mother of His Incarnate Son. It recalls how God the Son took our human nature in the virgin’s womb, making a marriage between human nature and the divine nature. It goes on to recall Christ’s own teaching regarding virginity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, and how He brought the Church into being as

³⁷ *OCV*, Caput I, pp. 11-12, no. 13.

³⁸ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 12, no.14.

³⁹ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 12, no. 15; and Caput III, pp. 54-55, nos. 138-139.

⁴⁰ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 12, nos.14 and 38.

⁴¹ “ab Ecclesia Matre.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 13, no. 16.

⁴² “Regno Dei dilatando et ordini rerum temporalium spi ritu christiano for mando ardentius.” *OCV*, p. 13, no. 16.

Virgin, Bride and Mother: “Virgin for the sake of the integrity of the faith; Bride for the sake of the indissoluble marriage with Christ; Mother for the sake of a multitude of children.”⁴⁴

35. The suggested text recalls the baptism of the virgin to be consecrated and declares that, through the ministry of the Bishop, Christ will anoint her with a new grace and consecrate her to God by a new title. The text declares: “He binds you, raised to the dignity of bride of Christ, to the Son of God by an indissoluble bond.”⁴⁵ The text goes on to relate the spousal nature of the relationship between the consecrated virgin and Christ to the spousal relationship between the Church and Christ. The consecrated virgins “constitute a visible sign of the great mystery, which, while it was announced at the origins of the human race, was brought to fullness by the spousal union of Christ with the Church.”⁴⁶

36. The text exhorts the virgin regarding the virtues required of a bride of Christ. It urges the following of the Mother of God in her virginity and in her abundant fruitfulness because of her total communion with Christ. It urges the virgin to nourish herself with the Heavenly Food of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist; to strengthen herself by self-denial; to grow in knowledge of Christ through the study of the Holy Scriptures, prayer and works of mercy. Referring to the *Letter to the Colossians*, the text urges the virgins: “Let your life be hidden with Christ in God.”⁴⁷

⁴³ “divinae aeternaeque incorruptibilitatis.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 13, no. 16.

⁴⁴ “Virginem propter fidei integritatem ; Sponsam propter indissolubile cum Christo coniugium; Mater propter filiorum multitudinem.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 13, no. 16.

⁴⁵ “vos, ad sponsae Christi dignitatem provectas, indissolubili vinculo Dei Filio conjungit.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 14, no. 16.

⁴⁶ “signum manifestum illius inagni existitis sacramenti, quod, cum inhumani generis primordiis nuntiatum esset, sponsali Christi cum Ecclesia connubio perfectum est.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 14, no. 16.

⁴⁷ “vita vestra abscondita sit cum Christo in Deo.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 14, no. 16. Cf. *Col* 3:3.

37. The text asks the virgins to devote themselves to prayer for the spread of the Gospel and for Christian unity. Virgins are urged: “Pour out solicitous prayers to the Lord for the married.”⁴⁸ The consecrated virgin is related to the married, in a special way, for she is a visible sign of Christ’s spousal love of the Church, of which the married life is a sacrament. Finally, the virgins are to remember those who, “having forgotten the Fatherly goodness, have abandoned love, so that the merciful God may save by mercy those whom He cannot save by justice.”⁴⁹

38. The virgin is reminded that, by her consecration, she will belong totally to the Church and to all her brothers and sisters. Virgins “exercising, however, their apostolate, both in the Church and in the world, both in the spiritual order and in the temporal order, are thus to let their light shine before men, so that the heavenly Father is glorified and his counsel is fulfilled, by which He wishes to restore all things in Christ.”⁵⁰ These words reflect the distinctive nature of consecrated virginity lived in the world. It is a call to a life totally for Christ and, in Christ, totally for others. The consecrated virgin, therefore, is to show God’s merciful love to all, without boundary. The text exhorts the virgin: “According to your strengths, help the poor, care for the sick, teach the ignorant, protect the little ones, sustain the old, comfort widows and the afflicted.”⁵¹

39. The suggested homily recalls to the virgin that her renunciation of the good of marriage “for

⁴⁸ “Sollicitas pro coniugibus preces Domino effundite.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 14, no. 16.

⁴⁹ “paternae bonitatis obliti, amore defecerunt, ut misericors Deus salvet clementia quos non potest salvare iustitia.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 14, no. 16.

⁵⁰ “Exercentes autem apostolatam vestram tam in Ecclesia quam in mundo, tam in ordine spirituali quam in ordine temporalis, sic luceat lux vestra coram hominibus ut caelestis Pater glorificetur eiusque perficiatur consilium quod vult in Christo omnia instaurare.” *OCV*, Caput I, pp. 14-15, no. 16.

⁵¹ “Pro viribus subvenite pauperibus, infirmos curate, docete indoctos, parvulos protegite, senes sublevate, viduas afflictosque confortate.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 15, no. 16.

the sake of Christ” is not a denial of her maternal gifts. She is to exercise a spiritual maternity, “so that countless children may be born into or restored to the life of grace.”⁵²

40. The text concludes by reminding the virgins: “Christ, the Son of the Virgin and the Bridegroom of Virgins, will be, already on earth, your joy and your crown, until He leads you into the heavenly marriage and into his kingdom, where singing a new song, you will follow the Divine Lamb Himself, wherever He will go.”⁵³

Examination

41. The examination consists of three questions which underline the reality of the consecration, namely, the presentation of the virgin who both is firm in her holy resolve to remain in the state of virginity for the sake of giving witness to the love of Christ and to be a sign of the Kingdom which is to come, and requests to be consecrated to Christ as His Bride.

42. The consecrating Bishop asks the virgin: 1) whether she wishes to persevere in her holy resolve of virginity and to serve the Lord and the Church to the end of life; 2) whether she wishes to embrace the resolved following of Christ in the Gospel, embraced in such a manner that she may offer a witness of charity and a visible sign of the future Kingdom; and 3) whether she wishes to be consecrated and solemnly espoused to our Lord Jesus Christ, the Most High Son of God.⁵⁴

Litany of the Saints and Prostration

43. As in every solemn consecration, the Church, before proceeding to the act of consecration,

⁵² “ut innumeri filii vitae gratiae pariantur aut restituantur.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 15, no. 16.

⁵³ “Christus, Virginis filius ac virginum Sponsus, iam nunc in terris vestrum gaudium erit vestraque corona, dum inducat vos in caeles tem thalamum atque in regn um suum, ubi canentes canticum novum, ipsum divinum Agnum, quocumque ibit, sequimini.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 15, no. 16.

⁵⁴ *OCV*, Caput I, pp. 15-17, no. 17.

asks the intercession of the Mother of God and of all the saints.⁵⁵ The invocation of the saints precedes immediately the Prayer of Consecration and asks, through the intercession of the Saints, an abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the virgin whom the Lord has chosen for Himself.

44. During the Litany of the Saints, it is most fitting for the virgin to prostrate herself, an external sign of the disposition of her whole being to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the consecration. If the prostration, for some reason, is not possible or fitting, then it may be omitted.⁵⁶ In the prostration, the analogy between the priestly consecration and the consecration of virgins is seen, once again.

45. The Litany of the Saints contains the invocation of a number of virgin saints. The names of other saints venerated in the place or to whom the virgin has special devotion may be added.

46. The Litany concludes with intercessions asking that the parents of the virgin be abundantly blessed with heavenly gifts, and that the Lord would deign to bless, sanctify and consecrate the virgin.

Renewal of Resolve of Chastity

47. Before proceeding to the Solemn Prayer of Consecration, the virgin renews her resolve to remain in the virginal state for the rest of her life. The manner of declaring the resolve can include placing her hands in the hands of the Bishop. In any case, she asks the Bishop, as her spiritual father, to accept her resolve of perfect chastity and the following of Christ, which, with the help of the Lord, she is declaring before the Bishop and the holy people of God.

⁵⁵ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 16, no. 18.

Prayer of Consecration

48. The Prayer of Consecration follows the ancient formula found in the Leonine Sacramentary. The Prayer makes reference to the holy resolve which the virgin has placed into the hands of God through the hands of the Bishop, and which resolve is itself a gift of God's love poured forth into her heart. The Latin text reads: "They offer their devotion to Him from Whom they have received the very desires (*ipsa vota*)."⁵⁷ In some places, the word, *vota*, is translated with the same word as is used for the vows of religious. It must be made clear that the word, *vota*, here refers to the holy desires of the virgin, which are contained in her resolve to remain a virgin for the rest of her life. It does not refer to the taking of vows.

49. In a wonderful expression, the Prayer of Consecration expresses the relationship of the call to consecrated virginity with the call to the married life:

Also this gift in certain souls
you have poured forth from the font of your bounty,
so that, while no prohibitions have diminished the honor of marriage
and upon the sacred union
the original blessing has remained,
there exist, however, souls,
who by the counsel of your Providence,
renounce chaste marriage
but desire its sign,
not imitating what pertains to marriage
but loving what is foreshadowed by marriage.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 17, no. 19. Cf. René Metz, *La consécration*, pp. 75 ad 97.

⁵⁷ "ei devotionem suam offerunt, a quo ipsa vota sum pserunt." *OCV*, Caput I, p. 27, no.

24.

⁵⁸ "etiam hoc donum in quasdam mentes de largitatis tuae fonte defluxit, ut, cum

By her consecration, the virgin is, in a particular way, devoted to fostering the faithful and enduring love of the married. Here is also an analogy with the promise of celibacy of the priest, which also places the priest in a special relationship of example and support to those called to the married life.

50. The Prayer of Consecration asks for the protection of God upon those who make such a holy resolve and prays that they be vigilant against anything which would betray their perfect virginity and, at the same time, the purity which is to mark the love of the married.

51. The Prayer of Consecration then calls down upon the virgin the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, giving the virgin the gifts of modesty, right judgment, kindness, wisdom, gentleness, strength of character, freedom, and, above all, the grace of chastity. It asks that the virgin be endowed with the warmth of love, that her life be worthy of praise, that she give glory to God by her holiness of life, that she love and fear and serve God. It also asks that God be the all of the virgin, her comfort, her wisdom, her protection, her patience, her riches, her spiritual food, and her remedy in every suffering or trial.

52. The Prayer of Consecration concludes: “In You, Whom they have chosen above all things, may they have all things.”⁵⁹

Presentation of the Insignia

53. After the Prayer of Consecration, the faithful are seated and the newly consecrated virgin, together with her companions, presents herself before the consecrating Bishop to receive the

honorem nuptiarum nulla interdicta in inuissent ac super sanctum coniugium initialis benedictio permaneret, existerent tam en ani mae, quae, tuae Providentiae consilio, casto renuntiarent connubio at eius concupiscerent sacramentum, nec imitarentur quod nuptiis agitur, sed diligenter quo nuptiis praentotatur.” *OCV*, Caput I, pp.27-28, no. 24.

insignia of her consecration. The insignia are the external signs of the interior grace which she has just received for a lifetime of faithful and enduring chastity in the virginal state. In earlier forms of the Rite of Consecration, the presentation of the insignia was much more elaborate.⁶⁰

54. The veil is the most ancient of the insignia, representing the espousal of the virgin to Christ for ever.⁶¹ While the Rite indicates that the option of not giving the veil, the option must be understood to refer to the situation of a professed nun who has already received the veil. The veil is imparted to the virgin as it is imparted to the bride in the Sacrament of Marriage. It is not a part of a religious habit, but a vesture which symbolizes the new reality of the consecrated virgin and may be worn by her from time to time, for instance at Mass on the anniversary of her consecration. Such a practice respects the state of the virgin living in the world.

55. While the imparting of the ring was introduced into the Rite of Consecration at a later date, it also is rich in spousal symbolism for the consecrated virgin.⁶² The ring represents the total gift of her virginity to Christ for ever.

56. The veil and ring are visible reminders to the virgins and to the Church of the great gift of consecrated virginity and of the care which must be taken to preserve it in its integrity. In giving the veil and ring, the consecrating Bishop says to the newly consecrated virgin: “Receive, dearest daughters, the veil and ring, the insignia of your consecration; and preserve inviolate fidelity to your Spouse, and never forget that you are bound to the service of Christ and to His Body which is the Church.”⁶³

⁵⁹ “In te habeant omnia, quem elegere super omnia.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 29, no. 24.

⁶⁰ René Metz, *La consécration*, pp. 191-192.

⁶¹ René Metz, *La consécration*, p. 191.

⁶² René Metz, *La consécration*, p. 192.

⁶³ “Accipite, filiae carissimae, velamen et anulum, vestrae consecrationis insignia; et fidem Sponso vestro intactam servate, nec umquam obliviscamini vos Christi servitio mancipari et Corpori eius, quod est Ecclesia.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 29, no. 25.

57. Finally, the consecrating Bishop hands over to the newly consecrated virgin the book of the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours for her daily prayer for the salvation of the world. Once again, the Rite states that the Liturgy of the Hours is handed over to the virgin, if fitting. Seemingly, it would be always fitting to give the Liturgy of the Hours to the newly consecrated virgin, unless she had already been praying the Divine Office, as a professed nun. In handing over the Divine Office, the consecrating Bishop says: “Receive the book of the prayer of the Church, so that the praises of the heavenly Father may resound in your mouth without ceasing, and you may intercede for the salvation of the whole world.”⁶⁴ As a sacred person in the Church, the consecrated virgin is bound to give praise and worship to God always and to pray for the salvation of the world. The Liturgy of the Hours is the public prayer of the Church, offered throughout the day, in praise of God and for the salvation of souls.

58. At the conclusion of the giving of the insignia, a beautiful antiphon is suggested, which expresses the great grace which the consecrated virgin has received. The consecrated virgin is invited to sing these words: “I am espoused to Him Whom the angels serve, Whose beauty the sun and moon admire.”⁶⁵

Continuation of the Mass

59. The celebration of the Mass continues, as usual, with some additions which express the new reality of the consecrated virgin in the Church. It is fitting that the consecrated virgin should participate in the presentation of the bread and wine which will become the Body and Blood of

⁶⁴ “Accipite librum orationis Ecclesiae ut caelestis Patris laudes sine intermissione in ore resonent vestro et pro totius mundi intercedatis salute.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 31, no. 28.

⁶⁵ “Ipsi sum desponsata, cui Angeli serviunt, cuius pulchritudinem sol et luna mirantur.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 32, no. 29.

Christ.⁶⁶ There are also special texts to insert into the Eucharistic Prayer.⁶⁷ The Rite also indicates that, at the Sign of Peace, it is fitting for the consecrating Bishop to offer the Sign of Peace to the newly consecrated virgin.⁶⁸

60. At the Communion Rite, the newly consecrated virgin should approach the altar to receive Holy Communion after the consecrating Bishop and concelebrants have received. It is also appropriate for the newly consecrated virgins, her companions, parents and other relatives to receive Holy Communion under both species.⁶⁹

61. At the time of the Final Blessing and Dismissal, the consecrated virgin presents herself once more before the consecrating Bishop. The Bishop offers three invocations before imparting the Blessing, which are most expressive of the Church's faith and life in what pertains to consecrated virginity. He prays: 1) "May the almighty Father keep inviolate by His protection the resolve of holy virginity which He infused in your hearts"⁷⁰; 2) "May the Lord Jesus, Who joins the hearts of sacred virgins to Himself by a spousal covenant, render your minds fruitful with the word of divine seed"⁷¹; and 3) "May the Holy Spirit, Who overshadowed the Virgin and Who consecrated your hearts today by His outpouring, inflame you most strongly for the service of God and the Church."⁷² There is also an alternate formula which aptly expresses the new reality of the consecrated virgin in the Church.

⁶⁶ cf. *OCV*, Caput I, p. 32, no. 32.

⁶⁷ cf. *OCV*, Caput I, p. 32, no. 33.

⁶⁸ cf. *OCV*, Caput I, p. 32, no. 34.

⁶⁹ cf. *OCV*, Caput I, p. 32, no. 35.

⁷⁰ "Omnipotens Pater, beatae virginitatis propositum, quod pectoribus vestris infudit, sua protectione inviolatum custodiat." *OCV*, Caput I, pp. 32-33, no. 36.

⁷¹ "Dom inus Iesus, qui sacrarum virginum corda sponsali sibi foedere iungit, mentes vestras divini seminis verbo fecundet." *OCV*, Caput I, p. 33, no. 36.

⁷² "Spiritus Sanctus, qui supervenit in Virginem quique cordo vestra hodie suo sacra vit illapsu, ad Dei Ecclesiaeque servitium vos vehementer accendat." *OCV*, p. 33, no. 36.

62. Before the recessional, the consecrated virgin fittingly receives once again the lighted candle which she carried when the Bishop called her forth for consecration, and she carries it in the recessional.⁷³

Conclusion

63. It is my hope that the extended and somewhat detailed reflection on the Sacred Liturgy for the consecration of virgins has helped us all to understand and appreciate more deeply and with new enthusiasm the great gift to the Church which is the vocation to consecrated virginity. In the Sacred Liturgy, the vocation is identified in its distinct nature and its dignity in the Church is made strikingly evident.

64. While the study of the Rite of Consecration uncovers anew the gift of the Holy Spirit given to the virgin who presents herself for consecration, it also reminds us of the care which should be taken in the preparation and celebration of the Rite of Consecration, lest, by carelessness or neglect, the faith and practice of the Church be not fully expressed and reflected, and the faithful be led into confusion or even error regarding the reality of consecrated virginity in the Church.

65. Through the careful celebration of the Rite of Consecration, we see the action of the Holy Spirit consecrating the resolve of the virgin to remain in the virginal state for her lifetime, constituting her a sacred person in the Church, espousing her to Christ, the Bridegroom, and constituting her a sign of Christ's unfailing spousal love of the Church, and of its fulness to come in the Wedding Feast of the Lamb in Heaven. Indeed, "the law of praying establishes the law of believing."⁷⁴

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⁷³ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 33, no. 38.

⁷⁴ cf. footnote no. 2, above.

CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS

By Fr. Bernard Hwang, STD

INTRODUCTION: Before we enter into a discussion on the Consecration of Virgins, it is both useful and necessary to know the various ways the word "consecration" has been used in the English language. It can be used in a broad or loose sense, meaning to give one's life to a noble cause, or to a mission or charitable work, or one's life to God through Religious profession. In all these ways of consecration, the human person is the principal agent in the act of consecration.

However, the same word "consecration" can be used in the strict sense that implies a radical and substantial change in the object or person being consecrated. The most striking example is the consecration at Mass. The bread and wine consecrated become the Body and Blood of Christ. Only God can do such a thing. In the consecration of virgins, the word "consecration" is also used in the strict sense. The virgin consecrated is removed by God Himself from the secular domain and transferred to the realm of the divine. After consecration, the virgin no longer belongs to this world; she belongs solely to God. The principal agent in the consecration at Mass and the consecration of virgins is God Himself.

What is Consecration of Virgins?

Consecration of Virgins refers to the ceremonies or the series of rites through which the Catholic Church dedicates and sets apart those virgins who have already vowed* themselves totally, eternally, exclusively, and irrevocably to God. It is an action of God mediated through the ministry of the Church. By this action the virgins consecrated are removed permanently and absolutely from any secular or human usage. It is to be noted that one can only be consecrated to God because He alone has the right to our total dedication and service.

The Consecration of Virgins is one of the Church's Sacramentals composed of a series of liturgical acts. It is undoubtedly the most ancient, beautiful, elaborate Sacramental which one can find in the treasury of the Church. One has to experience it before he knows what has just been said. It is patterned after the ordination ceremony. It is one of the few Sacramentals that is reserved to the bishop and not found in the Ritual or Book of Blessings used by the priests. This Sacramental of the Consecration of Virgins is one of the channels of grace that connects to God's infinite treasury. It is always enshrined within the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

It is difficult to conceive the virgin's self-oblation and God's blessing on her offering enacted outside the supreme sacrifice of Christ's oblation. In the Catholic tradition, consecrated virginity, assumed for the reason of love, is equivalent to martyrdom because both witness to a supreme love of God and to the faith in the resurrection of the body. The difference between the two kinds of heroism is merely accidental and external. While martyrdom involves the shedding of blood and death and is caused by an external agent, consecrated virginity involves much sacrifice and a death to the world and to self with no external shedding of blood and no outsider involved in her death. When a consecrated virgin truly and generously lives her holy vocation for love of Christ and His Church, she gives up the joys and pleasures of the married life and is willing to die daily the slow death of the martyrdom of love through the generous

* *Editor note: In this context, "vowed" is not referring to the vows of a religious, rather to "ipsa vota", the resolve to remain a virgin for the rest of her life. Cf pg. 54 ¶ 48.*

giving of herself to the service of the Church. This martyrdom of love can cause as much pain and sacrifice as the martyrdom of blood. Both forms of martyrdom are faithful reproductions of Jesus' own death of love. For the death of Christ saves the world not merely by the pain and suffering which He endured, but by His loving obedience to His Father. The same is true of the holy martyrs and the consecrated virgins. Their life of self-giving unto death is meritorious, not by reason of the pain and suffering endured, but by reason of their immense love of God and their obedience of faith. For the slow daily dying through monotonous service and unpretentious labor of love for the Church and the needy can be a real martyrdom of both body and soul. Both the martyrs and the consecrated virgins can do what they do and can endure what they endure because they are both supported by the powerful grace of the Risen Lord who is interceding for them before the throne of God. Both of them are aware of their own weakness in doing what they do and in accomplishing what they accomplish; but they are both reinforced by the inexhaustible strength of God which can help them to do the humanly impossible, one by dying a violent death, the other by a slow immolation of herself until death for love.

It is useful to note that the Consecration of Virgins is not an upward movement of the virgins offering themselves to God, but rather a downward movement of God offering to the virgins His love and predilection, His blessings, His graces through the ministry of the bishop, God's special envoy. There has been much confusion in the minds of many. Some look at the Consecration of Virgins as a substitute or an equivalent of Religious profession. Even some in authority do not seem to be aware of the essential difference between the Rite of Religious Profession and the Rite of Consecration of Virgins. The two are not the same.

Despite the twenty-five years that have gone by since the restoration of this ancient Sacramental, not every diocese in the U.S.A. has the privilege of having consecrated virgins in its midst. Even among devout and learned Catholics, few are aware of the existence of consecrated virgins, and even fewer know about their significance and contributions to the life of the Church. God must have His reasons for allowing the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the hierarchy in regards to encouraging and supporting the movement of consecrated virgins in the Church in America. The correct Christian response to this phenomenon is not criticism, throwing blame, or looking for scapegoats but to pray and do penance for the removing of obstacles put there by the forces that are opposed to God and to truth. At the same time we must try to learn more about the real essence and true beauty of this ancient rite and try to do our best to make it known to all people of good will with all the modern means of communication available to us. Let us be God's instruments to spread the truth and beauty of this venerable rite throughout the Church. Let us be confident that in God's own time the movement of consecrated virgins will spread not only all over the United States of America but all over the inhabited world (oikoumene).

The Annunciation and Consecration of Virgins:

It is not difficult to see a similarity between the Consecration of Virgins and what happened at the Annunciation. The virgins, like their Queen and Model, have already vowed their lives to God at a time previous to their consecration. Like the Blessed Virgin Mary, the consecrated virgins become spouses of God and their virginity is made fruitful by the descending action of the Holy Spirit. At the Annunciation, Mary offered herself totally and permanently to God with her "Fiat"; the consecrated virgins do the same at their consecration with their own "Fiat" and

self-surrender. As at the Annunciation where God accepted the positive response of Mary expressed through her "Fiat", the consecrating bishop accepts the "Fiat" of the virgins in the name of God during the rite, and prays also that they may accept God's gifts with faith and gratitude. From then on, their life belongs totally to God and devoted to Christ and His salvific mission and it is to be lived for God alone. The Annunciation should be the constant and life-long subject of meditation of the consecrated virgins. It is so natural for the consecrated virgins to turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary for inspiration. She is not only the First Consecrated Virgin but also the Mother and Exemplar of all consecrated virgins. For it is in her that the mystery of virginal consecration to God is fully revealed to us.

It is good for all to know that it was Father Paschal Botz, O.S.B., who did the ground work for the Consecration of Virgins in the U.S.A. He has given us so much insight into the theological and mystical dimensions of the Consecration of Virgins. I agree with him that the spiritual nuptials of virginity are most perfectly expressed and celebrated in the Rite of Consecration of Virgins. It behooves all consecrated virgins to read and meditate on his conferences and writings. For many years he was the editor of the review Sponsa Regis where the subject of consecrated virgins was discussed.

Consecration of Virgins and Sacrament of Matrimony:

From what has been said, it is clear that the Consecration of Virgins is very different from the profession of the vow of chastity. It presupposes the vow of virginity and can be conferred on virgins alone. The vow of chastity can be dispensed by the authority of the Church while there is no dispensation possible for the Consecration of Virgins, as far as I know. I do not believe that the Pope himself pretends that he has that power. If it is true that what God has joined together let no man put asunder in regard to marriage between a man and a woman, how much more true it must be regarding a spiritual nuptial between God and the virgin! What human would dare annul such a sacred union or declare such a nuptial null and void? In my humble opinion the nuptial relationship between Christ and the consecrated virgin is a more striking image or reflection of the spousal relationship between Christ and His Church than the union of a married couple.

For those who are gifted with the true Catholic Faith and who have witnessed and experienced the Rite of Consecration of Virgins, it is much more touching and moving than the liturgy of the Sacrament of Matrimony. Not only is the former much longer and impressive, but the Bridegroom celebrated in this union is truly present, though not visible to human eyes; and He is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the King of the universe, the King of Love, the Savior of the world, and the Bridegroom of the Song of Songs. For those who have no faith, the Consecration of Virgins is idiotic, crazy, insane, and meaningless: to see a young, intelligent, dynamic woman surrendering herself and her whole life with great enthusiasm and dedication to an invisible bridegroom is to them absolutely absurd, ridiculous, and laughable. But for the consecrated virgins, it is the most meaningful, beautiful, and fantastic event that can happen to them in their life, something which transcends all human description, experience, and comprehension.

The Impact the Rite of Consecration has on the virgins:

It is very true that the Consecration of Virgins is not a Sacrament like marriage, but a Sacramental of the Church. However, it does confer the grace of God on the recipients in great abundance. If the virgins are well-disposed and prepared, there is an infusion of grace on the virgins to enable them to live according to their new identity as spouses of Christ. Indeed, they become through this ancient and venerable Sacramental the icons of the Church, as some spiritual writers like to call them. They receive the privilege to follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

This ancient Rite of Consecration of Virgins is not just an empty ritual, impressive no doubt, but ineffectual. On the contrary, it can, by the prayers and merits of the Church, produce in the souls of the virgins special effects that match its solemnity and beauty. It confers on the virgins a godliness and holiness that will last throughout their entire life and will stay with them even in heaven. According to Fr. Paschal, the consecrated virgins are given the new status of a sacred person who belongs only to God, as a wife belongs only to her husband by reason of the Sacrament of Matrimony. Furthermore, through the Rite of Consecration, the virgin is elevated to a new position in the Church. As a consequence, she shares intimately in the nature and mission of the Church, at the same time she becomes a striking witness to the holiness and pure love of the Church for Christ. Let us pray and hope that she now mirrors Christ the King, the Victor, her divine Bridegroom ever more perfectly and strikingly. It is not too difficult to see that the divine Bridegroom shares everything He has with His beloved bride as it is so clearly described in the Song of Songs: His perfume, His nard, His own spiritual endowments, above all, His knowledge and His love. This is not human imagination. God Himself tells us this in that most beautiful book in the Old Testament.

Let us not forget the new fruitfulness the consecrated virgin receives through the Rite. As at the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit made the virginity of Mary fruitful; so at the Consecration, God also makes the virgin fruitful. Virginity without fruitfulness is empty and ugly. However, it is not a natural fruitfulness like giving birth to babies, but a supernatural fruitfulness of giving birth to new children to God. The consecrated virgin participates intimately with the work of the Church in bringing new births into the spiritual family of God. Here, we are touching mystery, profound mystery which we can only hope to understand more clearly when we are in the beatific vision. After the Consecration, the virgin lives more intimately the mystery of the Church in her union with Christ, the divine Bridegroom, and in her begetting of new members. And finally, she participates more zealously in the Church's longing, loving, and adoring of the Triune God in her liturgy.

It is sad that such a source of grace is not better known by more people, especially by the dedicated women in the Church today. It must be painful to those who have done so much and worked so hard for the Consecration of Virgins to see such a treasure of the Church being ignored and put aside during the last thirty years. There must be a reason for this phenomenon which is known to God alone. Since God is good and omnipotent, He can bring much good out of this unfortunate happening which is beyond human comprehension. It is an occasion for those who have faith to adore God's way of doing things.

Side by side with their graces and privileges, the consecrated virgins also assume new duties,

new responsibilities, and new charges. Like the wise virgins in the Gospel, they must now await the glorious return of the Lord in the name of the Church for the Christians and the entire human race. To keep the eschatological aspect of the Church in the conscience of the Christian people is a very important duty which the consecrated virgins must assume and fulfil. At the same time they must also assume the charge of cooperating with their Spouse in the work of redemption through prayer and sacrifice, and especially through the mission of vicarious atonement. In this charge, one can see that the Rite of the Consecration of Virgins is not for the immature and the fainthearted. Another duty they also have assumed is to join in the liturgy of praise of the Church. Like the Blessed Virgin Mary, their place must be in the midst of the apostles, the bishops, the priests as a source of unity and of inspiration for the laity. Another very important duty they must fulfil with zeal and enthusiasm is to reproduce in themselves the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary for the glory of the Blessed Trinity. They have the duty now to show to the world what the Church should look like and what the Church should be: holy, sinless, totally dedicated to the cause of Christ, enthusiastic, joyous, and ready to do anything that is asked of them, even to the giving of their life.

By reason of their Consecration, the virgins assume also a fundamental ministry in the Church, a ministry parallel to and supportive of the priestly ministry. In my humble opinion, the consecrated virgin also embraces through the Consecration the vocation of love in the heart of the Church, the vocation which St. Theresa describes so eloquently and glowingly in the *Canticum of Love* which she wrote her sister Marie shortly before her death. By reason of her loving sacrifices, the missionaries could preach the Gospel with enthusiasm and the martyrs could die with heroism. Like the virgin martyrs of old, especially St. Cecilia, the consecrated virgins of today are the apostles of Christ. Through their life of purity, heroism, and generous love, they lead those who know and admire them to Christ.

At this very critical moment when the Church is confronting the serious problem of low morale and defection among the ministers of the Gospel, the consecrated virgins can share with their brothers in the priesthood the mystical meaning of their Consecration and the joy and enthusiasm which their Consecration has brought into their lives. For, after all, the Sacrament of Orders is also a consecration to Christ the High Priest and to the people of God. What a wonderful vocation it is to confirm, encourage, and support their brother priests in their holy vocation! This function of encouragement and support given by the consecrated virgins to their brothers in Christ is vividly shown in the life of Scholastica, Clare, Catherine, Teresa, and many others. Let us not forget the great contributions which the consecrated virgins of the first centuries gave to the popes, bishops, and priests, and the whole Church of Christ by their heroic dedication and service in time of persecution. Even a casual reading of the acts of martyrs will acquaint us with the inspiration and help which Sts. Agnes, Cecilia, Agatha, Lucy, and many others have given to the Church as a whole. If the consecrated virgins of our times can offer similar contributions to the Church which is facing a crisis no less threatening than the Roman persecution of the first three centuries, the future of the Church is absolutely assured. One can see why the enemy of the Church desires to destroy the movement of the consecrated virgins before it can flower and bud. Let us have confidence in God. For if this movement is from God, no power, neither human or diabolical, can destroy it. Like the kingdom of God which is small and insignificant at its beginning, the movement of consecrated virgins in the Church will grow and grow under the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit into a big tree that will give shade and comfort to many

dedicated women throughout the world.

Personal Reflections:

From the list of the consecrated virgins in the U.S.A., it is clear that God once again has chosen the weak to confound the strong and the lowly to shame the learned. If God chose a group of uneducated fishermen to be carriers of the Good News of salvation, He can surely use now a group of non-sophisticated women to start a new model of consecrated life in the Church. God does not need the intellectual elite of our times to bring His work of salvation to success. God prefers to use the humble, the poor, the lowly, the disabled, those who will listen to Him and obey Him, people like the Virgin of the unknown village of Nazareth, to carry out and complete the magnificent Plan of restoring all things in Christ. I feel it a great privilege in being called by God to render a humble service to this great movement which I firmly believe to be originated from God, directed by God, and much blessed by God. I want to carry on what Fr. Paschal Botz, my mentor and teacher in Christ, has begun and is continuing to inspire from his quasi-hermitage in Minnesota. I thank God for the good health, education, the material blessings, and precious time that He has given me to do His work. May He be praised and glorified in all things.

The revival of the Consecration of Virgins in the Church throughout the world at this juncture of history has a great significance for those who believe that we are living at a very important turning point in the history of mankind. In the history of the Church we have noticed that the revival of the Consecration of Virgins often ushered in a period of great fervor in the Mystical Body of Christ. Our Holy Father Pope John Paul II himself believes that the Church is entering into a new springtime at the end of the Second Millennium and the beginning of the Third. In his letter "Tertio Millennio Aveniente" he invites all Christians, yes, the whole human race, to prepare themselves to welcome this great Jubilee of the Year 2000. For those who live in hope, the revival of the Consecration of Virgins is one of the signs of the new birth of faith and of new vitality in the Church. It is a true and striking sign that God is pouring great graces on the Church because these pure and wise virgins are the most striking signs of beauty and fidelity in the Church and the most vivid symbols of the new spiritual springtime in the Church when the virtues of purity and charity blossom once more after the winter of stagnancy and death. The history of the Church has taught us that the revival of the Consecration of Virgins invariably marks the coming of a new age of faith and fervor in the Church.

We are right now in 1995 witnessing only the beginning of a new springtime in the Church. The age of rebellion and dissent in the Church seems to be coming to its closing days. We are witnessing the return of right reason and sincere dialogue. It is quite possible that the Consecration of Virgins, restored in this juncture of history, is intended by God to assist and support the authentic renewal of the Church in the coming Millennium. Through the fervent prayers of these virgins, their sacrifices, prayers, good example, and enthusiasm, the Church will move confidently into all parts of the world with new hope, vigor, and apostolic zeal, raising the victorious standard of the Cross in every continent of the planet. For those who love Jesus Christ, this is an exciting time to be alive. The consecrated virgins are indeed the radiant sign of

life, the morning star heralding a new dawn of salvation, a symbol of peace which Jesus Christ brought into the world for the first time 2000 years ago.

Spirituality of the Consecrated Virgins:

We come now to the most important subject to be explored regarding the Consecrated Virgins. All our explorations and discussions are not very helpful to them unless these can help them to live their consecration in a way that is most pleasing to God and beneficial to them. The consecrated virgins, like other committed Christians, need to live a deep and intense spiritual life guided by a sound and authentic spirituality.

The spirituality of the consecrated virgins is essentially the same as all truly committed Christians. It is the living of the Mystery of Christ and of the imitation of the Lord Jesus. Like their Lord and Master, they have only one goal in life and that is to return to the Father, to the right hand of the Father where Jesus is. It is a spirituality that facilitates the living out of the Baptismal commitments with the help of the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, and with the assistance of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. They keep the Bible as their indispensable travel guide and the breviary and missal as their constant companions.

Specifically, however, they should be immersed in the mystery that was enacted at the Annunciation where they can best discover the mystery of their own consecration. It is to the Blessed Virgin Mary that they must turn in order to learn about the mystery of their unique and holy vocation. Like their holy Mother Mary, they must learn to listen, to ponder, and to treasure the word of God so as to find in it the enlightenment regarding their identity, and their special call and ministry in the divine Plan of Salvation. It is in the word of God that they must learn about their new being, their unique vocation in the Mystical Body of Christ. No secular writings can help them in this matter. They must understand the word of God in the light of the living Tradition of the Church as handed down through the centuries in the teachings of the Church's Magisterium and in the life and writings of the Fathers of the Church and the saints.

The Song of Songs:

There is one book in the Bible that the consecrated virgin must be very familiar with, and that is the Song of Songs. It is hard to imagine how the consecrated virgin can be ignorant of this unique book which was written specifically for her. It is her book given her by God Himself. The experiences of the Bride, so touchingly described in that book, are really her experiences. The story of the Bride's growth and maturation is the very story to be relived in her own life.

Once the consecrated virgin realizes who she is with the grace of God, she will immediately understand that the Song of Songs was written specifically for her and will treasure it as her own. She will have no difficulty in seeing herself as the Bride in that book. She will immediately recognize also that it is God's love-letter addressed to her personally. With the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is the Bride par excellence of the Song of Songs, she can see herself, her life's history, her spiritual journey vividly depicted in this most beautiful book of the Bible which describes in the form of a drama the infinite, patient, and incredible love of God for His poor

spouse.

Like the Bride of the Song of Songs, the consecrated virgin is also from the People of the Land, not from the nobility and wealthy class who lived in palaces and mansions in a walled city. She has to work and earn her own living by working in the fields. She is not one of those who appears in the cover of Vogue or the New Yorker. Or is she numbered among the CEOs who run big corporations giving orders to others or making decisions. She knows that she belongs in the company of the anawim, the poor of Yahweh, and the Song of Songs was written with her in mind.

Like the Bride in the Song of Songs, she is in the process of growing and she makes many mistakes and blunders. She is far from being self-confident or able to make all decisions for herself. She is still growing, learning, and maturing. She finds that the Song of Songs is just right for her, and she finds great comfort in it. Deep down in her heart, she knows that she has won the heart of the King. However, she does not know why He loves her so much. She presumes that the King must be blinded by love to have chosen her out of all others who are surely better and more qualified and appealing than she. The Song of Songs reveals to her unsophisticated mind the mystery of divine love which has been hidden from the proud intellectuals of her days. She realizes that this unique Book is just the book for her. In it she learns how to grow and advance in the Science of Love. It also gives her the insatiable desire to know more. It urges her to ask her beloved bridegroom to teach her more when she is alone with Him. The pleading of the Bride to the divine Bridegroom, "Teach me!" comes so natural to her lips because she knows well that it is impossible to learn enough of the divine secret of love. Yes, who can teach her the secret of love better than her Beloved who is for her the best of all lovers and who is at the same time her first Love and the only Lover she has ever known and wanted?

In this unique book, she can hear the most beautiful love songs which easily wrap her into ecstasy. How can any consecrated soul be indifferent to such a love call: "Come then, my love, my lovely one, come. For see, winter is past, the rains are over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth. The season of glad songs has come, the cooing of the lovebird is heard in our land. Come then, my love, my lovely one, come. Let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is beautiful?"

In this same book, the consecrated virgin encounters the most beautiful compliments from her Beloved: "How beautiful you are, my love; how beautiful you are!" "What spells lie in your love, how delicious is your love, more delicious than wine!" She hears Him calling her by the most exquisite names: "My dove, my sister, my promised bride, my beloved, my most beautiful one!" Finally, she learns from her beloved Bridegroom the absolutely overwhelming power of love which is stronger than sheol, yes even than death itself. Does she need to look for any other book to guide her in her love journey other than the Song of Songs which her Master and King has given her? The answer to this question is definitely No.

If the Song of Songs was meaningful and inspiring to the virgin before her Consecration, it becomes even more meaningful and exciting after her Consecration. Because now with the help of this book, her identification with the divine Bridegroom becomes more real and intimate. Her

union with Him is no more a mere dream, a wish, a desire; it is now a reality, an ecstatic experience. She is now not only in the house of the Bridegroom, her King, but in the inner chamber, the wine cellar itself, experiencing not only His myrrh, His sweet scent, and His perfume but His loving embrace, yes, even the kiss of His mouth.

In the midst of such wonderful experiences she becomes more aware of her sinfulness, immaturity, selfishness, weakness, misery, and unworthiness. Instead of being discouraged, the grace of Consecration gives her a greater trust in God's unconditional love, and also a greater courage to plunge herself into the divine furnace of infinite mercy. Her failures and mistakes embolden her under the influence of grace, instead of frightening her. The awareness of her human limitations only encourages her to seek God's help with greater earnestness and challenges her to try harder. The process of growth and maturation is long and hard in view of her human condition, but that only encourages her to move forward instead of retreating. For how can the divine and understanding Bridegroom remain indifferent to the poor efforts of His loving Bride? The Song of Songs shows her that He cannot and will not; it also reminds her over and over that He has no memory of her past and her failings. He simply does not remember. He has already thrown them into the bottom of the ocean. Moreover, He is so fascinated by the beauty and goodness that He has endowed her with on the day of her Consecration, in both the natural and supernatural orders, that He prefers to look at the many positive elements in her instead of the negative ones. He is so happy just to see her and be with her that He forgets all her faults, mistakes, and blunders. He knows also that, at the end, He will win. His powerful graces will transform her into the image of His holy Mother, the model of all consecrated virgins for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity. As far as the divine Bridegroom is concerned, the battle is already won, though individually the virgin is still on the way to victory.

The Book of Isaiah: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

The next book which the consecrated virgin should know well is the Book of Isaiah, especially the four mysterious hymns of the Servant of Yahweh, which describe so vividly the mission of Christ's vicarious atonement. As true bride of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, she absolutely cannot avoid participating in this vocation of the Messiah if she wants to be faithful to her divine Spouse. How can any faithful bride be indifferent to her Bridegroom's mission of suffering to redeem the human race? There is no doubt that the readiness of sharing into this vicarious atonement of her divine Bridegroom is the most difficult challenge which a consecrated virgin has to face. There is no escape from it. In the Song of Songs, we find that towards the end of that book, the Bride begged her Bridegroom with these touching words: "And You would teach me!" No doubt, the Bride has learned many things during her numerous encounters with her Bridegroom, her King, and her Beloved, but there is still the most important lesson that she needs to learn absolutely well in order to graduate in the school of divine love. And this last lesson is vicarious atonement. How can the Bridegroom refuse the request of His own loving Bride?

The process of growth in love from the human level to the divine level is a long process which starts in this life and continues on in the next. Since the consecrated virgin has the desire and willingness to grow in love for her beloved Bridegroom and King, the Spirit of God is ready to lead her towards the sublime state of perfect union of love. But this union can never be reached

without the grace of God and the purifying fire of suffering which vicarious atonement always requires.

Teaching is indeed one of the messianic roles of the Bridegroom. Man, by reason of his fall, has lost his sharp vision; his intellect has been dulled and blinded. The Messiah is sent to open the eyes of sinful man and to show him the way of truth. Sinful man, touched by the grace of the Messiah, always wants to learn the truth which he has lost by sin. The Bride, who has experienced her inadequacy and poverty in her close relation with her Beloved, really feels the need to learn more about His way of love and His science of love. She pleads to Him to teach her that science so that she can truly be His love, His sister, His disciple, and His bride. If there be any one whom He wants to teach this science of love, it is to His most precious bride. The last and the most important lesson in the science of divine love is on suffering and the mystery of atonement for the sins of others. It is the mystery of kenosis, self-emptying, of vicarious atonement. Jesus taught this very lesson to His mother from the Cross. For three long hours Mary opened her eyes, her ears, her mind, and her heart to the preaching of her divine Son, not given in words but in deed, in the very act of dying for love of us. The Sorrowful Mother learned this lesson not just for herself, but for her newly adopted children. She learned how to become the Mother of Sorrows and the Queen of Martyrs without going through physical death. She learned how to die without actually experiencing the separation of body and soul. She died mystically with her Son for the glorification of God and the redemption of the human race. John and Mary Magdalene must have also learned the lesson of the Cross on Calvary. We too have to learn this lesson of suffering from our Master Jesus Christ, the sooner the better. As bride of the crucified Lord, it is unthinkable that she would want to skip this last and most important lesson. Surely the divine Bridegroom wants to teach her this most important lesson she needs to know in order to be truly His bride. For how could she let her Beloved suffer alone or be indifferent to and ignorant of the most painful page of His life? To know Jesus Crucified was for St. Paul the most important and most crucial knowledge a Christian should know and identify with. It is true to say that unless one knows and identifies with Jesus Crucified, one cannot say that she is the bride of Christ. Without doubt, the Bride of the Song of Songs wants to learn this last lesson of Jesus Crucified and of vicarious atonement when she pleads to her Bridegroom: "And You would teach me!" Teach indeed He will, as He has taught this last lesson to His mother and to John and Mary Magdalene. For sure, this ultimate lesson regarding the Cross as a passage to glory must be taught to the Bride. Its meaning and value is an important part of her total formation as the Bride of the Crucified Lord. The consecrated virgin knows well that her life on earth is a novitiate where she learns to live in love as a preparation for the life of love with her divine Bridegroom in heaven. The Song of Songs and the Book of Isaiah are the most useful manuals of love which God has given her during her earthly journey towards Him. Blessed is the consecrated virgin if she knows these two books well and use them profitably. May she, with the powerful grace of God and her humble cooperation, learn these books well before her final encounter with her Lord and Beloved!

The Psalter:

The third book in the Bible which is very precious and useful to the consecrated virgin is the Psalter. These beautiful songs and prayers are God's gift to the Church. Our loving Father knows well our human poverty, and He provides for us a book of songs and prayers unsurpassed

in beauty and warmth. He puts so much depth and meaning into them and endows them with His own timelessness that they can be sung now with as much freshness as when they were first used by David and the Israelites in the Temple thousands of years ago. The psalms uttered from the heart of the sacred psalmist and on the lips of the Israelites are not mere words. They are the living expressions of the religious sentiments and hopes of the Chosen People of God. When we Christians recite them now, we assume not only their sentiments but we also live and fulfil the deep sense that was put there by God and which was first realized in Christ and is now fulfilled in us.

The psalms, besides being songs given us by God to express our homage, praise, and inner feelings to Him, have been used by God to teach the Chosen People the great truths of revelation, to keep alive in the Old Testament time the fire of hope for the coming of the Messiah and Redeemer, and to show forth in prophecies the eternal glory and existence of Christ (Ps. 2), His kingly dignity and priestly power (Ps. 109), and even the humiliation and sufferings He was to undergo for our redemption (Pss. 21, 68). The psalms also summarize for the Chosen People the Law and the Prophets and express them in songs. The psalms are the compendium of the whole Old Testament in poetic form.

These beautiful songs and holy prayers are specially destined to be used by the consecrated virgin in her life of prayer. When they are uttered from the heart of a pure and loving person, they are not mere words but become the living expressions of faith which are very pleasing to God. From her beloved Bridegroom, she learns the usefulness and beauty of these sacred songs. She also learns from Him the love of the psalms which speak of Him and find their full meaning in Him. During His life on earth, He often recited and sang the psalms. He used them in the synagogues and Temple. He recited the gradual psalms in His pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the various feasts of the Jews. He sang them with His disciples after the Last Supper. And finally, He died with the psalms on His parched lips (Mt. 27:46; Lk. 23:46). He alone could sing the psalms with the truth they contain. The full sense of the psalms as intended by God came right out when they were used by Christ. Without doubt, the consecrated virgin can also learn how to love and use the psalms from the Blessed Virgin Mary who must have taught them to the Christ-child and recited them with Him during the thirty years of His hidden life at Nazareth. And finally, she must have united with Him to recite the psalms at the foot of the Cross that all the prophecies concerning Him spoken by the holy kings and prophets of the Old Testament might be fulfilled.

Like her beloved Bridegroom and her heavenly Mother and Model, the consecrated virgin loves the psalms. She uses them not only to praise and celebrate God's perfection but to express her sentiment of joy and sorrow, her needs, and her problems to God. The psalms weep for her in her pain and grief. They also rejoice for her in her moment of joy and exaltation. They express her thanksgiving to God in time of gratitude and her sorrow in time of repentance. They long for God's face on her behalf in moment of dryness and desolation. There is no sentiment or aspiration of her soul that the psalms cannot express for her.

When the consecrated virgin prays the psalms, especially in the setting of the liturgy, she prays with the Church and for the Church. She does not pray only the literal sense of the psalms. With the help of the Holy Spirit, she penetrates into the spiritual sense as put there by God for her

usage and enjoyment. This is possible by reason of her union and identification with Christ. But before she gets into the spiritual sense of the psalms, she must first understand and pray them in the literal sense, that is, the sense that was intended by the sacred psalmist. This can be achieved by entering into the mind of the sacred psalmist and trying to share in his religious experiences when placed face to face with God's perfection and before His divine presence. Thus her soul can vibrate with the same sentiment of joy, hope, sorrow, fear, or love which the inspired authors wished to express with the psalms. If she succeeds in joining her heart to this flow of the genuine religious sentiments of the psalmists, she is already praying the inspired songs magnificently.

However, in the wisdom of God, the psalms are also to be the prayer and religious expression of His Incarnate Son our Lord Jesus Christ and that of His Mystical Body. In His divine mind, the psalms have a deeper and fuller meaning than what is signified on the surface of the words. When they are placed in the light of the mysteries of Christ and His Church, the psalms assume a new dimension and significance. For example, Israel, Jerusalem, Exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea--these figures and events, in the light of the redemptive mysteries of Christ, are not mere historical facts, but facts foreshadowing and pointing to a higher reality, pregnant with truths of a different order. In other words, they possess a deeper and hidden meaning, put there by God, commonly known as the spiritual sense. It is into this deeper and fuller sense that the consecrated virgin must try to enter with God's help, while she looks forward to beholding the meaning of the psalms in its full splendor in the beatific vision. In the meantime, being the Bride of Christ, she is given the liberty to pass from the literal to the spiritual sense, from the sentiments of the inspired psalmist to those of Christ, from figure to reality, and from prophecy to fulfillment. She transcends the description of the temporal blessings mentioned in the psalms and raises her eyes to the wonderful gifts in the order of grace which Christ has won for her.

It may be beneficial for the consecrated virgin to be aware of the different voices that some ancient authors recognized in the psalms: 1. the voice of Christ addressing His Father; 2. the voice of Christ addressing the Church, His Bride; 3. the voice of the Father speaking to Christ or concerning Him; 4. the voice of the prophets speaking of Christ as the Messiah; 5. the voice of the Church addressing her Bridegroom Christ; 6. the voice of the Church addressing God the Father. Once she can recognize what voice the psalm represents, she joins herself into that voice and prays accordingly. It is quite sure that she can easily recognize that voice 2 and voice 5, as a dialogue of love between herself and her beloved Bridegroom.

It is hoped that these few remarks may be of help to the consecrated virgins to live their vocation more fully and more meaningfully. What is left to be discussed is how to use the three precious gifts which Christ has given to them: the Holy Eucharist, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Holy Spirit, and how to practice the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, poverty, humility, and purity so that they can live their noble vocation to the full for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity and for the advancement of the Church.

The Rite

A. CONSECRATION TO A LIFE OF VIRGINITY FOR WOMEN LIVING IN THE WORLD

INTRODUCTION

1. It is appropriate for the rite of consecration to take place during the octave of Easter, on solemnities, especially those which celebrate the incarnation, on Sundays, or on feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary or of holy virgins.
2. On a day scheduled close to the day of the rite of consecration, or at least on the day before the consecration, the candidates are presented to the bishop, so that the father of the diocese may begin a pastoral dialogue with his spiritual daughters.
3. It is at the discretion of the bishop and by his authority that women living in the world are admitted to this consecration, and often they take part in the good works of the diocese. It is therefore fitting that the rite of consecration should take place in the cathedral, unless local circumstances or custom suggest otherwise.
4. As occasion offers, and especially to promote an esteem for chastity, to deepen understanding of the Church, and to encourage a greater attendance of the people, the faithful should be notified of the celebration in good time.
5. The Mass of the day or the ritual Mass for the day of consecration is celebrated in accordance with the rubrics (see Introduction, nos. 8-10).
6. The consecration ordinarily takes place at the chair. To enable the faithful to take part more easily, the bishop's chair may be placed in front of the altar. Seats for the candidates should be so arranged in the sanctuary that the faithful may have a complete view of the liturgical rites.
7. For the eucharistic celebration enough bread and wine should be prepared for the ministers, the candidates, their parents, relatives, and friends. If only one chalice is used, it should be sufficiently large.
8. In addition to what is needed for the celebration of Mass, there should be ready: a) the Roman Pontifical; b) veils, rings, or other insignia of bridal consecration to be presented in accordance with local rules or approved customs.

INTRODUCTORY RITES

9. When the people are assembled and everything is ready, the procession moves through the church to the altar in the usual way, while the choir and people sing the entrance song of the Mass. The candidates may join in the procession.

10. It is appropriate for two women – either consecrated themselves or chosen from the laity – to accompany the candidates to the altar.

11. When they come to the sanctuary, all make the customary reverence to the altar. The candidates go to their places in the body of the church and Mass continues.

LITURGY OF THE WORD

12. The liturgy of the word takes place as usual, except for the following:

- a) the readings may be taken from the Mass of the day or from the texts listed in Chapter V (see Introduction, nos. 8-9);
- b) the profession of faith is not said, even if prescribed by the rubrics of the day;
- c) the general intercessions are omitted, since they are included in the litany.

CONSECRATION

CALLING OF THE CANDIDATES

13. After the gospel, if the consecration takes place in front of the altar, the bishop goes to the chair prepared for him and sits.

When candles are not used see no. 15 below. If candles are used, the choir sings the following antiphon:

**Be wise: make ready your lamps.
Behold, the Bridegroom comes;
go out to meet him.**

Any other appropriate song may be sung.

The candidates then light their lamps or candles and, accompanied by the two women mentioned above (see no. 10), approach the sanctuary and stand outside it.

14. Then the bishop calls the candidates; he sings or says aloud:

**Come, listen to me, my children;
I will teach you reverence for the Lord.**

The candidates reply by singing this antiphon or some other appropriate song:

**Now with all our hearts we follow you,
we reverence you and seek your presence.
Lord, fulfill our hope:
show us your loving kindness,
the greatness of your mercy.**

As they sing the antiphon, the candidates enter the sanctuary and take up their positions so that everyone may have a complete view of the liturgical rites. They place their candles in a candelabrum, or give them to the ministers until they are returned at the end of Mass. They then sit in the places prepared for them.

15. Or, when candles are not used:

[138] The deacon calls each of the candidates by name. Each candidate, on hearing her name, rises and replies: **Lord, you have called me.** The candidate may make some other suitable reply. Then she goes to the sanctuary and stands outside it.

[139] After the calling of the candidates, the bishop invites them in these or similar words;

**Come, daughters,
that through me, his servant,
the Lord may consecrate
the resolution you have formed in your hearts.**

The candidates reply by singing this antiphon or some other appropriate song:

**Now with all our hearts we follow you,
we reverence you and seek your presence.
Lord, fulfill our hope:
show us your loving kindness,
the greatness of your mercy.**

As they sing the antiphon, the candidates enter the sanctuary, accompanied by the two women mentioned above (see no. 10), and take up their positions so that everyone may have a complete view of the liturgical rites. They then sit in the places prepared for them.

HOMILY

16. The bishop then gives a short homily to the candidates and the people on the gift of virginity and its role in the sanctification of those called to virginity and the welfare of the whole Church. He does so in these or similar words:

Dear brothers and sisters, today the Church consecrates these candidates to a life of virginity. They come from God's holy people, from your own families. They are your daughters, your sisters, your relatives, joined by the ties of family or friendship.

God has called them to be more closely united to himself and to be dedicated to the service of the Church and of mankind. Their consecration is a call to greater fervor in spreading the kingdom of God and in giving to the world the spirit of Christ. Think of the good they will accomplish by their prayers and good works, and the abundant blessings they will obtain from God for holy Church, for human society, and for your families.

He then addresses the candidates:

And now we speak to you, dear daughters. Our words are not words of command but encouragement from the heart. The life you seek to follow has its home in heaven. God himself is its source. It is he, infinitely pure and holy, who gives the grace of virginity. Those to whom he gives it are seen by the Fathers of the Church as images of the eternal and all-holy God.

When the fullness of time had come, the almighty Father showed, in the mystery of the incarnation, his love for this great virtue. In the chaste womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word was made flesh, in a marriage covenant uniting two natures, human and divine.

Our Lord himself taught us the high calling of such a life, consecrated to God and chosen for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. By his whole life, and especially by his labors, his preaching, and, above all, by his paschal mystery, he brought his Church into being. He desired it to be a virgin, a bride, and a mother: a virgin, to keep the faith whole and entire; a bride, to be one with him for ever; and a mother, to raise up the family of the Church.

The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, through baptism has already made you temples of God's glory and children of the Father. Today through our ministry he anoints you with a new grace and consecrates you to God by a new title. He gives each one of you the dignity of being a bride of Christ and binds you to the Son of God in a covenant to last for ever.

The Church is the bride of Christ. This title of the Church was given by the fathers and doctors of the Church to those like you who speak to us of the world to come, where there is not marrying or giving in marriage. You are a sign of the great mystery of salvation, proclaimed at the beginning of human history and fulfilled in the marriage covenant between Christ and his Church.

Make your whole life reflect your vocation and your dignity. Our holy mother the Church sees in you a chosen company within the flock of Christ. Through

you the Church's motherhood of grace bears its abundant fruit. Imitate the mother of God; desire to be called and to be handmaids of the Lord. Preserve the fullness of your faith, the steadfastness of your hope, the single-heartedness of your love. Be prudent and watch: keep the glory of your virginity uncorrupted by pride. Nourish your love of God by feeding on the body of Christ; strengthen it by self-denial; build it up by study of the Scriptures, by untiring prayer, by works of mercy. Let your thoughts be on the things of God. Let your life be hidden with Christ in God. Make it your concern to pray fervently for the spread of the Christian faith and for the unity of all Christians. Pray earnestly to God for the welfare of the married. Remember also those who have forgotten their Father's goodness and have abandoned his love, so that God's mercy may forgive where his justice must condemn.

Never forget that you are given over entirely to the service of the Church and of all your brothers and sisters. You are apostles in the Church and in the world, in the things of the Spirit and in the things of the world. Let your light then shine before men and women, that your Father in heaven may be glorified, and his plan of making all things one in Christ come to perfection. Love everyone, especially those in need. Help the poor, care for the weak, teach the ignorant, protect the young, minister to the old, bring strength and comfort to widows and all in adversity.

You have renounced marriage for the sake of Christ. Your motherhood will be a motherhood of the spirit, as you do the will of your Father and work with others in a spirit of charity, so that a great family of children may be born, or reborn, to the life of grace.

Your joy and your crown, even here on earth, will be Christ, the Son of the Virgin and the Bridegroom of virgins. He will call you to his presence and into his kingdom, where you will sing a new song as you follow the Lamb of God wherever he leads you.

EXAMINATION

17. After the homily the candidates stand and the bishop questions them in these or similar words:

Are you resolved to persevere to the end of your days in the holy state of virginity and in the service of God and his Church?

Together, all the candidates answer: I am.

Bishop:

Are you so resolved to follow Christ in the spirit of the Gospel that your whole life may be a faithful witness to God's love and a convincing sign of the kingdom of heaven?

Candidates: I am.

Bishop:

Are you resolved to accept solemn consecration as a bride of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

Candidates: I am.

Bishop and all present: Thanks be to God.

INVITATION TO PRAYER

18. Then all stand, and the bishop, without his miter, invites the people to pray:

Dearly beloved, let us pray to God the almighty Father through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, that, by the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, he will pour out the Holy Spirit of his love on these servants of his whom he has chosen to be consecrated to his service.

19. Deacon (except during the Easter season):

Let us kneel.

LITANY OF THE SAINTS

Then the bishop, the ministers, the candidates, and the people kneel (except during the Easter season, when all stand). Where it is customary for the candidates to prostrate themselves, this may be done.

20. The cantors then sing the litany (Chapter V). At the proper place they may add the names of other saints who are specially venerated by the people, or petitions suitable to the occasion.

21. Then the bishop alone rises and, with hands joined, sings or says:

**Lord,
hear the prayers of your Church.
Look with favor on your handmaids
whom you have called in your love.
Set them on the way of eternal salvation;
may they seek only what is pleasing to you,
and fulfill it with watchful care.**

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen.

Deacon: Let us stand.

All stand.

RENEWAL OF INTENTION

22. Then, if it seems suitable, the candidates offer themselves to God at the hands of the bishop. This may be done, for example, in the following way: the candidates come one by one before the bishop. Each one kneels, places her joined hands between his hands and says:

Father, receive my resolution to follow Christ in a life of perfect chastity which, with God's help, I here profess before you and God's holy people.

If there are many candidates, the bishop may allow all to remain kneeling in their places and to say together:

Father, receive our resolution to follow Christ in a life of perfect chastity which, with God's help, we here profess before you and God's holy people.

23. Another suitable rite, in accordance with local custom, may be substituted.

PRAYER OF CONSECRATION

24. After the renewal of intention, the candidates return to their places in the sanctuary and kneel. The bishop extends his hands over them, and sings or says the prayer of consecration. The words in brackets may be omitted.

**Loving Father,
chaste bodies are your temple;
you delight in sinless hearts.
Our nature was corrupted
when the devil deceived our first parents,
but you have restored it in Christ.
He is your Word, through whom all things were made.
He has made out nature whole again,
and made it possible for mortal people to reflect the life of angels.**

**Lord,
look with favor on your handmaids.
They place in your hands their resolve to live in chastity,
You inspire them to take this vow;
now they give you their hearts.
[Only you can kindle this flame of love, and feed its brightness,
giving strength and perseverance to our will.
Without you our flesh is weak,**

bound by the law of nature,
 free with false freedom,
 imprisoned by habit,
 softened by the spirit of the age.]

You have poured out your grace upon all peoples.
 You have adopted as heirs of the new covenant
 sons and daughters from every nation under heaven,
 countless as the stars.
 Your children are born, not of human birth,
 nor of man's desire, but of your Spirit.
 Among your many gifts
 you give to some the grace of virginity.
 Yet the honor of marriage is in no way lessened.
 As it was in the beginning,
 your first blessing still remains upon this holy union.
 Yet your loving wisdom chooses those
 who make sacrifice of marriage
 for the sake of the love of which it is the sign.
 They renounce the joys of human marriage,
 but cherish all that it foreshadows.

[Those who choose chastity have looked upon the face of Christ,
 its origin and inspiration.
 They give themselves wholly to Christ,
 the Son of the ever-virgin Mary,
 and the heavenly Bridegroom of those
 who in his honor dedicate themselves to lasting virginity.]

Lord,
 protect those who seek your help.
 They desire to be strengthened by your blessing and consecration.
 Defend them from the cunning and deceit of the enemy.
 Keep them vigilant and on their guard;
 may nothing tarnish the glory of perfect virginity,
 or the vocation of purity which is shared by those who are married.

Through the gift of your Spirit, Lord,
 give them modesty with right judgment,
 kindness with true wisdom,
 gentleness with strength of character,
 freedom with the grace of chastity.
 Give them the warmth of love,
 to love you above all others.

Make their lives deserve our praise,
without seeking to be praised.
May they give you glory
by holiness of action and purity of heart.
May they love you and fear you;
may they love you and serve you.

Be yourself their glory, their joy, their whole desire.
Be their comfort in sorrow, their wisdom in perplexity,
their protection in the midst of injustice,
their patience in adversity,
their riches in poverty,
their food in fasting,
their remedy in time of sickness.

They have chosen you above all things;
may they find all things in possessing you.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

All: Amen.

PRESENTATION OF THE INSIGNIA OF CONSECRATION

One of the following forms, nos. 25 to 29 or nos. 151 to 154, is used.

25. After the prayer of consecration, the bishop and the people sit. The newly consecrated stand and, accompanied by the two consecrated or lay women mentioned above, come before the bishop. He says once for all of them:

If the veil is given:

Dearest daughters,
receive the veil and the ring
that are the insignia of your consecration.
Keep unstained your fidelity to your Bridegroom,
and never forget that you are bound
to the service of Christ and of his body, the Church.
They all reply together. Amen.

26. Or, if the veil is not given:

Receive the ring that marks you as a bride of Christ.
Keep unstained your fidelity to your Bridegroom,
that you may one day be admitted to the wedding feast of everlasting joy.
They all reply together. Amen.

27. While the newly consecrated kneel, the bishop gives the ring to each one and, if customary, the veil and other insignia of consecration.

Meanwhile, the choir and the people may sing the following antiphon with Psalm 45.

**To you, O Lord, I lift my soul;
come and rescue me, for you are my refuge and my strength.**

The antiphon is repeated after every two verses. **Glory to the Father** is not said. The psalm is interrupted and the antiphon repeated when the presentation of the insignia is completed.

Any other appropriate song may be sung.

PRESENTATION OF THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

28. Then, if it seems appropriate, the bishop gives the newly consecrated the book containing the prayer of the Church, saying these or similar words:

**Receive the book of the liturgy of the hours,
the prayer of the Church;
may the praise of our heavenly Father
be always on your lips;
pray without ceasing
for the salvation of the whole world.
All reply together: Amen.**

The newly consecrated come before the bishop, who gives each a copy of the liturgy of the hours. After receiving it, they return to their places and remain standing.

29. Then, if appropriate, this or some suitable antiphon is sung.

**I am espoused to him whom the angels serve;
sun and moon stand in wonder at his glory.**

If possible, all those newly consecrated sing the antiphon together; otherwise the choir sings it.

Or.

[151] (For the giving of the veil. The rite is omitted if those consecrated have already received the veil canonically.) After the prayer of consecration the bishop and the people sit. The newly consecrated stand and, accompanied by the conse-

crated or lay women mentioned above, come before the bishop. He gives the veil to each one, saying:

**Receive this veil,
by which you are to show
that you have been chosen from other women
to be dedicated to the service of Christ
and of his body, which is the Church.
Each one replies: Amen.**

After receiving the veil each one returns to her place and remains standing. When all have received their veils, they sing the antiphon:

**I will raise my mind and heart to you, O Lord,
that I may be holy in body and in spirit.**

The choir may begin the antiphon after the veil has been given to the first or second one. It may be repeated after one or more verses of a suitable psalm or canticle.

[152] (For the giving of the ring.) When all have received the veil, the rings are given in the following way: those consecrated come before the bishop in the same order as before. Then he gives each one her ring, saying:

**Receive the ring that marks you as a bride of Christ.
Keep unstained your fidelity to your Bridegroom,
that you may one day be admitted to the wedding feast of everlasting joy.
Each one replies: Amen.**

PRESENTATION OF THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

[153] Then, if it seems appropriate, the bishop gives the newly consecrated the book containing the prayer of the Church, saying these or similar words:

**Receive the book of the liturgy of the hours,
the prayer of the Church;
may the praise of our heavenly Father
be always on your lips;
pray without ceasing
for the salvation of the world.
Each replies: Amen.**

Each returns to her place.

[154] After all have received the insignia of profession, those consecrated sing the antiphon:

I am espoused to him whom the angels serve;

sun and moon stand in wonder at his glory.

If appropriate the choir may sing the antiphon after the ring has been given to the first or second person. It may be repeated after one or more verses of a suitable psalm or canticle.

31. After this the newly consecrated return to their places in the sanctuary and the Mass continues.

LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

32. During the preparation of the gifts, some of the newly consecrated may bring to the altar the bread, wine, and water for the eucharistic sacrifice.

33. In the eucharistic prayer the offering of those newly consecrated may be mentioned (see Ritual Masses, Consecration to a Life of Virginity).

34. After **The peace of the Lord be always with you**, the bishop gives an appropriate sign of peace to those newly consecrated.

35. After the bishop has received the body and blood of Christ, the newly consecrated come to the altar to receive communion under both kinds.

Their parents, relatives, and friends may also receive communion under both kinds.

CONCLUDING RITE

SOLEMN BLESSING

36. When the prayer after communion has been said, those newly consecrated stand before the altar. The bishop faces them and sings or says one of the following:

**The almighty Father
has poured into your hearts
the desire to live a life of holy virginity.
May he keep you safe under his protection.
± Amen.**

**May the Lord Jesus Christ,
with whose sacred heart
the hearts of virgins are united,
fill you with his divine love.
± Amen.**

May the Holy Spirit,
by whom the Virgin Mary conceived her Son,
today consecrate your hearts
and fill you with a burning desire
to serve God and his Church.
± Amen.

Finally he blesses the whole congregation:

May almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
bless all of you who have taken part in this celebration.
± Amen.

Or [155, 156]:

God inspires all holy desires and brings them to fulfillment.
May he protect you always by his grace
so that you may fulfill the duties of your vocation
with a faithful heart.
± Amen.

May he make each of you a witness
and sign of his love for all people.
± Amen.

May he make those bonds
with which he has bound you to Christ on earth
endure for ever in heavenly love.
± Amen.

Finally he blesses the whole congregation:

May almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
bless all of you who have taken part in this celebration.
± Amen.

38. After the blessing by the bishop, the newly consecrated may take their candles. The choir and the people sing an appropriate song or a canticle of praise, and the procession is formed as at the beginning.

THE CODE OF CANON LAW

CANON 604

1. The order of virgins is also to be added to these forms of consecrated life. Through their pledge to follow Christ more closely, virgins are consecrated to God, mystically espoused to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church, when the diocesan Bishop consecrates them according to the approved liturgical rite.
2. Virgins can be associated together to fulfill their pledge more faithfully, and to assist each other to serve the Church in a way that befits their state.

THE VOCATION AND MISSION OF CONSECRATED VIRGINS ACCORDING TO ORDO CONSECRATIONIS VIRGINUM

(Latin for: The Rite of Consecration
to a Life of Virginity),

Br. Pierre Raffin, OP, Bishop of Metz

The restoration of Ordo Virginum 25 years ago was the fruit of a liturgical decision since it is the promulgation of Ordo Consecrationis Virginum on May 31, 1970, resulting from the Sacrosanctum Concilium Constitution (n° 30) (= Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), which gave a new existence to a nearly obsolete institution. The canonical dispositions themselves were only to appear thirteen years later in 1983 when the new Codex Iuris Canonici (Code of Canon Law) was promulgated. It was therefore necessary to mark the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of Ordo Consecrationis Virginum and on the occasion of this jubilee, to spend some time studying the rite itself as well as underlining what callings and promises are entailed.

1. Liturgical Consecration.

The title Ordo Consecrationis Virginum as René Metz, a leading historian of Ordo Virginum (=the Order of Virgins) remarks, has a meaning. Although in the oldest liturgical tradition the three words consecratio, benedictio or velatio (= consecration, blessing, veiling) are used, in the most recent tradition, only the terms benedictio and consecratio have been retained; at the present time, the precise meaning of the words consecratio and benedictio in the technical language of liturgists and canonists should normally have led to the suppression of consecratio in favour of the word benedictio. Yet the reverse took place.

“By suppressing the word consecratio in order to keep benedictio alone, one ran the risk of seriously compromising the prestige formerly enjoyed by this sanctifying rite which is now being recovered. Indeed it means more than a simple blessing; by this rite, a person becomes so to speak “a thing of God”; she becomes sacrata to use an expression familiar to St. Ambrose. We have here a solemn act which goes beyond a mere benedictio.” (pp.1.94)

To refer to Ordo Consecrationis does not mean instituting an eighth sacrament. According to Praenotanda, (= the Introduction to the Rite) Ordo Consecrationis Virginum is a ‘sollemnis ritus, quo virgo constituetur persona sacrata’ (= a solemn rite constituting the candidate a sacred person) (Rite, n° 17) in other words, a sacramental. What is a sacramental? It is an action or sacred reality which belongs to the sacramental order in the broad sense of the word without being a sacrament properly so called. Before the seven sacraments were instituted in the 12th century, the word sacrament referred to any sacred function. It is commonly said that the sacraments act *ex opere operato*, i.e. only because the rite is accomplished, whereas the sacramentals bring about the action of the Church *ex opera operantis Ecclesiae*, i.e. only because of the action and prayer of the Church. Yet it is not a question of God acting in the sacraments while the Church deals with the sacramentals, since all liturgy is a work between God and the Church and the most humble sacramental appeals to God’s sanctifying action. What one should remember is that sacraments are of divine institution, whereas sacramentals have been instituted by the Church but not without the assistance of the Holy Spirit.⁽²⁾ In this present case of Ordo

Consecrationis Virginum, we are dealing with one of the most ancient sacramentals of the Church, since the oldest texts date back to the age of the Church Fathers.

Today the Church celebrates this sacramental, either for enclosed nuns or for women who lead a secular life in the world. In doing so, the Church revives an old and venerable practice. Since the 4th century there had been in Rome and elsewhere two kinds of virgins devoted to God: those who lived in the world and those who had accepted communal life in a convent. The 1970 Ordo considers both cases but the liturgical differences are of minor importance and only really concern the possible insertion of the religious profession in the ceremony for enclosed nuns.

2. Public and Solemn Consecration.

The words Ordo Consecrationis indicate that the consecration of virgins is primarily an act of the Church rather than a step taken by one person, or to put it better, an act of God himself through the ministry of the Church. In the usual vocabulary we refer to “devoting ourselves” or “devoting our lives to” emphasizing the human commitment. Let us mention here by the way that here is what is specific to the religious profession even if the vows are made to God Himself and if the new Ordo Professionis Religiosae (= Rite of Religious Profession) has introduced a Sollemnis benedictio seu consecratio professi (= a Solemn Blessing or consecration of the Professed) which is similar to the Sollemnis prex consecrationis (= a Solemn Prayer of Consecration) of the Consecration of virgins. Even if this Sollemnis prex consecrationis is preceded by Contitatis propositi renovation (= the Renewal of Intention to live a life of perfect chastity) it nonetheless remains essential and specific to the rite.

The ordinary minister of the sacramental of the consecration of virgins is the bishop of the diocese, “*Episcopus Ordinarius loco*” (= the Bishop who is the Ordinary of the Place) (Praenotanda, nb 6). Indeed through his ministry the virgin accepts Christ as her Bridegroom. “*Vultis consecrari ac Domino nostro Iesu Christo, summo Dei Filio, solemniter desponsari?*” (= Are you resolved to accept solemn consecration as a bride of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God?) as is said in the Rite, n° 17, an idea which Canon 604 has taken up. In this, the consecrated virgin becomes an eschatological image of the Spouse-Church, to quote the very words of Praenotanda: “*imago eschatologica Sponsae caelestis*” (= an eschatological image of the glory of the heavenly Bride of Christ) (n° 1). It is through the particular Church of which she is a living stone and of which her bishop is the Bridegroom that the virgin celebrates her exclusive mystical nuptials with Christ. And yet the human link of affection with the bishop of the diocese who consecrates her is secondary because what is prior is the link with Christ and the Church; the connection is not from the consecrated virgin to the bishop and through him to the Church but from the consecrated virgin to the Church and then to the bishop who is the servant of the Church and the instrument of the consecration. The virgin is not consecrated by the physical person of the bishop but through his ministry. Therefore what matters is the episcopal ministry and not the person who exercises it and who is bound to change. In analogy I revere the bishop who ordained me as a deacon, a priest and a bishop but what is prior is the episcopal ministry of those who have ordained me. . . Of course such a woman becomes a consecrated virgin in such a particular Church and through this has an institutional connection with her bishop, but she becomes a consecrated virgin in the Catholic Church, a member of Ordo Virginum of, and in the Catholic Church.

Can the bishop of the diocese delegate his ministry of consecration of virgins? The Rite does not consider this possibility but the Caeremoniale Episcoporum which was promulgated more recently and is an authority in the matter, specifies that “*Alius tamen Episcopus ritis praesesse potest de consensu ipsius Episcopi diocesani*” (= Another bishop may perform the Rite with the consent of the diocesan Bishop) (n° 720). “*Alius Episcopus*” is not only the coadjutor auxiliary bishop but any bishop of the Catholic Church. The Caeremoniale Episcoporum does not envisage that a priest can be delegated as is the case for the sacrament of confirmation (Canon 884). Is a sacramental like the consecration of virgins more important than a sacrament? Of course not but it is not so frequently celebrated and has not the same urgent character as confirmation, a sacrament of Christian initiation.

The consecration of virgins is a **festive rite** of the Church. Thus one should choose to celebrate it during “*the octave of Easter, or on solemnities (especially those which celebrate the Mystery of Incarnation), on Sundays and on the feast-days of Our Lady or holy Virgins*” (Rite, n° 1).

It is also a public rite of the Church. If enclosed nuns are consecrated in the church of their convent, women who live in the world are consecrated in the cathedral church “*nisi res moresque loci aliud suadeant*” (= unless circumstances or local custom suggests otherwise); so the French adaptation of the Rite says that the consecration should “*normally take place in a church where the presence of the faithful expresses the part taken by the local community in this event. . . in the church where the place that the consecration gives them in the particular Church will be best conveyed*”.

Such details are reasonable for apart from the most knowledgeable Catholics, most people are not likely to understand the meaning of Consecrated Virginité easily.

Since it is a public rite of the Church, the people of God will be invited; “*pro opportunitate*” (= as occasion offers) as the Latin text says, and the translation into French specifies: “*One will encourage the enlightened participation of the people of God*”. (Here is what the English text says: As occasion offers, and especially to promote an esteem for chastity, to deepen understanding in the Church and to encourage a greater attendance of the people, the faithful should be notified of the celebration in good time. (Rite, n° 4).

3. Description of the Rite.

This public rite of the Church is celebrated during Mass after the homily which will bring out the ecclesial meaning:

“Thus we come back to an old tradition which we can trace back to a collection entitled the Pontifical of Saint-Aubin of Angers dating back to the end of the 9th century, as René Metz explains. In the middle of the 10th century the author of the Romano-German Pontifical also placed the consecration after the reading of the Gospel; but this practice was not kept. In most manuscripts of the Romano-German Pontifical, the place of the ceremony was changed and moved between the epistle and the Gospel. This practice was taken up in all the later rites without exception. It was still after the reading of the

epistle, more exactly after the singing of the gradual, that the consecration of virgins took place until the New Rite was promulgated in 1970.” ⁽³⁾

The Missal and the Lectionary contain the proper texts for the occasion and should be used according to liturgical rules.

The proclamation of the Gospel is followed by the Virginum advocatio (= Calling of the Candidate(s)).

As René Metz says:

“The ceremony begins with the call to the candidates. As they stand at the entrance to the sanctuary, the bishop sings the 12th verse of Psalm 33 (as an invitation to them to enter the sanctuary). ‘Come my daughters, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.’ The candidates respond to the invitation and as they approach the sanctuary, they sing two verses of the Canticle of Azariah (Daniel 3, 41-42): ‘Now with all our hearts we follow you. Lord’.

This part of the ceremony is relatively ancient. The rite of the call, together with the corresponding texts (mentioned above) are to be found in several Pontificals of the 12th and early 13th centuries. The elements of the ceremony could already be found in older rites which did not all concern the consecration of virgins. . .

The only change which the present text has adopted consists in mentioning the bishop’s call only compared to the three calls made to the candidates in the former rite. After each call, the candidates moved a few steps forward in order to reach their place in the choir after the third call.” ⁽⁴⁾

This rite may be accompanied by that of the light, inspired by the Gospel parable of the ten virgins who had lit their lamps. In this case, the antiphon Prudentes virgines (= Be wise, make ready your lamps) is sung after the bishop’s call while the candidates stand up, light their lamps and step forward towards the bishop.

After the homily, a dialogue takes place between the bishop and the virgins. The candidates must be fully aware of the commitment which they are undertaking and must assume their responsibilities in full knowledge of what they are doing before the people of God. That is why the bishop begins by asking the candidates if, on their part, they are resolved to persevere in the holy state of consecrated virginity (or monastic life) throughout their lives as well as in the service of God and his Church, and secondly if they wish to receive consecration and become the brides of Christ.

This dialogue which figured in the previous rite dates back to the late 13th century and bears some resemblance to the rite of ordination.

The dialogue is immediately followed by the Litany of the Saints. The final request, “*Ut has ancillas tuas benedicere, et sanctificare et consecrare digneris*” (= Bless these handmaids, make

them holy and consecrate them to your service), borrowed from the rite of ordination, was introduced at the end of the 13th century.

Then the candidates express or renew either the propositum of chastity (Renewal of the Intention) for women who remain in the world or the monastic vows for nuns. To take this vow, each virgin places her joined hands between those of the bishop. At the end of the 13th century, Guillaume Durand, the bishop of Mende, had already prescribed this gesture in his rite for the consecration of virgins. Guillaume Durand did not invent this rite but borrowed it from the rite of ordination for priests. Like the virgin, the ordinand placed his joined hands between those of the bishop as he swore allegiance to him; the bishop then gave the priest the kiss of peace. The embrace was probably suppressed from the rite of the consecration of virgins on grounds of propriety

This rite which has also been used in the religious profession of the Dominicans, *in manibus Fioris*, (= in the hands of the Prior) from the very beginnings of the Order, was borrowed from the feudal society. The gesture described in the ordination of priests or monastic Dominican Professions or in the consecration of virgins corresponded to the attitude of the vassal paying obeisance to his suzerain, i.e. bestowing his whole person upon him while swearing allegiance. The suzerain then gave the kiss of peace to his subject. In the rite of the consecration of virgins, the bishop stands for Christ—the Bridegroom to whom the virgin gives up her whole self and promises fidelity.

4. Nature of propositum castitatis (= the Renewal of Intention of Chastity)

The nature of the propositum has already been questioned. Indeed certain authors refuse to consider it as a vow or sacred bond (ligamen sacrum) which forms the basis of consecrated life (Canon 573,2). Yet consecrated virginity is indeed a stabilis vivendi forma (= stable form of living) (Canon 573,1) judging from the first question asked by the bishop to the candidates: “*Vultis in sanctae virginitatis proposito ac Domini Ecclesiaeque servitio ad extremum vitae perseverare?*” (= Are you resolved to persevere to the end of your days in the holy state of Virginity and in the service of God and his Church?) (Rite, n° 17) The oldest Tradition considered the unfaithful virgin as adulterous and sacrilegious towards Christ since it did not believe that the Church had power to give dispensation — as was it the case for Solemn Profession as St Thomas Aquinas teaches (Summa 2a 2ae q 88a 11). The propositum which the virgin professes for life, although it is not a vow strictly speaking, has the same dignity and similar effects. It introduces the person who makes it into a public state of consecrated life.

One might object that, unlike the vows, the consecration of virgins does not constitute, according to the present Code of Canon Law, a nullifying impediment to marriage. This discrepancy in the Code of Canon Law is sooner or later bound to be removed by the Pontifical Council for the interpretation of legislative texts, for, as I have just said, the Tradition is unanimous in suggesting the consecration constitutes a diriment impediment to marriage.

This indicates the high esteem accorded by the Church to the consecration of virgins and how important it is to confer it only on women who are sufficiently mature and fully aware of the implications of such a commitment.

The propositum concerns chastity (perfecta castitas) and the following of Christ (sequela Christi) but sequela Christi thus understood clearly includes the other evangelical counsels which form the basis of consecrated life (Canon 573,1) without which the propositum would not really be evangelical.

5. The Consecration Proper

The bishop then proceeds to the consecration proper. In the present Rite, the consecration consists of one prayer only. This gives it a dignified yet simple character which it did not have in the previous rites. The unique formula now used by the bishop is the oldest prayer of consecration which has come down to us through the ages. It is the prayer of consecration which is found in the Leonine Sacramentary, which is the oldest version of the Roman liturgy extant.

The various elements which make up the Leonine Sacramentary date back to a period extending from the late 4th century to the middle of the 6th century. In this Sacramentary we find the beautiful prayer of consecration of virgins which the new Rite has retained in full while later additions to the original text have been withdrawn.

This prayer is in the form of a long Preface. It begins by praising the Lord for the marvelous effects of the Incarnation. It tells us that not only has God reestablished man in his first state of innocence but He has also given him the ability to imitate the perfection of angels: the virgin who gives herself totally to God, realizes this ideal. What is more, God has opened up the prospect of meeting His Son to the human soul, an encounter of which married love, however great and holy it might be, only gives an imperfect image: through her commitment, the virgin is admitted into the intimacy of her divine Bridegroom.

But how could a human creature aspire to such happiness if God Himself did not both arouse in her a taste for it and give his help to achieve it? There are indeed many obstacles on the way of the woman who embraces such an ideal.

That is why the second part of the prayer is in the form of a supplication:

Lord, protect those who seek your help. They desire to be strengthened by your blessing and consecration.

The virtues proper to the consecrated virgin are obviously modesty but also prudence and simplicity, kindness and wisdom, gravity and tactfulness, “casta libertas” (= chaste liberty) and above all, charity.

Such is the magnificent prayer which the liturgical reform resulting from the last Council has restored to us. Nowadays many historians think that Pope St. Leo the Great composed the prayer himself. Whether this is true or not, this magnificent text is for consecrated virgins the major spiritual reference on which the spirituality of Ordo Virginum (= the Order of Virgins) may be based.

6. What is meant here by ‘Consecration’?

The sollemnis prex consecrationis (= Solemn Prayer of Consecration) makes the virgin, over whom the bishop prays, a persona sacrata. How are we to understand this expression? When trying to define what consecrated life is, the October 1994 Synod which has not yet been concluded by the Holy Father developed the teaching of Vatican II that the fundamental consecration is that of the sacraments and first and foremost, that of baptism. Baptismal consecration makes the person, as St Paul says, a “new creature” and nothing else is needed for a Christian to attain the perfection of charity. It is an initiative of God, through the ministry of the Church, and a response of the person to whom this initiative is addressed. On this level, which is sacramental, we may say, for example, that married people lead a consecrated life. Any other type of consecration can only be understood on the basis of the sacraments of Christian initiation and by analogy, in relation to these sacraments.

Taking up the approach of Lumen Gentium which first and foremost referred to baptismal life and the universal call to holiness which baptism entails and only then mentioned religious life as an animating and significant response to this unique call, we may explain “consecrated life” as a specific response to this call, a response marked by evangelical radicality, particularly by the commitment to chastity lived in celibacy for the Kingdom.

Celibacy for the Kingdom is the main characteristic of “consecrated life”. Should celibacy be missing there would be no “consecrated life” in the full sense of the word: the sequela Christi (= the following of Christ), in its radicality, implies celibacy for the Kingdom. It particularly testifies to an exclusive attachment to God and the certainty that the Kingdom of God is here and to come. It is a response of faith to the dazzling attraction of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. It contributes to making consecrated life a sign given to the Church.

Moreover, Lumen Gentium states that among the evangelical counsels “*Outstanding among them is that precious gift of divine grace which the Father gives to some, so that by virginity or celibacy, they can more easily devote their entire selves to God alone with undivided heart.*” (n° 42).

History confirms this way of seeing since the first form of consecrated life which appeared after martyrdom is consecrated virginity, as Ordo Consecrationis Virginus (the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity) recalls.

Therefore, a persona sacrata is, in the fullest sense of the words, a baptized person who leads a “consecrated life” in the way it has just been described; a baptized person who, in response to a call from God, leads a Christian life according to one of the types of consecrated life officially recognized by the Church and thus seeks to be wholly devoted to God and his/her brethren. The consecrated virgin is a baptized woman who, strengthened by the liturgical consecration she has received from the bishop, becomes a signum transcendens amoris Ecclesiae erga Christum, (= a surpassing sign of the Church’s love for Christ) and an imago eschatologica Sponsae caelestis vitaeque futurae (= an eschatological image of the heavenly bride and of the world to come) (Praenotanda, n° 1).

The ‘consecrated life’ itself is a lay life, even if consecrated people may sometimes be ordained. However, the term lay should be clearly defined. Is it being used in the sense of Lumen Gentium n° 31 which defines the lay person by distinguishing him from the Christian in Holy Orders or in religious life — which results in dividing Christ’s faithful into three categories — or is it being used in the sense of Lumen Gentium n° 43 according to which the state of life based on the religious vows and taking into account the divine and hierarchical constitution of the Church, does not stand between the state of the cleric and that of the lay person, a position which has been adopted in Canon 207?

According to this meaning, a consecrated virgin remains a lay person as does an enclosed nun.

M.Th. HUGUET prefers to describe the consecrated virgin as secular since the Ordo refers to mulieres vitam saecularem agentes (= Women living in the world) (Praenotanda, n° 3).

“Indeed the consecrated virgin, she writes, is not devoted directly, as are lay people or members of Secular Institutes, to the building of this world since she stands on the frontier of earth and heaven” ⁽⁵⁾

This distinction seems to me somewhat far-fetched. Is there a fundamental difference between a lay teacher, a teacher who is a consecrated virgin or a teacher who is a member of a secular institute, as regards the building of the earthly city? Do not all three of them contribute to it, whether they intend to or not, if they lead their professional lives with competence and evangelical vigour? -

What is true is that the consecration of virgins must be clearly distinguished from a service or mission, which a bishop may entrust to one of the women of his diocese. The consecration is not a kind of ministerial ordination, however much the rite of ordinations may have influenced the rite of the consecration of virgins. A bishop may well entrust a given mission to a consecrated virgin, if he wishes to do so, but he may just as well content himself with the servitium Ecclesiae proprio statui consonum (= the service of the Church in a way that befits their state) mentioned by Canon 604,2. In these days of almost obsessive demand for women’s ministry, it is essential that we do not become confused and ask of the consecration of virgins that which it is not: it is not a sending out on mission, nor is it a commitment to mission; just as the propositum is nothing without the consecration which follows it.

7. Consecrated in the heart of the Church.

The servitium (= service) mentioned by Canon 604,2 is very well defined by Silvia Recchi when she writes:

“The consecrated virgin is a transcendent sign of the loving response of the Church to her Bridegroom. So, the virgin can be said to become an image of the whole Church. The virgin personifies the Church in her personal bridal vocation. Her mission consists in living and showing in a prophetic way this mystery of the love between Christ and the Church, a sign of what the Church already is and what humanity must become.”

This is the first and principal service she must render in the heart of the particular Church where she has been consecrated. If other services or missions whether pastoral, apostolic or charitable are entrusted to her within this Church, as Praenotanda (=the Introduction to the Rite) suggest (n^o 2), she may well take them upon herself, even if they do not properly belong to her state of life, on condition that they do not jeopardize what is essential to her vocation and witness.

As Silvia Recchi rightly remarks, the nuptial relationship to Christ which is so clearly emphasized in virginal consecration, concerns all consecrated women, particularly enclosed nuns, *“but for the consecrated virgin this relationship with her heavenly Bridegroom constitutes the strongest, most specific and most striking feature of her identity.”*

Thus the texts and ritual of Ordo Consecrationis Virginum (= the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity) provide sufficient material from which to derive the spirituality of Ordo Virginum. The Fathers, in their various treatises on consecrated virginity simply comment on and develop the aspects opened up by the Rite. Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter, Mulieris dignitatem (=the Dignity of Women) is in keeping with this tradition. This pontifical text is essential reading if we are to properly understand the vocation and mission of women in the Church and in the world today.

As we can only correctly understand and speak of Christian marriage today by seeing it in the light of celibacy for the Kingdom, so we can only properly speak of the consecrated virgin when we put her alongside the woman who is a spouse and mother. The vocation of the consecrated virgin who is also a spouse and mother can only be understood with reference to the vocation of the married woman and of human motherhood.

This does not prevent a consecrated virgin from being connected to a spiritual family and leading her life along Benedictine, Carmelite, Dominican or Franciscan lines. . . in the same way as a diocesan priest may enrich his ministry by his links with a spiritual family — but the consecrated virgin remains primarily rooted in medio Ecclesiae (= in the midst of the Church). Her first point of reference is the bishop of the diocese — the primary moderator of consecrated virginity — with whom she works out the way in which she will live her vocation and to whom she will give account for it at regular intervals. This is quite different from religious life or life in a secular institute.

8. Bridal Consecration.

The consecration of virgins ends with the traditio (= handing over) of the insignia which symbolize the new status of those consecrated: the veil (if this seems suitable), the ring, and possibly the breviary.

Originally the veil was the only sign of the consecration of virgins. Its use is strongly attested as early as the end of the 4th century. The giving of the veil was borrowed from the rites of marriage so as to convey the parallel that exists between the union of the virgin to Christ and human nuptials.

The giving of the ring came later in the rites used in Frankish countries, especially around 950 in the rite to be found in the Romano-German Pontifical. This rite has the same purpose as the veil: i.e to express the parallel between both states of life, that of the consecrated virgin and that of the married woman.

The rite of the giving of the breviary only appeared in the 15th century when the Roman Pontifical was published in 1497. This rite was mainly used by enclosed nuns who celebrated the choral office but it is not out of place today since the last Council expressed the wish that the Liturgy of the Hours might become the prayer of all baptized people.

This overview of Ordo Consecrationis Virginum (= the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity) leaves us with the feeling that to live such a life authentically is no easy task. This state of life presupposes emotional and psychological maturity and the capacity to live in solitude whilst at the same time, living a life involving relationships with other people.

Being a consecrated virgin also requires having the evangelical virtues mentioned in the great Prayer of Consecration. Can one fulfill such a vocation without a preliminary formation: a human formation, (psychological balance, an ability to live on one's own, an ability to blossom as a human being: "*Consecrated virgins have no love handicap*", as Cardinal Danneels once said; biblical, liturgical, doctrinal, spiritual formation?

Only under those conditions will Ordo Consecrationis, which was restored twenty-five years ago, bear fruit for the Church and for the World.

- (1) René Metz. Le nouveau rituel de Consecration des Vierges. Sa place dans l'histoire. La Matson-Dieu, 110, 1972, pp. 93-94
- (2) Sacramental article, in R. Le Gall, Dictionnaire de Liturgie, CDL. 1983
- (3) René Metz, art. cit. p.109
- (4) René Metz, *ibid.*
- (5) M-Th. Huguet, La renovation du rite liturgique de a Consecration des Vierges, p. 97 -

Preparation Process
for the
Consecration of Virgins Living in the World

Prepared by the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins

15 September 2000, Our Lady of Sorrows

INTRODUCTION

The revised Rite of Consecration of Virgins for Women Living in the World was published by the decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship on 31 May 1970, after having been formally decreed by the Second Vatican Council.

The decree of promulgation explains the development of this venerable and ancient rite in this way.

The rite for the consecration of virgins is one of the most treasured in the Roman liturgy. Consecrated virginity is among the most excellent gifts bequeathed by our Lord to his Bride, the Church. From apostolic times women have dedicated their virginity to God, so adding to the beauty of the mystical body of Christ and making it fruitful in grace. Even from earliest times, as the Fathers of the Church bear witness, mother Church in her wisdom set her seal on this high vocation by her practice of consecrating those who followed it by means of a solemn prayer. This prayer, enriched in the course of time by other ritual elements to bring out more clearly the symbolism of virginity in relation to the Church, the bride of Christ, was incorporated into the Roman Pontifical. [*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 62 (1970): 650]

Canon 604 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* provides for the establishment of the Order of Virgins as a form of consecrated life in the Church. The word, order, is used in the sense of a distinct group of persons in the Church, for example, the order of presbyters, the order of deacons, the order of penitents or the order of widows. It is not used in the sense of a congregation of consecrated religious, for example, the Order of Saint Benedict, the Order of Preachers, or the Order of Friars Minor.

As expressed in the *Roman Pontifical*, the consecrated virgin is to be a “spouse of Christ,” a sign of Christ’s Virgin Bride, the Church. She is freely and joyfully to bear to Christ the same undivided and perpetual love that joins Christ and the Church. The ring she receives during the Rite symbolizes her perpetual fidelity to her Bridegroom. The suggested Homily in the Rite of Consecration of Virgins for Women Living in the World explains the origins of consecrated virginity in this way.

Our Lord himself taught us the high calling of such a life, consecrated to God and chosen for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. By his whole life, and especially by his labors, his preaching, and, above all, by his paschal mystery, he brought his Church into being. He desired it to be a virgin, a bride, and a mother: a virgin, to keep the faith whole and entire; a bride, to be one with him for ever; and a mother, to raise up the family of the Church.

The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, through baptism has already made you temples of God’s glory and children of the Father. Today through our ministry he anoints you with a new grace and consecrates you to God by a new title. He gives each one of you the dignity of being a bride of Christ and binds you to the Son of God in a covenant to last for ever.

The Church is the bride of Christ. This title of the Church was given by the fathers and doctors of the church to those like you who speak to us of the world to come, where there is no marrying or giving in marriage. You are a sign of the great mystery of salvation, proclaimed at the beginning of human history and fulfilled in the marriage covenant between Christ and his Church.

.....

You are apostles in the Church and in the world, in the things of the Spirit and in the things of the world. . . .

You have renounced marriage for the sake of Christ. Your motherhood will be a motherhood of the spirit, as you do the will of your Father and work with others in the spirit of charity, so that a great family of children may be born, or reborn, to the life of grace.

Your joy and your crown, even here on earth, will be Christ, the Son of the Virgin and the Bridegroom of virgins. He will lead all of you to his presence and into his kingdom, where you will sing a new song as you follow the Lamb of God wherever he leads you.
[from "Homily," #16, *Rite of Consecration for Women Living in the World*]

Consecrated to God, as a "spouse of Christ," the consecrated virgin is at the service of the Church. Her vocation is authenticated by the call of the bishop of her diocese. She lives in the heart of the Church in a definitive state of life. Her consecration does not establish her within a new structure or institute in the particular Church. Rather it establishes her in a true spiritual bond with the Diocesan Bishop and gives her a distinct spiritual identity in the whole Church.

Like the Church herself, her vocation is virginal, spousal, and maternal. Her primary service in the Church is prayer; hence she is given the Liturgy of the Hours as a sign of this spiritual responsibility. Consecrated virginity looks to its foundation in the early Church herself, under the inspiration of the mystery of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The consecrated virgin expends her efforts and energy according to her own unique talents, age, profession or occupation, and charisms in service to the Church. Her works of charity flow from her life of prayer as "spouse of Christ." She is dedicated to the service of the Church because she is espoused to Christ, her Bridegroom, forever.

**CONSECRATION OF A VIRGIN FOR A WOMAN LIVING IN THE WORLD
According to Canon 604**

APPLICATION _____ FORM

To _____
(Bishop of the Diocese)

I, _____ (name), of _____ (city),
_____ (state), desiring to begin formal preparation to receive the Consecration of a
Virgin for a Woman Living in the World, according to Canon 604, make this petition to be
considered for such Consecration. I understand that a period of preparation must precede this
sacramental, and I offer my cooperation in such a process.

Signature: _____

Dated: _____

Personal Information:

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Place and Date of birth: _____

Place and Date of Baptism: _____

Place and Date of First Holy Communion: _____

Place and Date of Confirmation: _____

References: (Please list three. By listing their names below, you are agreeing that they may

answer questions about you and how they know you. Please do not list your spiritual director as one of these references.)

Name: _____

Address: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Please list the name and address of your pastor, who will be asked to be a reference for you.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Please list the name and address of your spiritual director, who will be asked only if you have been receiving consistent spiritual direction.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Have you ever been a member of a religious institute or other form of the consecrated life, or have you applied to another diocese for the consecration of virgins living in the world? If yes, please explain.

Have you ever been married?

Have you ever lived in open violation of chastity?

Documentation:

Please attach proofs of Baptism (current copy of Baptismal Certificate), First Holy Communion, Confirmation, and citizenship.

Because the (Arch)Diocese of _____ is not responsible for the financial care of consecrated virgins, please indicate your means of financial independence:

- 1/ What is your current means of income?

- 2/ Is it adequate to support you?

- 3/ How are you providing for your retirement?

- 4/ What health insurance provisions do you have?

- 5/ Additional comments on your financial status if desired.

Please attach a personal life history, indicating your reasons for seeking the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World.

Please list below education and work experience, both salaried and volunteer, and indicate approximate dates. Attach a separate sheet if necessary.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Diocese of _____
Address

Reference for: _____

As a Consecrated Virgin Living in the World, according to Canon 604

Note: This petitioner for the Consecration of a Virgin has agreed that you may respond to these questions.

Please be as thorough and specific as possible as you answer as many of these questions as you can.

1. Under what circumstances did you come to know her? How long have you known her? What is your present contact?

2. What characteristics do you observe that make her a fitting candidate for Consecrated Virginity Lived in the World?

3. What is her understanding of the doctrine of the faith and of the discipline of the Church?

4. How has she shown her faith in practice? Can you attest to her way of life as virtuous?

5. What is her experience and understanding of prayer and the spiritual life?

6. Describe the quality of her relationships with people.

Page 2/3

Reference for: _____ (cont.)
As a Consecrated Virgin Living in the World, according to Canon 604

7. How does she understand herself as a woman? How does she understand her sexuality?

8. Is she a mature, integral person? Has she demonstrated freedom and maturity in making decisions for herself?

9. How does she understand Consecrated Virginity Lived in the World? Does she understand it as a gift of grace? Does she understand the responsibilities that this vocation entails for the rest of her life?

10. How has her call to consecrated virginity lived in the world been tested over time?

11. How does she understand her relationship with the neighborhood/area in which she lives?

12. In your opinion, does the applicant possess sufficient age, prudence, and universally esteemed character to provide assurance of perseverance in a life of perpetual chastity dedicated to the service of the Church and of her neighbor?

13. Other comments.

Reference for: _____ (cont.)

As a Consecrated Virgin Living in the World, according to Canon 604

Evaluator's name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip code: _____

Phone : _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

PROCEDURES

Criteria

1. Candidates must have suitable character and sufficient qualities of maturity as an integrated person. By age, prudence, and universally attested good character, the candidate must give assurance of perseverance in a life of chastity dedicated to the service of the Church and of her neighbor. Psychological health, character, and maturity are to be attested to, if necessary, by using experts.
2. Candidates must be free to accept a life of consecrated virginity lived in the world. It is required that she have never been married or lived in public or open violation of chastity. She should demonstrate in some way that her call to perpetual virginity has been tested over time.

Application

1. The individual completes the Application Form and submits it with the required documentation to the diocesan bishop.
2. Three references submit letters of recommendation to the diocesan bishop. See preceding sample reference questions.
3. In addition to the Application Form and the letters of recommendation from three references, documentation of Baptism, First Holy Communion, Confirmation, and citizenship, and assurance of financial independence are required.
4. The applicant's spiritual director testifies in writing to the diocesan bishop that the applicant has been receiving regular and appropriate spiritual direction.
5. The diocesan bishop reviews the application and supporting documentation and letters. He accepts or rejects the application.

Period of Preparation to Receive the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World

1. The purpose of the period of preparation prior to reception of this sacramental of Consecration is to help the candidate better understand and live this divine vocation to which she is called. This period should further test and strengthen her resolve of perpetual virginity.
2. Ordinarily, the period of preparation is for not less than two years, but length of time will, nevertheless, depend on the candidate's progress and readiness.
3. The period of preparation is carried out with the assistance of the spiritual director and a

preparation coordinator who is well acquainted with the Consecration of a Virgin and who is appointed by the diocesan bishop to help coordinate the preparation process for the candidate. Should the Diocesan Bishop request it, the spiritual director may carry out the preparation coordination for the Consecration. In any case, however, the preparation coordinator should well understand the nature of the Consecration itself and the practicalities of life as a consecrated virgin living in the world. Ideally, the preparation coordinator would be a consecrated virgin.

4. The spiritual director and/or preparation coordinator is to provide guidance in development of prayer and the vocation of consecrated virginity itself. This spiritual guidance should include the model of the Church as Bride of Christ and the consecrated virgin as an icon of the Church. Guidance in prayer should include especially an understanding of the Liturgy of the Hours.

5. The preparation coordinator and the candidate periodically evaluate the progress of the preparation process. They will keep the diocesan bishop apprised of this progress.

6. At the conclusion of the period of satisfactory preparation, the preparation coordinator is to write a letter to the bishop recommending that the candidate receive the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World, according to Canon 604. The spiritual director will write a letter also attesting only to the fact that the candidate has been receiving regular and appropriate spiritual direction throughout the period of preparation.

Records

1. A file of all applications, letters, documents, and progress reports of the candidate is to be retained in the office of the diocesan bishop. A copy of her certificate of Consecration should be added to her file after her Consecration has taken place.

2. A certificate attesting to the Consecration is to be kept in the diocesan archives. [Please see sample.] The Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World should be noted on the consecrated virgin's Baptismal record.

THE DIOCESAN BISHOP

Before the Preparation Period of the Candidate

The diocesan bishop is to decide if the applicant is suitable to begin preparation to receive the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World. He will take care in admitting individuals to the preparation process. Only a virgin who by her age, prudence, and universally approved character, and who gives assurance of perseverance in a life of virginity lived in the world should be allowed to receive the Consecration.

In collaboration with the candidate, he will decide on the conditions under which she will undertake a life of perpetual virginity lived in the world, in accord with her life's circumstances, health, occupation, individual talents and interests. He will also decide with her when they will have their regular meetings and whether he wishes to have any reports from her.

The diocesan bishop will see to it that a suitable preparation process is available for the candidate.

He will be able to suggest the names of possible spiritual directors in the diocese, if she does not know any who are knowledgeable about the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World.

He will be aware that the preparation for the Consecration of a Virgin Living in the World is not identical to that which some candidates may have received elsewhere in their spiritual life; therefore, he will be sure that the candidate understands the nature of this vocation in the consecrated life. It might be helpful to have available printed materials, videotapes, and audiocassette tapes that the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins has prepared as a service and resource to candidates. She should be encouraged to attend the annual Inquirers Retreat sponsored by the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins. It is understood that membership in the USACV is not required of any candidate or consecrated virgin; however, the USACV is always glad to be of service and to assist voluntarily with educational resources and personal communication.

During the Preparation Period of the Candidate

He will meet with the candidate early in her preparation process for the Consecration and continue to follow her progress in her preparation for this sacramental.

The diocesan bishop will make the final decision on whether a candidate, after proper preparation, is suitable to receive the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World.

The Rite of Consecration and after the Consecration

He will meet with her close to the Consecration date to begin the spiritual dialogue that they will carry on regularly after the Consecration.

The Rite of the Consecration of a Virgin is reserved to the diocesan bishop. He may, however, delegate another bishop to consecrate the virgin.

The Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity for a Woman Living in the World is to be celebrated in the manner set forth in the *Roman Pontifical*.

THE CANDIDATE

The virgin seeking to follow Christ more closely by the Consecration to a Life of Perpetual Virginity is consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite. The diocesan bishop may delegate another bishop to perform the Consecration.

A virgin who aspires to receive the Consecration of a Virgin does so for the sake of a more fervent love of Christ and out of love of her brothers and sisters in the Church and in the world.

As a consecrated virgin, the individual is dedicated to the service of the Church. Her service will be according to her own abilities, circumstances, talents and charisms.

The virgin who petitions to receive the Consecration of a Virgin should have already lived a virginal commitment in tranquility for a number of years.

Each virgin petitions individually and not as part of a group or formal organization.

The individual who petitions to receive the Consecration of a Virgin accepts the responsibility to collaborate actively with her spiritual director and preparation coordinator so that she may faithfully respond to the grace of a divine vocation during her preparation period.

The candidate may freely leave the period of preparation prior to the Consecration; moreover, the bishop or the bishop in consultation with the preparation coordinator can dismiss the candidate.

Following her preparation period, the virgin may petition the bishop of the diocese to receive the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World. The bishop makes the final decision to consecrate the virgin.

The diocese assumes no financial responsibility for the support of a Consecrated Virgin Living in the World. In cases where she may be employed by a Church institution, the normal salary and benefits are to be assigned.

According to the Rite of Consecration, the virgin renews her resolve to follow Christ in a life of perfect chastity and then is consecrated to a life of perpetual virginity in the Church by the diocesan bishop.

The virgin is to be given a copy of the Liturgy of the Hours and a ring during the Rite of Consecration.

The spiritual bond between the consecrated virgin and the diocesan bishop should be nourished by their personal meeting, preferably two times a year, but at least once a year. The bishop will also encourage other means of communication, e.g., written communication when necessary.

The consecrated virgin should be considered an integral part of the diocese and can be called

upon for prayer and intercession; she should be included in diocesan events for consecrated persons as well as on mailing lists, in vocational information events, and other diocesan events proper to consecrated life.

The consecrated virgin, on her part, should participate as much as possible, as her circumstances permit, in the full life of the diocesan church.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Certain questions and areas of concern often come to mind as one reflects on this ancient and venerable vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world. Hence we have grouped together several questions often posed during retreats and meetings with our Episcopal Moderator. We hope the following paragraphs will help enlighten inquirers as they discern the nature of this vocation and whether this is the form of consecrated life they are called to follow.

1. Can you explain some of the theological/spiritual facets of the nature of consecrated virginity lived in the world?

We must remember that the theological virtue of love--the laying down of one's life for one's brothers--is the most important virtue, and it applies to all vocations in the Church. The Church has come to an understanding at this time of three states of life: the clergy, the laity, and consecrated persons. The consecrated virgin is a member of that third category; that is, she is a consecrated person.

As a consecrated person she lives in the world; she does not flee the world. Her life is a public witness in the Church and in society. By her very life of virginity she is witnessing her total love for her Spouse, Jesus Christ. However, it must be remembered that her life of total virginity is a gift of grace; God Himself was the author of that gift, which she has kept intact and offered back to Him in total love on the day of her Consecration when she renewed her resolve to remain a virgin forever. During the Rite, exactly at the Prayer of Consecration which the bishop pronounces over her, the Holy Spirit poured out His grace on her to make that virginity spiritually fruitful.

2. Perhaps you can be more specific to help us understand how consecrated virginity is like and unlike other forms of consecrated life.

Yes, sometimes it helps to compare/contrast consecrated virginity lived in the world with other forms of consecrated life so that we can see and understand each form more clearly. Often consecrated virginity is regarded as a private vow lived in the world, or as a form of Religious life. Sometimes the term "Order" is misleading. Let us clarify these misunderstandings now.

In *Vita Consecrata*, the papal exhortation which is the result of the meeting of the World Synod of Bishops, we find that various categories of consecrated life are listed. They are all forms of consecrated life, e.g., monastic life, consecrated virgins, hermits, institutes of religious dedicated to the apostolate, religious institutes completely devoted to contemplation, and secular institutes. Each of these is a separate category under the larger, general "umbrella" term of "consecrated life." Each form is distinct in itself with its own attributes. Each

form, however, lives the evangelical counsels in imitation of Jesus Christ Himself, poor, obedient, and chaste. That does not mean, however, that all forms pronounce poverty, chastity, and obedience as vows.

In the case of Religious profession, the vows are pronounced and received by the Church. In the case of consecrated virginity the virgin presents herself to the Church and she is consecrated by the Church as a virgin living in the world. The Consecration is a definitive act on the part of the Church, constituting the individual in a particular state of holiness by the Church. Whereas it can be fitting, even, to speak of dispensing someone from vows or promises which she may have made, it does not make sense to speak of dispensing someone from an act of consecration made on the part of the Church itself.

The Consecration of a Virgin is a sign of the relationship of Christ, the Bridegroom, to the Church, the Bride. The consecrated virgin is a sign of the relationship of the Church, the Bride, to Christ, the Bridegroom. The sign is founded on the natural order, the relationship of a man and a woman in the marriage bond. Clearly, a man cannot be the sign of the Bride of Christ. Likewise, the spiritual relationship with Christ the Bridegroom is expressed in action by spiritual maternity in the Church. A man does not have the natural gifts of woman to exercise spiritual maternity.

The bond of Christ with His bride, made as a definitive act on the part of the Church as stated above, cannot be “undone.” That is, it cannot be dispensed. For that reason, a virgin should not be admitted for Consecration until she has reached a mature age, has lived consistently a chaste life, and shows every sign of perseverance in the gift of her virginity.

As such also, the Consecration cannot be “renewed,” as vows are, because the Consecration was received by the woman, not made or professed by her. She can reflect on the great gift of the Consecration which she received, she can renew her resolve to live as a virgin, but she cannot “renew” her Consecration as such. It is God who consecrates; the virgin merely offers herself.

We often hear of “Orders” in the Church, and most of the time reference is being made to a Religious institute, e.g., Order of Carmel, Order of St. Francis, Order of St. Benedict. In English we have only one word for “Order” which could mean a Religious institute as well as a category of consecrated life. The Order of Virgins refers to the latter meaning, that is, a category of consecrated life. It is not an Order in the sense of a Religious order, which is another form of consecrated life. One cannot, therefore, transfer vows from a Religious institute to the Order of Virgins and thereby be constituted a consecrated virgin under Canon 604.

Lastly, some people raise an objection or question why one would even aspire to receive the Consecration of Virgins when one already has a private vow or promise of perpetual virginity in place. Sacramentals are part of the treasury of

the Church constituted to confer grace when received properly. As any consecrated virgin can tell you now, great graces are conferred through that sacramental of the Church when the candidate properly prepared for this Consecration.

Today, even with just the relatively few consecrated virgins living in the world, we know that they are praying for families, priests, and Christian unity. Prayer is their primary “work.” They do not wear habits and veils, nor use the title “Sister,” nor write “OCV” after their names--these marks of consecrated life for those living in a Religious Institute do not belong to their state of consecrated virginity lived in the world. However, consecrated virgins witness subtly, but powerfully, by their very lives as virgins. Their life in their occupations often draws people to ask questions of them, and this is the very same kind of witness that the early virgins in the Church gave. They did not wear habits or live and work apart from the everyday world, yet they witnessed very powerfully by their consecrated life given exclusively to Jesus Christ alone. Consecrated virgins today wear their ring, but their comportment, modesty in dress, simplicity in life style all betoken their living of the evangelical counsels. Their loyalty to their bishop and the entire Magisterium of the Church should be a flawless witness of their obedience in the Church. They often are known in their parish communities or in other diocesan groups or apostolic endeavors, as they give of their time on a volunteer basis. They are not obliged to take up any particular work or apostolic activity in their parish or diocese, but they do all that they can as their circumstances permit in service to the Church.

3. As women discerning the call to consecrated virginity, what concrete steps should they be taking?

Certainly one should start with the prayer life of a consecrated virgin: daily Mass if possible, the Liturgy of the Hours, frequent Confession, and when possible the Rosary and visits to the Blessed Sacrament. They should read the Rite of Consecration and the lives of the virgin saints. If possible, they should then read what the Fathers of the Church wrote on consecrated virginity. Of course it is understood that if one cannot pray the Divine Office by reason of some handicap or another, one could still be consecrated. The same applies to daily Mass.

It is understood that those discerning this call should progress toward the Consecration with a spiritual director. Eventually, if it be discerned that this is the proper call, then the spiritual director will help them receive the Consecration properly and with its full effect as a sacramental in the Church.

Specifically, the process usually goes this way. One normally should have had a spiritual director for some years, and it is understood that the virgin is a practicing Catholic and accepts all the teachings of the Catholic Church. After a discernment process with her spiritual director and after having lived in tranquil celibacy for a number of years, then she can write a letter of petition to the bishop

of her diocese and request that she be considered to become a candidate for the Consecration of a Virgin living in the world. The bishop will usually meet with her to determine if she is a good candidate. If it is decided that she would be suitable for the Consecration, then she begins her preparation process. The time of preparation depends on how much the candidate already understands about the Consecration and how fast she can absorb the concepts. For each individual it will be different. The bishop of the diocese makes the final determination on whether the candidate, after her preparation, be suitable for the Consecration.

The Consecration as such has no upper age limit. At the other end of the scale, there is no certain age that one should have attained before one can receive the Consecration. Dioceses may choose to set a minimum age, but the important point is that the woman be of mature character, that she have lived in tranquil continence for a number of years, and that from all indications she will persevere in perpetual chastity.

The spiritual bond that the consecrated virgin will have with the bishop starts even before she receives the Consecration. In the introductory text for the Consecration, it is stated that the bishop is to start a dialogue with the virgin even before she is consecrated. It is understood, then, that if this dialogue is only to start before the Consecration, it will continue on after the Consecration too. Usually, the bishop will meet with the consecrated virgin every six months, or at least once a year. Of course the bishop himself will meet with the consecrated virgin as an individual, never delegating such a rich meeting to someone else nor meeting with all the consecrated virgins in the diocese at once. This is not an annual review, but a rewarding and pleasant dialogue. It is a good idea sometime to read the Fathers of the Church as they wrote about virgins as they knew them in the early Church.

4. Some practical questions often come up about the Rite itself and related matters. Let us tackle those briefly now.

Some candidates ask if they can receive a crucifix as part of the insignia during the Rite. It is discouraged to add anything to the Rite, and usually a crucifix is an insignia of mission to Sisters after they make Profession. This addition of a crucifix, as devotional as it is, would tend to blur the distinction of consecrated virgin living in the world and a Religious making Profession in an apostolic institute.

Sometimes it is thought that the Consecration could be delegated to a priest to perform. It is very clear from history and from the *Roman Pontifical* that this Rite is reserved to the bishop of the diocese. The bishop of the virgin's diocese, however, may delegate it to another bishop to perform, but he should not delegate it to a priest. The full symbolism of the Rite of Consecration is reflected when the diocesan Bishop carries it out because of the spiritual bond which exists between consecrated virgins and their bishop.

After the Consecration, an official notation should be made in the Baptismal record of the consecrated virgin, just as one records marriages or Religious Profession. The consecrated virgin herself should receive a document testifying to her Consecration and a copy of this document should be filed in the diocesan archives.

5. Could we look at some of the practical questions now about the actual living of this vocation in the Church? What are some of the aspirations of consecrated virgins today?

Because consecrated virgins want to grow in their life of prayer and to participate in their diocese as much as their individual situations permit, they often have two requests. They want to be able to adore the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament as fervently and as often as they can and, therefore, they ask how they can receive permission to have the Blessed Sacrament reserved in their homes. This permission can be granted only by the Ordinary of the diocese. The pertinent canons of the *Code of Canon Law* are: canons 934 § 1, no. 2; 934, § 2; 938, §§ 2-5; 940; 941, §§ 1-2; and 943. A second request is that they be notified of diocesan events that would pertain properly to them so that they can attend, if they can.

Sometimes they want to know if they can be a god-mother for a child at Baptism. Of course they can. Others wish to know what procedure to follow should they have to move from their current diocese into another one, to take a job, for example. In the case of relocation, a consecrated virgin should write a letter to inform her current bishop that she will be moving and write a letter to the bishop into whose diocese she will be living to let him know who she is and of her plans to change residence. It is helpful for the bishop of her current diocese to write a letter to the bishop into whose diocese she will move to introduce her to him.

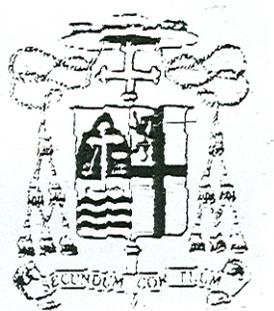
In some rare cases, a consecrated virgin may live in one diocese but work “across the border,” so to speak, in another diocese. Then the question comes up as to which diocese she should consider herself a part. The answer is that her diocese is the one in which she intends to make her home.

Another question, sometimes posed, is whether a person after having received the Consecration of Virgin for a Woman Living in the World could become a Religious Sister at a later date. It is possible that a consecrated virgin living in the world may later discern a further vocation to the religious life. There is nothing in the vocation to consecrated virginity lived in the world which is contrary to profession as a religious. It would, however, mean that the consecrated virgin ceases to live in the world and accepts the essential elements of religious life, which are distinct from consecrated virginity. What must be noted here is that consecrated virginity lived in the world has its own integrity as a distinct form of consecrated life and leads the consecrated virgin to holiness of life. It is not a lesser form of consecrated life which can be perfected by the call to a higher form

of consecrated life. Therefore, the consecrated virgin living in the world who has carefully discerned her vocation will not be likely to discern another form of vocation to the consecrated life. It is important to discern properly, through a thorough preparation, whether one is called to consecrated virginity lived in the world. Once the virgin has made the proper preparation and received the Consecration, she should devote herself with an undivided heart to fulfilling the requirements of her state and vocation in life.

RAIMUNDUS LEO

Divina Miseratione et



Apostolicae Sedis Gratia

EPISCOPUS CROSSENSIS

Hisce litteris fidem facimus atque testamur

dilectam Nobis in Christo filiam

CLEMENTISSIMAM DOMINAM PATRICIAM MARIAM MURRAY

Virginem vitam sæcularem agentem

intra Missæ celebrationem

iuxta ritum Sanctæ Roman Ecclesiæ

et formam in *Pontificali Romano* præscriptam

a Nobis consecratam esse

die octava mensis iunii anno Domini MCMXCVII,

in cathedrali templo Sancti Ioseph Opificis.

Datum Crossæ, die octava mensis iunii anno Domini MCMXCVII°, Dominica decima per annum.

L. S.

Episcopus Diœcesanus

Cancellarius

RAYMOND LEO

By the Grace of God and



the Favor of the Apostolic See

BISHOP OF LA CROSSE

We hereby certify and attest
that Our beloved daughter in Christ
MISS PATRICIA MAE MURRAY
a Virgin living in the world
was consecrated by Us
according to the rite of the Holy Roman Church
and the form prescribed in the *Roman Pontifical*
on the eighth day of June in the year of Our Lord 1997,
in the Cathedral Church of Saint Joseph the Workman.

Given at La Crosse on the eighth day of June in the year of Our Lord 1997, the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

SEAL

Diocesan Bishop

Chancellor

DIOCESAN OPTIONS

The individual diocese may wish to set up its procedure for application to receive the Consecration of a Virgin living in the world, according to Canon 604. Some suggestions include:

1. A spiritual-director approved and recommended by the Bishop of the diocese. Often a person does not know of spiritual directors available in the diocese who are knowledgeable about the Consecration of a Virgin. This spiritual director should help her discern if this is the vocation for her.
2. Application procedure to include an autobiography written by the candidate herself with particular attention paid to her own spiritual history over the years and her stated reason(s) for desiring the Consecration of a Virgin; application form; letters of recommendation.
3. This Formation material available for the spiritual director (and Formation director, if these be two different persons). The period of Formation should be as long as is necessary within reason for a candidate to grasp and understand the meaning of Consecration of a Virgin and to grow intellectually and spiritually in preparation for this sacramental of the Church. Candidates will differ in their rate of growth and understanding, depending upon their background, time available for study, and individual capabilities.
4. No age limits are stated in Canon Law nor in the Roman Pontifical. It is understood however, that a candidate should have a history of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturity.
5. The consecrated virgin is responsible for her own financial security and health insurance provisions.
6. It is important that the bishop of the diocese decide ultimately on the suitability of the candidate who petitions to receive the Consecration. Therefore, meetings with the bishop should be scheduled so that the bishop and the candidate may get to know each other. After the Consecration, the diocesan bishop should meet individually with the consecrated virgin about once every six months and not less than once per year. These meetings are not to be delegated to another person nor are they to be held as group meetings.
7. Because the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World is a distinct vocation in itself, it should not be assumed that because a woman has Religious Life background she is suitable, or formed already, for this vocation. Consecrated virginity should also not be regarded as the vocation for those who are not suitable, for various reasons, to enter or remain in Religious Life.
8. After the Consecration, the consecrated virgin should be regarded as an integral part of the diocese and should be included in diocesan events and on the diocesan mailing list.

Discernment

Virginal, Feminine, Spousal Love for Christ

prepared by Judith M. Stegman, consecrated virgin, for the Rome 2008 International Congress-Pilgrimage of Consecrated Virgins

I've been invited to ponder with you the theme, "Virginal, Spousal, Feminine Love for Christ" – to ponder not so much in an academic way, for I am an accountant by profession – but to offer a studied theological reflection based on my experience as a consecrated virgin living in the world. My experience includes the privilege of serving for the past four years as president of the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins, and engaging in exchanges about our vocation with Bishops, priests, delegates for consecrated life, vocation directors, and, of course inquirers, candidates, and consecrated virgins themselves. My world also includes business clients, colleagues, boards of directors, a large family, close friends, and an active parish life. In one way or another, all of these have informed my study and reflections on our theme of "virginal, spousal, feminine love for Christ."

Is this a theme relevant only to consecrated virgins? Surely not, for a virginal, spousal, feminine love affair with Jesus is exactly what is offered to each member of His virgin-bride, the Church. But it is the great privilege of the consecrated virgin living in the world to manifest this love affair in her very person, offering the love of Christ as Spouse to each human being with whom she has contact. It is a great privilege and a great responsibility to be "mystically espoused to Christ"¹, the Bridegroom, and to receive the title "bride of Christ,"² a title the consecrated virgin shares with the Church herself.³

The spirituality of our vocation centers about these three fundamental aspects of our particular love for Christ – virginal, feminine, and spousal - as well as the maternal fruit born by that love. But even the naming of "virginal," "feminine," and "spousal," as intrinsic elements of the vocation of consecrated virginity is not without challenge.

Some challenge the notion that virginity encompasses the physical as well as the spiritual and psychological, or, if they do recognize physical virginity, minimize its importance. Some, noting the example of St. John, hope that one day men will be consecrated in a similar Rite in the Church. And some even challenge the essential bridal nature of this vocation, explaining that it is old-fashioned for a religious woman to speak of being "married" to Christ, and to don the signs of marriage: veil, dress, and ring, on the day of her consecration.

Such challenges are odd to hear, particularly if one considers the virginal, spousal, feminine love that characterizes both our Blessed Mother, the first consecrated virgin, and Holy Mother Church, wed to the one Bridegroom.

Our Blessed Mother

Let us reflect first on our Blessed Mother, on she who was chosen to enter into relationship with the Triune God not as Deity, but in her graced humanity. In Mary we

¹ Canon 604.1, Code of Canon Law

² Rite of *Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World*, #26

³ *Lumen gentium* 1:6

first see the birth of Christian virginity: feminine, virginal, and spousal. The Servant of God Pope John Paul explained that Mary is the first person who manifests a new awareness of a connection between motherhood and virginity. She was firm in her resolve to remain a virgin, as she asked the angel: “How can this be, since I have no husband?” (Lk 1:34) ⁴

Then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, in his homily at the consecration of a virgin, also spoke of this new awareness of a connection between motherhood and virginity. With the word of her “fiat”, he said, “Christian virginity is born.” He described the Annunciation as a time of joy for Mary, “Rejoice, Mary”, the angel said . . . but this “fiat” of Mary led to an invincible joy for her, born only after enduring the suffering of the Cross. “. . . it is a joyful mystery that cross and resurrection, virginity and maternity interpenetrate in the ‘yes’ of our Lady, which is the origin and permanent place of the virginal state.”⁵

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, in his great work, Mary, Mirror of the Church, recalls that the Fathers of the Church have said that Mary’s womb was the “bridal chamber” where the nuptials between God and humankind took place, the ‘loom’ where the robe of the union was woven. And of the motherhood of Mary, Fr. Cantalamessa remarks that the dignity of women is surely conveyed by the humility of God: “God wanted to have a mother!” and Mary had the honor of bearing the God-man, Jesus. ⁶

Thus we see that the first consecrated virgin was the Blessed Virgin Mary, the new Eve who revealed the fruitfulness of virginity as she conceived by the Holy Spirit and bore in her womb the Redeemer. God thus gave the gift of Christian virginity to the human race – in our Blessed Mother; in the Church; and in those individuals to whom he would give the particular grace of virginity to live on earth as “an eschatological image of the world to come and the glory of the heavenly Bride of Christ.” ⁷

Holy Mother Church

We move naturally from our reflection on Mary to a reflection on the Church herself, also virginal, spousal, and feminine in relationship to God. It was John the Baptist who introduced Jesus as the Bridegroom, and St. Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians so clearly reflected on the Church as the Bride. ⁸

⁴ Pope John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, #20, The motherhood accomplished in her comes from the “power of the Most High,” the result of the Holy Spirit’s coming down upon her (cf Lk 1:34). John Paul explains that “this divine motherhood is an altogether unforeseen response to the human expectation of women in Israel. It is a gift to Mary from God Himself, a gift which is the beginning and prototype of a new expectation on the part of all for fulfillment of the Eternal Covenant, a sign of eschatological hope.”

⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Gift in the Church and for the Church”, homily at the consecration of Dagny Kjaergaard, March 25, 1988

⁶ Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, Mary, Mirror of the Church, pg 64-66

⁷ Introduction to the Rite of *Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World*. #1

⁸ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* #25.4 Reflecting on the Bride herself, described as the Church in St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, John Paul said: “In the sphere of what is ‘human’ – of what is humanly personal – ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are distinct, yet at the same time they are complete and explain

We see the Church, feminine in relationship to her Spouse as she, and each of her members, male and female, receives and accepts the gift of love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond by giving the gift of love of his or her own person. And the Church is a virgin-Bride, described in these words by St. Ambrose, “The Holy Church, immaculate where coitus is concerned and fertile where birth is concerned, is virgin through chastity and mother through issue. She gives us birth in a virginal way, made pregnant not by man but by the Holy Spirit.”⁹ And in the words of the suggested homily for the Rite of Consecration, we hear, “He desired [the Church] to be a virgin, a bride, and a mother: a virgin, to keep the faith whole and entire; a bride, to be one with him forever; and a mother, to raise up the family of the Church.”

Our topic today is specifically about expression of Love for Christ, love as virginal, as spousal, as feminine. We have seen this love expressed by Mary in her fiat, and by Jesus on the cross. Born from the side of Christ on the Cross, the Church, the Bride of Christ, is wed to Him for eternity. Christ as head and Spouse of the Church loves His Bride as His own Body, even giving her Himself as bread to eat. The priest, standing “in persona Christi,” shows in a particular way the love of Christ for the Church.¹⁰

For her part, the consecrated virgin, the “bride of Christ,” shows in a particular way the love of the Church for Christ. As the priest is “alter Christus,” perhaps the consecrated virgin may be considered “alter Ecclesia,” consecrated by God to eternally stand before Him as bride. At her consecration she becomes “a surpassing sign of the Church’s love for Christ.”¹¹ Commenting on this line from the Introduction to the Rite of Consecration, Silvia Recchi has said: “So, the virgin can be said to become an image of the whole Church. The virgin personifies the Church in her personal bridal vocation. Her mission consists in living and showing in a prophetic way this mystery of the love between Christ and the Church, a sign of what the Church already is and what humanity must become.”¹² In the words of Pope John Paul II: “the choice of virginity for one’s whole life has become in the experience of the disciples and followers of Christ an act of particular response to the love of the divine Bridegroom.”¹³

each other. In the Church every human being – male and female – is the ‘Bride’, in that he or she accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person.”

⁹ St. Ambrose, quoted by Fr. Cantalamessa in *Mary, Mirror of the Church*, pg. 79

¹⁰ Franc Cardinal Rodé, January 7, 2008, address to Society of Jesus, as reported in Zenit. “Love for the Church is a love based on faith, a gift of the Lord which, precisely because he loves us, he gives us faith in him and in his Spouse, which is the Church. Without the gift of faith in the Church there can be no love for the Church.”

¹¹ Introduction to the Rite of *Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World*. #1

¹² Sylvia Recchi, quoted by Br. Pierre Raffin, O.P., Bishop of Metz, *The Vocation and Mission of Consecrated virgins according to Ordo consecrationis virginum*, #7, (conference at the 1995 International Pilgrimage of Consecrated Virgins in Rome)

¹³ John Paul II, General Audience of April 28, 1982, #1

Thus we see our Blessed Mother and Holy Mother Church characterized by virginal, spousal, and feminine love for Christ, and we see the consecrated virgin called in a particular way to personify the mystery of this love. How can this be, I think we might humbly ask, in the spirit in which Mary asked the same of the Angel Gabriel...How can it be that you have chosen me to live such a mystery? Certainly it is through no merit of my own.

Linking Human Marriage and Christian Virginit

Let's turn again to the words of John Paul II, who points out that Christ linked marriage and lifelong continence, and presented them as complementary states lived for the kingdom of heaven. He said that the two vocations actually complete one another and find expression in one another as they are lived within the Christian community, the Church.¹⁴ So, by looking at human married love, we learn about virginal love for Christ. And by looking at virginal love for Christ, we learn about human married love. Both of these spousal states involve a conscious choice of a vocation for one's entire earthly life; both are expressed through a complete gift of self marked by faithfulness and exclusive love; and both are fruitful, leading to fatherhood or motherhood in the spiritual sense.

John Paul defines "spousal" love as love expressed through a complete gift of self. The spousal love of the married couple is understood; it was present "at the beginning" and is even extolled in the prayer of consecration of a virgin, "As it was in the beginning, your first blessing still remains on this holy union." But, in Christ, this spousal gift of self can also stand as the basis of virginity lived for the Kingdom of God!

Virginal love, my sisters, is something very counter-cultural. In fact, it is something that can hardly be understood by a culture that says that the only fulfilling and real intimacy that exists for a woman is the intimacy that is achieved in the climax of sexual union. In reality, true intimacy is achieved in that complete gift of self.

What does this gift of self look like in the virgin?

- It is exclusive. It necessarily involves the renunciation of a complete gift of self to another human person in order to choose to give oneself totally, entirely to Christ.
- Can it fulfill me sexually? As women, we are naturally aroused in our physical, sensual, emotional beings by one that we love. If Jesus has given us the *gift* of virginity, and invited us to give our entire self to Him, He invites us to turn even these thoughts, these passionate feelings, to Him. To give over our whole selves.

¹⁴ Mt. 19:11-12; "Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it." John Paul points out that it is significant that this discussion concluded a major discourse on the indissolubility of marriage, which the disciples found hard to take: "If this is so, it is expedient not to marry."

And, I daresay, the consecrated virgin is deeply fulfilled in this intimacy of union with her Spouse.

- With the consecration itself comes a particular grace for this – a grace to turn these desires to Christ, our Bridegroom, not by ignoring the desires or engaging in sexual fantasies, but by truly turning these affections to Him who has espoused us.
- It is a process – experiencing the reality of the gift of virginity that we’ve been given as something fulfilling, as we learn to deepen in intimacy with Him in daily life. It is a process that is nourished by prayer, by Scripture, and by the Sacraments, a process towards union with Him to be consummated fully in heaven, but begun now.

Virginal, Feminine, Spousal love for Christ is counter-cultural, but it is characteristic of those called and gifted to live a life of Christian virginity. Why? Let’s take a closer look at each of these points.

Virginal

I’d like to tell a story of a woman I will call Amanda, a woman in the United States who, a few years ago, attended our annual convocation just two months before her scheduled consecration. During the gathering, she heard consecrated virgins speaking to one another and sharing freely about the gift of virginity that had been given to them. It seemed to her that they were speaking not only of a spiritual and mental virginity, but somehow also of a physical virginity.

Hearing this, she called me aside and spoke to me of the young women with whom she worked in her apostolate, explaining that many were attracted to this vocation, but most had engaged in some sexual impropriety. “Could it be,” she asked, “that we were really saying that the consecration of virgins was reserved to those who were physical virgins? Would we really be reducing the criteria for this vocation to an accidental, to something that simply happened to a person in the course of life? What about ‘second virginity’, the concept she often presented to the young women – that after repentance and confession, they could ‘begin anew’ having had their sins wiped away. They could present themselves as cleansed, yes, as virgins. Is this not true?”

My heart ached as I heard Amanda’s words – and yet, “yes, it is true,” I found myself saying again to her. “It is true that one cannot be consecrated a virgin if one does not have the gift of virginity to offer! Surely, the young woman of whom you speak may be called by Christ to a different form of consecrated life, or may be called to offer a private vow of celibacy. She may be called to a full bridal relationship with Christ within the Church, but she is not called to consecrated virginity, because she has not received the gift of virginity to offer back to Christ!”

“And, surely,” I explained, “a sign that one is called to the vocation of consecrated virginity is that one has been given the gift of virginity.” “Is there a physical test,” she

asked, “of a person’s virginity? What if the person has let no one, except a confessor, know of the past situation, will she be questioned about it? What would happen if she never told anyone, if she never told the Bishop and he never asked her, and she was consecrated anyway? What then?”

“It is difficult,” I explained, “because, as you have experienced here these last few days, the consecrated virgins do speak freely to one another of this gift they have received, and in all humility they look to the Virgin Mary and the virgin saints as their models. When this very situation that you describe has arisen – the woman who has been consecrated, though not a virgin, is often uncomfortable, recognizing that she is living something other than what is being lived by those around her. No, most certainly there is not a physical test. Of course not. But, yes, the Bishop should make known to the candidates the criterion of virginity. We have found that when the criterion is made known, the woman seeks another vocation if her gifts do not match this.”

A few weeks after this retreat, Amanda contacted me again – “I was that woman”, she said. “And when I came home from your retreat, I went in tears to my Bishop, telling him again of my past, and suggesting that maybe his understanding was incorrect and that I should not receive the consecration of virgins, since I was not a virgin.” She told me that he met with her and deeply apologized for his earlier misunderstanding of the vocation. He graciously encouraged her in the work she was doing in her apostolate with young women, asked her to continue this work in his name for the diocese, and said that he hoped to meet with her each year. Amanda accepted this, canceled her consecration and humbly explained her past to those who had been invited. She told me that she was peaceful, accepting that the Lord had a different plan for her life.

Amanda returned to her work with a renewed fervor to encourage young women to keep their virginity for marriage – marriage in this life to a human spouse or marriage in this life to a Divine Spouse – in either case, a human life lived in preparation for the marriage feast of the Lamb to which all of the faithful are invited. And Amanda personally? She has chosen to wear an engagement ring in this life, to remind her always of the hope she has in heaven. For my part, I’ve vowed not to forget Amanda’s story, and to do my part in seeing that all have a proper understanding of this virginal vocation, so that Amanda’s embarrassment, however fruitful it has been, will not be repeated.

That’s Amanda’s story, and I imagine it’s not too atypical. I also know that what I’ve presented is difficult for some people to hear, possibly because they have received the consecration in good faith, but with a misunderstanding of this essential point. Wanting clarification of the matter from Rome so that there would not be a continued confusion, Archbishop Raymond Burke, Episcopal Moderator of the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins, wrote a letter to Cardinal Francis Arinze, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. He wrote to confirm his interpretation of the following passage from the Introduction to the Rite of Consecration for a Woman Living in the World: “neque publice seu manifeste in statu

castitati contrario vixerunt”, translated as “has not lived in open or public violation of chastity.”

Archbishop Burke’s letter explained, “Sometimes, the language ‘publicly’ has been interpreted as living in a notorious state of a lack of chastity. I have always understood this to mean simply that the acts are public, namely, committed with another person.” The Archbishop explained his position on this delicate, and yet important question, saying that in the case of a woman who has engaged in sexual relations with a man and then has thoroughly repented and now desires to consecrate her life to Christ and the Church, he has offered counsel to such women who in fact do not have the gift of virginity to offer to our Lord, that they should make another form of consecration, usually a private vow of chastity. He requested an interpretation of the text in question so that there not be a continued confusion, causing scandal among the faithful and causing hurt to the individuals involved.

Archbishop Burke’s letter also explained his understanding in the case of a woman who, as a youngster, was sexually abused by her father or by another man, but without her consent. He said that he has understood that in such cases of rape or incest, in which the loss of physical virginity was not intended by the woman, she could still receive the consecration of virgins living in the world.

The response from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments stated concurrence with Archbishop Burke’s interpretation of the text.¹⁵

Given this authoritative response from the Congregation on the necessity of physical virginity for the consecration, we are led to a profound sense of wonder. And I expect we may look forward to theologians in the future explicating the matter to enrich our understanding. Surely it is true that our virginity must be deeper than a mere physical fact, and yet just as true is the fact that there is profound spiritual significance to our physical virginity. Why is it that physical virginity is characteristic of our bridal

¹⁵ Letter to His Excellency, the Most Reverend Raymond Burke, Archbishop of St. Louis, dated April 4, 2007 from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, signed by Archbishop Albert Malcom Ranjith, Secretary. “This Dicastery concurs with the propriety of Your Excellency’s interpretation according to which women who have lost the gift of virginity by knowingly and deliberately engaging in sexual relations should not be received as consecrated virgins, but may be encouraged to make another form of personal consecration. It is reasonable to assume that the wording of n. 5a of the *Praenotanda* of the *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum*, cited in Your Excellency’s letter, contains the phrase *publice seu manifeste* in order to avoid a possible inference that anyone should be required to make a manifestation of conscience in the external forum, since such a requirement would clearly violate the Church’s ancient praxis regarding all matters of conscience. Still, it seems clear that if a loss of the gift of virginity is ascertained in the external forum during the course of one’s petition for reception as a consecrated virgin, then such a woman should not be so received. If the same is ascertained in the internal forum, however, then the woman should simply be counseled to withdraw voluntarily – even though there would be no way for such a counsel to be enforced as a precept.”

vocation? We have discussed virginity as characteristic of Mary, the first Christian virgin, and the Church herself. But in our own lives – does it make a difference?

Pope Benedict, in *Sacramentum Caritatis* #81, speaks directly: “Here I wish to reaffirm the importance of the witness of virginity, precisely in relation to the mystery of the Eucharist. In addition to its connection to priestly celibacy, the Eucharistic mystery also has an intrinsic relationship to consecrated virginity, inasmuch as the latter is an expression of the Church’s exclusive devotion to Christ, whom she accepts as her Bridegroom with a radical and fruitful fidelity. In the Eucharist, consecrated virginity finds inspiration and nourishment of its complete dedication to Christ.”

Commenting on these words of our Holy Father, Archbishop Burke explained that in the Eucharist, we see the highest expression of the spousal relationship of the Church and the spousal relationship of the consecrated virgin with Christ. There is a union of hearts, a oneness in His glorious pierced Sacred Heart, the pierced heart through which the Church was created (just as Eve was created from the side of Adam).¹⁶

Diane Farr, a consecrated virgin in the United States, writes from her own experience: “. . . the consecrated virgin must have a strong sense of her own identity as a virgin bride of Christ. She must enter evermore deeply into the mystery of holy virginal purity, which she sees mirrored for her in the life of Our Blessed Lady. She strives always to bring the purity of her soul to Jesus as she receives him in the banquet of his love. . . . ‘Be yourself their glory, their joy, their whole desire.’ One who has heeded his call [and hears these words at her consecration] can surely testify that Christ himself is the glory of virginity and the joy and desire of all virginal hearts. Only with great simplicity of heart can we penetrate the depths of this mystery of virginal love, which is ours. It is our hidden treasure and our pearl of great price. When Christ places the seal of His love upon our virginity we can no longer see it apart from him. Remembering that He is jealous of our hearts we maintain a certain reserve and modesty in our whole demeanor.”¹⁷

Spousal

We’re considering why these three elements: virginal, spousal, and feminine, are characteristic of the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world. We’ve discussed “virginal” in some detail. Let’s move on to “spousal.”

“Are you resolved to accept solemn consecration as a bride of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God?” The question is explicitly asked at our consecration. At the hands of the Bishop, the new title “bride of Christ” is given to each of us. “The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, through baptism has already made you temples of God’s glory and children of

¹⁶ Archbishop Raymond L Burke, *The Holy Eucharist: Communion of the Consecrated Virgin with her Spouse*, conference presented at the August 2007 Convocation of Consecrated Virgins in the United States

¹⁷ Diane Farr, 2007, *The Essence of the Consecrated Virgin’s Mystical Espousal to Christ*, published in the September 2007 edition of *The Lamp*, the newsletter of the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins

the Father. Today through our ministry he anoints you with a new grace and consecrates you to God by a new title. He gives each one of you the dignity of being a bride of Christ and binds you to the Son of God in a covenant to last for ever. The Church is the bride of Christ. This title of the Church was given by the fathers and doctors of the Church to those like you who speak to us of the world to come, where there is not marrying or giving in marriage.”¹⁸

Far more than a title only, this new identity as bride of Christ is transformative. At our 1995 gathering, Fr. Ignazio Maria Calabuig explained, “The consecrated virgin is already the ‘spouse of Christ’ by Baptism, but now she goes a step further as she voluntarily renounces earthly nuptials. Thus the gift of the Spirit enables her to deepen her resolution to live a life exclusively dedicated to the love of Christ and to the service of the Kingdom. In this way she becomes the ‘visible sign’ of the wedded condition of the Church.”¹⁹

I’m sure each of us could relate personal stories of our spousal relationship with Christ. One that I enjoy telling of myself has to do with a client of mine, a businessman who telephoned me after moving away to another town years earlier. His first words on the phone were, “How’s your husband?” I hesitated, considering the meaning of his question, and wondering to myself if I had not mentioned to him my vocation and way of life. He asked again, “how’s your husband?” Finally, realizing what he meant, I quickly responded, “He’s perfect, He’s wonderful, I love him so much!” And he quietly said back to me, “I called just to hear you say that. You know, I don’t know Him well, and I’d like to get to know Him better.”

Diane Farr describes our mystical espousal to Christ in this way: “. . . the virgin’s mystical espousal to Christ [is] uniquely different from a marriage between a man and a woman. Instead of a marriage between equals this holy union is between a creature and her Creator. The finite creation enveloped by infinite love. There is a deeper mutual self-giving as God may freely communicate himself to the attentive soul. The bride in turn is perfectly known and comprehended by her Beloved. Thus a higher more perfect union is achieved. Virginity itself becomes the enduring and radiant sign of our eternal marriage with the Lamb. The consecrated virgin may be compared to a splendid white lily which in this life begins to open its petals to the Divine Son only to be transplanted one day to the heavenly garden of the Holy Trinity. We use many images and concepts to describe an ineffable reality that is beyond all words.”²⁰

Dr. Magalis Aguilera, a consecrated virgin and clinical psychologist living in the United States, describes her spousal relationship with Christ in this way: “I think our relationship with our Divine Spouse is a relationship that integrates all the aspects of

¹⁸ Suggested homily, Rite of *Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World*.

¹⁹ Fr. Ignazio Maria Calabuig, 1995, *The Consecrated Virgin Manifests the Wedded Love of the Church for Christ*, address given at Rome 1995 International Pilgrimage of Consecrated Virgins

²⁰ Diane Farr, *The Essence of the Consecrated Virgin’s Mystical Espousal to Christ*

human love, including friendship. He comes to us in the mysterious way of interior communication that includes the sensory aspects of the soul. There is nothing that a married woman has that I don't have in my relationship with Christ as my Spouse. The difference is that sensorial communication with Him comes from His resurrected body to my inner self. This is a process that takes a lot of time to understand, because our human tendency is to understand a sensorial communication only in an external sense. To integrate our being to intimacy with our Divine Spouse is a continuing challenge, one that is full of new experiences. But when we have His love as a stronghold in our life, we are truly free. We are joyful.”

Feminine

It is also characteristic of the love of the consecrated virgin that it is feminine. Christian virginity, in the sense in which we are speaking, represented first in Mary and in the Church herself, is always feminine. The language and essence of the Rite of Consecration is feminine, as is a bride and a mother. We know this, but what does it have to say about the nature of the love that we give?

The gift of self is a gift of one's entire femininity, as expressed in one's body (the natural expression of spousal love). The female person is always the receptor. I learned this very early, before understanding anything about the sexual act – my dad would be working with mechanical items and showing me the difference between the male and female parts – the female always being the one which would receive.

But this receptivity of the female is far from passive. It is *active* for one to choose to give a gift of one's feminine self to another – to make oneself open to receiving! It is easier to close oneself, not to be open to receiving love. To receive means not giving in to fears, it means being vulnerable with our love, it means letting go of oneself so that one can receive. For a consecrated virgin, it may even sometimes mean setting boundaries in other relationships that unsettle or distract her from making a complete and exclusive gift of love to her Divine Spouse.

In the words of John Paul II, as he speaks about the feminine aspect of the vocation to virginity: “Women, called from the very ‘beginning’ to be loved and to love, in a vocation to virginity find Christ first of all as the Redeemer who ‘loved until the end’ through his total gift of self; and they respond to this gift with a ‘sincere gift’ of their whole lives. They thus give themselves to the divine Spouse, and this personal gift tends to union, which is properly spiritual in character. Through the Holy Spirit's action a woman becomes ‘one spirit’ with Christ the Spouse (cf 1 Cor 6:17).”²¹

Fr. Cantalamessa speaks of this receptiveness in Mary as her act of faith: “Mary's act of faith is the nuptial yes of a bride to her bridegroom.” Faith is active; it is a response to one who gives and who woos our trust in Him. It is through faith that we receive, and the

²¹ Pope John Paul II *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, #20

woman most naturally is this receiver in relationship to God. He explains that Mary's faith existed even before the apostles' faith – faith didn't begin with Christ, but it began with Mary, the first member of the Church.

Faith began with Mary, the first consecrated virgin! Through the receptivity natural to her womanhood, Mary's act of faith permitted grace to work. The role of our Divine Spouse in the relationship is in the active sense of giver: he fills with grace. The role of the consecrated virgin, (and every other person in the Church), is in the passive sense of receiver: as she who is filled with grace. And as she is filled with grace, she is made beautiful, attractive, and amiable by Him who fills her.²² She is feminine!

There's much to be said to our society by the female person acting from the strength of her feminine personality, and the consecrated virgin has a unique opportunity to do just this. The Gospels tell us that the women, unlike the Twelve, remained faithful to Jesus in the hour of his Passion.²³ And Mary gives us a model of receptivity to God, a model of cooperation with the Holy Spirit, a model marked by peace and not antagonism. It is a model we can emulate in our relationship to Church hierarchy, to our brothers who are priests and Bishops.

Far from a model of suspicion, fear, and antagonism between men and women, the feminine consecrated virgin, filled with grace, accepts and promotes the legitimate authority of the Church. As Marian and Petrine roles differ in the Gospel, she embraces the complementary roles proper to men and to women in the Church. In the fruitfulness of her relationships with men and with women, in the variety of occupations engaged in by consecrated virgins, she demonstrates that gender “difference leads to unity, to communion,” without “dominion of one [sex] over the other, but rather respect for the dignity of both in their singularity and unrepeatableness.”²⁴

Maternal

Distinctive to feminine, virginal, spousal love is maternity, and with what better words can we identify the expressions of spiritual motherhood proper to the consecrated virgin than the words of our beloved Pope John Paul II to us when we gathered in Rome in 1995. He said:

“Not less than the woman who follows the path of matrimony, the consecrated virgin is capable of living and expressing spousal love. ‘In a similar love’ she becomes in the Church a gift for God, for Christ the Redeemer, and for every brother and sister.

²² Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, Mary, Mirror of the Church, pg 17, 19

²³ Pope Benedict XVI referencing Mt 27:56, 61; Mk 15:40; General Wednesday audience, February 14, 2007

²⁴ Cardinal Antonio Cañizares, interview with Zenit published 2/12/08, during the international conference on the theme “Woman and Man: The ‘Humanum’ in its Entirety.”

Your total and exclusive love for Christ does not exempt you from love towards all men and women, your brothers and sisters. For the horizons of your charity – precisely because you belong to the Lord – are the same as the horizons of Christ. [You] seek “the things that are above, where Christ is, sitting at God’s right hand”. And yet this does not estrange you from the great values of creation and from the longings of humanity, nor from the suffering of the earthly city, from its conflicts and from the sorrows caused by war, famine, disease, and the wide-spread ‘culture of death.’ Have a merciful heart and share in the sufferings of the brethren. Commit yourselves to the defense of life, the promotion of women and respect for their liberty and dignity.

You are well aware: “You who are virgins for Christ” become “mothers in the spirit”, cooperating with love in the evangelization of man and his promotion.”²⁵

The fullness of grace received by Mary, and the grace received by each virgin at her consecration when she is “set apart,” is meant to be a blessing to the whole body of Christ. It should produce a fruitful virginity, not obtained by a cheap grace, without discipleship or the cross, and with a presumptuous speaking of Christ as friend, but a fruitful virginity as salt and leaven of the earth.²⁶ To be distinctively feminine, to be a woman, is to be one who is receptive, who accepts the gift of love, and who helps others find a place, a mission – such is what we find in Mary, the new Eve, even as she walked with Christ, present at his side both at Cana, at His first miracle, and again at the Cross, as he completed His mission.²⁷

In the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, “virginity and maternity, virginity and fecundity, are inseparable. Mary’s virginity becomes Christian virginity at the same moment in which it becomes maternity. . . Christian virginity always has an ecclesial character . . . It is a state in the Church, the Marian state, which is for the fecundity of the Church not less necessary than the ministerial state of the priesthood in the Apostles’ succession.”²⁸

Living in Today’s World

Given all of this, why has the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world been restored in the late 20th century? Why now? What message does it speak specifically to the people of our day?

These are important questions for us and I’ll suggest two reasons for our consideration: First, as Archbishop Burke has summarized, the unique mission of the consecrated virgin

²⁵ Pope John Paul II, June 1995, *May Christ be Your Total and Exclusive Love*, address to those gathered for the Rome 1995 International Pilgrimage of Consecrated Virgins

²⁶ Fr. Ambrose Bennett, O.S.B., August 2007, *Mary as the Living Icon of the Church and of Consecrated Virginity*, conference presented at the August 2007 Convocation of Consecrated Virgins in the United States

²⁷ Fr. Patrick Sempere, address to consecrated virgins in Paris (France), November 24, 2007

²⁸ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Gift in the Church and for the Church”, homily at the consecration of Dagny Kjaergaard, March 25, 1988

in today's society is "to present the love of Christ, as Spouse, to the world about her." No one else can do this in the same way. The second reason is that we present a nearly irrefutable challenge to the mixed up sexuality of the culture about us today.

Presenting a conference to consecrated virgins in the United States in 1999, in an early year of our association, one priest advised us, "Don't lose that word 'virgin'." A willingness to call ourselves virgins in the midst of today's culture is certainly counter-cultural; the very word 'virgin' presents a challenge to those who hear, and the thought that the virgin remains virgin in order to be bride of Christ sounds outlandish. And so the two reasons are intricately related: the consecrated virgin, humbly identifying herself as virgin, in demeanor and acts of charity presents a challenge and a hope to those around her. They see in her what they hope to see in the Church, whose title "Bride of Christ" she shares, the virgin-bride in love with Christ alone, inspired by Him to love those about her. They are attracted to Christ in her, attracted to Him as Bridegroom, to Him who invites them to turn to Him that they might share in the heavenly banquet, the wedding Feast of the Lamb. It is an awesome responsibility and joy we have to bear this title, "Bride of Christ."

Ironically, we hear from this sex-crazed society that it is we who are focusing inappropriately on sex – by bringing attention to and even identifying ourselves by our physical state. Pope Benedict has referred to the "decline in moral values, fueled by the trivialization of sexuality in the media and entertainment industries [that] leads to the degradation of women and even the abuse of children."²⁹ Holy Church has named our vocation "consecrated virginity," and in order to be in a position to witness to the world, it seems to me that we need do little more than speak publicly the name of our vocation, to say "I am a consecrated virgin in the Catholic Church." Drawing their attention is just the start – but an important start it is if it can begin to challenge the false trivialization of sexuality.

By presenting ourselves as virgins, happy, content, fulfilled, and in love with Christ, we can begin to show in ourselves the attractiveness of Christ and His way, even as St. Augustine said of Lady Continence in the Confessions: "serene and cheerful without coquetry, enticing me in an honorable manner to come and not to hesitate." This witness of true virginal femininity in relationship to Christ and to our brothers and sisters in the Church, this witness is a far cry from a radical feminism. It presents a femininity open to cooperation, confident, trustworthy and trusting in God.

Our Holy Father Pope Benedict has called for "a renewed anthropological study ... which contributes to deepening not only the feminine identity but also the masculine," noting that, "Faced with cultural and political trends that seek to eliminate, or at least cloud and confuse, the sexual differences inscribed in human nature, considering them a cultural construct, it is necessary to recall God's design that created the human being masculine and feminine, with a unity and at the same time an original difference and

²⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, address to Thailand's ambassador to the Holy See, reported in Zenit 12/13/07.

complimentary.”³⁰ The consecrated virgin, accepting her femininity, offers a particular witness to the understanding of male and female complementarity.

Such a witness of feminine cooperation is sorely needed. At a recent conference on Catholic feminism, Mary Ann Glendon, then president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, spoke of the need for the Church to “demonstrate the seriousness of its belief that women and men are equal but not identical, by providing examples of lay women and men and priests working together in real partnerships.” She said that unless the Church “can show the world concrete models of male-female cooperation in positions of responsibility and decision-making the church will continue to struggle against charges that it is chauvinistic.”³¹

Time and time again, we see examples of consecrated virgins working side-by-side with priests and Bishops, precisely in this concrete model. Isn't the consecrated virgin, in her natural support and love for the priesthood, in a unique position to do this? And the witness of a feminine, virginal, spousal love for Christ can also be evident in our professional work, as we strive to love the world first loved so intimately by our Divine Spouse. It is a love that is evangelistic in nature. To be effective, it is also important that we encourage and cultivate among us intellectual curiosity, ongoing theological formation, and a striving for excellence in our professions, that we might have the tools to engage seriously those with whom we work and serve.

The culture about us, too, needs the witness of consecrated virginity. As evidence points to the widespread use of pornography in all sectors of society,³² one might wonder at a vocation called “consecrated virginity.” And yet this is the 21st century culture in which our vocation is being presented.

Shall we hide our light under a bushel basket, this great gift given us by Christ Himself? Is the darkness of our culture so much different than what our sisters faced in prior days? Maybe the cyberspace aspect is different, but Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, speaking at a recent conference on citizenship and evangelization, compared current U.S. society to the early Christian society. He noted that to be Christian then, as now, meant believing that sex and marriage were sacred. “From the start,” he said, “being Christian meant rejecting abortion, infanticide, birth control, divorce, homosexual activity and marital infidelity – all things widely practiced by their Roman neighbors.” As consecrated virgins living in the world, we have a particular independence and ability to interact with the world about us, to speak the truth in love.

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, address to the participants in the international convention on the theme *Woman and Man, The Humanum in its Entirety*, February 9, 2008, published by Libreria Editrice Vaticana

³¹ Mary Ann Glendon, at December 2006 conference on *Feminism and the Catholic Church*. reported by Catholic News Service 12/18/06, as quoted in The Criterion Online Blog.

³² Jason Byassee, *Not your Father's Pornography*, January 2008 issue *First Things*

Surely in this regard, we must be prudent; we must be guarded, trusting in the grace of the consecration. Recall the solemn blessing of the Bishop: **“Lord, protect those who seek your help. They desire to be strengthened by your blessing and consecration. Defend them from the cunning and deceit of the enemy. Keep them vigilant and on their guard; may nothing tarnish the glory of perfect virginity, or the vocation of purity which is shared by those who are married. Through the gift of your Spirit, Lord, give them modesty with right judgment, kindness with true wisdom, gentleness with strength of character, freedom with the grace of chastity. Give them the warmth of love, to love you above all others.”**³³

The consecrated virgin is passionate in her love for the Eucharist, receiving Christ as her Spouse, her inspiration, her food. She is female, always ready to receive the intimate love of her Bridegroom and to return that love in prayer and service. “More than others [she] can be compared with the Church.”³⁴ Strengthened by this food, she dares to publicly call herself virgin in the midst of an antagonistic society, humbly recognizing that she is not simply a consecrated woman, but a consecrated virgin. She is courageous, recognizing that neither was the virginal life easy for Agnes, Cecilia, Agatha, or Lucy, who lived in a society not unlike our own, antagonistic to virgin, female, and the possibility of an intimate spousal relationship with the Creator of the universe.

What a powerful witness we have to offer - who would dare to approach the All-Holy God, Creator of all, as a Husband, a Spouse, an intimate lover, as a woman approaches a man? Who would dare? And yet our God has initiated such a relationship with those He has created. He has offered this bond not only to consecrated virgins, but to all He has created. It is the privileged joy of consecrated virgins to manifest this relationship - virginal in its integrity, feminine in its receptivity, and spousal in its intimacy – to all men and women, all who have been created in the image and likeness of God.

³³ Prayer of Consecration, Rite of *Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World*.

³⁴ St. Ambrose’s *De virginibus*, 12, cited in the Office of Readings for the Feast of St. Lucy, December 13.

DISCERNMENT OF THE VOCATION

The candidate should prepare an autobiography to present to her spiritual director/formation director and to the bishop. She should include an explanation of why she seeks the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World according to Canon 604.

The autobiography is a useful starting point in order to determine maturity, points of discussion, and motivation for candidacy.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION? "It is the guiding of a person into a life truly under the dominion of the Holy Spirit, Who is the Primary Director."

Fr. Thomas Dubay, S.M., *Seeking Spiritual Direction*, Servant Publications

**SPIRITUAL DIRECTION:
FINDING A DIRECTOR AND ONGOING DIRECTION**

Most people seeking spiritual direction desire to grow in prayer and discernment of God's will for their life. Prayer and discernment are inextricably linked.

Prayer: Prayer is conversation, communication leading to a deep and intimate relationship with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the very *heart* of the consecrated virgin's vocation. Because of her charism, "bride of Christ," and the distinctly nuptial characteristic of her vocation, the consecrated virgin will find her prayer being focused in a particular way on Jesus as Bridegroom, as Husband. She will also find herself developing a strong, personal relationship with Mary who is "Virgin of virgins."

Discernment: Discernment is the ability to know and to come to an understanding of God's will in any particular area of one's life.

Prayer and discernment are dependent upon one another, each facilitating or fostering the deepening of the other. Through the graces received in prayer, one listens and comes to understand God's will. The more one acts in accordance with, and is obedient to His personal direction for life, the more He blesses one. The more He blesses one with Himself, the gift of His Holy Spirit, the more one seeks Him in prayer and desires His holy will, His desire. Through discernment and prayer, one comes to understand the Scripture: "the Holy Spirit is given to them that obey Him" (Acts 5:32). As the Lord matures one in this process, there is a gradual coalescing of desires as one's deepest desires become one with His.

One of the graced functions of spiritual direction is "co-discernment." It is two persons together seeking, listening for, and being attentive to the Lord's direction in any particular aspect in the life of the "directee." It is not a situation in which the "director" tells the "directee" what to do. This is crucial to note, for there is only one real director—the Holy Spirit. The spiritual director facilitates another's relationship with the Lord and helps that person to learn His ways.

As important as the co-discernment process is, the *final* discernment regarding any situation lies in the heart of the directee. Each directee is ultimately responsible for her own decisions before the Lord. She is not under the "obedience" of the director as, for example, a professed religious is under obedience to a superior. Any unhealthy dependence of directee upon director needs to be guarded against by both persons. Throughout life, growth in the ability to discern is aided by the help of appropriate spiritual direction; however, this relationship must never supersede the absolutely unique and personal responsibility the directee has to grow in her ability to hear and understand the Lord's personal voice in her heart.

Does everyone need a spiritual director?

Vatican II, in *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 5 says, "It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love...to reach this perfection the faithful should use the strength dealt out to them by Christ..." Spiritual direction is a charism long recognized in the Church given for the "sake of the Body."

St. Faustina explains, "Oh, how great a grace it is to have a spiritual director! One makes more rapid progress in virtue, sees the will of God more clearly, fulfills it more faithfully, and follows a road that is sure and free of dangers. The director knows how to avoid the rocks against which the soul could be shattered" (Saint M. Faustina Kowalska, *Diary, Divine Mercy in My Soul*, Stockbridge, MA: Assoc. of Marian Helpers, 1996, p. 149, #331).

Seeking spiritual direction requires humility, even as it helps with the need for accountability. We are "too close" to see ourselves clearly or objectively. As we share openly and honestly with our director, spiritual freedom allows deeper prayer. As one advances in prayer, the need for a spiritual director is greater, not less!

How does one choose a spiritual director?

Pray. Ask Jesus to give you the spiritual director He has in mind for you!

Talk to someone who is trusted (e.g. a priest) in your Diocese to see who is available for giving spiritual direction. Do not be deterred by the apparent busyness of a priest or director.

Ask to get together once with that person. If you are comfortable that you are somewhat like-minded and seem to be on the same spiritual plane and if you have a clear sense that this person is orthodox, ask for another appointment. Pray your way through this process. It is best to wade rather than to dive into the relationship. There must be a good fit between you and your director; however, this takes time—at least three sessions—to determine if the possibility of continued spiritual direction even exists.

If a director is unfamiliar with the Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World, even more importantly, if he/she is unwilling to read and study to gain a true understanding of this Consecration or is obviously antagonistic in any way toward it, then it would not be advantageous to choose him/her as a spiritual director.

It is important to note that prior to Consecration, the spiritual director's role will be one of co-

discernment and assistance with "preparation," not formation. After Consecration, the director's role will include assuring accountability of the directee to the Consecration she has received and continual growth in consonance with the distinctive characteristics of this unique vocation.

Some general and some specific things to know about a spiritual direction relationship for consecrated virgins:

Remember that spiritual directors are not plentiful. Furthermore, good directors are very busy, so come to sessions prepared. It is helpful to prioritize, in writing, those things you wish to discuss. Take responsibility for carefully staying within the time limit agreed upon. In an established spiritual direction relationship, a once-a-month session normally lasts one hour.

It is important to share "good things" as well as difficulties. Spiritual direction is not crisis counseling; however, God uses everything in one's life for spiritual growth. The spiritual life should not be compartmentalized. Anything the Holy Spirit seems to be "prompting" should not be eliminated. This is a "protected" relationship; the director observes absolute confidentiality. The directee, although not bound by the same confidentiality, should observe prudence in sharing anything from a spiritual direction session with another person.

Although face-to-face spiritual direction is the ideal, the possibility of spiritual direction through the mail or over the telephone should not be ruled out.

Is there a fee for spiritual direction? There is no "charge" for spiritual direction, but many who receive direction feel more intentional and committed when they give an offering.

It is the responsibility of the directee to inquire regarding the customary donation for the director's time and then honor that. This is a common and respectable practice. If the director declines a stipend, it is commendable for the directee to make a regular monetary contribution, in accord with what he/she *can* and *wants* to make, to a charity (preferably one

favorable to the director) in appreciation for the time spent in direction. This could be, for example, the director's parish, a religious order, some missionary work, a seminary, pro-life organization, etc.

If a monetary contribution is entirely impossible, an offering of prayer may be made for the director. Making a Holy Hour (an hour of prayer) for the time spent in direction will be greatly appreciated and mutually beneficial. In fact, *everyone* should be committed to praying for his or her director, just as surely the director will be praying quite often for the directee.

How does one determine the effectiveness of the relationship? Generally speaking, one simply has a peace, an inner sense or knowing that "this is right," even in spite of difficulties that might arise. The Holy Spirit "bears witness" in one's spirit with appreciable clarity that one is receiving guidance that is from God through the co-discernment process. It is something known and experienced interiorly, and it passes the test of time.

Good fruit will certainly accompany a good spiritual direction relationship. There is some

sense that one's relationship with the Lord is growing through prayer and discernment. This growth will be manifested concretely as an increase in charity in relationships with others.

Although it is important not to "hop" from one spiritual director to another, especially in order to avoid difficult issues, there are legitimate reasons for a change. Even when a spiritual direction relationship has worked very well for a significant period of time, it is possible that the Lord would lead one to be under the direction of another person for the next part of the spiritual journey. Prayerful and careful discernment through this transition and openness and honesty with the present director regarding the sense of being led to make this change is needed. Termination of a spiritual direction relationship *for any reason* demands proper respect and appropriate appreciation to the director with whom one has been working.

MATURITY AND CONSECRATED VIRGINY

If all Christians are supposed to follow Jesus Christ, the consecrated virgin has a special obligation to keep very close to Him as His beloved spouse should do. The way which He takes us to walk on is the Way of the Cross. This demands total self-giving, self-forgetting, courage, and heroism. To prepare for this, the consecrated virgin must grow beyond childhood and adolescence. She has to be mature emotionally, intellectually, and above all spiritually.

Grace is built on nature. This is the normal path or the law which we have to follow. If our nature is not ready, grace will not work, unless we expect God to work a miracle at every turn of our life. This is wishful and unrealistic thinking. Consequently, the consecrated virgin must try to use every means available to grow into maturity on every level: emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Her driving force can no longer be self-interest, self-fulfillment, self-realization but self-sacrifice, self-giving, and self-immolation. She must live and work for the good of others, for the good of the Christian community, for what is good for the cause of Christ. She must be ready to give up everything: her dreams, her pleasure, her interest and, yes, even her life in martyrdom for her Spouse and His cause. This demand is not for the childish, the immature, the non-saints.

She may not be able to reach that height at this moment, but she must have the desire, the courage, the determination to attain it someday with the grace of God. She must work towards the stage of total self-giving, and self-emptying (kenosis) like her divine Spouse Jesus Christ. It is clear that only mature individuals can do such a thing and reach such a height. It is towards such a goal, such an ideal, that the consecrated virgin must strive and aim. It is towards this stage of maturity that a consecrated virgin must work at every moment of her life.

As to how to reach such a goal, such a sublime stage of maturity, what St. Paul regards as the full stature of Christ, is not just a psychological question or an academic question; for the consecrated virgin, it is a challenge she cannot evade without betraying her real vocation as a bride of Christ. It is a question of holiness for her. It is an existential question which she cannot evade or ignore. She must face it in her life, the sooner the better.

However, she knows that without a psychological maturity, maturity as a human person, she will be working in a vacuum. Therefore, she must strive first to reach that emotional, psychological, and spiritual maturity of a self-actualized adult Christian and then divine grace will step in to finish the work of sanctification in her. Then, she will walk closely with her divine Spouse and Savior on the way to Calvary.

Maturity Notes

Three factors that must be in place in order to be mature and stable: relationship with God, social relationships with other people in some way, work that has a meaning for the person doing it.

The work can be either voluntary or paid, but it must be seen to have a transcendental meaning. It must be of benefit to others in some way. One can see this is a "mission" one has received from God. The work, therefore, can be directly beneficial to others on this earth, or it can be spiritually beneficial to others, as suffering endured for love of God and offered for the salvation

of others. The work must be done for God, not for human appreciation or self-seeking

CONSECRATED VIRGINITY REQUIRES THE INTEGRATED PERSON

from *Coleccion Pastoral Juvenil, Num. 1,*

co-authored by Magalis Aguilera, consecrated virgin and Doctor of Clinical Psychology

The integrated personality requires the development of the whole person, i.e., body, intellect, will, social relationships, and the life of grace. No person is pre-determined, nor pre-programmable, but rather she enjoys a unique and individualized freedom. Although certain factors influence the growth of any human being and they seem to determine her personality, they can be changed if and when the person wants and asks for help. Human maturity is an ongoing process, to be worked at consciously each day; it is never without areas of improvement no matter what the chronological age.

A number of components are necessary for human maturity. One must be able to give and receive when on different levels of human affective development. A person needs to recognize and act realistically within the time and space in which she finds herself. If her physical, economic, intellectual (education and culture), free will (capacity to make free decisions and the capacity to surrender herself in love), social (general society), communitarian (family, friends, school), and spiritual needs are successfully filled, then we can expect that a person will continue to grow in maturity.

In observing various levels of maturity, psychologists have recognized certain traits belonging to the stages of human development. Briefly, they are:

Child: body, thinking, social relations, affections, and the spiritual are all in the service of the child. She needs familial and social security. She has nothing to decide for herself.

Adolescent: advances toward giving. She goes through various stages. Although she receives a great deal, she is called to give of herself and open herself to others. She would like to jump into adulthood, but she can never do it without discovering first her personality by trying out its possibilities through her own care of her body, long discussions, friendship, teamwork, a movement to the margins of the familial circle, and the exploration of ideals.

Adult: gives and receives--both are necessary. She is in full possession of herself and is called to give to others in order to be happy. She continues to receive, but it is to the benefit of others. She continues to grow each day in physical maturity, intellect, affections, and spirituality. It is understood that this stage of human development is not a pre-determined one, but made by one's own decisions.

It is clear from the brief descriptions above that each stage of human development means that a person cannot reach her full identity without changing her relations with the people who played a role in each period of her life from childhood through the various stages of adolescence. Closely related to this principle, also, is the fact that in the social sphere, no matter what group(s) one may belong to, a person will never find herself fully satisfied in her social needs. This is because

each group has its own proper interest, be it economic, professional, political, medical, cultural, or whatever. They are bound by that interest and, therefore, by their very nature will provide only a part of the social interaction that an integrated, mature person needs. Each social grouping provides for a give-and-take, but only in one aspect of an integrated human personality.

The above being said about the characteristics of the integrated human personality and maturity, it is time to look at the question of vocation. "Grace is built on nature," and the spiritual director/formation director should be aware that an aspirant to consecrated virginity lived in the world should be a mature person for her chronological age. In addition, just as there is a "readiness" in certain stages of human growth and development, for example, the "readiness" to learn to read when one is a child, so the spiritual director/formation director should be aware that there is a point of "readiness" when a candidate is prepared to receive the Consecration of a Virgin.

Let us look first, however, at the general concept of vocation, the unique call from God that He makes to the individual person.

The integrated person knows that vocation is a necessary component of human growth and maturity. She must come to know that she is called by God to live in a way planned by Him. The call is from God to man, not from man to man. She is to participate in the ministry of Christ and be configured to Christ personally and existentially. God calls, and man responds to the mission that God proposes to her. This mission is PROPOSED, NOT IMPOSED; man is free to accept or to reject it.

This call of God necessarily means that there is some mission, some temporal work to do, on this earth. (Even contemplative life, or a life of physical suffering and immobility, have a "work" in that they build up the Body of Christ through prayer and penance.) This temporal mission is a person's work in the time and place in which she finds herself. It is her unique part of developing and perfecting the world around her. It is a necessary part that leads to her eternal mission. The mission, the "work," that the person is called to do spans, then, both time and eternity; it is her eternal identity and mission in salvation history.

Vocation is not unilateral. To be human means to be called by God to integrate oneself into salvation history. By entering into it consciously, one progressively discovers her own manner of personally responding until she has made God the center of her life. The three moments of vocation are:

1. The call from God as the fruit of His love
2. Man's response: free, conscious, and grateful
3. The mission that God proposes (not imposes) to man and her free execution of it

The internal and external signs of a certain vocation are:

1. External circumstances are agreeable to that perceived call and the person's capacity shows that she can carry out that specific mission to its conclusion
2. Objective and subjective gifts are evident in the person to show that she can complete that mission to which she feels called. If God calls one to a specific mission, then He will give the specific gifts needed to fulfil that mission. Peace

is a result of the union with God's will.

When a person perceives a certain vocation, it is a dynamic process. God has her recognize little by little that He is calling her through the circumstances in daily life. She responds as an integrated person because to be human means an evolutionary process of growth--somatically, socially, psychologically, spiritually--until she reaches her own identity.

Jesus indicates and confirms His will through normal channels in His Church.

In summary, then, the spiritual director/formation director of the aspirant for consecrated virginity lived in the world should be able to recognize that the proper components of the candidate are in place. She should be mature in personality--within herself and in relation to others. Basic human necessities should be satisfied. The intellect should be developed to the adult stage and the person should continue to want to grow and learn each day. She should be able to make decisions and carry them out. Lastly, she should be able to articulate that she has perceived a call from God, not that she is trying to emulate or copy someone else's call, nor that she is looking for an "escape" from some situation, nor should she manifest that she is aggressively looking to "get her own way." The person called to a specific vocation should be willing to learn about it, go through a formation period to prepare herself for it, and desire to continue to grow in that vocation even after she has entered it. Consecrated virginity for women living in the world usually manifests itself as a vocation that has taken awhile in a woman's life to develop; it is not a vocation for those "just shopping around." When this vocation is confirmed by the bishop who gives his approval for the woman to receive the Consecration of a Virgin, she is humbled and displays an attitude of "innocent freshness," not one of "Well, I finally made it!"

How Do I Discern the Call to Consecrated Virginity?

The Consecration of a Virgin for a lay woman living in the world (Canon 604) is a call from God. It is a definitive vocation in the Church. No one can presume to take it on herself, nor should she ever deem herself "worthy" of it. Most importantly, it is a call of love, and love alone should be the motivation. Love of Jesus makes everything have sense, meaning. It is the love of Jesus that calls a lay virgin to become a bride of Christ, a bride of the Lord Jesus, an living image of the Church.

Called to be bride of Christ, the consecrated virgin concentrates her life on who she is, rather than on what she does. In this vocation, she is not called to a particular service or ministry in the Church, although most consecrated virgins use their talents and gifts in volunteer service to the Church. The life of being the bride of Christ is essential; her service in the Church and in humanity flows out from who she is. She can volunteer her time in catechetics, health care, administrative service, or civic responsibilities, but primarily she is a consecrated virgin. The key to her identity is love--as her whole love, attention, life, and desire are all surrendered to Jesus alone. Love in absolute surrender is the key to being a bride of Christ.

Sometimes lay women discerning this vocation would like to know what questions to ask themselves so that they can better perceive if they have this call, or not. Often points of comparison can throw contrasts and one can see more clearly the objective in view. With this in mind, let us look at some questions and subsequent discussions of these questions.

If I had been called to a vocation other than consecrated virginity lived in the world, could I have followed it in my life and been successful? For example, if I had been called to marriage, could I have married and made a success of the marriage? If I had been called to Religious Life, could I have entered a congregation and been successful in community interaction? If a woman can answer Yes to these questions, then she can be fairly sure that she is not seeking the Consecration of Virgins as a "last resort," but rather that she is seeking an intimate bond with Jesus as a consecrated virgin.

The Consecration of Virgins for lay women living in the world is not a "catch-all," a vocation to aspire to "when all else fails." It is a demanding life, perhaps one might even say a "tough life." Further questions can distill the true vocation from surrounding residues.

What am I seeking? Am I looking for a status, a certain identity, in the Church? Do I want the respect (and attention) of others in the Christian assembly? Do I want to be known as "Sister"? Do I seek a job, a position, as an aftermath of the Consecration? The answer to these questions is No--No, in that the Consecration does not give one the habit so that she can be easily identified as a consecrated person in the Christian assembly. No, she is not to assume the title of "Sister" because that title is reserved for those in canonical Religious Institutes. No, a job or position in the parish or diocese is not a necessary by-product of the Consecration. If she is seeking any of these "sideline residues," then she ought to look deeper, and more honestly, into what her motivation is. Perhaps the motivation is really self, not Jesus.

How can a lay woman, then, try to discern the purity of her intention in desiring the Consecration of Virgins? An easy way is to go through the Beatitudes in the Gospel (Matt. 5:1-12). She can try to apply each of the Beatitudes to the life of a consecrated virgin who should be living a life of humility. For example, am I willing to be a meek person of the earth?

Am I

satisfied with no title of honor, no authority or power, no recognition in the congregation gathered together for Mass, no particular job or position in parish or diocese? Am I willing to be "lost in the crowd" of Sunday worshipers, praying sincerely for my bishop and clergy, praying for all the laity around me gathered in the pews? Am I willing to mourn over those who have lost their way, not condemning, judging, or feeling self-righteous? Am I willing to pray and do what I can to help them return to the fulness of the faith, to the fulness of their vocation, to the health that they have disregarded? Do I feel their tragedy in my silent compassion? Do I trust that God will comfort all who mourn over the tragedies of our life today in the Church and in society?

Am I willing to endure persecution--the persecution that inevitably comes from being a "sign of contradiction" to the world? Virginity in today's world especially is ridiculed in the media, in social life, in one's workplace. Am I willing to be misunderstood because of my vocation of consecrated virginity? Am I willing to accept that I cannot live and recreate like others in my profession because of evangelical poverty? Am I willing to turn down some activities, legitimate for others, but ones that would cut into my time for prayer, time that I need to spend with Jesus? This is the virgin/martyrdom of our century, and we must be willing to live through it as our witness (and "martyr" means "witness") for Jesus.

Do I really trust all to Jesus? Have I made, and do I make each day, that total act of faith that He will keep His words, "Seek first the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness, and all will be given to you besides"? Am I willing to wait until eternity to see the results of my life, my witnessing, my prayer, and the entire meaning of my life?

If one can go through each of the Beatitudes like this in light of discerning the vocation of consecrated virgin, then perhaps she can get a clearer insight into whether she is called to pursue further preparation for the Consecration. And, it should be understood that no amount of preparation will ever be enough, but in the succeeding chapters we will just give a skeleton of an outline that one can flesh out as one prays and studies the Consecration. The Consecration of Virgins is ever-fresh, ever-new, and ever-growing because it is a life of love; after she receives the Consecration, the consecrated virgin lives it out sincerely, vigorously, and joyfully each day, aware that all the graces she needs will always be there and Jesus is, and always will be, faithful.

What Attitude Should I Have?

In the last chapter we spoke of trusting Jesus' words, "Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all the rest will be given to you as well." This takes an act of faith in more than one way. Perhaps one will think only of trusting in Divine Providence to take care of all material and emotional needs throughout life. That is perfectly true. However, another "hidden," so to speak, trust is necessary in a "hidden" region of our heart. Perhaps it is so close to us, so hidden deep down, that we are hardly perceptive of it. It is our dignity as human beings, our wanting to be respected for what we are. Certainly, nothing is wrong with wanting to be properly respected as a human being, but the question is the means.

In the Beatitudes referred to in the last Chapter, we see what seems to be almost an about-face in attaining the respect that we so universally desire. Jesus does not say to seek human respect for itself, but to be meek and gentle, expecting persecution for who and what we are. Is this respect from the world?

In another text, Jesus says, "Learn from Me for I am gentle and lowly of heart." Again, does this foster human respect? Is Jesus asking us to do something contrary to our human nature? No, He came to fulfil human nature. So, how do we square these paradoxes in our minds? Only faith, the revealed faith of Christianity, can make sense of these seeming contradictions.

We must not forget that human nature is fallen, that we are affected by the sin of Adam. Therefore, Jesus invites us to look above fallen human nature and to be willing to see as God sees, or at least accept that His ways are not our ways and His thoughts above our thoughts (cf. Isaiah). Jesus invites us to be meek and humble of heart--this is His way. Why?

Only a humble heart can receive God and His gifts. Only an empty glass can be filled with water. Only a heart filled with God can be happy, or "blessed," as stated in the Beatitudes. So, "Wonderful," you say, "but that is more easily said than done. How do you do it?"

That "how do you do it" part is the subject of this chapter on Attitude. What kind of attitude should we have when we prepare for the Consecration of Virgins and what kind of attitude should we maintain throughout all our lives as consecrated virgins. You have probably guessed by now the attitude is humility, the kind of humility lived by the Blessed Virgin and the saints.

The key to the humility that God wants is most evident in the Blessed Virgin. And the means she used is so simple--she always concentrated her attention on Jesus. If we could just shift the focus from ourselves to Jesus, just as we shift the lens of a camera from a chaotic scene to the person we want to capture forever in our photograph, then we will walk in the right direction. If we could just keep looking at Jesus, trying to get His portrait clearer and clearer in our heart's lens, then we will concentrate on Him, not on ourselves. This will be a shift away from the capital sin of pride and a movement toward Jesus. This simple shift is the way to walk the road of humility. And, only in humility will we be able to appreciate all of God's gifts to us--talents, health, life itself, reasoning power, possessions, and on and on. We will begin to comprehend

the greatness and goodness of God, and we will want to thank Him. We will concentrate more on prayers of adoration and thanksgiving for His goodness to us.

Let us look now at a bit of Scripture, taken from the Gospel read for the feast of St. James the Apostle, July 25. When James and John's mother approached Jesus to ask that her sons be seated one on His right hand and the other on His left in His kingdom, what kind of focus did she (and they) have? Was it not self? Was it not human pride? Then, what did Jesus answer? He reminded them that they (note He speaks to them directly now, not to their mother) did not know what they were asking. He then went on to ask them "Can you drink of the cup I am to drink of?" "We can," they said. Can't you just hear the tone of voice with which they answered "We can"? He then promised them that they WOULD drink from that cup, but that where to sit in His Father's kingdom was the Father's selection. In other words, Yes, they would suffer in this life, but selection of places in the kingdom was the Father's prerogative.

Jesus then goes on to teach us even further--anyone who feels himself called to greatness must be the servant of all, and Jesus Himself sets the example. He is the Son of Man who has come not to be served, but to serve and to give His own life as a ransom for others.

Now, what is Jesus telling us here as consecrated virgins listening to His words? What is our attitude? Is it to be looked up to? Is it to get respect for being called to this position in the kingdom of God? If that is our attitude, our expectation, then we are in the wrong kingdom. We are in the self-serving kingdom, the kingdom of pride. On the contrary, what does Jesus ask? He tells us to serve others, to be their servant, and even to follow Him to give our lives in union with Him as a ransom for the many (drink His cup--His cup of sufferings for the salvation of mankind).

Jesus does not leave us there, though. Remember, He added when He spoke to James and John that His Father would assign places in His kingdom. So, is our faith great enough to trust that the Father will take care of our places too? Are we willing to put our identity in His hands, knowing throughout our life that we have the greatest dignity of all--that of being called a child of God through our Baptism into Christ? We have been recognized and loved by the Father; what more do we need? Let us concentrate our energies, our activities, and our FOCUS on Jesus Himself and serve Him by serving others ("Whenever you have done it for the least of My brethren, you have done it for Me.") That is the secret of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the secret of the saints. They did not need titles, plaques, places of honor, publicity, positions, or even sensitivity workshops to know that they were respected and loved. They just concentrated their attention on Jesus, did all for Jesus and the glory of the Father, and saw themselves throughout life as unprofitable servants. They put their faith in God, and in their humility God "did great things for [them] and holy is His Name."

Does My Life Have Any Fruitfulness?

In the last two chapters we spoke of the foundations not only of Consecrated Virginity but also of basic Christianity. That is, the Beatitudes are the blueprint for the Christian life, and humility of heart in faith is the operating mode. Upon these foundations we can build our structure of activity--the service of others for the sake of Christ. Jesus promised, "Whenever you have done anything for the least of My brethren, you have done it for Me." He even promises that a glass of cold water given to a thirsty man will not be forgotten by the Father. As human beings, we are not mere static beings; our growth requires actions and reflection upon our actions.

As Christians, then, we will see our activities in the light of faith and endure persecution for our way of life and even sometimes for our good works. In the Scripture readings chosen for the feasts of the Apostles, we can get a clue on what we can expect. Let us look again at the Scripture assigned to the feast of St. James the Apostle, this time the Epistle from the Second Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians. "We possess a treasure in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way possible, but we are not crushed; full of doubts, we never despair. We are persecuted but never abandoned; we are struck down but never destroyed." St. Paul describes what we can expect in our life not only as Christians, but especially as consecrated virgins. Our life is a contradiction to the ways of the world, and our Christian service, our actions, should flower from our being a consecrated virgin for Christ.

First, we DO "possess a treasure in earthen vessels." We embody that consecrated virginity totally dedicated in love to Christ. Like the Church itself, we are His bride. Our physical virginity is an external representation of our total INTERIOR virginity, which demands undivided love for the Lord Jesus. Yes, our treasure of virginal love for Jesus is in this earthen vessel of our human nature. As part of the same sentence, St. Paul immediately explains that this surpassing power, the on-going strength to remain totally faithful to Jesus in virginity, is from God, not from us. No honest person would deny that. So, God is always sustaining us in our being virgins for the sake of Christ. However, St. Paul goes on to detail further what we can expect, especially as we live the Beatitudes and act accordingly. We can expect sufferings, persecutions, afflictions, and even doubts; but we are never abandoned by God nor should we ever despair because God is with us and strengthens us. Even if we are struck down, we will never be destroyed. With that assurance from the Word of God, what more do we need to carry on each day? No matter what our work, our responsibilities, our daily difficulties, God will never abandon us. He will always provide the strength, the help, and even the way out that we need. Our role is to recognize His strength, help, and avenue of recourse and seize them.

How do we recognize his help and the next course of action that we should take, especially when we are faced with difficulty or even supposed failure? We can look at Scripture again and learn from the miraculous catch of fish. Do you remember that the Apostles were fishing one time all night long, and they caught nothing. How many times have we tried to do our best in some good work, but seemingly have "caught" nothing? Had we prayed for guidance before we started the work? Have we left the result, even if visibly nothing, in God's hands? Have we realized that "Unless the Lord build the house, the builders labor for nothing"? Let us turn again to the same

Scripture which describes the Apostles' fishing failure of that night. Jesus told them to put the nets off to the right side of the boat and there they would catch fish. They OBEYED IN FAITH, and what was the result? Too many for even one boat's nets--153 fish! The key here is OBEDIENCE IN FAITH, nothing more. They had let those nets out several times the same night before--their human activity alone--and caught nothing. With the OBEDIENCE IN FAITH, they did the same activity of letting down the nets and caught so much that they had an overabundance of fish.

The obedience of faith always brings results. God has promised that He will not send out His Word and it will return to Him empty--no, it will always come back with the fruitfulness that He has deigned it to have. However, the key is God's glory. All our activities should be directed for His glory, so that He has the recognition for the fruitfulness, so that He gets the credit for the harvest. At the end of the passage chosen for the Epistle on the feast of St. James, we see St. Paul say that very thing: "Indeed, everything is ordered to your benefit, so that the grace bestowed in abundance may bring greater glory to God"

Should we expect always to see, with these human eyes, the results of our good works? No, we may not see anything as a spiritual result. One cannot forget Charles de Foucauld who for years in the Sahara Desert prayed that others would join him in his style of life dedicated to God. Did he see any result when the time came for him to die? No, to the human eye at the time, it looked as if his life was a failure. His way of following Christ seemed to be obliterated with his death. But today--look! All over the world there are Little Brothers and Sisters of Charles de Foucauld, witnessing the meekness of Christ by their lives of faith, silence, humility, and poverty. What sustained Charles, the ascetic of the Sahara Desert? It was surely faith in Christ, the kind that St. Paul speaks of. God's grace never failed him, nor will it fail us, even if all we see now in spiritual fruitfulness is a spiritual desert.

What Are the Essential Insignia of the Consecration?

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What Is Meant by "Sacred Person"?

"Consecration" means a setting apart of a person or object to be totally given over to the service of the All-Holy God. The word "consecration" has been used in various ways and contexts in our modern world, but for our usage here we will maintain the above definition. To ponder this definition of the Consecration of a Virgin, then, is rich food for thought just in itself: a virgin set aside totally for God Himself.

Who is the active agent in this holy action? Is it the virgin herself? No, she has already done her part by previously offering to God her promise of perpetual virginity. It is presumed before the actual Rite of Consecration of a Virgin that she has been living this commitment for some time. She has already proven herself for some years and her bishop has recognized that. The Consecration is, then, not something that she does, but something that she receives. She receives this profound blessing, one of the most ancient sacramentals, through the Church at the hands of her bishop, one of the successors of the Apostles.

Note, then, that before the bishop performs the Rite of Consecration, he invites the virgin to renew her resolution, her promise, of perpetual virginity for Christ. He asks her point blank, so to speak, "Are you resolved to persevere to the end of your days in the holy state of virginity and in the service of God and his Church?" Only after he receives her renewal of her promise of perpetual virginity does he begin the Prayer of Consecration. He invites the people present at the ceremony to pray, and then he invites all to join in the Litany of the Saints to ask all of Church Triumphant to join in interceding for these candidates who ask to be consecrated.

The actual Prayer of Consecration first addresses God the Father and recalls the purity of Creation. It reminds us that after sin came into this world, God in His mercy gave mankind a new covenant so that all nations under heaven could be born not of human birth, nor of man's desire, but of the Holy Spirit. Among the gifts of this new life in the Spirit, virginity is given to some to make the sacrifice of marriage, good in itself, for a greater good--"to . . . give themselves wholly to Christ, the Son of the ever-virgin Mary, and the heavenly Bridegroom. . . ." They "renounce the joys of human marriage, but cherish all that it foreshadows." That is, they live in and cherish the love that will be made manifest to all in heaven--the nuptial love between Christ and His Church.

The bishop then prays for the protection and help the virgins will need as they go through this life. He asks for their protection from the cunning and deceit of the enemy. Lastly, he prays for more detailed gifts, gifts which we can recognize are true gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom with kindness, right judgment and modesty, fortitude with gentleness, humility of heart, purity, fear of the Lord, and total love of God. We can also see that these gifts of the Holy Spirit make it possible for the Christian, and especially the consecrated virgin, to live out the Beatitudes in her life.

As a virgin set aside totally for God and living in His close embrace, the bishop continues on to pray for special gifts that she will need over the years: he asks that God alone will be her glory, her joy, her whole desire. He asks that God Himself will comfort her in sorrow, guide her in

perplexity, protect her in the midst of injustice, help her to have patience in adversity, keep her in evangelical poverty, and be her strength in penance. His final intercession, summing up all, reminds us of St. Matthew's Gospel: "Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness and all will be given to you as well." The bishop concludes the intercessions with the words: "They have chosen you above all things; may they find all things in possessing you." And the Prayer of Consecration concludes with the invocation "through our Lord Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever."

At the end of the Mass during which the Consecration of a Virgin has taken place, the bishop has a special Solemn Blessing to give. He humbly begs the Father again who has initially poured into the heart of a virgin the desire and grace to live a life of holy virginity. Then he appeals to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, our Lord Jesus Christ, God-made-man, to fill the heart of the consecrated virgin with the love from his divine heart. Lastly, he invokes the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, to fill the consecrated virgin with the burning desire to serve God and His Church. How appropriate that He should be invoked now to continue to pour out His graces on the consecrated virgin so that she will do her part to praise God and serve her neighbor with good works! Finally, the bishop blesses the whole congregation present with the usual blessing invoking the Blessed Trinity.

The Consecration is the Rule of Life for the consecrated virgin. The Consecration is never "over." It is always present. God's grace through this sacramental is always available to help her to live this most sacred life of being set apart for the God's glory and the service of the Church. Never are its graces exhausted, never will the prayers in the Rite of Consecration go unanswered at any moment of the consecrated virgin's life. May all glory and thanksgiving be given to God for such a great gift to the Church!

What Intention Should the Consecrated Virgin Have?

In another chapter we speak of those days, months, years of persevering love, prayer, and good works. These provide the means to live the consecrated virgin's spiritual motherhood, the building up of the Body of Christ. In this chapter we will plunge a little deeper into that spiritual motherhood.

Like Christ, our Spouse, we live the Cross. We reach out horizontally, one might say, to others in their need of nursing care, teaching, cleaning up, visiting the lonely, and the like. The vertical aspect of our lives is often referred to as prayer, that raising of our minds and hearts to God. But what about the vertical aspect that plunges deep into our hearts, that sadness and suffering that come to us from physical pain, frustration, misunderstanding, and the like. These also are part of the Cross--they plant the Cross deep down into our hearts here on earth.

In the actual Prayer of Consecration during the ceremony, several avenues of penance are mentioned, and we will take up these in a later chapter. However, for the moment, let us concentrate on some general categories and the intention we should have in our prayer and penance.

Penance, first of all, is doing our daily duties well. If we must make our bed, then we should make it well. Not much creativity or delight is found in making beds, but this is a chore of our daily duty. Do we have to cook for ourselves, wash dishes, mop floors? Let us do them well as part of our daily duties. St. Therese of Lisieux had the right idea when she did little things with great love and after her death was given the commission as Patroness of the Missions. It was her intention that counted--her love for Jesus and doing all for Him was the key.

Penance also is the suffering that comes to us; we don't look for it. In fact, we don't necessarily want it. Frustration in work, pain in illness, misunderstanding in human relations, fatigue, monotony with daily tasks--all these are ingredients for penance in our lives. Perhaps one of the deepest sufferings is to observe those who have left the Church, their vocations, their morality to follow now some trinket or obsession. We cannot talk about them to others out of charity, or even speak to them because we know they would not "hear" us. We can only groan within us, as Abraham or Lot were distraught over the sins and condition of their fellow citizens. We can only beg God for His grace and mercy for their conversion to Him and His ways.

Penance can also be little things we do extra. Does your job require eight hours of work per day? What if you added an extra ten minutes for tidying up after work and offered those extra minutes as a bit of penance? Are you a teacher? What if you were to spot a certain student having some difficulty and helped him for a few extra minutes? A nurse? Can you give an extra smile to a troublesome patient? Can we all go beyond the call of duty, just a little bit each day, for our part of penance in the Mystical Body?

All of these areas of penance mentioned above, however, will mean nothing without the proper intention. St. Paul reminds us, "Even if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it is nothing." So, we must do all for love of Jesus, uniting ourselves with Him on the Cross. He also

reminds us, "Whenever you do the least little bit for the least of My brethren, you have done it for Me." When we give that extra smile, therefore, or that extra few minutes to someone, we are actually giving it to Jesus.

Perhaps the most poignant passage of Scripture, however, to lead us to the mystery of Jesus are His words: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his brethren." Yes, Jesus did it for us, even when we were still sinners; can we not do the same for Him through His brethren?

As consecrated virgins, for whom are we specially called to lay down our lives? In the suggested homily written about in another chapter, we had a few categories of people listed. It is appropriate here, however, to zero in on a special responsibility that the consecrated virgin living in the world has. She has a special bond with her diocese and a spiritual bond with the bishop who represents Christ to her in the diocese, as he does to all in his diocese. Her designated role and duty is to intercede for her bishop, the diocesan priests, and all the needs of her respective diocese. If she could pray and do penance with the same fervor of intention of St. Therese of Lisieux, what could her diocese become? It would surely be transformed! And, what if every diocese had even one St. John Vianney? How the laity would be transformed! This is the MOST SPECIAL intention that the consecrated virgin should have in all her prayer and penance--her diocesan bishop, priests, and laity.

The exciting view of the consecrated virgins living in the world, throughout the various continents, is that they are indigenous to their own diocese. They did not have to get to their diocese from abroad. They live there now. The Holy Spirit, restoring their vocation in the Church and raising them up on various continents, cultures, and countries, is giving the Church in our day a spiritual powerhouse. He is truly "renewing the face of the earth" by calling these virgins to prayer and penance for their local church. Let us praise and thank Him for revitalizing this movement of consecrated virginity in the Church at this critical juncture of history and not fall down on the job that we are called to do in faith.

How Can I Make It to the Finish Line?

*Be wise: make ready your lamps.
Behold, the Bridegroom comes;
go out to meet him.*

These opening words of the Consecration of a Virgin during Mass are timeless. The word "wise" is a key. What does it mean to be "wise" in the Christian sense? How should a consecrated virgin be "wise"?

It is obvious that this antiphon quoted above refers to the Gospel story of the wise virgins who were ready with their lamps when the bridegroom arrived. They, as well as the foolish virgins, waited for some time, not knowing when the bridegroom would arrive. In contrast to the foolish virgins, however, they were ready with their lamps alight for the bridegroom's arrival and entrance into the wedding hall.

How were they wise? They provided oil for their lamps. What is this oil in the spiritual sense of the parable? It is what makes the lamp continue to burn, to give light. Is it not interesting that in another parable Our Lord instructs us to be "lights of the world"? How interesting--both passages of the Gospel exhort us to give light, to keep those lamps burning! "But how?" one may ask.

First of all, to keep lamps burning takes diligence and work. In the everyday life that we live, what does that mean? Our "light" must be our faith; we must keep that faith aflame in order to "shine before all men." And, in order to keep that faith alive, we must be faithful to prayer, holy reading, and the good works which follow prayer.

In this chapter, we will deal with those times when the flame flickers, when it is hard to keep going, when month after month we have to keep working in the same good works, but seeing no results. Perhaps prayer is an effort. No emotional "highs" lift us above the mundane. How does one persevere during these days, which are probably the majority of the days of our lives?

These days are probably the most important ones of our life. Emotions, highlights, and celebrations carry us through those days without much effort. But, during days of humdrum, faith must take over. Acts of faith during these seemingly sterile days show that God's grace is really working in us. We could never participate in the life of God through faith without His grace. So, these days prove His action in our lives, as long as we cooperate with Him in acts of faith and persevere in our hope and love of Him.

The Rite of Consecration of Virgins will help us out here. Let us look ahead from that opening antiphon to the suggested homily and get our meaning for the ordinary days of our life. After the bishop reminds the congregation that consecrated virgins are very much a part of the human family and members of God's holy people, the Church, he reminds the listeners that God has called the consecrated virgin to be more closely united to Himself and dedicated to the service of

the Church and mankind. They have received a call to a greater fervor in spreading the kingdom of God and in giving to the world the spirit of Christ. Their "lamps" must burn brightly for all to see. The bishop then reminds the people that the consecrated virgins will accomplish great good for the Church and all human society by their prayers and good works.

The bishop then goes on to address the candidates for Consecration directly. He reminds them that their Consecration was initiated at the Incarnation, when the Word was made flesh and thereby united the two natures of divinity and humanity. The bishop reminds the candidates that it was by the labors, preaching, and especially the Passion of Christ that Our Savior brought His Church into being. The Church is virgin, bride, and mother--as are consecrated virgins. Consecrated virgins are a sign on this earth of the world to come where the marriage covenant between Christ and His Church will be perfectly fulfilled.

The bishop then instructs the candidates on what their life should be like while they wait for the Bridegroom. How are they to keep their lamps trim and burning? He asks them to imitate the mother of God; they should desire to be called and to be in reality handmaids of the Lord. They must preserve the faith, hope, and love given to them at Baptism and strengthened in Confirmation. They should be prudent, watchful of encroaching pride. They nourish their love for God by the sacrament of the Eucharist; they are strengthened by self-denial; and they build up their life of faith by the study of Scripture, untiring prayer, and works of mercy.

We could stop right here and have the answer to our question of how to keep the lamps of faith burning so that we can be that "light to the world." When we feel the light flicker, the room grow stale, the monotony of work without apparent result, then we can turn to this homily and find out how to keep going. How shall we wait, as the wise virgins in the parable, for the coming of the Bridegroom? Are we supposed to sleep? No, we are to keep awake by the study of Scripture, prayer, the reception of the sacraments, and works of mercy.

The suggested homily of the bishop in the Rite does not stop there, however. It goes on to refer to the words of St. Paul: "Let your life be hidden with Christ in God,." while offering prayer for the crucial intentions of the spread of the Christian faith and the unity of all Christians. This is spiritual motherhood--to beget new Christian life and nurture that life in the family of the Church. Then the homily asks the virgin to pray for the welfare of the married--those who beget physical human life and rear their children in the Christian faith. Lastly, he admonishes the virgin, as a spiritual mother, to pray for those who have strayed from the family of the Church, just as a mother in a human family prays and always tries to unite her family in love.

The next paragraph of the suggested homily details more ways of service to the whole of the human family. The bishop reminds the consecrated virgin that she is an apostle in the Church and in the world to bring all to Christ so that His Father may be glorified in heaven. She should love everyone, especially those in need. Who might those needy be? The poor, the weak, the ignorant, the young, the elderly, those without family to care for them, those in some kind of distress, and those who have lost their faith and fallen away from God's love.

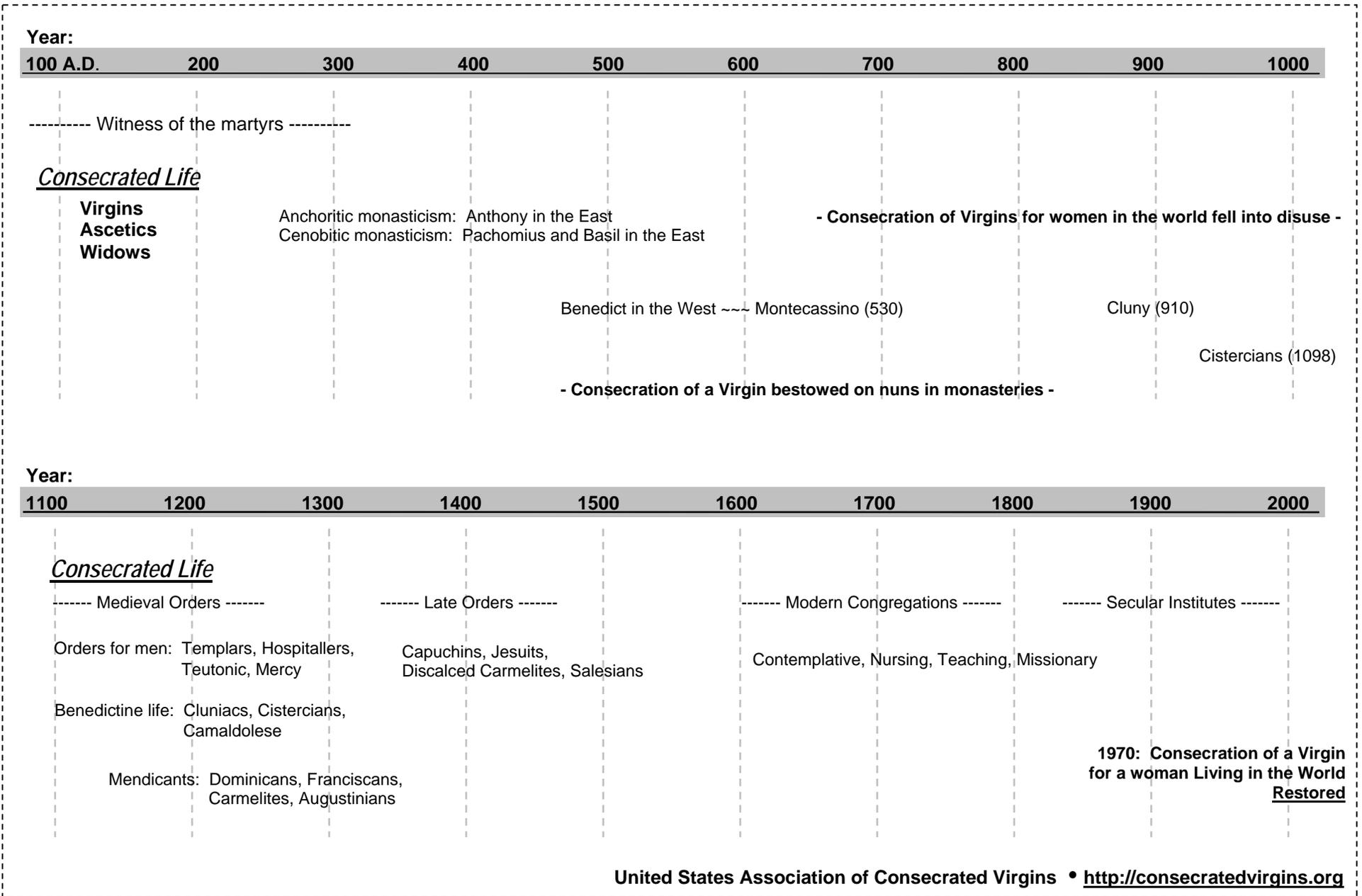
Lastly, the bishop ends by reminding the candidate for Consecration that her motherhood is of the spirit and her children will be those born, or reborn, to a life of grace. Her Bridegroom is the

Son of God and Son of the Virgin. She waits for Him now by doing His good work on earth. The promise is that she will be called into His presence and into His kingdom, in His wedding hall, where she will sing a new song and follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

With this work to do and this spiritual motivation, who cannot but "stay awake" and keep those lamps trimmed by prayer and good work for her Bridegroom. What are a few hours of monotonous tasks when He is due to arrive before the night is over? Perseverance is possible by God's grace only, as it is a sign of God's never-failing grace. Only by faith that His grace will always be there is the virgin able to make her first promise of perpetual virginity in the first place. However, the "tools" of perseverance are prayer, Scripture, and good works. Let us get busy, then, because there is plenty to do before He comes! The consecrated virgins are called upon especially today to keep alive the virtue of HOPE, as symbolized by the burning lamp. They must keep alive the invocation of the primitive Christians and the virgin-martyrs of the first centuries: "Come, Lord Jesus, Come!"

History

HISTORY OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN THE CHURCH



HISTORY OF THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS

(taken from Rene Metz' *The Consecration of Virgins in the Roman Church*)

Introduction

When, on August 15, 1868, eight Benedictine nuns received the Consecration of Virgins in the abbatial church of Sainte-Cecile at Solesmes, it marked the beginning of a revived appreciation of this holy sacramental in the Church. Thanks to the initiate of Dom Gueranger, this Rite, which had been neglected for several centuries, started to be revived. Although it never had ceased to be used in monasteries of the oldest Orders in the Church, with the exception of the mendicants, it had never really been widely appreciated for what it is. By November 21, 1958, nearly 100 years later, the apostolic Constitution of *Sponsa Christi* indirectly encouraged all communities of nuns to take it up again because it was considered "one of the most beautiful monuments of the ancient liturgy."

Although we speak of the Consecration in the Roman Church, or in the Latin Rite, various countries and cultures contributed to its liturgical form according to their temperament and customs. It is truly the fruit of a collaboration of various Christian countries.

Often one hears that the Vestal Virgins of ancient Rome were the prototypes of the consecrated virgins of Christianity. However, that is a mistaken notion because their resemblance is only exterior, at best. Suffice it to say that the virginity of the Vestals was neither voluntary nor perpetual. The asceticism of the Christians, under its various forms is a means of living out the Gospel, and the holy virgins lived out this evangelical counsel quite early in our history. The Church always cherished virginity, and when, during the early part of the 2nd century, some who were vowed in virginity lived with certain ascetics who would counsel and protect them, the Church put an end to this practice for fear of abuses that could later manifest themselves.

With the 4th century, we see the first evidence of a ceremony of Consecration. However, it is obvious that in preceding centuries consecrated virginity was lived out, but we have no written history of the Consecration until the Church would finally be able to live and prosper in a civil society of peace and acceptance. At first the ceremony was simply Roman in character, but soon the influence of the Gallican (French) Christians penetrated the Rite. By the year 950 A.D., the rite shows influences of the German and it can then be characterized as truly a liturgical hybrid.

Chapter 1

The Christian Virgins before the Peace of the Church

Although the evidence is sparse from the first two centuries of the Church, it is certain that in the heart of the primitive community of Christians a small group of Christians lived a life of total and perpetual continence. In the beginning of the second century, St. Justin cites numerous examples of men and women who kept their chastity all through their life. St. Polycarp (*Letter to the Philippians*, V, 3) affirms that at the side of the priests were not only deacons and widows, but also a veritable "ordo virginum" within the Church in the mid-second century. In fact, after having spoken about deacons, he addresses himself to the virgins to make recommendations to

them: "It is important that virgins live in the purity of a perfect conscience." In later years texts abound with references to virgins who are classified as a group, along with the priests, deacons, and widows. At this time no one term designated these Christian virgins among the writers; sometimes they were referred to as women who have renounced marriage in order to live in continence. In the primitive Church the titles of "sacred virgins," "holy virgins," "spouses of Christ," "handmaids of God" are all used in texts from the first two centuries of Christianity.

We also have no information on the life or occupations of the virgins of this early time. They lived with their family, in all likelihood, and it is probable that nothing distinguished them from other Christians. The Christian virgin who remained a virgin had fulfilled her essential obligation in her state of life. She was neither asked to have a special fervor nor an extraordinary assiduity in the assembly of the Christians, nor to take on certain good works. Nevertheless, evidence shows that the virgins surely did perform services that were assigned to deaconesses and widows. However, one must be clear to discern that they were not required to perform any particular work or fulfil any defined assignment in the Church. Were they particularly honored in the Christian community? Although no information exists on this point, we suspect that they were so honored and that this situation brought about a temptation to seek favor in the eyes of their Christian contemporaries. St. Ignatius and St. Clement of Rome warn them by reminding them to practice humility in order to combat this temptation to pride.

Finally, we have absolutely no information on how these early virgins embraced their state of life. Did they make a true vow? If so, was it made privately, or before the Christian community when they assembled for worship, or only in the presence of the leaders of the community? What obligations flowed from this profession of virginity? We have no definitive answers to these questions; and the notion of a vow is still vague in the information we have about the Church in these early years.

In the 3rd century we begin to see their life a little more clearly. The documents are replete and furnish us with information relatively detailed about the situation of the virgins. However, just because we have more precise information from documents of the 3rd century does not mean that the virginal way of life did not exist previously. It means only that the contours of that life were not well defined in those first two centuries.

The most prized information we have today from the Church of the 3rd century on the life of virgins comes from the Church in Africa. In addition, from the Church in the East we get the impression that the development of this state of life was not far behind the Church in the West. In Asia Minor and in Carthage we begin to see already a slight tendency on the part of the virgins themselves to separate themselves from the rest of the community.

Although in previous years we have not found a term specially designated to refer to Christian virgins, we see in the 3rd century terms which will be used for them from then on in the succeeding centuries. Tertullian uses the term "holy virgins," a term which does not seem to have been used by any other author of the 3rd century. Caution is advised here, though, because when Tertullian uses this term, he could also be referring to those who maintained chastity until marriage, not necessarily only those who promised perpetual virginity for the sake of Christ. The term "spouse of Christ" at this time, of course, referred to the Church, and this term for the

Church would become the current usage in Christian literature. However, the virgins who renounced marriage to become "spouses of Christ" were members of the Church par excellence.

Although Christian writers of this century do not employ the term "spouse of Christ," they certainly imply it when they speak of the Song of Songs (St. Methodius of Olympus) or when they speak of those who have left their promise of virginity and are called "adulteresses toward Christ" (St. Cyprian). Another expression used by Tertullian expresses the same idea: "virgins married to Christ" ("virgines Christo maritatae"). Although the term "virgin" can express at this time one who has maintained chastity until marriage as well as one who has vowed perpetual continence, in St. Cyprian's writing we find the expressions of "puellae et virgines Christi" and "membra Christo dicata;" these expressions definitely point to virgins who have vowed perpetual continence as opposed to those who maintain chastity until marriage. It must be noted, however, that the terms "holy virgins," "spouses of Christ," "daughters and virgins of Christ," and "dedicated member to Christ" are used only rarely. Tertullian uses "holy virgins," "spouses of Christ," "virgins married to Christ," and "handmaids of Christ" only a handful of times. St. Cyprian calls virgins "daughters and virgins of Christ" and "members dedicated to Christ" only once in his writings. From the few times that these terms are used we cannot draw the conclusion that these same terms prove that virgins pronounced public vows, as some modern authors would conclude.

In the 3rd century, it is clear that the virgins continued to live in their families and participate in the life of the faithful, as they did in the previous centuries. In their daily routine, they lived and worked as other Christians. Nothing distinguished them, especially not a special attire or dress. It is true that Tertullian enjoins the virgins to wear a veil, but this recommendation was given to all young women as they grew out of childhood. St. Cyprian was not concerned about wearing a veil at all, but encouraged them to conform themselves to the customs of their time and place. Of course he urged them to good grooming. They were to maintain their common social relations with all the women, and we see them helping at wedding banquets and even frequenting mixed baths, where men and women encountered each other rather freely. It is true that St. Cyprian did not approve of this latter behavior and reprimanded them quite severely. In Olympus, Methodius encouraged them to avoid public places, wedding dinners, and dances. It is clear that the independence that the virgins enjoyed could lead to real deviations from the precepts of the Gospel. It is no wonder then that the communal life for virgins, which started to take hold at the beginning of the 4th century, was promoted as a way to curb abuses which could result from too much independence and too much mixing with the style of life of the common faithful.

If it be premature to say that the virgins pronounced a true vow of chastity in the preceding period, we would have no hesitation to say that the various authors of the 3rd century leave no doubt that virgins made at least a simple intention or resolution to renounce marriage. It is clear that they made a promise to God to practice perfect continence. How this promise, or vow, was made is still not certain. Did a virgin make it privately? Did she make it before the bishop with the community of the faithful present and according to a definite prescriptive ceremony? According to some interpretations of the authors of the time, the vow of virginity was made in the presence of the bishop and the assembly of the faithful; a certain rite was already in place. Others interpret that the virgin made her promise privately, but the bishop was charged with

making known her decision to the community. Others contend that the virgin was consecrated to God in private and that the bishop did not intervene to make the vow public. In the absence of a text making allusion to some sort of ceremony of public profession of virginity, one interpretation today assumes that the virgins made their vow in private and communicated the promise they had made to the ecclesiastical authority; the bishop was charged to make known the vow to the community during a gathering of the faithful for worship. This hypothesis could explain how the virgins could have a private vow and yet be known among the faithful as virgins who were respected and venerated.

In the 4th century, Christian virgins became more and more numerous and began to associate among themselves in community; and, what is more, they entered into their state of life by a liturgical ceremony. They were found in all regions where Christianity had succeeded in implanting itself, like Gaul (France), Spain, Africa, Palestine, Asia Minor, and of course Rome and Milan. They were growing in number in the local churches both of the East and the West., although in the East the rate of growth was slower. Because of the veneration of a bishop like St. Ambrose, some virgins even traveled from their own regions to receive the veil from the hands of this holy bishop. In all the regions where we find consecrated virgins, we find that some started to group together in monasteries, in addition to those living in more personal independence within their families. Some of the bishops, like St. Augustine, favored communal living for the virgins. When the number of virgins multiplied so greatly, it soon became necessary, however, to deal with defections from their state of life. St. Basil in a letter dated in the year 375 denounced those defections from the "Order of Virgins."

Chapter 2

The Christian Virgins in the Roman Church at the Beginning of the 4th Century

Although our information from the first three centuries about the Church in Rome is only relatively precise, we have enough information from the Church in Africa and other Eastern regions to be assured that in the Church in Rome among the faithful there were persons who renounced marriage in order to respond to the evangelical counsels and who bound themselves to perpetual virginity by a vow. We can be certain that Christian virgins lived in Rome in the early centuries because of the great number of virgins we find in Rome by the 4th century--this fact points to the plausible supposition that virgins were among the numbers of the faithful in earlier centuries. Only after the peace came between the Church and the state do we find documents from Rome to show us in the greatest detail the institution of this state of life in the Church. In fact, Rome furnishes us with the most numerous, most detailed, and most complete history of the liturgical ceremony which accompanied the profession of virginity from the 4th century onwards.

St. Agnes was considered the model of Christian virginity in Rome. Despite her young age of 13 years old when she was martyred (under Diocletian, 304-305), Agnes had already vowed her virginity to God. Documents show other virgins in Rome about this same time--Marcellina, sister of St. Ambrose and who was consecrated by Pope Liberius in 352/353; Asella, of whom St. Jerome speaks and who was consecrated to God about 344; Irene, the sister of Pope Damasus and who was also consecrated about the middle of the 4th century just before she died at age 20; Eustochium; and Sts. Domitilla and Januaria whose names were inscribed in the catacombs as

"puella virgo Dei" and "virgo benemerens Ianuaria."

Although the majority of the Roman virgins lived with their families in relative personal independence as in previous centuries, it is very probable that some renounced their independence to live a communal life. It is known that the first monastery for virgins was founded in Rome in 350 A.D., near the Basilica of St. Agnes. By the time of the invasion of the Lombards, Rome could count a total of 3,000 virgins in all the monasteries. Pope St. Gregory the Great called them the protectresses of Rome because of the holy lives they lived. Undoubtedly, various popes, and in particular Pope St. Gregory the Great, favored the communal life over the independent life of the consecrated virgins. However, both forms of life continued throughout the 5th and 6th centuries, just as they had in previous epochs. Virgins who would live either form of life were able to receive the veil (receive the Consecration of Virgins) from the hands of the bishop.

It is necessary to note, however, that not all young women who made a profession of virginity received the Consecration of Virgins. Some made a profession of virginity, but did not receive the Consecration; they continued to live in the world as did those who had received the Consecration. They had made a private vow of virginity, their "propositum," and it was known to the ecclesiastical authority, but it was not confirmed by the ceremony of the Consecration of Virgins. We can see, therefore, that there were two types of virgins: those who were consecrated and those who were not consecrated but content with only the simple "propositum." Those who were consecrated were called "veiled," and those who were not consecrated were called "not veiled."

The popes spoke about the two types of virgins clearly. For example, Pope Innocent I in a letter to the bishop of Rouen, Victricius, says in 404 A.D., that not all virgins are to be treated in the same manner. Those who had been consecrated (received the "veil") should be punished more harshly than those who were not consecrated when they had not been true to their commitment. The pope made it clear that those who had received the Consecration had had their vow officially sanctioned by a liturgical act, whereas the others who were "not veiled" had not. Pope Leo I also had to respond to a bishop, Rusticus of Narbonne, regarding the same question of defection among virgins. Pope Leo I made it clear that there are two categories of virgins: those who had made the vow of virginity (their "propositum") and those who had received the Consecration sometime after they had made their "propositum."

One could be admitted to the category of virgins by simply making the "propositum." However, the Consecration came after a certain time--sometimes during the same liturgical ceremony, but not necessarily. The Consecration rendered the obligations of their state far more serious than the mere "propositum." We know that virgins did wait some time to receive the actual Consecration of Virgins, in the example of a certain Juliana of the 4th century. Her epitaph reads that she had been vowed to Christ for a long time, but as she approached her death, her "propositum" was ratified by the tradition of "the veil," that is, the Consecration.

Chapter 3 The Consecration of Virgins in the Old Roman Rite

The ceremony, or Rite of Consecration of Virgins, at this time had no specially designated term. Various ones existed, with no particular one being finally decided on at this period of history.

However, very early and very quickly in the history of the Church the bishop was required to perform the Consecration, the minimum age of the virgin set, a period of time for probation was required, and eventually the determination of the virgin's free choice was to be determined before being able to receive the Consecration.

From the 4th century on, we see that the Consecration was the exclusive right of the bishop to perform. Even though we do not have any legislative text on this subject before the 4th century, it is clear that all the Consecrations were done by bishops and never by simple priests. In Rome, the pope made it his prerogative to consecrate virgins himself. Throughout the years, from the Council of Carthage in 390, to the synod of Rouen about the year 650, in the Council of Paris of 829, in the Council of Pavia in 850, and on to the Council of Worms in 868--all upheld the exclusive right of the bishop to consecrate virgins, a power not given to a simple priest. In 789 A.D. certain abbesses had to be forbidden, in a most absolute manner, to attempt to consecrate virgins.

The virgin also was under certain requirements before being able to receive the Consecration. Up to the 4th century no age requirement was set; in Rome, as elsewhere, the judgement was left to the bishop who judged each petitioner individually. St. Ambrose and St. Jerome, who were acquainted with Roman customs, did not see a need to set a rule regarding age when they could look to their own experience and societal customs. However, there was a tendency to raise the minimum age for a virgin to be able to receive the Consecration. Some felt it should be the same as the minimum age for deaconesses and widows who were designated to serve the Church--that age was 60 years old. In the 5th century, however, the Council of Chalcedon lowered the minimum age to 40 years old. Naturally, Church leaders feared that the responsibilities given to deaconesses, be they widows or virgins, might be jeopardized if they were given to women who were too young. The same thinking prevailed for the consecrating of a virgin who was too young and without a sufficient experience behind her to guarantee that she would not abuse the privilege of the Consecration. Thus it was decided that the virgin should have proved her maturity in the practice of virtue over the years as well as be of mature age. St. Ambrose had looked to the Roman custom of the marriageable age for women and said that if a woman could be given to a man at that age according to law, why not to God? It is not certain, however, if he meant the simple "propositum" and then would reserve the Consecration itself to a later time in life of the virgin. Nothing shows us any conclusion on the question of the minimum age for the Consecration; however, we do have evidence that the Consecration was given as an exception to a virgin called Deuteria who was on the point of dying.

We do know, however, that the Church did allow a virgin to make a vow of virginity, the "propositum," at age twelve. This remained intact until the Council of Trent, which raised the minimum age to 16. The Church in the second half of the 4th century gave in to the rigorist

tendency of 40 years old for the minimum age, but later lowered it to 25 years old, where it finally remained.

For the Church in Rome, we have no documents which deal directly with the subject of age of the virgin in order to be able to receive the Consecration of Virgins. It is interesting to note, however, that Pope St. Leo wrote that the virgin should be 60 years old to receive the "veil." Another text, but not very reliable, states that at the beginning of the 6th century, contemporary custom had it so that a virgin had to be at least 72 years old to receive the Consecration. Some say that these texts had mistakes in them when they were copied into various editions, and that the "sixty" should read "forty" and thus the "72" would be reduced to "52." However that may be, it is clear that the tendency in Rome was that the virgin should be a rather advanced age in order to be eligible for the Consecration.

In other localities, we see a variety of minimum ages. In Spain it was set at 40 years old. Other regions, like Africa, required 25 years old. Provision was made in various regions, however, for the age of 25 in case of necessity or even earlier in case of the danger of death.

Because the Consecration was an official sanction of the vow of virginity, its definitive coronation, the Church wanted to be sure with a measure of certainty that the virgin would live up to her responsibility. Of course, it is true, that the elevated minimum age eliminated a number of virgins who might otherwise have been consecrated. But it remained necessary, nevertheless, that the virgin give proof of her seriousness and her firmness of resolution to observe her promise of virginity throughout the time of probation. Much is not historically certain today about how these early centuries handled the question of minimum age and how to measure certainty that the virgin would live up to her promise of virginity for the rest of her years, but it is known without a doubt that the decision to consecrate was left to the judgment of the bishop. Later, as community life developed, rules were precisely fixed as to the amount of time for probation before the Consecration, at least for those living in a monastery.

Another condition for Consecration was the freedom of the virgin. Civil and canonical law unanimously agreed in the 5th and 6th centuries that a slave could not make a religious profession without the consent of her master.

The symbolism of the Consecration is fraught with the theme of the Spouse of Christ. The Church was always called the Spouse of Christ, and now the symbolism was transposed to the Christian virgin who had made a perpetual vow of continence. Those who did not keep their vow were considered "Christi adulterae." Pope Siricus sees in the perpetual vow of continence a celestial marriage, and the laws which bind a husband and wife bind the virgin and Christ--unity, fidelity, and indissolubility. They did not believe that this was mere rhetoric, but by these images a reality to be experienced. This is where the symbolism of the veil comes in. In Roman times the veil and a prayer of benediction were inscribed in the marriage liturgy--so also would they be in the celestial marriage of the virgin to Christ. The Consecration took place on great feast days like Christmas, Epiphany, or Easter, (later centuries allowed the Feasts of Sts. Peter and Paul), during the Mass, in the presence of the community of the faithful. The Rite was very simple. First, the bishop reminded the virgin and the faithful of the meaning of the ceremony. It is most probable that the community assembled already knew the virgin and of her resolution to

belong to God alone. Following the homily, the bishop recited the prayer of benediction (Consecration) over her and gave her the veil. Very likely the Consecration was performed at the time of the Readings, as is done for Ordination. It is most probable also that after the homily the bishop asked the virgin to renew her vow ("propositum") before the entire community present; she had made this vow in private and had since lived it up to this time. The Consecration itself was effected in the prayer of Consecration properly said over her. In later centuries, we find that the Leonine Pontifical printed the actual prayer of Consecration very likely composed by Pope Leo himself, probably for a Consecration of a Virgin which took place either on Christmas or Epiphany because of the many allusions to the Incarnation.

The veil which she received at the ceremony did not distinguish her in its style from that type of veil of married women. The virgin did not wear any particular type of clothes, either, from this time on; the veil was the only official sign that she belonged to God. Their ordinary clothing was that of their contemporaries of the day, only they were admonished to wear clothes that were modest and colors that were subdued.

Chapter 4

The Elaboration of the Roman Rite

From the 4th century onward, we have seen in Rome and elsewhere, two categories of consecrated virgins--those who lived community life in monasteries and those who lived in the world, usually remaining with their families. We have no evidence, however, of two categories of the Rite of Consecration of Virgins.

By the 9th and 10th centuries, though, two distinct, well-defined Rites do appear. The majority of those consecrated to God lived in monasteries, but we do see particularly in the Germanic and Frankish countries a certain number of consecrated virgins who were authorized to live an independent life in their families. This isolated type of life for consecrated virgins was not favored any longer by the Church about the beginning of the 9th century; however, it continued on for some time.

About this same time, too, we see the marriage ritual current at that time interposed on the Rite of the Consecration of Virgins. Various symbols in the marriage ceremony were beginning to be used in the Consecration Rite. For example, in the marriage ceremony of ancient Greece and Rome we see a cortege of candle bearers; the tradition of carrying a candle and offering it at the Offertory of the Mass in the marriage ceremony was practiced in the 9th and 10th centuries in northern Europe. In the ceremony of the Consecration of a Virgin we see that the virgin now will hold a candle, as those who are marrying do in their ceremony. However, there is one difference: she is to hold on to the lighted candle rather than placing it among the offerings at the Offertory of the Mass. [It was only Bishop Guillaume Durand who required the virgins to make an offering of it].

In these centuries also, the 9th and 10th, we see more elaboration given to the Rite of the Consecration of Virgins printed directly from the antiphon in the Passion of St. Agnes, not from the Office of the Commons of Virgins. Further elaboration was the prayer "Deus plasmator corporum" which was written in the form of the great prefaces. It asks God to preserve the

virgins from all carnal blemishes and to give them a taste for the delights of heaven. The origin of this prayer is intriguing in that it bears the title of "Benedictio Matthaei Apostoli." The ancient authors attribute its authorship to St. Matthew. According to the "Passio Matthaei," the Apostle had evangelized Ethiopia. King Aeglippus (Egyppus) became a Christian, along with all his court. After his death, his successor to the throne, Hyrtacus, asked St. Matthew to intervene in his favor before Iphigenia, daughter of the late king and with whom he was enamored. But, Iphigenia, according to the legend, remained steadfast in her decision to give herself to Christ. She sincerely and determinedly asked St. Matthew to consecrate her to God along with a number of her companions who, like her, had already made a vow of continence. The Apostle did not hesitate to respond to her request: he imposed his hands and recited the prayer of Consecration "Deus plasmator corporum." The author of the "Passion of St. Matthew," who lived at the end of the 6th century, definitely puts in the mouth of the Apostle the prayer of Consecration. In the 10th century we find this prayer of Consecration called the "Benedictio Mattaei Apostoli" in the ritual for the Consecration of the Pontifical of Mayence.

At this time, too, we find new symbols appearing in the Consecration ceremony. These symbols also come from the marriage ritual--the crown and the ring. The ring, a sign of fidelity, is at the same time a pledge of eternal happiness for the faithful virgin. The crowning of those who are marrying was a custom in the Church in Rome, which had come under the influence of Byzantium; it was the Eastern Church which had first integrated the pagan custom of the coronation of the marrying couple into its nuptial liturgy. We do not know exactly, however, when the crowning became part of the ceremony for the Consecration of Virgins, but we do see the melding of the two rites (marriage and Consecration of Virgins) here. When the bishop imposes the crown, he makes an allusion to the mystical marriage of Christ with the virgin.

One last custom in the monasteries, but later dropped completely by the 13th century, was to reserve the Sacred Species consecrated at the Mass during which the Consecration of Virgins took place. It was to be received as Holy Communion by the virgin herself for each of the eight days following her Consecration. The origin of this custom goes back to an old Roman practice which was part of the Ordination rite of priests and bishops.

For those virgins to be consecrated but living in the world, we find at this time, and for the first time, in the pontificals a prayer which the bishop recites and in which he invites all to join with in intention: he prays that God will give the virgin the grace to persevere in virginal innocence so that she might present herself as such to the eternal Judge. For the virgin living in the world, the Consecration ceremony contains a slightly different prayer for the reception of the veil, and neither ring nor crown are given (Rhenish Pontifical). No mention is made either of the reservation of the Sacred Species for reception in succeeding days.

It is clear that during these centuries, the Rite evolved from its ancient Roman sobriety to a form that was very expressive. It took on the form of a true liturgical drama in an age that was experiencing the birth of the religious theater in the West. By taking the text from the "Passio" of St. Agnes, the young Roman martyr who represented the highest ideal of the consecrated virgin, the liturgists of the times were able to set before the faithful a ceremony that showed the "sponsa Christi" par excellence. As St. Agnes had refused the flattery of human suitors and responded only to the invitation of her Divine Spouse, she became a poetic, albeit historic, model

for consecrated virgins. All the Oriental display one finds in the Song of Songs was recited in her story. Before the eyes of the faithful, the ceremony of the Consecration of Virgins corresponded truly to a wedding ceremony; the virgin took the place of the bride and the bishop represented Christ, the bridegroom.

Chapter 5

The Roman-French Rite in Rome First Adaptations

In the period from the second half of the 11th century to the end of the 12th, we find that the Rite for the Consecration of Virgins in Rome tried to disengage itself from the influences of northern Europe and elsewhere and reassert itself anew. The Roman temperament did not respond well to the liturgical drama of emotion and imagination that the other cultures of Europe were used to.

Up until this time, also, two forms of the Rite existed: one for those virgins living in the cloister and one for those living in the world. After the 10th century, one can no longer find any virgins living in the world alone. Perhaps there might be one isolated case here or there, but these were extremely rare examples. It was no longer necessary, therefore, to maintain or even produce a special form of the Rite of Consecration for them. If necessary, the Rite for those in the cloister could be used or adapted for a virgin living in the world. In essence, one might say, the two Rites were now combined into one, with the focus on consecrated virgins living in monasteries.

Chapter 6

The Work of the Curia in the 13th Century

In the early years of the 13th century, the Curia tried to work on an official pontifical. It was clear, however, at this time that no matter what forms and variations the Rite of the Consecration had up to this time, one element was always the same: the formula of the Mass.

In the formula for the Rite of Consecration, we see that up until this time, the ring was the symbol of a wedding ring, that is, the Consecration made the virgin the spouse of Christ. The liturgist of the Curia in the 13th century, however, made the ring the symbol of fidelity to the vow of continence. In addition, in times past the crown had been a symbol of the nuptials ("ut uxor eius efficiaris"); now the crown became the symbol of virginity. Lastly, the benediction attributed to St. Matthew was completely dropped from the Rite.

Chapter 7 The Work of Guillaume Durand

Guillaume Durand, Bishop of Mende, restored the idea of the mystical marriage in his work on re-editing the pontifical himself. This was in the late 13th century. He restored the idea of the mystical marriage for the Consecration of Virgins by reinstating some of the symbols that had been dropped. He was not content, however, with the nuptial symbolism only; he brought together also the Consecration of Virgins and the Ordination of the clergy.

As a canonist, he prescribed the days on which the Consecration would be permitted and the necessary conditions according the canons to admit a virgin to the category of those persons consecrated to God. He requested that the consecrating bishop question the virgin, in express terms, on her vow of continence and the sincerity of her act.

Lastly, he summed up and completed a number of rubrics which had been too loosely followed over the years; and he himself followed them exactly. The ceremony, therefore, proceeded harmoniously because all was prescribed up to the least detail. In all, he remained faithful to the work of his predecessors.

This bishop, Guillaume Durand, first gave the title to the Rite: "De benedictione et consecratione virginum" (The Blessing and Consecration of Virgins). Some liturgists before him had given one or the other title, "Blessing" or "Consecration," but he used both.

Next, he specified on which days a virgin could be consecrated: Epiphany, Easter week, Ascension, Pentecost, the feasts of the Virgin and the Apostles, and if necessary on all Sundays of the year except those during Advent and Lent. (A pontifical predating that of Durand also included not only those which he named but also all feasts of the Lord and principal feasts of the martyrs.) The Consecration could also be given on any day in case of danger of death.

He also stipulated that the bishop should make sure that the virgin understands all the conditions stipulated by the law. He should make a minute inquiry the evening before the morning of the ceremony. He should himself inquire of the virgin herself her age to be sure she was at least 25 years old and whether she had understood and freely decided to maintain her virginity. He should question her about her past life and any infractions of her bodily integrity. Although the Rhenish Pontifical and later the Pontifical of Apamee prescribed a questioning of the virgins to be consecrated by the bishop, particularly on the sincerity of their intentions and their understanding of the responsibilities of their holy state, this bishop of Mende rendered more solemnity to this part of the preparation for the ceremony.

He greatly incorporated the parable of the wise and foolish virgins from the Gospel according to St. Matthew: the virgins are waiting for their Spouse. Thus he incorporated the symbolism of candles once again into the Rite. Durand also added something not seen before in the Rite of the Consecration of Virgins: he had the bishop ask the spokesman priest during the ceremony if these virgins were worthy of the honor of Consecration. The priest then was to respond that he believed they were, as much as a human could be assured so. This question and testimony are, without doubt, adapted from the Ordination ceremony. Afterwards, when the bishop addresses

the virgins to come forward, he invites them forward three times with the word "Venez" ("Come"). Each time, the virgins advance a little, and then kneel, advance a little, and then kneel. Little by little they advance toward the altar until they finally reach it, and then before the bishop they prostrate themselves on the ground. With each step forward, they recite the antiphons "We follow You without delay and with all our heart; we fear you and we aspire to see Your Face." When they are prostrate before the altar, they chant, "Receive me, Lord, according to Your word, so that no injustice may take hold of me." This part of the ceremony comes from an Ordination ceremony that is quite old because under one form or another we find it already in several pontificals from the 12th and beginning of the 13th century. Also, the triple invitation addressed to the virgins by the bishop comes from a ritual of reconciliation of penitents used by the Pontifical of Apamee for Holy Thursday. He also restored in the Rite the exhortation of the bishop before conferring the Consecration, something that had been in use in early Rome.

At this time also we find the introduction of other religious women who would assist and accompany the virgins to be consecrated. This practice was incorporated from the marriage ceremony, which used paranymphes to accompany the bride.

Guillaume Durand also required during the ceremony of Consecration an assurance that the virgins themselves stated publicly their promise to be faithful and that they understood the responsibilities of this sacred state of consecrated virginity. It was at this moment in the ceremony that they offered their hands into those of the bishop and answered his question of "Do you promise that you will keep your virginity forever?" with the words "I do promise." Each virgin then kissed the hand of the bishop and returned to her place. The placing of the hands in those in the bishop again reminds one of the Ordination of a priest when he promises obedience while his hands are joined in those of the bishop. The bishop then kisses the priest. This part of the Rite harks back to the feudal world when the vassal rendered his "homage" to his suzerain. Lastly, we find that the litanies are also in both the Consecration Rite and the Ordination Rite. It is clear that Durand wanted to show the analogy of the two vocations in the Church--that of the priest and that of the consecrated virgin.

Guillaume Durand then prescribed that the bishop bless each insignia given to the virgin-- the veil, the ring, and the crown. In giving the ring, the bishop truly manifested the idea of the mystical marriage. For some years, the thumb, forefinger, and the middle finger were touched with the ring while invoking the Blessed Trinity while touching each finger respectively. The ring finally ended up on the fourth finger on the right hand. Then the formula was simplified to just placing it on the fourth finger of the right hand.

During the Mass not only did the virgins prepare the hosts to be offered, but they also prepared extra for three days following their Consecration so that they could receive Holy Communion from those Hosts consecrated during the Mass of the Consecration of Virgins.

Chapter 8

The Consecration of Virgins according to the Official Editions of the Roman Pontifical

In the Pontifical of 1485, we see a slight modification of Guillaume Durand's ritual--the husband puts the ring directly on the 3rd finger of the spouse in the marriage ceremony and the bishop puts the ring directly on the 3rd finger of the consecrated virgin. In these two ceremonies, we see the two rituals modified at the very same time to keep the correspondences. Also modified was the preparation of the hosts for Holy Communion for three days after the Consecration. This custom was dropped completely. By 1497 the singing of the "Veni Creator" was no longer required after the litanies. Up until the end of the 19th century, because the Consecration of Virgins was so rarely performed, the need to modify the ceremony was not felt at all.

The Consecration of Virgins almost fell out of use completely during the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries. We see at times, however, that certain bishops tried to revive it and encourage its use. One of these was St. Charles Borromeo for his Archdiocese of Milan. In 1721, on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the Archbishop of Ravenna, Jerome Crispi, consecrated thirteen nuns at the convent of St. Andrew. Prosper Lambertini, the future Pope Benedict XIV, noted in 1731 that there were still a few monasteries of Benedictines who at that time would have nuns consecrated. [On July 9, 1959, a group of Carthusians nuns in France received the privilege to have the Consecration of Virgins.--from the thesis of Sister Glenna Raybell] Thanks to the work of Dom Gueranger, interest in the Consecration was revived and the eight Benedictine nuns spoken of in the Introduction received this sacramental on August 15, 1868. The Consecration was considered a privilege of those religious institutes which had solemn vows; those institutes with simple vows, albeit perpetual vows, could not receive the Consecration without an indult from the Holy See. Nevertheless, no general canonical provision made the Consecration the right of only those religious belonging to the ancient Orders of the Church to the exclusion of those religious belonging to congregations or institutes founded in modern times. Theoretically, also, nothing prevented the Consecration for virgins living in the world; no law ever forbade that ancient application of the Consecration. It is known that some bishops did permit virgins to be consecrated who had made a perpetual vow of virginity and who did not belong to any religious institute. [Cardinal de Cabrieres, bishop of Montpellier, between 1917 and 1921, consecrated eight or nine virgins who had made a vow of perpetual virginity and continued to live in the world; Bishop Mermillod, bishop of Geneva, and Cardinal Mercier also consecrated young women who did not belong to any religious institute.] On March 25, 1927, the Congregation of Religious made it known that the Holy See was not disposed to authorize the consecration of persons living in the world. And, on November 21, 1950, Pope Pius XII decreed that the Rite of Consecration would be an exclusive right of properly called "nuns." At the same time, he encouraged all monastic communities to take advantage of this right, if they had not done so already. It is interesting to note that in the Roman Pontifical in use at that time, even when the Profession of Perpetual Solemn Vows was pronounced, there was inserted after the profession of virginity the question by the bishop as to whether the nun would like to be blessed and consecrated. It is important to note this separation of the Profession of Vows from the Consecration of Virgins itself.

Anne Leflaive, 1899-1987
(taken from Christi Sponsa, 1 January 1996)

Who was Anne Leflaive? For consecrated virgins now benefiting from the restoration of the Rite to virgins living in the world, Anne Leflaive is someone they should revere and treasure. One might even say that God planned that she should be a pioneer of our modern times for the Consecration of Virgins to be restored to laywomen living in the world.

When the Consecration of Virgins was reserved to only a few nuns, like the Carthusians in Europe, Anne Leflaive received it as a virgin living in the world in 1925. She had never been a nun, nor had she ever felt called to Religious Life. How did her Consecration come about?

She came from an educated, industrialist family who owned a metallurgy factory. Well acquainted with the social problems of the day, Anne grew up with awareness of the current world conditions and in a family that was well known to the local bishop who resided in St-Etienne (the town in which her family's factory was located). It was her own great-grandfather who had petitioned the Pope in 1896 for a bishop to reside in the Loire region. Her grandfather obtained one in 1917 in the person of an auxiliary of the Archbishop of Lyon; he would reside in St-Etienne. Bishop Chassagnon, former director of the works in Loire and Vicar General of the Archbishop of Lyon, was named to this post and resided in St-Etienne from 1917-1922, before being promised the episcopacy at Autun. It is understood, therefore, that he was well acquainted with Anne's family.

Little wonder, then, that it was Bishop Chassagnon in 1925, who would consecrate Anne as a consecrated virgin according to the Rite in the Roman Pontifical. This took place at Paray-le-Monial. It was to Bishop de Cabrieres, however, bishop of Montpellier from 1874-1921, that she was most open and whom she regarded as a spiritual father. She considered him as the original instrument of her vocation as a consecrated virgin living in the world.

In 1929 she started to study the Consecration of Virgins extensively; by 1934 she had published a small number of works. After the 1956 encyclical of Pope Pius XII, Holy Virginity, she re-edited her brochure by adding text to it from the encyclical. Her brochure, *Epouse du Christ*, was honored by a preface written by Cardinal Feltin, Archbishop of Paris. In 1968 she published *La femme et l'Eglise*; in the pages of the last chapter, she implied an intriguing question, as we look at it today, namely, should the Consecration of Virgins be restored to women living in the world? Fr. Jean Gautier, priest of Paris, gave this work a *Nihil Obstat*, and E. Berrar, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Paris, gave it an *Imprimatur*. Anne's works continued to be published, not only in 1934 and 1956, but also in 1968. She wrote in order to make the Consecration known to others so that someday lay women would be able to receive what she had in 1925. Perhaps it will be possible, when pertinent archives are studied, to know one day if she had been one of those questioned in the 1950s and 1960s by Italian bishops who were weighing the idea of allowing the Consecration to be received by those outside of monasteries.

Anne's life and thinking were profound. Because of her communication with the bishops mentioned above, her experiences during the world wars, and her reflection upon the politics of her country and Europe, she worked out in her own mind and heart some apostolic projects between the

years of 1930 and 1945. She conceived the idea of an institute of secular missionaries of Catholic Action. She had spoken of this project to the Apostolic Nuncio, Bishop Maglione; she had asked advice of Armida Barelli, foundress of the Young Catholic Italian Women; she had made contact with a group of Notre Dame du Carmel, whose spirit she loved; and she had reflected a long time with the Archbishop of Cambrai, Bishop Chollet, before writing to Bishop Courbe, the prelate responsible for the whole national plan of Catholic Action in France. (The establishment of such an institute, however, was probably dropped when the Auxiliaries of the Apostolate were founded in 1942 by Bishop Guerry and the parish secular missionaries of Catholic Action were established. It is possible, however, that Anne's ideas inspired Bishop Guerry.)

Anne's ideas, nevertheless, are worth looking at today in order to understand her vision, given that she wrote them in the first half of the 20th century. Her proposal was for young women, without the vows of Religion and who would remain in the world, to give themselves to God in a perpetual promise of virginity. After some seven to ten years of living this life of virginity in the world, they would be able to receive the Consecration of Virgins according to the Rite in the Roman Pontifical. They would always remain truly in the world and set themselves at the disposal of their bishop to aid him effectively in his apostolate. They would have the spirit of participation in the mission of the Church, maintaining and spreading the kingdom of the Father. The consecrated virgin would live particularly a life of humility because this is the foundation of all other virtues. She would work in the spirit of service and mutual fraternity as the primitive Christians. Living in joy like Mary, her model, she would lead the life of a woman of her times in simplicity, humility, and modesty. Like Mary, she would exercise her spiritual motherhood in watchfulness over souls, while waiting for the triumph of the eternal reign of God.

Anne's ideas remain. They remain as exhortations to key virtues that the consecrated virgins in the world should practice, even though the institutes of secular missionaries of Catholic Action were suppressed. The spirit of mission in the Church and support of the bishop are always timely, but especially so today.

Anne remained forever faithful to her vocation as a consecrated virgin living in the world. One thread of the garment of her fidelity comes down to us in her testimony that all her life she was committed to praying the Divine Office; and when that was impossible, she replaced it with the Rosary. She never forgot who she was as a consecrated virgin, nor her bond to Christ, her Bridegroom.

RECENT HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

In August 1957, at the Liturgical Week conference at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, various participants spoke about the Consecration of Virgins. Their statements, quoted below, are from *Liturgical Week (Proceedings) 1957*.

Mother Kathryn Sullivan, New York, spoke on the ceremony in the medieval *Pontificale Romano-Germanicum*:

(It) contains not only one but two ceremonies for the consecration of virgins: the author prepared one for women who wished to live a life dedicated to God in the cloister, another for women who wished to give God special service, living a solitary life in their own homes. . . . Both ceremonies are intimately linked with the Mass. The older tradition was that the consecration be made before the Gospel, just as in the case of candidates of holy orders The veil and the insignia (ring and crown) were followed by a final blessing. . . . The Mass was continued. . . . (*Liturgical Week (Proceedings) 1957*, pp. 166-70)

Father Bouman, from Holland, emphasized that in the Middle Ages

. . . the most important rite of the Church was not the taking of vows as such but the blessing by the Church of the virgin. . . . It was considered in the ancient Church as a *sacramentum* . . . once and for always. (*Liturgical Week (Proceedings) 1957*, pp. 171-72)

Sister Anne Catherine distinguished the Consecration from religious vows:

The three vows, much later in their origin than the Consecration, are today's requirement for religious. . . . But it is true that the vows are the creature's effort to offer himself to his Creator. Beyond that is the mighty consecration ceremony of the Church which is the Creator's ratification of the offering and the outpouring of His power drawing the virginal soul to Him in sacred espousals. (*Liturgical Week (Proceedings) 1957*, pp. 172-73)

Msgr. Hellriegel explained the distinction in another way:

There are two kinds of consecration. There is a consecration on our part to God--that is *Virgo Deo consecrata*. And there is a consecration that comes from God, and that is *Virgo a Deo consecrata*. One who consecrates herself to God, and the one who by God is consecrated. The first is the silver act to be done in a golden way; the second is the golden act which is everlasting. This is something that

cannot be renewed. (*Liturgical Week (Proceedings) 1957*, pp. 176-78)

Fathers of the Church

on

Consecrated Virginity
summarized

ST. AMBROSE

Paraphrased and summarized: *De Virginibus* and *De Virginitate*

Two main points that St. Ambrose stresses are: the virgin is the spouse of Christ and ideal Christianity means chastity and celibacy. The idea of the virgin as wedded to Christ brings St. Ambrose to look at the Song of Songs as expressing the intimacy between Christ and His spouse. *De Virginitate* is practically a phrase by phrase commentary on this book of the Bible. The Jews have seen this book as an allegory of Yahweh and the Chosen People; Christians have seen it as the union between Christ and the Church. The Greek Fathers have written that the virgin is the ideal representation of the Church, especially the Blessed Virgin.

St. Ambrose sees the Incarnation as an absolutely new Creation, with a new Adam and a new Eve; Christ and Mary are both virginal, as in Paradise before the Fall. The Christian, therefore, who is perpetually committed to virginity share that perfection and that paradise. Virginity is the essential nucleus of Christian virtue; sanctity means purity. St. Ambrose' moral writings turn on this one theme.

Virginity is not praiseworthy because it is paired with martyrdom, as in St. Agnes, but because it is what produces martyrs. Virgin/martyrs are victors not only over just flesh and blood, but also over the prince of this world, the ruler of this age. They are victorious over visible and invisible powers.

As we see in Matthew 22:30, those who are virgins for the Lord are compared to angels. This way of life, virginity, came down from heaven at the Incarnation; it was not found on earth after the Fall until Christ came down to earth himself.

Virginal chastity is integrity without stain because the author of virginity is the stainless Son of God. Christ is a virgin's Spouse, for virginity belongs to Christ, not Christ to virginity. In the same vein, the Church is both a virgin and spouse of Christ.

Virgins espoused to Christ do not depend on finery nor on cosmetics for their beauty, but on virtue. They should seek only to please God who can see the beauty of a soul despite an imperfect body.

Virgins, like the Church herself, have numerous offspring, for the chaste soul has everyone for her child who has been reborn in Christ. These descendants live forever; thus the virgin espoused to Christ never knows bereavement in her Spouse nor in her children.

St. Ambrose does not condemn marriage, for he praises the virtuous marriages of Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel.

Ps. 44:10ff. The Holy Spirit has assigned to the virgin royalty, gold, and beauty. Royalty: her Spouse is an everlasting king; gold: the virgin's body when consecrated to the Spirit increases its splendor; beauty: there is no greater beauty than that of her who is loved by the divine King.

Song of Songs 4:7-8. The perfect and faultless virginal soul, consecrated at God's altars, unbent by mortal fears amid the assaults and deceits of evil spirits, ever intent on the mysteries of God, wins an eternal Spouse whose heart teems with joy.

Song of Songs 2:1. Virginité is compared with bees: industrious, modest, continent. The bee feeds on the dew, knows no sexual intercourse, produces honey: the food of the virgin is the dew of the Divine Word, virginal modesty knows no violation, the lips of the virgin produce no bitterness but words of sweetness. The virgin's words should always be the honey of simplicity and dignity.

Song of Songs 5:10. The virgin will recognize the white of divinity in her Spouse and the red of His humanity.

Religion of the true God is called a virgin; that which makes false gods is a harlot.

Some angels fell from heaven (devils) while those who are virgins for the sake of Christ have passed from earth to heaven because this world and its enticements have no hold on them.

The woman of the world, who tries to draw everyone's attention to her beauty through display admits her inherent ugliness, while the virgin's lack of adornment effects the recognition of her beauty.

The Spouse of the virgin is infinitely wealthy, so virginal poverty is more precious than earthly accounts. If you can trust your riches to men, why not lend at interest to Christ?

She who conquers the ties of home can conquer the world.

Take Mary as your example. Note that in her life she made God, rather than man, the arbiter of her inner thoughts and her actions.

Song of Songs 1:3 and 8:9. Note that at first the virgin is drawn by perfumes, but later they are exchanged for the fortress. She who formerly played with kisses now builds towers because she is turreted with the pinnacles of sanctity and can both repel hostile attack and build the fortifications of merit.

Prayer at various intervals of the day and night, as King David offered, is indispensable for the virgin betrothed to Christ.

Note the example of St. John the Baptist: if he gave his life for upholding the sanctity of marriage, how much more precious is it to uphold virginity consecrated to God himself.

Note the examples of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalen after the Resurrection. The Blessed Virgin was the first to see the resurrection of the Lord and believe at once. Mary Magdalen saw but doubted. Why? The Blessed Virgin had unwavering faith, but Mary Magdalen's faith wavered. Why was Mary Magdalen forbidden to touch the risen Christ? Because only a firm faith may touch Christ. Even the apparition of angels and Christ himself did not assuage Mary Magdalen's doubts, and because she doubted, she did not recognize Christ. He called her then "woman" while she was still an unbeliever. However, once her conversion begins, the risen Lord calls her "Mary," the same name as His mother who was a believer from the first. During her conversion, however, she was still not allowed to touch the risen Lord because she was still in the disposition of doubt. The lesson to be drawn is that Christ is never absent from those who seek Him and believe in Him.

Note another instance from the Gospel: children, ignorant of evil because of their years, possessed in their innocence the gift of purity. "The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." It belongs to those who return to the purity of childhood, to a childlike ignorance of corruption.

A bishop must guard against consecrating a virgin too early in life. He ought to take account of her age--not her chronological age, but her age of faith and modesty. He should note her maturity of modesty, her wisdom, her good behavior, her years of purity, and the spirit of chastity. Her age of character is what is important, not her age in years.

Note our Lord's example in shunning all vainglory. He never objected to the great number of sick, but cured them all. He, however, shunned all ostentation in what He did.

We must seek Christ in good deeds, the same place where the Church seeks Him. He also frequents the open simplicity of a pure mind. God is drawn to the humble of heart, He is appeased by a heart of sorrow. Love cannot exist without faith, and no matter what we do we can invite our Lover to come and be with us in faith. He will come.

Anger, cupidity, pleasure, fear draw the soul down under the weight of the corruptible body. When we sin, do not try to conceal it but confess it to the Lord who already knows it.

If we are insulted or taunted because of our faith, do not answer the accusers or taunters, just as Christ did not answer those who jeered at Him when He hung on the Cross. Address our words only to Christ at these times.

Be aware at all times that you can fail God and fall. Pride leads one to a fall. Therefore, be humble. Do not envy.

Note the figures of the man, lion, ox, and eagle in the Bible. We often take them to represent the four Gospels. But they can also stand for the four affections: the rational, the irascible, the concupiscent, and the discerning. In every wise man there are four

faculties: reason, anger, desire, discernment (prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice). We must use these four faculties to virtuous advantage.

ST. ATHANASIUS

Paraphrased and summarized: "On Virginity--Timely Advice"

The consecrated virgin should direct all her thoughts to the work of God, to whom she is espoused. Her whole occupation should be to do the will of God. The will of Christ is that one should be one with Him and not follow the ways of the world nor occupy one's thoughts with the things of the world. She should put her thoughts toward the Cross and how Christ so loved the Cross. Her thoughts and solicitude should be to sing hymns of glory day and night in tribute to Christ Crucified, while keeping her intentions pure, her heart chaste. She should seek to know the will of God and to fulfil it.

Let us look also to the ways in which we treat others. If Christ, being God, tolerated insults from men who are sinners, how much more ought we to tolerate mistreatment and insults as fellow human beings!

One is often called a fool in this life when he acts according to the wisdom of God and follows His laws. We often see men defrauding others in order to build up gain for themselves. We know that the devil is clever in the ways of evil and we have to be on the alert. That is why the Savior said in the Gospel "Be wise as serpents but as innocent as doves."

Humility of soul is the great aid to salvation. Our God is the God of the humble of heart.

Fasting and simplicity of dress are contrary to the ways of the world, where women seek cosmetics and costly clothes; but the virgin should seek only those things which her Spouse desires, namely a pure heart, a body without dishonor and given to fasting. If anyone counsels the virgin differently, she should not follow that advice. Enemies often are jealous. Just look at the Holy Scriptures and see how Daniel and his young companions ate only vegetables and drank only water; the result was that they looked in better health than those young men who ate at the king's table. The effects of fasting are health of the body, the putting to flight of the demons, the expulsion of harmful thoughts, and purity of heart and mind. In a word, it exalts the man to the throne of God. Remember the episode in the Gospel when the disciples could not cast out the evil spirits in the sick boy. The Lord said that this kind could only be cast out by prayer and fasting. So powerful is fasting that great feats can be realized through it by God, even the cure of the sick. One cannot live a holy life and one of devotion and humility without fasting. Fasting, however, requires that no unkind words fall from the lips and that one keep oneself innocent of all greed.

Ambition and vainglory are enemies that can trip one as she follows the road of virtue. One can even make too much of fasting. If another person should happen to call you holy, you should say that if you make it to heaven, then he can call you holy. But in the meantime, here on earth, there is no guarantee that one is going to end up holy because men can change like the wind.

Take note also that if a good work needs to be done, then do it. However, do it in secret so that only your Heavenly Father will see it and reward you in heaven. Otherwise, vainglory will

sneak up on you. In addition, if others wish to hear you speak, then do it, but not one word extra. Remember that the Lord said one does not throw precious stones to pigs. The words of God are these precious stones and they should be given only to those who are worthy of them.

Pray, sing the Psalms, and read--do these acts all alone in a place apart. Do not take other hearers with you when you pray and do spiritual reading. However, if there are one or two virgins of similar heart and mind, then pray together because, as Our Lord said, "Where two or three are gathered together, I am there in the midst of them."

When you work, do it well and with a serious demeanor.

Be modest at all times, especially because, since the moment of your determination to live in continence for God, your body is a temple of God [as it was made at Baptism] and it is holy to Him and should not be desecrated in any way.

Day and night the Holy Scriptures should be your meditation.

When you eat, do so with prudent and pious virgins, not with arrogant women. Do not take as a friend a woman who is boastful. If you are seated at table with a rich woman and then see a beggar woman, invite the beggar to eat too without being ashamed to do so in the presence of the rich woman. Don't love the glory one receives from men better than the glory which comes from God because He is a God of the poor and deprived.

It is better for a young woman to live under the supervision of an older one than to live in the company of another young woman.

The majority of mankind in the world are insensitive to the things of God and occupy themselves with eating, just like animals without reason. They often confess with their lips, but their works betray them. If one really loves God, then he ought to obey Him.

Sorrow and tears over sin is an excellent remedy to wipe away guilt. Not all tears are efficacious, but only those which are directed toward heaven and change one's life to live in mortification and penance. In this life one can expect to have to continue to work at virtue with sadness and anguish that will come one's way. There is no rest in this life, but only in heaven.

There are two roads one can choose--either life or death. The way of death is the way of the world; the way of life is sanctity, that is, following the ways of holiness and justice while living in this world. A holy man goes from this world to eternal rest. He will experience what "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has it entered the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him."

The poor and the rich, the slaves and the free, the sinners and the just--all have to work in this life. The just man works, it is true, but not just to eat; he does not worry just about his body. His thoughts are on God, looking for God. The man who seeks only material things is blinded by them in this world.

In the middle of the night, rise and give praise to God, singing the Psalms. It was at this hour that the Lord rose from the dead and praised His Father.

Live in charity above all things because it is the highest virtue. God is love, and He loved man first, submitted Himself to free him from sin. If, then, the Lord died for us, we ought also to give our lives for each other. If a man does a great deal for his neighbor but has no love, then his work is in vain. Charity toward one's neighbor shows itself not only by word, but also by deed. One should not bear any grudges toward one's neighbor for a past offense because one cannot then offer a pure prayer to God.

Do not remain disheartened over an adversity nor a past injury. "The sadness of this world works toward death." Do not raise one's voice against anyone or injure anyone through vicious talk; rather, raise one's voice in hymns and prayers which give glory to God. If someone arrives at your house, give him hospitality because Our Lord Jesus Christ said, "He who receives you, receives Me." As to hospitality and alms, do not remember what you have done.

In church, keep silent, without speaking a word but just keep your attention on the reading. If you are inspired to do some work, do not take it lightly or reject it, but consult with the elders. Always in your prayers, keep your attention on the Psalms and prayers and let them penetrate your heart.

The commandments of God are not heavy for those who fear God. Do not let the oil of the lamp run out, but wait for the arrival of the Bridegroom. You do not know when He will come, whether at the first hour of the night or in the morning. Be prepared, then when he comes. You can meet him in the company of prudent virgins, carrying their lamps of oil, that is, of good works. A penitent life is trying, continence is difficult; but nothing is sweeter than the heavenly Spouse.

ST. AUGUSTINE

Paraphrased and summarized: "On Holy Virginity"

Part I: The prerogatives of virginity and its advantages over matrimony

The Church, spouse of Christ, is like Mary, Virgin and Mother. So also is the consecrated virgin; she is virgin and mother. Mary gave birth to the Head of the Church so that the Word was made flesh; the Church gives spiritual birth to the members of the Body of Christ. The virgin, sharing in both the flesh and in the spirit, is a truly virgin and mother because of her vocation as part of the Church.

Like Mary, the virgin can share in her fecundity by following Mary's example of doing the will of the Father. Christ himself said that "whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is my mother, my brother, my sister." Although, therefore, only Mary is the mother of Christ according to the flesh, Christ himself calls those who do the will of His Father his brothers, sisters, and mother according to the spirit. The Church, therefore, by doing the will of the Father shares in this spiritual motherhood to give birth to Christ in souls. The virgin also, by doing the will of the Father as a member of the Church, gives spiritual birth to Christ in souls.

All Christian women, married or consecrated virgins, if they live a holy life and possess the charity that comes from a pure heart, a correct conscience, and a sincere faith, are truly mothers of Christ according to the spirit if they do the will of the Father. No one can be called pure unless she be so not only in the flesh but also in her heart.

No one is born a consecrated virgin as such. Only in the Church do we find consecrated virgins because the Church herself is a sacred virgin; one might say that it is through the Church are consecrated virgins brought forth. The Church brings to birth, so to speak, virgins sacred in body and in spirit.

Part III: Humility is necessary in order to maintain virginity, which is a gift from God

One's greatness is measured by her degree of humility. The battle against pride continues on; and pride is the mother of envy. Charity is not puffed up or conceited; in charity there is no envy because there is no pride.

Certainly the model of virginal integrity is Christ himself and it is to Him that we should direct our attention and focus. The greatest thing is to be humble because we will never learn from Christ unless we are humble. If all sinners easily recognize the value of humility, how much more easily ought consecrated virgins see its value. We ought to look at the humility and tears of the woman who cried over her sins at the feet of the Savior and learn from her what humility and love are.

The fear of the Lord is to fear the danger of gravely offending One we love and who is so

lovable. We should fear because of love, not out of servility. The Holy Spirit dwells in hearts that have true humility and that fear the danger of sin as long as they are on this earth.

Those who have not fallen into sin should have the greatest humility and love because by God's providence they have been spared the tragedy of falling into sin. Their humility and love should be greater than those who committed sin and then were forgiven. Those who are prudent and sincere know that they would have committed great sin if it were not for the providence of God. Therefore, all our virtues and good works are not ours; they are gifts of God to us.

Continence and wisdom proceed from God, not from man. One should not become like the pharisee who thanked God for the graces he had received, but he lacked humility. Before God, no one can pretend humility, either. When we look at the gifts God has given us, can we truly say that we are free of this temptation to regard them as our own virtues, and not as gifts from God?

When we look at the gifts of God among us, we must acknowledge that the most useful are those not for this life, but those for eternity. Therefore, the virgin ought to try to grow in humility and avoid all occasions whereby the greatest of all gifts, that of the virtue of charity, would be lost or even diminished.

All must acknowledge that they are sinners. Anyone who says she is not a sinner is a liar, as St. John tells us.

The great men of any time will always be the most humble and will always find grace in the presence of God.

The great gift of virginity can be lost if one is proud. God truly sustains the grace of virginity. God will dwell only where there is humility because He is love itself. And, beware, pride leaves no place in one's heart for love. So, humility of heart is the best way to welcome God, who is love, into our hearts. And, when He is there, He will sustain the grace of virginity.

Work hard at humility, virgins of God. Follow the Lamb wheresoever He goes. And learn from Him for He is "meek and humble of heart." Think of others as being better than yourselves and look at their virtues. Pardon others their faults and pray for yourselves; face the future with vigilance, and blot out your sins through confession. Contemplate the beauty of your loving Spouse, consider how He is equal to the Father and submitted himself to a mother, how He rules the heavens and serves the earth, how He created all things and lived among creatures. Think on these things when the proud sneer at you. Contemplate with the eyes of your soul the wounds He suffered on the Cross, the wounds that were opened, the blood that was poured out, the valor of submitting himself as the price of our salvation, the precious price of our redemption.

What a joy to have such a Spouse, whom you do not see with your eyes, but you know by faith! He has no defect, no ulterior motives, nor false suspicions. When you live with this kind of love, you will not fear, then, the vice of pride in you because you will be full of love and meek and humble of heart.

ST. CYPRIAN

Paraphrased and summarized: "The Dress of Virgins"

"[Virgins] are the flower of the tree that is the Church, the beauty and adornment of spiritual grace, the image of God reflecting the holiness of the Lord, the more illustrious part of Christ's flock. The glorious fruitfulness of Mother Church rejoices through them, and in them she flowers abundantly; and the more a bountiful virginity adds to its numbers, the greater is the joy of the Mother."

Virgins should not be solicitous to adorn themselves nor to please anyone except the Lord Jesus Christ. If virginity is destined for the kingdom of God, it does not make sense that virgins, then, would ever wish to strive to please men in their dress, adornments, or cosmetics. Continnence and chastity consist not only in purity of the body but also in dignity and modesty of dress and adornment. A virgin should not only be such, she should be recognized as such by all who see her. Her innocence, dignity, and modesty should be apparent to all the public.

Instead of seeking external trappings, therefore, the virgin should be seeking only the word of God and to embrace those blessings which will last forever.

Virgins are rich in God; their wealth is Christ himself. These riches are eternal. Worldly wealth will remain just where it is--in the world when death comes.

If a virgin should find that she is wealthy in the goods of this world, it does not mean that she is free to do whatever she likes with those riches. She is not to boast of those riches, either. Worldly riches, if they are in the virgin's possession, should be used for good works and to relieve the needs of the poor. Make Christ your debtor through your alms and good works.

Virgins should avoid cosmetics, which falsify one's body that has been created by God, and gossip, which also profanes the glory and dignity of virginity. If a virgin does not heed this admonition, then just as she had been destined for great rewards she will find that she will suffer great punishment for the defilement of her vocation.

Persevere in what you are and will be forever. We will all be virgins in paradise, but virgins have already begun that life here on earth. They are passing through the world without the pollution of the world. As long as they remain pure in body and spirit, they are like the angels of God. They are already tasting the glory of the resurrection.

Older virgins should give instruction to the younger; younger virgins should encourage each other.

Lastly, remember us (St. Cyprian and other bishops) when you begin to receive your heavenly reward.

ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA

Paraphrased and summarized: "On Virginitly"

As an introduction, it is important to note that anyone who wants to live a life of continence cannot do so if she is submerged in the affairs of the world, that is, total involvement in concupiscence and in what belongs only to this world.

It is through virginitly that we can understand that the Father has an only-begotten Son. When He was made incarnate, He was conceived without passion through the Holy Spirit. The immaculate virgin Mary was filled with the plenitude of Christ's divinity, in her virginal soul as well as in her body. But first Mary had to have faith, just as we need to know Christ now through faith, not by means of our bodily senses. Such is the power of virginitly that it spans both heaven and earth.

When one is living her virginitly for Christ, she is free of the cares of the world. She does not suffer the sorrow of widowhood, the lament of seeing orphans, the anxiety of living with a husband that will someday die, the cares of a household, and the fear of possible disgrace among her associates. Rather, a virgin always lives in the presence of those mansions where there is no death, no separation from her Beloved. She does not have to bother about the human vices of greed, hatred, and vanity. In the acquisition of virtue, there is no room for envy. When one is concerned about the things of heaven and lives in the sphere of God, then she will remain elevated above all the problems of the earth.

All the earth belongs to the Creator; man is not the lord of the earth. He is born without knowing it and will leave this earth when he least desires to. Men come and go, but the earth remains. Such is the vanity of this life. The vanities of this life are such that the more one has, the more one wants, be it material goods or vainglory. How does one escape the vanities of this life except as a bird from a snare, as the Psalmist says. The means to escape the snare of vanities is by means of the wings of virtue.

One should try to keep as free as possible from the cares of this world, just as those who want to become scholars put their minds on the discipline of study. For the one who wants to live a virginal life, she should take up a moral discipline and contemplate the divine. As such, then, she can go through life with great tranquility. Elias and St. John the Baptist are examples of this kind of life. One can take the example of a river--if it runs in too many little directions of rivulets, then it loses its effectiveness in agriculture. The same is true of life--if we disperse our attention in too many diverse directions, we lose also the effectiveness of our attention and sense of direction in life.

In all that one does in life, prudence is the best guide. It lies in the center of the two extremes. However, one should never expose oneself to occasions of sin, to temptations, or try out what is morally forbidden. When one falls one time, it is very easy to fall again into sin.

Some people do not understand the loftiness of virginitly. To try to explain it to them would be

like trying to perceive the radiance of the sun by means of the ears. Virginity is of a supernatural order and to perceive its meaning one must have pure eyes and mind. The parable of the coin which was lost fits here. One must sweep the house clean before one can discover the meaning of virginity. The neighbors in the parable are the other faculties of the person--knowledge, reason, emotions. They rejoice when the soul finds the meaning of virginity.

If to be united totally to Christ, we have to prepare to die, then we should begin to prepare for that ultimate separation from the things of this earth. Paradise is the dwelling of the living, not for those who are dead through sin. We know that the flesh and things of the earth are subject to death as a consequence of sin, but the Spirit of God is immortal, living, and incorruptible. Virginity lived for God alone triumphs over sin and death. Virginity does not dwell only in the body, but in the good actions of the soul.

The spiritual maternity of the virgin means that she conceives immortal children through the work of the Holy Spirit. She is called sterile by the prophet because of her continence. Death which came into the world through sin and rolled on through the centuries was as if dashed to pieces against a rock when it came to Mary, the Virgin Mother of God. The power of death was broken by the dominance of virginity over the carnal life, no longer having its mortal sting. The Son born of her was not the work of blood, nor of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but only of God. In Him we receive the incorruption of the Spirit, the light of wisdom, justice, and the sanctity of redemption.

For the consecrated virgin, it is absolutely necessary that she have a longing, a yearning, deep in her soul for the Lord. This longing for the Lord will help her to keep her consecration intact and pure. The consecrated virgin should arm herself with patience and hope, especially when she experiences temptations; and she should do penance for sins, taking advantage of the sorrow she feels in her penitence. However, she should seek the counsel of those wiser than she in this life so that she never falls into fraud or foolishness. It is not, we repeat, abstaining from marriage that is of merit, but it is a pure soul with the proper motivations for virginity that elevate the life of virginity. The life of the spirit in the true virgin takes total precedence over the life of the flesh.

Just as the eye cannot look at two things at once, nor can one speak two languages at the same time, one cannot be married to a man and be married to God at the same time.

One who is a virgin for God must take special care not to indulge in delights of food and drink. Overindulgence in either not only makes for ailments of the body, but also leads to vices that afflict the soul. One should be aware of rationalization when being tempted to overeat or overdrink, saying that this or that is necessary for health, when in actuality it is not. In practicing temperance, one should separate the useful from the pleasurable so that one can better distinguish what might be rationalization. One does not enter the spiritual realms through corporal indulgence; but bodily indulgence rather makes the spiritual life of a person weak and gaunt. Temperance is the answer to proper eating and drinking in order to preserve the health of the body while advancing in one's spiritual life at the time.

One should try to find a wise spiritual director, usually an older person who is schooled in the ways of the spiritual life, in order to lead one to a life of perfection. Just as one does not go to a doctor who experiments on his patients, so one does not go to a spiritual director who does not have wisdom and know what he is doing. One can usually spot such a spiritually wise person by the example of his life; if he has lived an innocent and good life, he can usually direct others to the same.

One should use the energy of one's youth throughout life to pursue virtue and God Himself. One should have a firm anchor of hope in God, knowing that if one is crucified with Christ, then she will reign forever with Him as He is now reigning in heaven. All our hopes and desires will be fulfilled in Christ, in His glory, above anything we can now hope for or feel. This is what Moses hoped for, as well as did the prophets and kings.

ST. JEROME

The following is the Conclusion of "The Theological Basis of Virginité According to St. Jerome" by Fr. Demetrius Dumm, O.S.B. It was his dissertation for the Doctorate presented to the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Institute of St. Anselm, Rome, 1961. Reprinted with permission of the author.

St. Jerome, as a man formed by the Bible, was keenly aware of the divine orientation of history. God wholly dominates history: he inaugurated it, he maintains constant control over it and he guides it ineluctably to its conclusion. Within this framework, the drama of salvation-history unfolds, consisting of a personal interplay between God--holy, merciful, just--and man--sinful, repentant, suffering. It is against this background that one must view St. Jerome's writings on virginity.

Sacred history begins and ends with the harmony and happiness of paradise. And in the garden of Eden just as in heaven virginal continence is the characteristic of man absorbed in his Creator. Marriage came only after the Fall and was an indulgence granted by God to weakened human nature. It is therefore good and meritorious but it is not the ideal and its chief merit lies in the fact that it provides an eventual "harvest" of virgins.

The Incarnation marked the turning-point of history. When God assumed a human nature and entered personally into human history, it meant that the reign of sin was challenged and that a new era of the spirit had been inaugurated; it meant, in a word, that paradise had been restored. And with paradise virginity returned to earth. Christ and Mary were virgins; the Apostles were virgins, or, at least, remained continent after their calling. Until the Second Coming, the challenge of Christ remains in effect and every man must make his personal choice: either to remain with the world or to follow Christ. Logically, those who would follow Christ perfectly must also accept the call to a life of virginity.

The culmination of sacred history will be marked by the glorious Coming of the Lord and the judgment of the world. At that time paradise will be fully restored and virginity will again become the normal condition of man under God. Accordingly, virgins presently anticipate the life of heaven. Death for them is a simple transition to the state of perfect and irrevocable virginity; they will have nothing to give up because they have learned to cherish only that which can survive the assault of death.

In view of this concept of virginity, St. Jerome is perfectly consistent when he characterizes the virgin quite simply as one who has accepted wholeheartedly the challenge of Christ and has pledged himself unconditionally to the Christian ideal. Since the essence of Christianity consists, not in a philosophy but in a Person, it is altogether appropriate that the virgin should be called quite simply the "bride of Christ." As such, she is wholly dedicated to God and, like the perfect virgin, Mary, she too combines purity of life with bountiful spiritual fecundity.

St. Jerome repeatedly warns the virgin that the world which she has renounced does not necessarily lose its attractiveness and that she must therefore maintain constant vigilance lest she

fail in “marital fidelity.” In this respect there can be no compromise or concession. It is also clear that true virginity goes far beyond physical or corporal integrity; the virgin must give her heart and soul to God as well as her body. In order to do this effectively, she will strive to divorce herself as much as possible from contacts with the world, in the sure knowledge that solitude is a perfect ally of undivided spiritual devotion.

It was inevitable that St. Jerome should compare virginity with marriage. He takes pains to acknowledge the merit of a truly Christian married life but it is obvious that he considers it an indulgence granted by a merciful God to imperfect mankind. When he speaks harshly of the married state, however, it is only fair to bear in mind that he was by nature of an uncompromising disposition and that he took full advantage of the somewhat more liberal rules of literary combat in vogue in his day. St. Jerome cast himself unabashedly in the role of virginity’s champion; he did not condemn matrimony but he certainly did not strongly recommend it either. To do otherwise would have appeared to him an infidelity to his declared personal convictions.

Finally, St. Jerome outlines, with an exceptional grasp of practical difficulties, the program that the virgin must follow if she wishes to remain faithful to her commitment. The body must be kept in check by fasting and penance. But such ascetical exercises must never become an end in themselves. The chief aim of the bride of Christ must always be to spend as much time as possible in spiritual communion with her divine Spouse; the virgin must accordingly be concerned first of all with prayer. This prayer will be nourished in turn by *lectio divina*: a meditative perusal of the holy Scriptures. And the virgin should also apply herself assiduously to manual labor since this will not only eliminate the serious hazards of idleness but will also serve as a means for the provision of alms. By generous fidelity to this program the virgin will enter every more deeply into that union of spiritual marriage with God which is the fulfillment of the Christian vocation and which, as such, represents a restoration of the harmony of Eden as well as an authentic anticipation of heavenly glory.

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

Paraphrased and summarized: "On Virginitly"

Part I

A woman is not considered in the state of virginitly just because she is unmarried. She is not considered in the state of virginitly while she is unmarried but waiting for the right man to come along. She is considered in the state of virginitly only if the will to remain a virgin for the sake of her love for Christ is added on to her physical virginitly. The state of virginitly in the Church requires both the physical integrity as well as the decision to remain a virgin for the sake of Christ.

To remain a virgin before marriage is morally correct. That is just meeting the minimum. To decide to remain a virgin forever for the sake of Christ goes beyond the minimum. To abstain from sexual activity before marriage is a law of God; to follow Christ in the state of perpetual virginitly is a counsel given by the Lord (St. Matthew).

If one detests marriage, however, one is playing into the hands of the devil. Marriage is good.

Neither fasting nor virginitly is a good in itself; it is the intention that gives the merit.

If virginitly is adopted for the wrong reason, then it is worse than adultery; it is an injustice against men and is in conflict with God, offending His infinite wisdom.

Two points can be summarized here: one should see the good in marriage as a divine institution while one should appreciate the glory of virginitly at the same time.

To condemn matrimony is to offend the state of virginitly. Those who are married will someday live like the angels in heaven where there is no giving and taking in marriage; the married, then, are on their way to a heavenly state in life which the virgins anticipate now here on earth.

The merit of a true virgin (one who has decided to remain a virgin for the sake of Christ) is not in her dress, albeit it poor and simple to all who see her, but in her soul.

Part II

The counsel of St. Paul on virginitly is the same as the counsel given by Christ himself. St. Paul says that he has the Spirit of God who speaks through him.

Matrimony is necessary in this life for the procreation of children. When all creation is fulfilled according to the plan of God, then matrimony will cease at the end of time. Matrimony is the plan of God; God could have created men just as He did in the very beginning with Adam and Eve, but He chose to do it through matrimony after the Fall of man. Because matrimony is part of God's plan, it is good and should never be deprecated. God ordered mankind to multiply and

fill the whole earth.

After man had lived for some time on earth and multiplied, then Divine Providence revealed the state of virginity. Mankind was gradually taught over the centuries the higher truths of Revelation; virginity was one of them. Virginity in principle existed before the Fall of man, but after the Fall was revealed only after mankind had lived in marriage for some time and matrimony had become more refined, more and more according to the plan of God. Only with the coming of Christ in His Incarnation through a Virgin do we see the state of virginity in its glory.

Some people state that virginity ruins human generation. It is not virginity that ruins, but vices that ruin mankind. Those who deprecate the state of virginity are liable for punishment because they are calumniating a holy state of life. If they do not receive their punishment here on earth, they can expect more terrible punishments in the next life.

Part III

Virginity is a fountain of immeasurable good. In the fight against the demons, we have to realize that "only if the Lord keeps guard over the city" is it safe. So also with our moral life--fasting, night vigils, exactitude in keeping the Commandments and observing the counsels cannot protect one as well as the distrust in oneself and thereby putting all one's trust in the Lord.

In matrimony one might find it more difficult to give oneself up to a total seeking of virtue because of the reluctance of one's spouse. The virgin can aim straight at practicing virtue without distraction of another human being.

One should always be aware that continence is a gift of the Lord. In the fight for a virtuous life, the virgin must never rest or slack off.

A professed virgin (or a widow who promised perpetual chastity after her husband had died) is guilty of a great abomination if she then marries. A virgin has a Spouse who lives forever; she cannot marry a man when her Spouse is always alive.

Note St. Paul's words as he writes about himself: he does not say he is a guide to us because he has remained faithful, but because he has received the grace from God to be faithful.

Part IV

The virgin has the responsibility to overcome all difficulties because of the grace given to her. Also her way of life removes her from the distractions of riches, banquets, beautiful dresses, cosmetics, and a plethora of other sensual delights. She also has a Spouse who is always faithful; therefore, she can never be the victim of deceit or fraud. She is never enslaved in a tyrannical situation or arrangement; she never has to fear the death of her Beloved or His

separation from her at death. On the contrary, death means a meeting with her Spouse and enjoyment of His glory.

The virgin does not have to fear being poor nor humble because she should live as such in patience and be thanking her Spouse for such a state. She does not have to concern herself with bodily beauty nor any such useless effort. She is in a free condition in this regard which allows her to concentrate on the beauty of her soul.

She does not have to fear other women in better conditions, nor does she have to think about obtaining a rich husband. Gold and jewelry bring with them more troubles than delights.

Simply, a virgin does not have to bother herself with all the earthly adornments and styles, but rather her soul should animate her simple dress, her walk, her smiles.

The tears of a virgin, because of her faith in Christ, have great power and they are greater than all the laughter of the world. Like the Apostles, after they were whipped, they left the place where they were punished with joy.

The virgin should appreciate that her home is a place far from disturbances of the world, its riches, its business deals--it is a place of silence and serenity of the spirit. Heaven is more splendid than gold, silver, or another other brilliant metals.

The virgin never has to worry about the vicissitudes of fortune, i.e., that she could lose all her riches or her way of life could be dissolved by a change in finances or the death of her husband. Rather, the virgin waits for the day of resurrection which is always close at hand. In all tribulation the virgin suffers all for Christ with love and enthusiasm because the time is short. The virgin lives with only the necessities of life in food and dress and devotes her thoughts to how to grow in holiness and adorn herself with sanctity in body and soul.

Virginity is not a lasso or rope around the neck. One should embrace it only with one's own free will and then take care to live it honestly and assiduously. She who strives for the things of this world is not a true virgin of Christ. To be a true virgin does not consist only in not getting married but to be pure in one's soul--i.e., a soul given only to Christ. She has eyes and longings only for Christ, not for things of this world, nor for superfluities, nor for any sort of concupiscence.

Virginity is a life like that of the angels, but it is also a life that has its roots in a crucified life. The fruits of this life grow from the crucified life. A life like this overcomes all fears and difficulties, is a slave to no one, and reaches glory and honor. It will reach heaven in liberty, trust, strength, ardent zeal, and fervent love. The Holy Spirit has now bestowed an abundance of grace with the coming of Christ; He has communicated Himself to us as a sovereign gift to make us as adults in the spiritual life after being children. Therefore we must discipline ourselves, and we should enjoy the perfect peace and rise to higher triumphs, much higher and superior than the ferocity of the battle itself.

ST. LEANDER

Paraphrased and summarized: "Letter to Virgins" and "Rule and Book of Instruction for Virgins and Their Contempt of the World"

One cannot put her full attention to the words of God and the work of the Holy Spirit when she is occupied with the vanities of this world and wounded by the whips of so many invitations to put her attention to this world.

God has given to the virgin the inheritance of His very self. God himself is her Spouse, her friend, her brother, her inheritance, the price of her redemption, her Lord and her God. In Him she has a Spouse to love. Because she is the adopted daughter of God the Father, God the Son is her brother. Jesus is a friend whom she can never have any reason to doubt. He is the goal of all her ambitions because He is a very part of her inheritance. He is the price of her ransom from sin because His Precious Blood was her redemption. In sum, He is her God and Lord, and she ought to obey, honor, and respect Him.

In order to gain our redemption from sin and eternal punishment, He used an antidote to sin, so to speak. His death means our life, his humiliation was the remedy for our pride, and by His wounds He restored our innocence.

It is impossible to speak of virginity and its rewards. It is a gift hidden from the eyes, closed to ears, absolutely incomprehensible to ordinary human understanding. Virgins are in fact in this life what the entire Church waits for in faith for all the members at the final resurrection. Virgins here on earth already enjoy something of the incorruptibility of the body that will be the inheritance of all in our final glory. What a crown of glory awaits all in eternity! The virgin has received here below the beginnings of the gift of incorruptibility which many long for. The virgin maintains the original condition of man at the beginning of Creation. The virgin should reflect on this and not vacillate in her commitment to Christ in perpetual virginity. Christ has embraced the virgin in His arms and she has put under foot and walked away from the attractions of the world. She has experienced the pleasure and peace of the arms of her Spouse, and may she obtain by her prayers pardon for her brothers and sisters, her parents, and others. She wins for them the blessings of glory. She should not think that her prayers are sterile; no, rather, she has as many spiritual children as she has virtues. Be it understood, however, that only the pure of heart have spiritual fruitfulness.

Pointers on how to live the life of virginity

The lifestyle of the virgin and the lifestyle of the married woman are different.

In imitation of the Savior, the virgin ought to be concerned for sorrows and illnesses of her sisters as if they were her own. She should remember the words of the Lord when He said, "When I was ill you visited me."

When she is spoken ill of, the virgin ought to repay with a kind word so that evil is overcome by good. She should not even try to defend herself against evil attacks, but trust her vindication to the Lord who will bring out the truth and see justice executed in due time. She should trust her innocent heart to God who sees all and will reward her confidence in Him. Patience, also, will calm the passion of the sister who inflicts injury upon another.

Prudence requires that the virgin not be puffed up with pride. One of the best ways to guard against pride is modesty because modesty leads to humility. Moderation and temperance conserves modesty and humility.

Insolence and pride are heinous crimes. Anger and arrogance corrupt the soul of one whose body has not been violated. When virgins are guilty of pride, they have not prostituted themselves by man but by demons.

The interior life, the soul, is where the glory of the virgin is found because of the grace given by God and the virgin's cooperation with that grace in a life of virtue. This is the real glory of chastity. The virgin, therefore, ought to cultivate not exterior dress but the beauty of the soul where God will find pleasure in just looking at her heart. A virgin's clothing should not render distinction and dignity before men, but it should present her as innocent before God, in simplicity and integrity of heart.

The greatest example of humility is that of Jesus, who, though He was equal to God, humbled himself to become a man and suffer a most cruel death because of our sins and to win for us salvation.

A virgin should eat whatever is necessary for her to maintain good health. This is part of her moderation and temperance.

There are three types of intemperance. One consists of an appetite for things that are forbidden. The second is eating and drinking what is licit, but which is a luxury. The third is not having discretion at times of meals, even though what one is eating and drinking is licit.

One should not murmur about anyone who is not present. Criticisms and gossip are great sins before God. What one cannot say to another's face should not be said behind her back. 171
One should not allow another to murmur in your presence either. One wounds the Body of Christ in this way, rather than building up its health.

The virgin should pray and read diligently. She should distribute her time between prayer and reading. When she does manual work or even takes a light snack, she should take something to read. In that way she will be nourishing her soul as well as her body on the word of God. Reading instructs and prayer always begs for grace. After prayer, too, the virgin should read in order to be aware of what she should pray for in her future prayers.

No matter what class a virgin comes from, she should look at her sister virgins as equals. The Lord does not make a distinction in classes, and neither should she. If she is from a higher class

in society by reason of birth or education, she should look at other virgins as her sisters, as equals. If she is from a lower class in society, she should serve others not in a spirit of slavery, but in a spirit of charity.

Take the example of our Savior who hid himself when the crowd wanted to make Him an earthly king; He was already with the Father who reigns eternally. So also the virgin should not seek to be elevated above others. Surely it is true that unless a virgin follows in the footsteps of humility of her Spouse, He will not receive her into His kingdom in eternity.

The virgin should not seek after earthly riches, which evaporate. Some people, like some of the patriarchs of the Old Testament, were able to possess riches and yet maintain a humble heart. They accepted riches and gave thanks to God; they were poor in heart. The virgin, however, should follow the example of Job who praised God in good times and in bad. The virgin should realize that prosperity can evaporate like vapor from the earth.

Note that the virgin should always speak the truth with her heart, but never judge another. Note that our Lord said that what is said in the darkness will be brought into the light of day and what He says for us to hear will be proclaimed from the rooftops. The best advice is never to say anything that you would not want God to know.

Another piece of advice is that the virgin should never turn back from the road of dedicated virginity that she has embarked on. She should look to Abraham as her example who never looked back, not like Lot's wife. The virgin should recall the words of Psalm 44 in which she is asked to forget her own people and her father's house because the King has desired her beauty, and He is her Lord and God.

As a dedicated virgin, she should remember in her prayers all her family and all those with whom she has ties of blood or friendship.

ST. METHIDIUS OF OLYMPUS

Paraphrased and summarized: *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*

Marcela

Virginité is a very noble and beautiful state of life. Although the virgin walks with feet on the earth, her head touches heaven.

A virgin should strive with all her strength to take care and be determined to listen to the divine words with diligence and without ceasing because they open the doors of the wise to her. These words will lead her to glorify Him who is Truth itself.

Meditation is the piquant salt which also preserves that which has been given for our benefit.

Before exalting our state of life as virgins and encouraging noble thoughts about virginité, one should get rid of all the infection of concupiscence. Many feel they can devote just a brief amount of time to hearing sacred doctrine because they are distracted by worthless things. Those souls which only seek diluted doctrine and false and rotten learning do not have a place in divine instruction. What a ridiculous thing to see these people speak without restraint and bracing themselves for things of little importance. They follow their own pretensions in the most assiduous way possible and neglect the most important determination that they should have, i.e., to go after the necessary means in order to grow in their love of chastity.

The flower of virginité was sent from heaven to the earth by a most noble act of God. Historically, one can see that at first after the Creation, God gave the command that mankind should multiply upon the earth. Then God led mankind progressively to follow the way of heaven until finally he arrived at the sublime evangelical counsel of virginité in order to give glory to His perfection. We can see that God led man to perfection gradually: at first he was forbidden to marry among his close family, then he was forbidden to take several women in marriage (as the animals do), then he was forbidden to commit adultery, and finally he was led to continence and from here to virginité so that he could arrive at the peaceful gate of incorruption.

We see in the Old Testament excellent prophets who taught and practiced many excellent doctrines; however, none praised nor elected the state of virginité. To our Savior alone was it reserved that He should carry into the world the counsel of virginité; He came into this world to teach man to go near to God. This High Priest, our Savior Jesus Christ, was the first among the prophets, the prince of the angels, and at the same time the first among all the virgins.

In the antiquity of the Old Testament times, we see that man had not yet arrived at perfection; he had not arrived at an understanding of virginité, a state so perfect in itself and created in the image of God that it was necessary that it could only be received from someone who is God, the Word made flesh. He was sent into the world to take our nature which had been stained by sin and to raise this nature to the divine. His mission was to enable us to participate in the divine. Therefore, being God, he chose to put on the clothing of our flesh so that we would have a divine

model and imitate its Author.

Jesus Christ, permanently a virgin Himself, encourages us to live in virginity, which is a privilege of a few.

Theophilia

It is clear that God, even though He had progressively raised mankind to appreciate and understand virginity in salvation history, does not deprecate marriage. It is very clearly seen in the Scriptures that the Divine Word, with His introduction of the counsel of virginity did not abolish marriage. Look at the splendor of the moon as an example: when it comes up, it does not extinguish the light of the stars.

It is clear that we must continue to multiply, just as Our Lord said that His Father is continuing to work at Creation. At the moment when the number of people destined for eternal life is complete, then human generation will cease. Never should we deprecate the procreation of children because the Almighty God himself takes part in their creation. Even those children who are born out of wedlock should never be despised, but cherished because God himself is the Creator of all. Did not God himself design the substance and form of the bones, the joints, the nerves of the baby even before he has been born? We know that even though children are born illegitimately, they are nevertheless given angels to guide and teach them. God does not negate those who have been given life.

Let us look to God and be inspired by Him: he is the only Creator of things visible and invisible. Those things which are invisible are incorruptible.

Human procreation is dignified, even though perpetual chastity carries with it the palm and crown. Note that St. Paul says that he who gives his daughter in marriage has done something good, but he that keeps his daughter as she is (as a virgin) has done something even better.

Talia

Note that St. Paul says it is better to marry if one need to than to fall into sin because of great difficulties one may have in keeping continent. One must be chaste in all respects, especially in conversation, to maintain truly one's chastity. St. Paul takes special care to write that one must be perfectly in control of oneself and in true liberty in order to decide to remain as a virgin. One should not be under any pressure whatsoever when deciding this state of life. Only in freedom can one decide to follow this counsel and persevere in it until one gains the palm of victory.

Theopatra

It is certain that there is nothing more effective than purity to turn men toward paradise, to restore the incorruptibility of mankind, to reconcile them with God, and to open the sure road toward eternal health.

Waves of frivolity can easily wash over the sentiments of our souls, stir up fierce passions, and thereby impede the progress of our spiritual life. However, thanks to the goodness of God, which we praise in Psalm 136, we can see that God transplants our souls from this miserable earth so that they can run with Christ in paradise where there is happiness without end.

In the Old Testament we can see the prefiguration of our salvation won for us by Christ. Pharaoh in Egypt is a figure of the devil, a tyrant. With ferocious cruelty, he ordered the death of the Hebrew infant boys while allowing the girls to live. The devil, in like manner, exercised his tyrannical imperialism in this "Egypt" of the world from Adam to Moses. He used our suffocating and raging carnal and irrational passions to battle the thoughts and dictates of our souls.

Looking at Ps. 136 again, we can see that the harps which were hung up on the trees are symbols of our carnal nature. The rivers of Babylon are nothing more than rivers of evil, with one wave after another of perversity without cease. We constantly cry to the Lord because we are filled with fear, begging Him with tears, not to let our carnal nature be caught up in the voluptuousness of the evil current, while we hang up our harps (our bodies) on the tree of purity. The Sacred Scriptures present the willow tree as a symbol of virginity. It grows near the water; and although the level of the water may surge higher and higher, its branches are high and ample enough to preserve purity. Purity is encouraged to grow through the fountains of Christ, soaking it, as it were, in the waters of wisdom. Just as the willow tree grows and flowers in the current of waters, so also virginity needs the food of divine teaching in order to live and flower. Without sufficient divine teaching, we will not be able to "hang up our harps [bodies] on the willow tree [virginity]," that is, we will not be able to sustain virginity in our bodies. Just as the willow tree is a means to conserve the harps intact and save them from the raging river, so virginity preserves the body from incontinence and the open sores of sin.

The law of God is like the blood of the lamb which protected the Israelites from death when the angel of death passed over Egypt.

We should not work for the vain things of this world, which pass away so quickly, like flattery and pleasures. They try to seduce us from adhering to the true God.

The more that virgins dress themselves in the tunic of purity, joy, piety, and the nobility of virginity, the sooner they will neither seek the delights of the flesh nor misinterpret the divine precepts. They will rise above all these ruins of the earth and look only at heaven, which will be apportioned to each according to her longings. The heavenly Jerusalem is where immaculate souls, delighting with pure lips in the austerity of virginity, will celebrate their wedding with the divine Bridegroom, having triumphed in the combat below in order to win the immortal crown. The heavenly Jerusalem is where all holy souls will gather, where the light will never be extinguished, where the white dress of virginity will never be stained by dull sentiments and thoughts.

Precious virgins, entrust yourselves to our Captain and Pastor Jesus, our Protector and Spouse, to protect you until the end! It will never be easier to find a guarantee more sure for men nor more

pleasing and acceptable to God.

Talusa

Among all the vows one can make to God, none is greater than to offer one's entire self to God in freedom and with one's entire will. One's riches or one's house cannot match the offering of one's very self to God. One who holds back anything or tries to evade obligations is not entirely dedicated to God. If one truly wants to dedicate herself to God perfectly, she must do so with all she possesses, with all her body, and with all her soul so that she will be a perfect and integral holocaust, lacking nothing.

Abraham offered not only his soul, but also his feelings and reason to God. When he was told to offer an animal three years old, the three years can be seen as a symbol of virgins who offer their three ages to God: the vigor of their youth, the mental and physical strength of their middle years, and their old age.

In order to foster the virtue of purity, it is most effective to start inculcating it even from childhood. One should start right away to explain to children what the dedication to God is. If one is to say she is totally dedicated to the Lord, then she should be pure and uncontaminated in body, free from carnal relations, and entirely unstained by vices and any other dullness. The eyes should be pure and consecrated to God; the ears should not hear murmurs and calumnies but listen to the word of God and the works of wise teachers; the hands should not engage in sordid business matters, avarice, or lewdness, but should be chaste and dedicated to God; the feet should not walk perverse roads, public places where fallen or insensate people congregate, but they should be employed in works of virtue to build according to the commandments of God. If one is chaste in spirit, she will direct all her thoughts to God, not admitting any lesser ideas or judging according to worldly standards.

The Old Testament Jews announced only the shadow of the image, but we, on the other hand, celebrate the clear image of the heavenly world because the pure and only truth has been revealed to us exactly since the Resurrection of Christ.

Agueda

Souls that are given to God in virginity have a beauty that is forever young, without the possibility of deterioration.

We should be aware that Satan and his fallen angels wage an all-out spiritual war against a soul that is given to the Divine Word.

A soul that is adorned with holiness and sanctity forms a part of the nuptial cortege of the Son of God because she keeps her lamp burning. Take the example in the parable of the Ten Virgins. Although all ten were prepared at the outset for the coming of the Bridegroom, only the five wise ones took enough oil with them to keep their lamps burning during the night. This oil is their

watchfulness to keep their eyes, ears, taste, hands, and mind free of sin and to fill their hearts, minds, and very lives with the wisdom of God and His holiness. When a soul is open to the outpouring of God, He fills that soul with an outpouring of grace for its life of virtue and good works.

The torch of the virgins in the parable is the language of the prophets, which spoke of trust in living a life of chastity that is fed by good works for the people of God. The delay of the Bridegroom's appearance at the wedding feast is an image in the parable of our present life here on earth, while we wait for the Second Coming of Christ. To live properly now while waiting for the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, we should live chastely in our bodies, carrying high our lamps which are not adorned with earthly riches but with prudence and wisdom so that they will radiate the heavenly chastity and divine splendor that will come in all its fullness at the end of time.

Procilia

God's people sail in different ships to His port of heaven. Our particular ship is the state of virginity.

We can also compare virginity to a lily in a garden, pure and grace-filled. Virginity is the flower of springtime, which without ceasing exhales the fragrance of incorruption from its white petals.

Those who keep their virginity for Christ as His spouse should be truly united to Him and take His name, as their Spouse. They should radiate the fragrance of Christ, as sweet flowers in a garden.

Another image for virginity is a pearl, which captivates the heart of Christ when he looks upon it. The heart of the virgin should be so attractive in her interior dignity to Christ that it steals His heart, so to speak.

Not all souls will receive at the end of time the same degree of honor and glory. Those who have suffered from the sins of others all their lives; have won the true olympic contest of chastity; those who have conquered the battles of passions, fear, sorrows, and other evils from human malice will receive the first prizes and be seated on the more dignified eternal thrones that have been promised to faithful men. There are many young women in the Church who will attain the crown of heaven, but some will be among the chorus of virgins in heaven.

Some in heaven will be queens, others will be faithful servants, and others will be known as maidens, but there is only one Bride. That Bride is the Church itself. None can compare with the Church herself, perfected and above all groups in heaven. She was founded on the Apostles, she is the beloved spouse, and she is forever fresh and young and filled with the fragrance of her virginity. We should look to the words of the Bridegroom who has said, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see and the ears that hear what you hear." In Psalm 44 we see Christ introducing His Spouse to the Father; His Bride is dressed in gold brocade, a symbol of virginal incorruption, and the virtues of chastity, prudence, faith, charity, patience, and all other good

works adorn her. The chorus of virgins will be seated close to the throne of the All-powerful God in heaven.

Tecla

The woman who appears in the heavens, clothed with the sun, crowned with twelve stars, and having the moon as her footstool is about to give birth in pain but with great longing. She is our mother whom the prophets saw in vision for the future; she was called the Spouse, the mountain of Sion, and the temple and tabernacle of God. She is the Church whose children are almost beyond numbering and who will be gathered together from all parts of the world, thanks to Baptism, after the Resurrection. Come and contemplate this pure mother, stainless, and of such heavenly beauty that she obscures the rays of the sun.

It is our election by God to be part of the Church, according to this symbol, which is suffering the pangs of birth until all peoples have become part of her, as members of the Church. We participate in this giving birth to all men who are ignorant or who just think along human terms; we participate in the labor of transformation of the men who are already filled with the Spirit. Those who are called to the Word are conceived in the womb of the Church, formed in like manner to the likeness of Christ over the centuries, and go on preparing that happy generation of those blessed for all eternity. The child who was born of the woman in the Apocalypse is not Christ, but the faithful who were given new life through Baptism. Through Baptism, the faithful are men similar resembling Christ, and the saints are "other Christs." Those who have been made "Christs" were reborn through water and the Holy Spirit; they have been baptized in Christ. They have contributed their part to the Church through their illumination and transformation in the Word.

The Son of God, although He is eternal, continues to be born in the souls of the faithful. Before a man knows Christ, before He has been manifested to him, he is merely living on a human level. But once he has experienced the mystery of grace, then Christ will be born in him when he is converted and embraces the life of faith; faith communicates a higher understanding and intelligence to him. This is why it is said that the Church always engenders and forms the Incarnate Word in those who are baptized.

In the symbolism of the woman in the Apocalypse, we see that the dragon is the devil and the stars which fell because of his tail are the perverse heretical sects of history. That huge dragon, the color of fire, is smart and has many limbs. He has seven heads and ten horns, and with his tail he has knocked down one third of the stars. He lies in ambush to devour the new-born child of the woman; he is the devil who is in perpetual battle against those born of the spirit of Christ. He wants to chew them up, destroy in them the image of Christ and the resplendent mark of the Word of God. One heresy denied the omnipotent Fatherhood of God, another said that the Incarnate Son was really a spirit, and another claimed that the prophets spoke only under their own impulses and not under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Virgins! Imitate your mother, the holy Church, and do not lose your peace no matter how many irritations and contradictions come your way in life. At the end, with your lighted lamp in hand

you will know the radiance of joy and rejoicing when you meet your divine Spouse in your heavenly nuptials.

The seven heads of the dragon and his ten horns can be summarized by the vices of intemperance, luxury, idleness, cowardice, lack of faith, and all the remaining sins against the Ten Commandments. The worst of all, however, is to attribute all one's sins to fate, to the attitude that one cannot help what she does, that she is not responsible for her sins.

Tisiana

Just as the Law was a figure and image of the Gospel of our day, of our centuries since the coming of Christ, so also our days are only a part of what is yet to come--our resurrection from the dead with a glorified body. Both soul and body will be reunited in a true glorified body. Virgins with lighted lamps will celebrate the honor of their Lord, adorning His tabernacle with good works as virgins who are prudent and wise. Think of the good works you do as materials by which you construct your holy life, your sanctity. Holy doctrine, charity, and prudence are distributed in their proper time to those who come to the waters of redemption. Use these gifts of the Spirit. The Gospel is the enduring truth and the reality of life. To maintain purity, one must live in faith, meditate on the Scriptures, and practice charity. Charity is a tree that bears more fruit than any other virtue.

Put your minds on the coming of the Lord, when He will fulfil His promises and lead you into the city of God, into His holy temple. Right now it is as if we are in the desert where the woman of the Apocalypse was led in order to save her child from the dragon. Here we must take advantage of the time given us to prepare for the solemnity of the last day, for the general resurrection from the dead, for the time when Christ will celebrate the heavenly nuptials. Keep your vision on the things of heaven, and do not occupy yourselves so completely with transitory things of the earth.

Domnina

Through the Scriptures we see the mercy and clemency of God's reign as symbolized by the olive. Olive oil has many applications: it sustains and fosters health of the body, it smoothes out and helps implements to work, it soothes pain, and provides fuel for lamps. In the same way, the mercies of God have provided for us--He has freed us from death, destroyed sin, and enlivened the light of our hearts.

In contrast, we see the grapevine. The wine, because of the good cheer and pleasure it can produce, made men think of themselves as free of the punishment of the flood. This episode indicated how earthly-bound their sentiments were, which eventually ended up in terror and anguish.

The briar and the agno-cactus are symbols of purity: the briar for its firmness against all delights, and the agno-cactus for its permanence in purity. The prickly-pear is the Law.

At times we see the vine as referring to Christ himself and the prickly-pear to the Holy Spirit in

order to indicate that Christ the Lord is the joy of our hearts and the Holy Spirit heals us. The fruits of the Spirit are divine gifts which are called figs because of their sweetness. It is certain that those who take refuge under the protection of the Holy Spirit and the Word will never be disturbed by dread nor shudder at that which can disturb hearts.

The branches of the spiritual olive tree are the Law and the Prophets. No one can ever reach a perfect understanding of Christ and the Holy Spirit without living a pure life.

Arete

No one can even think to maintain purity of the body if she does not keep guard over her tongue, over her eyes, over her hands. How could one keep the body clean if one does not keep all the members of that body clean from sin? Our virginity must be guarded not only by our conduct, but also by our speech.

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit will continue to dwell in us and keep us holy only if we stay away from sin and occasions of sin. The Lord declared that those who keep faith in Him will see God and that nothing will obstruct nor disturb the eyes of the soul. Totally free of the desires of this world and keeping our bodies pure and our hearts uncontaminated, we will become a veritable temple of the Holy Spirit. We must keep our head lifted up toward Christ. There is no merit in virginity without temptations and contradictions. However, the resistance is in the power of virtue. It is a greater power than the unholy desires and disturbances. It is a greater soul who conquers temptations and disturbances than one who has never experienced them at all.

ST. NICETAS OF REMESIANA

Paraphrased and summarized: "On the Fall of a Consecrated Virgin"

In the Greek world, it was St. Basil who lamented the fall of a consecrated virgin; in Latin literature, it was the bishop St. Nicetas who did the same.

For a consecrated virgin to have fallen by the sin of weakness it is a profanation of the Church, who is also the Bride of Christ. People who are against the Church for one reason or another rejoice over the sin of the consecrated virgin.

Christ, however, asks her to come back to Him. To cure such an ulcer, it takes patience and care. For such a sin a great reparation is necessary.

PSEUDO-CLEMENT OF ROME

Paraphrased and summarized: "Letter to Virgins"

He who professes perpetual chastity for Kingdom of God and she who professes perpetual virginity ought to take all available means to be worthy of reigning in the kingdom of heaven. The road to heaven is faith--a faith which is not just words in order to discipline oneself, but a faith which shows itself and grows by works. A person is truly justified by faith, a faith that is efficacious, that never gives in to doubt, that is never vacillating. It is a faith that manifests itself by good works done for the glory of the Lord God of the whole universe. It is necessary that the man of God work toward making himself perfect in word and action according to will of God.

Only he who is truly faithful in all things will attain salvation; but he who only believes but does not do good works because of his faith is, in reality, not a believer at all. Even if one is called a virgin but at the same time does not have all the corresponding virtues, she is a foolish virgin, as our Lord refers to in His parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

Great fortitude is necessary in order to overcome the difficulties of this state in life. Only she who walks the path of virginity in perfect faith and without fear can attain the crown of virginity. This state in life is an enterprise that requires a great deal of work, but also carries with it a great reward.

Note that our Lord was made man in the womb of a virgin and He Himself always remained perpetually chaste. From His example one can learn the glory of virginity. Therefore, those who have offered themselves to God in perpetual chastity imitate Christ Himself. Think of Sts. Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy of the New Testament. In the Old Testament we find Elias and Elisias and many others who lived lives pure and immaculate. If you desire to be like these saints, imitate them with all your strength.

Those who truly follow Christ in this state of life sincerely imitate Him with all their strength. Those who truly turn to Christ conform themselves to the image of Christ in all their works--in their life, in their conduct, in their purposes and motivations, in their words, in their acts, in their patience, in their fortitude, in their prudence, in their fairness, in their forbearance, in their tolerance of injuries, in their piety, in their holiness, in their continence, in their faith, in their hope, and in their perfect charity for the sake of God. To serve the Lord in the spirit of God means to live ones life purely and immaculately in constancy, that is, without being distracted this way or that.

Those who look toward ornate things of this world, the vanities, or who seek honors, acclaim, or arrogance can be termed by the true name of this plague--pride. It is pride that the Lord resists.

The true follower of God, be that person a man or woman, does not give himself over to desires of the flesh, but works for the fruits of the Spirit and of salvation. He realizes that he is a temple of the Holy Spirit where the Lord dwells, just as He dwells in the holy city of heaven.

Virgins ought to be aware of certain dangers to their professed vocation: occasions of sin by

eating and drinking that lead to lust, excessive frivolity, and dullness. Such behavior is not suitable for any Christian, much less for those who have professed the state of perpetual virginity. There are others who look for companions in vain and futile conversations, with indecent laughter and mean criticisms of others, going in pursuit of murmuring against others and showing themselves to be lazy. With people like this, one should not join in any meals and conviviality.

The lazy man has nothing to keep him busy, not even anything to do that is useful. They engage themselves in idle talk, gossip, and vanities, while going from place to place without even any fear of God. They even pretend to explain diverse doctrines under the pretext of teaching. They pretend to be erudite doctors of the faith, when in reality they are agents of iniquity against the name of Christ.

On the other hand, the holy man keeps guard over his tongue lest he be provoked to anger and endanger the salvation of his soul. The man who is not holy has soothing and kind words which touch the heart of the simple and unsophisticated by calling them blessed, but in reality the unknowing are being led into error.

One must be aware of these "doctors" of the faith, i.e., those who teach but do not work. They deceitfully assume the name of Christ, but teach false doctrines. However, one must act differently, i.e., one must give thanks to God for the spiritual charisms he has received, be they teaching, prophecy, or ministry. These charisms are given so that they might help all men abundantly. With these charisms one should serve her spiritual sisters in whatever way possible and through whatever words God provides. Everyone should know that she has to give an account at the end of time for the charisms received for the edification of the brothers and sisters in Christ. One should do all with total humility and meekness. Such gifts as one has received are really given for the good and usefulness of others.

A beautiful and useful way to serve is to "visit orphans and widows in their afflictions," and those poor people who have many children, especially those of the household of the faith. These works are undoubtedly proper for the servants in the household of God, and to do these works is both laudable and honorable for all.

Also beautiful and useful to do for all the brothers in Christ is to visit those who have spiritual illnesses and to pray for them to the Lord. Our Savior Himself has said that such illnesses can only be driven away by prayer and fasting. One should visit them and pray for them sincerely and diligently, without the odiousness of malice, without looking for any remuneration, without causing any disturbance, without deceit, without a lot of words, without false piety, without pride. Before all one should have the modesty and very humility of Christ. In sum, a beautiful activity is to help the sick.

It is beautiful in the eyes of God and men to give oneself to the poor and to offer hospitality to pilgrims, especially those of the household of the faith, for the love of God and for those He has created.

Each one should try to strengthen the faith of his brothers in the one God by edifying and

confirming them in the faith.

Current Documents

SACRA VIRGINITAS (On Consecrated Virginity)
Pope Pius XII

To Our Venerable Brothers, the Patriarchs, Primate, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Local Ordinaries in Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.

1. Holy virginity and that perfect chastity which is consecrated to the service of God is without doubt among the most precious treasures which the Founder of the Church has left in heritage to the society which He established.

2. This assuredly was the reason why the Fathers of the Church confidently asserted that perpetual virginity is a very noble gift which the Christian religion has bestowed on the world. They rightly noted that the pagans of antiquity imposed this way of life on the Vestals only for a certain time;[1] and that, although in the Old Testament virginity is ordered to be kept and preserved, it is only a previous requisite for marriage;[2] and furthermore, as Ambrose writes,[3] "We read that also in the temple of Jerusalem there were virgins. But what does the Apostle say? 'Now all these things happened to them in figure',[4] that this might be a foreshadowing of what was to come "

3. Indeed, right from Apostolic times this virtue has been thriving and flourishing in the garden of the Church. When the Acts of the Apostles[5] say that Philip the deacon was the father of four virgins, the word certainly refers to their state of life rather than to their age. And not much later Ignatius of Antioch salutes the virgins,[6] who together with the widows, formed a not insignificant part of the Christian community of Smyrna. In the second century, as St. Justin testifies, "many men and women, sixty and seventy years old, imbued from childhood with the teachings of Christ, keep their integrity."[7] Gradually the number of men and women who had vowed their chastity to God grew; likewise the importance of the office they fulfilled in the Church increased notably, as We have shown more at length in Our apostolic constitution, "Sponsa Christi."[8]

4. Further, the Fathers of the Church, such as Cyprian, Athanasius, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and many others, have sung the praises of virginity. And this doctrine of the Fathers, augmented through the course of centuries by the Doctors of the Church and the masters of asceticism, helps greatly either to inspire in the faithful of both sexes the firm resolution of dedicating themselves to God by the practice of perfect chastity and of persevering thus till death, or to strengthen them in the resolution already taken.

5. Innumerable is the multitude of those who from the beginning of the Church until our time have offered their chastity to God. Some have preserved their virginity unspoiled, others after the death of their spouse, have consecrated to God their remaining years in the unmarried state, and still others, after repenting their sins, have chosen to lead a life of perfect chastity; all of them at one in this common oblation, that is, for love of God to abstain for the rest of their lives from sexual pleasure. May then what the Fathers of the Church preached about the glory and merit of virginity be an invitation, a help, and a source of strength to those who have made the sacrifice to

persevere with constancy, and not take back or claim for themselves even the smallest part of the holocaust they have laid on the altar of God.

6. And while this perfect chastity is the subject of one of the three vows which constitute the religious state,[9] and is also required by the Latin Church of clerics in major orders[10] and demanded from members of Secular Institutes,[11] it also flourishes among many who are lay people in the full sense: men and women who are not constituted in a public state of perfection and yet by private promise or vow completely abstain from marriage and sexual pleasures, in order to serve their neighbor more freely and to be united with God more easily and more closely.

7. To all of these beloved sons and daughters who in any way have consecrated their bodies and souls to God, We address Ourselves, and exhort them earnestly to strengthen their holy resolution and be faithful to it.

8. However, since there are some who, straying from the right path in this matter, so exalt marriage as to rank it ahead of virginity and thus depreciate chastity consecrated to God and clerical celibacy, Our apostolic duty demands that We now in a particular manner declare and uphold the Church's teaching on the sublime state of virginity, and so defend Catholic truth against these errors.

9. First of all, We think it should be noted that the Church has taken what is capital in her teaching on virginity from the very lips of her Divine Spouse.

10. For when the disciples thought that the obligations and burdens of marriage, which their Master's discourse had made clear, seemed extremely heavy, they said to Him: "If the case stands so between man and wife, it is better not to marry at all." [12] Jesus Christ replied that His ideal is not understood by everybody but only by those who have received the gift; for some are hindered from marriage because of some defect of nature, others because of the violence and malice of men, while still others freely abstain of their own will, and this "for the kingdom of heaven." And He concludes with these words, "He that can take it, let him take it." [13]

11. By these words the divine Master is speaking not of bodily impediments to marriage, but of a resolution freely made to abstain all one's life from marriage and sexual pleasure. For in likening those who of their own free will have determined to renounce these pleasures to those who by nature or the violence of men are forced to do so, is not the Divine Redeemer teaching us that chastity to be really perfect must be perpetual?

12. Here also it must be added, as the Fathers and Doctors of the Church have clearly taught, that virginity is not a Christian virtue unless we embrace it "for the kingdom of heaven;" [14] that is, unless we take up this way of life precisely to be able to devote ourselves more freely to divine things to attain heaven more surely, and with skillful efforts to lead others more readily to the kingdom of heaven.

13. Those therefore, who do not marry because of exaggerated self-interest, or because, as Augustine says, [15] they shun the burdens of marriage or because like Pharisees they proudly

flaunt their physical integrity, an attitude which has been condemned by the Council of Gangra lest men and women renounce marriage as though it were something despicable instead of because virginity is something beautiful and holy,—none of these can claim for themselves the honor of Christian virginity.[16]

14. Moreover, the Apostle of the Gentiles, writing under divine inspiration, makes this point: "He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God... And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and spirit."[17]

15. This then is the primary purpose, this the central idea of Christian virginity: to aim only at the divine, to turn thereto the whole mind and soul; to want to please God in everything, to think of Him continually, to consecrate body and soul completely to Him.

16. This is the way the Fathers of the Church have always interpreted the words of Jesus Christ and the teaching of the Apostle of the Gentiles; for from the very earliest days of the Church they have considered virginity a consecration of body and soul offered to God. Thus, St. Cyprian demands of virgins that "once they have dedicated themselves to Christ by renouncing the pleasures of the flesh, they have vowed themselves body and soul to God ... and should seek to adorn themselves only for their Lord and please only Him."[18] And the Bishop of Hippo, going further, says, "Virginity is not honored because it is bodily integrity, but because it is something dedicated to God... Nor do we extol virgins because they are virgins, but because they are virgins dedicated to God in loving continence."[19] And the masters of Sacred Theology, St. Thomas Aquinas[20] and St. Bonaventure,[21] supported by the authority of Augustine, teach that virginity does not possess the stability of virtue unless there is a vow to keep it forever intact. And certainly those who obligate themselves by perpetual vow to keep their virginity put into practice in the most perfect way possible what Christ said about perpetual abstinence from marriage; nor can it justly be affirmed that the intention of those who wish to leave open a way of escape from this state of life is better and more perfect.

17. Moreover the Fathers of the Church considered this obligation of perfect chastity as a kind of spiritual marriage, in which the soul is wedded to Christ; so that some go so far as to compare breaking the vow with adultery.[22] Thus, St. Athanasius writes that the Catholic Church has been accustomed to call those who have the virtue of virginity the spouses of Christ.[23] And St. Ambrose, writing succinctly of the consecrated virgin, says, "She is a virgin who is married to God." [24] In fact, as is clear from the writings of the same Doctor of Milan,[25] as early as the fourth century the rite of consecration of a virgin was very like the rite the Church uses in our own day in the marriage blessing.[26]

18. For the same reason the Fathers exhort virgins to love their Divine Spouse more ardently than they would love a husband had they married, and always in their thoughts and actions to fulfill His will.[27] Augustine writes to virgins: "Love with all your hearts Him Who is the most beautiful of the sons of men: you are free, your hearts are not fettered by conjugal bonds ... if, then, you would owe your husbands great love, how great is the love you owe Him because of Whom you have willed to have not husbands? Let Him Who was fastened to the cross be securely fastened to your hearts." [28] And this in other respects too is in harmony with the

sentiments and resolutions which the Church herself requires of virgins on the day they are solemnly consecrated to God by inviting them to recite these words: "The kingdom of this earth and all worldly trappings I have valued as worthless for love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Whom I have seen, loved, believed, and preferred above all else." [29] It is nothing else but love of Him that sweetly constrains the virgin to consecrate her body and soul entirely to her Divine Redeemer; thus St. Methodius, Bishop of Olympus, places these beautiful words on her lips: "You yourself, O Christ, are my all. For you I keep myself chaste, and holding aloft my shining lamp I run to meet you, my Spouse." [30] Certainly it is the love of Christ that urges a virgin to retire behind convent walls and remain there all her life, in order to contemplate and love the heavenly Spouse more easily and without hindrance; certainly it is the same love that strongly inspires her to spend her life and strength in works of mercy for the sake of her neighbor.

19. As for those men "who were not defiled with women, being virgins," [31] the Apostle John asserts that, "they follow the Lamb wherever he goes." [32] Let us meditate, then, on the exhortation Augustine gives to all men of this class: "You follow the Lamb because the body of the Lamb is indeed virginal... Rightly do you follow Him in virginity of heart and body wherever He goes. For what does following mean but imitation? Christ has suffered for us, leaving us an example, as the Apostle Peter says 'that we should follow in his footsteps'." [33] Hence all these disciples and spouses of Christ embraced the state of virginity, as St. Bonaventure says, "in order to become like unto Christ the spouse, for that state makes virgins like unto Him." [34] It would hardly satisfy their burning love for Christ to be united with Him by the bonds of affection, but this love had perforce to express itself by the imitation of His virtues, and especially by conformity to His way of life, which was lived completely for the benefit and salvation of the human race. If priests, religious men and women, and others who in any way have vowed themselves to the divine service, cultivate perfect chastity, it is certainly for the reason that their Divine Master remained all His life a virgin. St. Fulgentius exclaims: "This is the only-begotten Son of God, the only-begotten Son of a virgin also, the only spouse of all holy virgins, the fruit, the glory, the gift of holy virginity, whom holy virginity brought forth physically, to whom holy virginity is wedded spiritually, by whom holy virginity is made fruitful and kept inviolate, by whom she is adorned, to remain ever beautiful, by whom she is crowned, to reign forever glorious." [35]

20. And here We think it opportune, Venerable Brothers, to expose more fully and to explain more carefully why the love of Christ moves generous souls to abstain from marriage, and what is the mystical connection between virginity and the perfection of Christian charity. From our Lord's words referred to above, it has already been implied that this complete renunciation of marriage frees men from its grave duties and obligations. Writing by divine inspiration, the Apostle of the Gentiles proposes the reason for this freedom in these words: "And I would have you to be without solicitude... But he that is with a wife, is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife; and he is divided." [36] Here however it must be noted that the Apostle is not reproving men because they are concerned about their wives, nor does he reprehend wives because they seek to please their husbands; rather is he asserting clearly that their hearts are divided between love of God and love of their spouse, and beset by gnawing cares, and so by reason of the duties of their married state they can hardly be free to contemplate the divine. For the duty of the married life to which they are bound clearly demands: "They shall be two in one flesh." [37] For spouses are to be bound to each other by mutual bonds both in joy

and in sorrow.[38] It is easy to see, therefore, why persons who desire to consecrate themselves to God's service embrace the state of virginity as a liberation, in order to be more entirely at God's disposition and devoted to the good of their neighbor. How, for example, could a missionary such as the wonderful St. Francis Xavier, a father of the poor such as the merciful St. Vincent de Paul, a zealous educator of youth like St. John Bosco, a tireless "mother of emigrants" like St. Francis Xavier Cabrini, have accomplished such gigantic and painful labors, if each had to look after the corporal and spiritual needs of a wife or husband and children?

21. There is yet another reason why souls desirous of a total consecration to the service of God and neighbor embrace the state of virginity. It is, as the holy Fathers have abundantly illustrated, the numerous advantages for advancement in spiritual life which derive from a complete renouncement of all sexual pleasure. It is not to be thought that such pleasure, when it arises from lawful marriage, is reprehensible in itself; on the contrary, the chaste use of marriage is ennobled and sanctified by a special sacrament, as the Fathers themselves have clearly remarked. Nevertheless, it must be equally admitted that as a consequence of the fall of Adam the lower faculties of human nature are no longer obedient to right reason, and may involve man in dishonorable actions. As the Angelic Doctor has it, the use of marriage "keeps the soul from full abandon to the service of God." [39]

22. It is that they may acquire this spiritual liberty of body and soul, and that they may be freed from temporal cares, that the Latin Church demands of her sacred ministers that they voluntarily oblige themselves to observe perfect chastity.[40] And "if a similar law," as Our predecessor of immortal memory Pius XI declared, "does not bind the ministers of the Oriental Church to the same degree, nevertheless among them too ecclesiastical celibacy occupies a place of honor, and, in certain cases, especially when the higher grades of the hierarchy are in question, it is a necessary and obligatory condition." [41]

23. Consider again that sacred ministers do not renounce marriage solely on account of their apostolic ministry, but also by reason of their service at the altar. For, if even the priests of the Old Testament had to abstain from the use of marriage during the period of their service in the Temple, for fear of being declared impure by the Law just as other men,[42] is it not much more fitting that the ministers of Jesus Christ, who offer every day the Eucharistic Sacrifice, possess perfect chastity? St. Peter Damian, exhorting priests to perfect continence, asks: "If Our Redeemer so loved the flower of unimpaired modesty that not only was He born from a virginal womb, but was also cared for by a virgin nurse even when He was still an infant crying in the cradle, by whom, I ask, does He wish His body to be handled now that He reigns, limitless, in heaven?" [43]

24. It is first and foremost for the foregoing reasons that, according to the teaching of the Church, holy virginity surpasses marriage in excellence. Our Divine Redeemer had already given it to His disciples as a counsel for a more perfect life.[44] St. Paul, after having said that the father who gives his daughter in marriage "does well," adds immediately "and he that gives her not, does better." [45] Several times in the course of his comparison between marriage and virginity the Apostle reveals his mind, and especially in these words: "for I would that all men were even as myself... But I say to the unmarried and to widows: it is good for them if they so continue, even as I." [46] Virginity is preferable to marriage then, as We have said, above all else because it has

a higher aim:[47] that is to say, it is a very efficacious means for devoting oneself wholly to the service of God, while the heart of married persons will remain more or less "divided." [48]

25. Turning next to the fruitful effects of virginity, our appreciation of its value will be enhanced; for "by the fruit the tree is known." [49]

26. We feel the deepest joy at the thought of the innumerable army of virgins and apostles who, from the first centuries of the Church up to our own day, have given up marriage to devote themselves more easily and fully to the salvation of their neighbor for the love of Christ, and have thus been enabled to undertake and carry through admirable works of religion and charity. We by no means wish to detract from the merits and apostolic fruits of the active members of Catholic Action: by their zealous efforts they can often touch souls that priests and religious cannot gain. Nevertheless, works of charity are for the most part the field of action of consecrated persons. These generous souls are to be found laboring among men of every age and condition, and when they fall worn out or sick, they bequeath their sacred mission to others who take their place. Hence it often happens that a child, immediately after birth, is placed in the care of consecrated persons, who supply in so far as they can for a mother's love; at the age of reason he is entrusted to educators who see to his Christian instruction together with the development of his mind and the formation of his character; if he is sick, the child or adult will find nurses moved by the love of Christ who will care for him with unwearied devotion; the orphan, the person fallen into material destitution or moral abjection, the prisoner, will not be abandoned. Priests, religious, consecrated virgins will see in him a suffering member of Christ's Mystical Body, and recall the words of the Divine Redeemer: "For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; naked, and you covered me; sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me... Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me." [50] Who can ever praise enough the missionaries who toil for the conversion of the pagan multitudes, exiles from their native country, or the nuns who render them indispensable assistance?" To each and every one We gladly apply these words of Our Apostolic Exhortation, "Menti Nostrae:" "... by this law of celibacy the priest not only does not abdicate his paternity, but increases it immensely, for he begets not for an earthly and transitory life but for the heavenly and eternal one." [51]

27. The fruit of virginity is not only in these external works, to which it allows one to devote oneself more easily and fully, but also in the earnest prayer offered for others and the trials willingly and generously endured for their sake, which are other very perfect forms of charity toward one's neighbor. To such also the servants and spouses of Christ, especially those who live within the convent or monastery walls, have consecrated their whole lives.

28. Finally, virginity consecrated to Christ is in itself such an evidence of faith in the kingdom of heaven, such a proof of love for our Divine Redeemer, that there is little wonder if it bears abundant fruits of sanctity. Innumerable are the virgins and apostles vowed to perfect chastity who are the honor of the Church by the lofty sanctity of their lives. In truth, virginity gives souls a force of spirit capable of leading them even to martyrdom, if needs be: such is the clear lesson of history which proposes a whole host of virgins to our admiration, from Agnes of Rome to Maria Goretti.

29. Virginitly fully deserves the name of angelic virtue, which St. Cyprian writing to virgins affirms: "What we are to be, you have already commenced to be. You already possess in this world the glory of the resurrection; you pass through the world without suffering its contagion. In preserving virgin chastity, you are the equals of the angels of God."[52] To souls, restless for a purer life or inflamed with the desire to possess the kingdom of heaven, virginitly offers itself as "a pearl of great price," for which one "sells all that he has, and buys it."[53] Married people and even those who are captives of vice, at the contact of virgin souls, often admire the splendor of their transparent purity, and feel themselves moved to rise above the pleasures of sense. When St. Thomas states "that to virginitly is awarded the tribute of the highest beauty,"[54] it is because its example is captivating; and, besides, by their perfect chastity do not all these men and women give a striking proof that the mastery of the spirit over the body is the result of a divine assistance and the sign of proven virtue?

30. Worthy of special consideration is the reflection that the most delicate fruit of virginitly consists in this, that virgins make tangible, as it were, the perfect virginitly of their mother, the Church and the sanctity of her intimate union with Christ. In the ceremony of the consecration of virgins, the consecrating prelate prays God: "that there may exist more noble souls who disdain the marriage which consists in the bodily union of man and woman, but desire the mystery it enshrines, who reject its practice while loving its mystic signification."[55]

31. The greatest glory of virgins is undoubtedly to be the living images of the perfect integrity of the union between the Church and her divine Spouse. For this society founded by Christ it is a profound joy that virgins should be the marvelous sign of its sanctity and fecundity, as St. Cyprian so well expressed it: "They are the flower of the Church, the beauty and ornament of spiritual grace, a subject of joy, a perfect and unsullied homage of praise and honor, the image of God corresponding to the sanctity of the Lord, the most illustrious portion of Christ's flock. In them the glorious fecundity of our mother, the Church, finds expression and she rejoices; the more the number of virgins increases, the greater is this mother's joy."[56]

32. This doctrine of the excellence of virginitly and of celibacy and of their superiority over the married state was, as We have already said, revealed by our Divine Redeemer and by the Apostle of the Gentiles; so too, it was solemnly defined as a dogma of divine faith by the holy council of Trent,[57] and explained in the same way by all the holy Fathers and Doctors of the Church. Finally, We and Our Predecessors have often expounded it and earnestly advocated it whenever occasion offered. But recent attacks on this traditional doctrine of the Church, the danger they constitute, and the harm they do to the souls of the faithful lead Us, in fulfillment of the duties of Our charge, to take up the matter once again in this Encyclical Letter, and to reprove these errors which are so often propounded under a specious appearance of truth.

33. First of all, it is against common sense, which the Church always holds in esteem, to consider the sexual instinct as the most important and the deepest of human tendencies, and to conclude from this that man cannot restrain it for his whole life without danger to his vital nervous system, and consequently without injuring the harmony of his personality.

34. As St. Thomas very rightly observes, the deepest natural instinct is the instinct of self-preservation; the sexual instinct comes second. In addition, it is for the rational inclination,

which is the distinguishing privilege of our nature, to regulate these fundamental instincts and by dominating to ennoble them.[58]

35. It is, alas, true that the sin of Adam has caused a deep disturbance in our corporal faculties and our passions, so that they wish to gain control of the life of the senses and even of the spirit, obscuring our reason and weakening our will. But Christ's grace is given us, especially by the sacraments, to help us to keep our bodies in subjection and to live by the spirit.[59] The virtue of chastity does not mean that we are insensible to the urge of concupiscence, but that we subordinate it to reason and the law of grace, by striving wholeheartedly after what is noblest in human and Christian life.

36. In order to acquire this perfect mastery of the spirit over the senses, it is not enough to refrain from acts directly contrary to chastity, but it is necessary also generously to renounce anything that may offend this virtue nearly or remotely; at such a price will the soul be able to reign fully over the body and lead its spiritual life in peace and liberty. Who then does not see, in the light of Catholic principles, that perfect chastity and virginity, far from harming the normal unfolding of man or woman, on the contrary endow them with the highest moral nobility.

37. We have recently with sorrow censured the opinion of those who contend that marriage is the only means of assuring the natural development and perfection of the human personality.[60] For there are those who maintain that the grace of the sacrament, conferred *ex opere operato*, renders the use of marriage so holy as to be a fitter instrument than virginity for uniting souls with God; for marriage is a sacrament, but not virginity. We denounce this doctrine as a dangerous error. Certainly, the sacrament grants the married couple the grace to accomplish holily the duties of their married state, and it strengthens the bonds of mutual affection that unite them; but the purpose of its institution was not to make the employment of marriage the means, most suitable in itself, for uniting the souls of the husband and wife with God by the bonds of charity.[61]

38. Or rather does not the Apostle Paul admit that they have the right of abstaining for a time from the use of marriage, so that they may be more free for prayer,[62] precisely because such abstinence gives greater freedom to the soul which wishes to give itself over to spiritual thoughts and prayer to God?

39. Finally, it may not be asserted, as some do, that the "mutual help,"[63] which is sought in Christian Marriage, is a more effective aid in striving for personal sanctity than the solitude of the heart, as they term it, of virgins and celibates. For although all those who have embraced a life of perfect chastity have deprived themselves of the expression of human love permitted in the married state, nonetheless it cannot thereby be affirmed that because of this privation they have diminished and despoiled the human personality. For they receive from the Giver of heavenly gifts something spiritual which far exceeds that "mutual help" which husband and wife confer on each other. They consecrate themselves to Him Who is their source, and Who shares with them His divine life, and thus personality suffers no loss, but gains immensely. For who, more than the virgin, can apply to himself that marvelous phrase of the Apostle Paul: "I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me." [64]

40. For this reason the Church has most wisely held that the celibacy of her priests must be retained; she knows it is and will be a source of spiritual graces by which they will be ever more closely united with God.

41. We feel it opportune, moreover, to touch somewhat briefly here on the error of those who, in order to turn boys and girls away from Seminaries and Religious Institutes, strive to impress upon their minds that the Church today has a greater need of the help and of the profession of Christian virtue on the part of those who, united in marriage, lead a life together with others in the world, than of priest and consecrated virgins, who, because of their vow of chastity, are, as it were, withdrawn from human society. No one can fail to see, Venerable Brothers, how utterly false and harmful is such an opinion.

42. Of course, it is not Our intention to deny that Catholic spouses, because of the example of their Christian life, can, wherever they live and whatever be their circumstances, produce rich and salutary fruits as a witness to their virtue. Yet whoever for this reason argues that it is preferable to live in matrimony than to consecrate oneself completely to God, without doubt perverts the right order. Indeed We earnestly wish, Venerable Brothers, that those who have already contracted marriage, or desire to enter this state, be properly taught their serious obligations not only to educate properly and carefully whatever children they have or will have, but also to help others, within their capacity, by the testimony of their faith and the example of their virtue. And yet, as Our duty demands, We cannot but censure all those who strive to turn young people away from the Seminary or Religious Orders and Institutes, and from the taking of sacred vows, persuading them that they can, if joined in marriage, as fathers and mothers of families pursue a greater spiritual good by an open and public profession of their Christian life. Certainly their conduct would be more proper and correct, if, instead of trying to distract from a life of virginity those young men and women, who desire to give themselves to the service of God, too few alas today, they were to exhort with all the zeal at their command the vast numbers of those who live in wedlock to promote apostolic works in the ranks of the laity. On this point, Ambrose fittingly writes: "To sow the seeds of perfect purity and to arouse a desire for virginity has always belonged to the function of the priesthood." [65]

43. We think it necessary, moreover, to warn that it is altogether false to assert that those who are vowed to perfect chastity are practically outside the community of men. Are not consecrated virgins, who dedicate their lives to the service of the poor and the sick, without making any distinction as to race, social rank, or religion, are not these virgins united intimately with their miseries and sorrows, and affectionately drawn to them, as though they were their mothers? And does not the priest likewise, moved by the example of his Divine Master, perform the function of a good shepherd, who knows his flock and calls them by name? [66] Indeed it is from that perfect chastity which they cultivate that priests and religious men and women find the motive for giving themselves to all, and love all men with the love of Christ. And they too, who live the contemplative life, precisely because they not only offer to God prayer and supplication but immolate themselves for the salvation of others, accomplish much for the good of the Church; indeed, when in circumstances like the present they dedicate themselves to works of charity and of the apostolate, according to the norms which We laid down in the Apostolic Letter "*Sponsa Christi*," [67] they are very much to be praised; nor can they be said to be separated from contact with men, since they labor for their spiritual progress in this twofold way.

44. From the Church's teaching on the excellence of virginity, let Us now come, Venerable Brothers, to some points which are of practical application.

45. In the first place, it must be clearly stated that because virginity should be esteemed as something more perfect than marriage, it does not follow that it is necessary for Christian perfection.

46. Holiness of life can really be attained, even without a chastity that is consecrated to God. Witness to this are the many holy men and women, who are publicly honored by the Church, and who were faithful spouses and stood out as an example of excellent fathers and mothers; indeed it is not rare to find married people who are very earnest in their efforts for Christian perfection.

47. It should be pointed out, also, that God does not urge all Christians to virginity, as the Apostle Paul teaches us with these words: "Now concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord; but I give counsel." [68] We are, therefore, merely invited by counsel to embrace perfect chastity, as something which can lead those "to whom it is given" [69] more safely and successfully to the evangelical perfection they seek, and to the conquest of the kingdom of heaven. Wherefore it is "not imposed, but proposed," as St. Ambrose so aptly observed. [70]

48. Hence, perfect chastity demands, first, a free choice by Christians before they consecrate themselves to God and then, from God, supernatural help and grace. [71] Our Divine Redeemer Himself has taught us this in the following words: "All men take not his word, but they to whom it is given... He that can take it, let him take it." [72] St. Jerome, intently pondering this sacred phrase of Jesus Christ, exhorts all "that each one study his own powers, whether he can fulfill the precepts of virginal modesty. For of itself chastity is charming and attractive to all. But one's forces must be considered, that he who can may take it. The Lord's word is as it were an exhortation, stirring on His soldiers to the prize of purity. He that can take it, let him take it: let him who can, fight, conquer and receive his reward." [73]

49. For virginity is a difficult virtue; that one be able to embrace it there is needed not only a strong and declared determination of completely and perpetually abstaining from those legitimate pleasures derived from marriage; but also a constant vigilance and struggle to contain and dominate rebellious movements of body and soul, a flight from the importunings of this world, a struggle to conquer the wiles of Satan. How true is that saying of Chrysostom: "the root, and the flower, too, of virginity is a crucified life." [74] For virginity, according to Ambrose, is as a sacrificial offering, and the virgin "an oblation of modesty, a victim of chastity." [75] Indeed, St. Methodius, Bishop of Olympus, compares virgins to martyrs, [76] and St. Gregory the Great teaches that perfect chastity substitutes for martyrdom: "Now, though the era of persecution is gone, yet our peace has its martyrdom, because though we bend not the neck to the sword, yet with a spiritual weapon we slay fleshly desires in our hearts." [77] Hence a chastity dedicated to God demands strong and noble souls, souls ready to do battle and conquer "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." [78]

50. Prior, therefore, to entering upon this most difficult path, all who by experience know they are too weak in spirit should humbly heed this warning of Paul the Apostle: "But if they do not contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be burnt." [79] For many,

undoubtedly, the burden of perpetual continence is a heavier one than they should be persuaded to shoulder. And so priests, who are under grave obligation of helping by their advice young people who declare they are drawn by some movement of soul to aspire to the priesthood or enter religious life, must urge them to ponder the matter carefully, lest they enter a way which they cannot hope to follow sturdily and happily to its end. They should prudently examine the fitness of candidates, even obtaining, as often as is proper, the opinion of experts; and then, if serious doubt remains, especially if it is based on past experience, they should make use of their authority to make candidates cease from seeking a state of perfect chastity, nor should these latter ever be admitted to Holy Orders, or to religious profession.

51. And yet, although chastity pledged to God is a difficult virtue, those who after serious consideration generously answer Christ's invitation and do all in their power to attain it, can perfectly and faithfully preserve it. For since they have eagerly embraced the state of virginity or celibacy they will certainly receive from God that gift of grace through whose help they will be able to carry out their promise. Wherefore, if there are any "who do not feel they have the gift of chastity even though they have vowed it,"[80] let them not declare they cannot fulfill their obligations in this matter. "For," says the Council of Trent, quoting St. Augustine, " 'God does not command the impossible, but in commanding serves notice that one do what he can, and pray for what he cannot,'[81] and He helps us to accomplish it."[82] This truth, so full of encouragement, We recall to those also whose will has been weakened by upset nerves and whom some doctors, sometimes even Catholic doctors, are too quick to persuade that they should be freed from such an obligation, advancing the specious reason that they cannot preserve their chastity without suffering some harm to their mental balance. How much more useful and opportune it is to help the infirm of this type to strengthen their will, and to advise them that not even to them is chastity impossible, according to the word of the Apostle: "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able: but will make also with temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it."[83]

52. Here are the helps, commended to us by our Divine Redeemer, by which we may efficaciously protect our virtue: constant vigilance, whereby we diligently do all that we can; moreover, constant prayer to God, asking for what we cannot attain by ourselves, because of our weakness. "Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."[84] A vigilance which guards every moment of our lives and every type of circumstance is absolutely necessary for us: "For the flesh lusteth against the spirit: and the spirit against the flesh."[85] But if anyone grants however little to the enticements of the flesh, he will see himself quickly pulled toward those "works of the flesh" which the Apostle lists,[86] the basest and ugliest vices of man.

53. Hence we must watch particularly over the movements of our passions and of our senses, and so control them by voluntary discipline in our lives and by bodily mortification that we render them obedient to right reason and God's law: "And they that are Christ's have crucified their flesh, with its vices and concupiscences."[87] The Apostle of the Gentiles says this about himself: "But I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway."[88] All holy men and women have most carefully guarded the movements of their senses and their passions, and at times have very harshly crushed them, in keeping with the teaching of the Divine Master: "But I say to you, that

whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart. And if thy right eye scandalize thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee. For it is expedient for thee that one of thy members should perish, rather than that thy whole body be cast into hell."[89] It is abundantly clear that with this warning Our Savior demands of us above all that we never consent to any sin, even internally, and that we steadfastly remove far from us anything that can even slightly tarnish the beautiful virtue of purity. In this matter no diligence, no severity can be considered exaggerated. If ill health or other reasons do not allow one heavier corporal austerities, yet they never free one from vigilance and internal self-control.

54. On this point it should be noted, as indeed the Fathers[90] and Doctors[91] of the Church teach, that we can more easily struggle against and repress the wiles of evil and the enticements of the passions if we do not struggle directly against them, but rather flee from them as best we may. For the preserving of chastity, according to the teaching of Jerome, flight is more effective than open warfare: "Therefore I flee, lest I be overcome."[92] Flight must be understood in this sense, that not only do we diligently avoid occasion of sin, but especially that in struggles of this kind we lift our minds and hearts to God, intent above all on Him to Whom we have vowed our virginity. "Look upon the beauty of your Lover,"[93] St. Augustine tells us.

55. Flight and alert vigilance, by which we carefully avoid the occasions of sin, have always been considered by holy men and women as the most effective method of combat in this matter; today however it does not seem that everybody holds the same opinion. Some indeed claim that all Christians, and the clergy in particular, should not be "separated from the world" as in the past, but should be "close to the world;" therefore they should "take the risk" and put their chastity to the test in order to show whether or not they have the strength to resist; therefore, they say, let young clerics see everything so that they may accustom themselves to gaze at everything with equanimity, and thus render themselves immune to all temptations. For this reason they readily grant young clerics the liberty to turn their eyes in any direction without the slightest concern for modesty; they may attend motion pictures, even those forbidden by ecclesiastical censorship; they may peruse even obscene periodicals; they may read novels which are listed in the Index of forbidden books or prohibited by the Natural Law. All this they allow because today the multitudes are fed by this kind of amusement and publication and because those who are minded to help them should understand their way of thinking and feeling. But it is easily seen that this method of educating and training the clergy to acquire the sanctity proper to their calling is wrong and harmful. For "he that loveth danger shall perish in it;"[94] most appropriate in this connection is the admonition of Augustine: "Do not say that you have a chaste mind if your eyes are unchaste, because an unchaste eye betrays an unchaste heart."[95]

56. No doubt this pernicious method is based upon serious confusion of thought. Indeed Christ Our Lord asserted of His Apostles, "I have sent them into the world;"[96] yet previously He had said of them, "They are not of the world, as I also am not of the world,"[97] and He had prayed to His Heavenly Father in these words, "I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from evil."[98] Motivated by the same principles, and in order to protect priests from temptations to evil, to which all those are ordinarily subject who are in intimate contact with the world, the Church has promulgated appropriate and wise laws,[99] whose purpose is to safeguard sacerdotal sanctity from the cares and pleasures of the laity.

57. All the more reason why the young clergy, because they are to be trained in the spiritual life, in sacerdotal and religious perfection, must be separated from the tumult of the world before entering the lists of combat; for long years they must remain in a Seminary or Scholasticate where they receive a sound and careful education which provides them with a gradual approach to and a prudent knowledge of those problems which our times have brought to the fore, in accordance with the norms which We established in the Apostolic Exhortation "Menti Nostrae." [100] What gardener would expose young plants, choice indeed but weak, to violent storms in order that they might give proof of the strength which they have not yet acquired? Seminarians and scholastics are surely to be considered like young and weak plants who must still be protected and gradually trained to resist and to fight.

58. The educators of the young clergy would render a more valuable and useful service, if they would inculcate in youthful minds the precepts of Christian modesty, which is so important for the preservation of perfect chastity and which is truly called the prudence of chastity. For modesty foresees threatening danger, forbids us to expose ourselves to risks, demands the avoidance of those occasions which the imprudent do not shun. It does not like impure or loose talk, it shrinks from the slightest immodesty, it carefully avoids suspect familiarity with persons of the other sex, since it brings the soul to show due reverence to the body, as being a member of Christ [101] and the temple of the Holy Spirit. [102] He who possesses the treasure of Christian modesty abominates every sin of impurity and instantly flees whenever he is tempted by its seductions.

59. Modesty will moreover suggest and provide suitable words for parents and educators by which the youthful conscience will be formed in matters of chastity. "Wherefore," as We said in a recent address, "this modesty is not to be so understood as to be equivalent to a perpetual silence on this subject, nor as allowing no place for sober and cautious discussion about these matters in imparting moral instruction." [103] In modern times however there are some teachers and educators who too frequently think it their duty to initiate innocent boys and girls into the secrets of human generation in such a way as to offend their sense of shame. But in this matter just temperance and moderation must be used, as Christian modesty demands.

60. This modesty is nourished by the fear of God, that filial fear which is founded on the virtue of profound Christian humility, and which creates in us utter abhorrence for the slightest sin, as Our predecessor, St. Clement I, stated in these words, "he who is chaste in flesh should not be proud, for he should know that he owes the gift of continence to another." [104] How important Christian humility is for the protection of virginity, no one perhaps has taught more clearly than Augustine. "Because perpetual continence, and virginity above all, is a great good in the saints of God, extreme vigilance must be exercised lest it be corrupted by pride... The more clearly I see the greatness of this gift, the more truly do I fear lest it be plundered by thieving pride. No one therefore protects virginity, but God Himself Who bestowed it: and 'God is charity.' [105] The guardian therefore of virginity is charity; the habitat of this guardian is humility." [106]

61. Moreover there is another argument worthy of attentive consideration: to preserve chastity unstained neither vigilance nor modesty suffice. Those helps must also be used which entirely surpass the powers of nature, namely prayer to God, the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist, a fervent devotion to the most holy Mother of God.

62. Never should it be forgotten that perfect chastity is a great gift of God. For this reason Jerome wrote these succinct words, "It is given to those,[107] who have asked for it, who have desired it, who have worked to receive it. For it will be given to everyone who asks, the seeker will find, to the importunate it will be opened." [108] Ambrose adds that the constant fidelity of virgins to their Divine Spouse depends upon prayer.[109] With that fervent piety for which he was noted St. Alphonsus Liguori taught that there is no help more necessary and certain for conquering temptations against the beautiful virtue of chastity than instant recourse to God in prayer.[110]

63. To prayer must be added frequent and fervent use of the Sacrament of Penance which, as a spiritual medicine, purifies and heals us; likewise it is necessary to receive the Eucharist, which as Our predecessor of happy memory Leo XIII asserted, is the best remedy against lust.[111] The more pure and chaste is a soul, the more it hungers for this bread, from which it derives strength to resist all temptations to sins of impurity, and by which it is more intimately united with the Divine Spouse; "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood, abides in me and I in him." [112]

64. The eminent way to protect and nourish an unsullied and perfect chastity, as proven by experience time and again throughout the course of centuries, is solid and fervent devotion to the Virgin Mother of God. In a certain way all other helps are contained in this devotion; there is no doubt that whoever is sincerely and earnestly animated by this devotion is salutarily inspired to constant vigilance, to continual prayer, to receive the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist. Therefore in a paternal way We exhort all priests, religious men and women, to entrust themselves to the special protection of the holy Mother of God who is the Virgin of virgins and the "teacher of virginity," as Ambrose says,[113] and the most powerful Mother of those in particular who have vowed and consecrated themselves to the service of God.

65. That virginity owes its origin to Mary is the testimony of Athanasius,[114] and Augustine clearly teaches that "The dignity of virginity began with the Mother of the Lord." [115] Pursuing the ideas of Athanasius,[116] Ambrose holds up the life of the Virgin Mary as the model of virgins. "Imitate her, my daughters... ! [117] Let Mary's life be for you like the portrayal of virginity, for from her, as though from a mirror, is reflected the beauty of chastity and the ideal of virtue. See in her the pattern of your life, for in her, as though in a model, manifest teachings of goodness show what you should correct, what you should copy and what preserve... She is the image of virginity. For such was Mary that her life alone suffices for the instruction of all... [118] Therefore let holy Mary guide your way of life." [119] "Her grace was so great that it not only preserved in her the grace of virginity, but bestowed the grace of chastity upon those on whom she gazed." [120] How true is the saying of Ambrose, "Oh the richness of the virginity of Mary!" [121] Because of this richness it will be very useful for religious men and women and for priests of our day to contemplate the virginity of Mary, in order that they may more faithfully and perfectly practice the chastity of their calling.

66. But it is not enough, beloved sons and daughters, to meditate on the virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary: with absolute confidence fly to her and obey the counsel of St. Bernard, "let us seek grace and seek it through Mary." [122] In a special way entrust to her during the Marian Year the care of your spiritual life and perfection, imitating the example of Jerome who asserted, "My virginity is dedicated in Mary and to Christ." [123]

67. In the midst of the grave difficulties with which the Church must contend today, the heart of the Supreme Pastor is greatly comforted, Venerable Brothers, when We see that virginity, which is flourishing throughout the world, is held in great honor and repute in the present as it was in past centuries, even though, as We have said, it is being attacked by errors which, We trust, will soon be dispelled and pass away.

68. Nevertheless We do not deny that this Our joy is overshadowed by a certain sorrow since We learn that in not a few countries the number of vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life is constantly decreasing. We have already given the principal reasons which account for this fact and there is no reason why We should return to them now. Rather do We trust that those educators of youth who have succumbed to errors in this matter, will repudiate them as soon as they are detected, and will consequently seriously resolve both to correct them and to do what they can to provide every help for the youth entrusted to their care who feel themselves called by divine grace to aspire to the priesthood or to embrace the religious life, in order that they may be able to reach so noble a goal. May God grant that new and larger ranks of priests, religious men and women, equal in number and virtue to the current necessities of the Church, may soon go forth to cultivate the vineyard of the Lord.

69. Moreover, as the obligation of Our Apostolic Office demands, We urge fathers and mothers to willingly offer to the service of God those of their children who are called to it. But if this be a source of trouble, sorrow or regret, let them seriously meditate upon the admonition which Ambrose gave to the mothers of Milan. "The majority of the young women whom I knew wanted to be virgins were forbidden to leave by their mothers... If your daughters want to love a man, the laws allow them to choose whom they will. But those who have a right to choose a man, have no right to choose God." [124]

70. Let parents consider what a great honor it is to see their son elevated to the priesthood, or their daughter consecrate her virginity to her Divine Spouse. In regard to consecrated virgins, the Bishop of Milan writes, "You have heard, parents, that a virgin is a gift of God, the oblation of parents, the priesthood of chastity. The virgin is a mother's victim, by whose daily sacrifice divine anger is appeased." [125]

71. Before We come to the end of this Encyclical Letter, We wish, Venerable Brothers, to turn Our mind and heart in a special manner to those men and women, who, vowed to the service of God, are suffering bitter and terrible persecutions in not a few countries. Let them imitate the example of the consecrated virgins of the early Church who with courageous and indomitable hearts suffered martyrdom for the sake of their virginity. [126]

72. May all who have vowed to serve Christ, bravely persevere "even to death." [127] May they realize that their pains, sufferings and prayers are of great value in the sight of God for the restoration of His Kingdom in their countries and in the universal Church; may they be most certain that those "who follow the Lamb whither He goeth," [128] will sing forever a "new canticle," [129] which no one else can sing.

73. Our paternal heart is filled with compassion for priests, religious men and women, who are bravely professing their faith even to the extent of martyrdom; and not only for them, but for all

those who in every part of the world are totally dedicated and consecrated to the divine service, We implore God with suppliant prayer to sustain, strength and console them. We earnestly invite each and every one of you, Venerable Brothers, and your faithful to pray with Us and to implore for all these souls the consolations, gifts and graces which they need from God.

74. Let the Apostolic Blessing, which with loving heart We impart to you, Venerable Brothers, to all priests and consecrated virgins, to those especially "who suffer persecution for justice's sake"[130] and to all your faithful, be a pledge of heavenly grace and a testimony of Our paternal benevolence.

75. Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, March 25th, Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1954, in the sixteenth year of Our Pontificate.

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VITA CONSECRATA (The Consecrated Life)

Pope John Paul II

Apostolic Letter given on March 25, 1996.

To the Bishops and Clergy, Religious Orders and Congregations, Societies of Apostolic Life, Secular Institutes and All the Faithful on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World

Introduction

1. The Consecrated Life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit. By the profession of the evangelical counsels, the characteristic features of Jesus, the chaste, poor and obedient one, are made constantly "visible" in the midst of the world, and the eyes of the faithful are directed toward the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realization in heaven.

In every age there have been men and women who, obedient to the Father's call and to the prompting of the Spirit, have chosen this special way of following Christ in order to devote themselves to him with an "undivided" heart (cf. 1 Cor. 7:34). Like the Apostles, they too have left everything behind in order to be with Christ and to put themselves, as he did, at the service of God and their brothers and sisters. In this way, through the many charisms of spiritual and apostolic life bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit, they have helped to make the mystery and mission of the Church shine forth, and in doing so have contributed to the renewal of society.

Thanksgiving for consecrated life

2. Because the role of consecrated life in the Church is so important, I decided to convene a Synod in order to examine in depth its significance and its future prospects, especially in view of the approaching new millennium. It was my wish that the Synodal Assembly should include, together with the Bishops, a considerable number of consecrated men and women in order that they too might contribute to the common reflection.

We are all aware of the treasure which the gift of the consecrated life in the variety of its charisms and institutions represents for the ecclesial community. Together let us thank God, for the Religious Orders and Institutes devoted to contemplation or the works of the apostolate, for Societies of Apostolic Life, for Secular Institutes and for other groups of consecrated persons as well as for all those individuals who, in their inmost hearts, dedicate themselves to God by a special consecration.

The Synod was a tangible sign of the universal extension of the consecrated life present in the local Churches throughout the world. The consecrated life inspires and accompanies the spread of evangelization in the different parts of the world, where Institutes from abroad are gratefully welcomed and new ones are being founded in a great variety of forms and expressions.

Consequently, although in some parts of the world Institutes of Consecrated Life seem to be experiencing a period of difficulty, in other places they are prospering with remarkable vitality. This shows that the choice

of total self-giving to God in Christ is in no way incompatible with any human culture or historical situation. Nor is the consecrated life flourishing within the Catholic Church alone. In fact it is particularly vibrant in the monasticism of the Orthodox Churches, where it is an essential feature of their life. It is also taking root or reemerging in the Churches and Ecclesial Communities which originated in the Reformation and is the sign of a grace shared by all of Christ's disciples. This fact is an incentive to ecumenism, which fosters the desire for an ever fuller communion between Christians "that the world may believe" (Jn. 17:21).

The consecrated life: a gift to the Church

3. Its universal presence and the evangelical nature of its witness are clear evidence—if any were needed—that the consecrated life is not something isolated and marginal, but a reality which affects the whole Church. The Bishops at the Synod frequently reaffirmed this: "*De re nostra agitur*" ("this is something which concerns us all").[1] In effect, the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church, as a decisive element for her mission, since it "manifests the inner nature of the Christian calling"[2] and the striving of the whole Church as Bride toward union with her one Spouse.[3] At the Synod it was stated on several occasions that the consecrated life has not only proved a help and support for the Church in the past, but is also a precious and necessary gift for the present and future of the People of God, since it is an intimate part of her life, her holiness and her mission.[4]

The present difficulties which a number of Institutes are encountering in some parts of the world must not lead to a questioning of the fact that the profession of the evangelical counsels is an integral part of the Church's life, and a much-needed incentive toward ever greater fidelity to the Gospel[5] The consecrated life may experience further changes in its historical forms, but there will be no change in the substance of a choice which finds expression in a radical gift of self for love of the Lord Jesus and, in him, of every member of the human family. This certainty, which has inspired countless individuals in the course of the centuries, continues to reassure the Christian people, for they know that they can draw from the contribution of these generous souls powerful support on their journey toward the heavenly home.

Gathering fruits of the Synod

4. In response to the desire expressed by the ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops which met to discuss the theme "The Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World," I intend to set forth in this Apostolic Exhortation the results of the Synod process[6] and to point out to all the faithful—Bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons and laity, and to any others who might be interested—the wondrous things which today too the Lord wishes to accomplish through the consecrated life.

This Synod, coming after the ones dedicated to the lay faithful and to priests, completes the treatment of the distinctive features of the states of life willed by the Lord Jesus for his Church. Whereas the Second Vatican Council emphasized the profound reality of ecclesial communion, in which all gifts converge for the building up of the Body of Christ and for the Church's mission in the world, in recent years there has been felt the need to clarify the specific identity of the various states of life, their vocation and their particular mission in the Church.

Communion in the Church is not uniformity, but a gift of the Spirit, who is present in the variety of charisms and states of life. These will be all the more helpful to the Church and her mission the more their specific identity is respected. For every gift of the Spirit is granted in order to bear fruit for the Lord[7] in the growth

of fraternity and mission.

work of the Spirit in the various forms of the consecrated life

5. How can we not recall with gratitude to the Spirit, the many different forms of consecrated life, which he has raised up throughout history and which still exist in the Church today? They can be compared to a plant with many branches[8] which sinks its roots into the Gospel and brings forth abundant fruit in every season of the Church's life. What an extraordinary richness! I myself at the conclusion of the Synod felt the need to stress this permanent element in the history of the Church: the host of founders and foundresses, of holy men and women who chose Christ by radically following the Gospel and by serving their brothers and sisters, especially the poor and the outcast.[9] Such service is itself a sign of how the consecrated life manifests the organic unity of the commandment of love in the inseparable link between love of God and love of neighbor.

The Synod recalled this unceasing work of the Holy Spirit, who in every age shows forth the richness of the practice of the evangelical counsels through a multiplicity of charisms. In this way too he makes ever present in the Church and in the world, in time and space, the mystery of Christ.

Monastic life in the East and West

6. The Synod Fathers from the Eastern Catholic Churches and the representatives of the other Churches of the East emphasized the evangelical values of monastic life [10] which appeared at the dawn of Christianity and which still flourishes in their territories, especially in the Orthodox Churches.

From the first centuries of the Church, men and women have felt called to imitate the Incarnate Word, who took on the condition of a servant. They have sought to follow him by living in a particularly radical way, through monastic profession, the demands flowing from baptismal participation in the Paschal Mystery of his Death and Resurrection. In this way, by becoming bearers of the Cross (*staurophoroi*), they have striven to become bearers of the Spirit (*pneumatophoroi*), authentically spiritual men and women capable of endowing history with hidden fruitfulness by unceasing praise and intercession, by spiritual counsels and works of charity.

In its desire to transfigure the world and life itself in expectation of the definitive vision of God's countenance, Eastern monasticism gives pride of place to conversion, self-renunciation and compunction of heart, the quest for *hesychia*, or interior peace, ceaseless prayer, fasting and vigils, spiritual combat and silence, Paschal joy in the presence of the Lord and the expectation of his definitive coming, and the oblation of self and personal possessions, lived in the holy communion of the monastery or in the solitude of the hermitage.[11]

The West too from the first centuries of the Church has practiced the monastic life and has experienced a great variety of expressions of it, both cenobitic and eremitical. In its present form, inspired above all by St. Benedict, Western monasticism is the heir of the great number of men and women who, leaving behind life in the world, sought God and dedicated themselves to him, "preferring nothing to the love of Christ." [12] The monks of today likewise strive to create a harmonious balance between the interior life and work, in the evangelical commitment to conversion of life, obedience and stability, and in persevering dedication to meditation on God's word (*lectio divina*), the celebration of the Liturgy and prayer. In the heart of the Church and the world, monasteries have been and continue to be eloquent signs of communion, welcoming abodes

for those seeking God and the things of the spirit, schools of faith and true places of study, dialogue and culture for the building up of the life of the Church and of the earthly city itself in expectation of the heavenly city.

The Order of Virgins; hermits and widows

7. It is a source of joy and hope to witness in our time a new flowering of the ancient Order of Virgins, known in Christian communities ever since apostolic times.[13] Consecrated by the diocesan Bishop, these women acquire a particular link with the Church, which they are committed to serve while remaining in the world. Either alone or in association with others, they constitute a special eschatological image of the Heavenly Bride and of the life to come, when the Church will at last fully live her love for Christ the Bridegroom.

Men and women hermits, belonging to ancient orders or new Institutes or being directly dependent on the Bishop, bear witness to the passing nature of the present age by their inward and outward separation from the world. By fasting and penance, they show that man does not live by bread alone but by the word of God (cf. Mt. 4:4). Such a life "in the desert" is an invitation to their contemporaries and to the ecclesial community itself never to lose sight of the supreme vocation, which is to be always with the Lord.

Again being practiced today is the consecration of widow [14] known since apostolic times (cf. 1 Tm. 5:5, 9-10; 1 Cor. 7:8), as well as the consecration of widowers. These women and men, through a vow of perpetual chastity as a sign of the Kingdom of God, consecrate their state of life in order to devote themselves to prayer and the service of the Church.

Institutes completely devoted to contemplation

8. Institutes completely devoted to contemplation, composed of either women or men, are for the Church a reason for pride and a source of heavenly graces. By their lives and mission, the members of these Institutes imitate Christ in his prayer on the mountain, bear witness to God's lordship over history and anticipate the glory which is to come.

In solitude and silence, by listening to the word of God, participating in divine worship, personal asceticism, prayer, mortification and the communion of fraternal love, they direct the whole of their lives and all their activities to the contemplation of God. In this way they offer the ecclesial community a singular testimony of the Church's love for her Lord, and they contribute, with hidden apostolic fruitfulness, to the growth of the People of God.[15]

Thus there is good reason to hope that the different forms of contemplative life will experience continued growth in the younger Churches as an evident sign that the Gospel has taken firm root, especially in those areas of the world where other religions predominate. This will make it possible to bear witness to the vitality of the traditions of Christian asceticism and mysticism, and will contribute to interreligious dialogue.[16]

Apostolic Religious Life

9. The West has also known down the centuries a variety of other expressions of religious life in which countless persons, renouncing the world, have consecrated themselves to God through the public profession

of the evangelical counsels in accordance with a specific charism and in a stable form of common life[17] for the sake of carrying out different forms of apostolic service to the People of God. Thus there arose the different families of canons regular, the mendicant orders, the clerics regular and in general the religious congregations of men and women devoted to apostolic and missionary activity and to the many different works inspired by Christian charity.

This is a splendid and varied testimony, reflecting the multiplicity of gifts bestowed by God on founders and foundresses who, in openness to the working of the Holy Spirit, successfully interpreted the signs of the times and responded wisely to new needs. Following in their footsteps, many other people have sought by word and deed to embody the Gospel in their own lives, bringing anew to their own times the living presence of Jesus, the consecrated one, par excellence, the one sent by the Father. In every age consecrated men and women must continue to be images of Christ the Lord, fostering through prayer a profound communion of mind with him (cf. Phil. 2:5-11), so that their whole lives may be penetrated by an apostolic spirit and their apostolic work with contemplation.[18]

Secular Institutes

10. The Holy Spirit, who wondrously fashions the variety of charisms, has given rise in our time to new expressions of consecrated life, which appear as a providential response to the new needs encountered by the Church today as she carries out her mission in the world.

One thinks in the first place of members of Secular Institutes seeking to live out their consecration to God in the world, through the profession of the evangelical counsels in the midst of temporal realities; they wish in this way to be a leaven of wisdom and a witness of grace within cultural, economic and political life. Through their own specific blending of presence in the world and consecration, they seek to make present in society the newness and power of Christ's Kingdom, striving to transfigure the world from within by the power of the Beatitudes. In this way, while they belong completely to God and are thus fully consecrated to his service, their activity in the ordinary life of the world contributes, by the power of the Spirit, to shedding the light of the Gospel on temporal realities. Secular Institutes, each in accordance with its specific nature, thus help to ensure that the Church has an effective presence in society.[19]

A valuable role is also played by Clerical Secular Institutes, in which priests who belong to the diocesan clergy, even when some of them are recognized as being incardinated in the Institute, consecrate themselves to Christ through the practice of the evangelical counsels in accordance with a specific charism. They discover in the spiritual riches of the Institute to which they belong great help for living more deeply the spirituality proper to the priesthood, and thus they are enabled to be a leaven of communion and apostolic generosity among their fellow clergy.

Societies of Apostolic Life

11. Also worthy of special mention are Societies of Apostolic Life or of common life, composed of men or women. These pursue, each in its own particular way, a specific apostolic or missionary end. In many of them an explicit commitment to the evangelical counsels is made through sacred bonds officially recognized by the Church. Even in this case, however, the specific nature of their consecration distinguishes them from Religious Institutes and Secular Institutes. The specific identity of this form of life is to be preserved and promoted; in recent centuries it has produced many fruits of holiness and of the apostolate, especially in the

field of charity and in the spread of the Gospel in the missions.[20]

New Expressions of consecrated life

12. The perennial youth of the Church continues to be evident even today. In recent years following the Second Vatican Council, new or renewed forms of the consecrated life, have arisen. In many cases these are Institutes similar to those already existing, but inspired by new spiritual and apostolic impulses. Their vitality must be judged by the authority of the Church, which has the responsibility of examining them in order to discern the authenticity of the purpose for their foundation and to prevent the proliferation of institutions similar to one another, with the consequent risk of a harmful fragmentation into excessively small groups. In other cases it is a question of new experiments which are seeking an identity of their own in the Church and awaiting official recognition from the Apostolic See, which alone has final judgment in these matters.[21]

These new forms of consecrated life now taking their place alongside the older ones bear witness to the constant attraction which the total gift of self to the Lord, the ideal of the apostolic community and the founding charisms continue to exert, even on the present generation. They also show how the gifts of the Holy Spirit complement one another.

In this newness, however, the Spirit does not contradict himself. Proof of this is the fact that the new forms of consecrated life have not supplanted the earlier ones. Amid such wide variety the underlying unity has been successfully preserved, thanks to the one call to follow Jesus—chaste, poor and obedient—in the pursuit of perfect charity. This call, which is found in all the existing forms of consecrated life, must also mark those which present themselves as new.

Purpose of the Apostolic Exhortation

13. Gathering together the fruits of the Synod's labors, in this Apostolic Exhortation I wish to address the whole Church in order to offer not only to consecrated persons but also to the Bishops and the faithful the results of a stimulating exchange, guided by the Holy Spirit with his gifts of truth and love.

During these years of renewal, the consecrated life, like other ways of life in the Church, has gone through a difficult and trying period. It has been a period full of hopes, new experiments and proposals aimed at giving fresh vigor to the profession of the evangelical counsels. But it has also been a time of tension and struggle in which well-meaning endeavors have not always met with positive results.

The difficulties however must not lead to discouragement. Rather, we need to commit ourselves with fresh enthusiasm, for the Church needs the spiritual and apostolic contribution of a renewed and revitalized consecrated life. In this Post-Synodal Exhortation I wish to address religious communities and consecrated persons in the same spirit which inspired the letter sent by the Council of Jerusalem to the Christians of Antioch, and I am hopeful that it will meet with the same response: "When they read it, they rejoiced at the encouragement which it gave" (Acts 15:31). And not only this. I also hope to increase the joy of the whole People of God. As they become better acquainted with the consecrated life, they will be able with greater awareness to thank Almighty God for this great gift.

In an attitude of heartfelt openness toward the Synod Fathers, I have carefully considered the valuable contributions made during the intense work of the assembly, at which I made a point of being present

throughout. During the Synod, I also sought to offer the entire People of God a number of systematic talks on the consecrated life in the Church. In them I presented anew the teachings found in the texts of the Second Vatican Council, which was an enlightening point of reference for subsequent doctrinal developments and for the reflections of the Synod during the busy weeks of its work.[22]

I am confident that the sons and daughters of the Church, and consecrated persons in particular, will receive this Exhortation with open hearts. At the same time I hope that reflection will continue and lead to a deeper understanding of the great gift of the consecrated life in its three aspects of consecration, communion and mission. I also hope that consecrated men and women, in full harmony with the Church and her Magisterium, will discover in this exhortation further encouragement to face in a spiritual and apostolic manner the new challenges of our time.

CHAPTER 1: "CONFESSIO TRINITATIS"

The Origins of the Consecrated Life in the Mystery of Christ and of the Trinity

Icon of the Transfigured Christ

14. The evangelical basis of consecrated life is to be sought in the special relationship which Jesus in his earthly life established with some of his disciples. He called them not only to welcome the Kingdom of God into their own lives, but also to put their lives at its service, leaving everything behind and closely imitating his own way of life,.

Many of the baptized throughout history have been invited to live such a life "in the image of Christ." But this is possible only on the basis of a special vocation and in virtue of a particular gift of the Spirit. For in such a life baptismal consecration develops into a radical response in the following of Christ through acceptance of the evangelical counsels, the first and essential of which is the sacred bond of chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.[23] This special way of "following Christ," at the origin of which is always the initiative of the Father, has an essential Christological and pneumatological meaning: It expresses in a particularly vivid way the Trinitarian, nature of the Christian life, and it anticipates in a certain way that eschatological, fulfillment toward which the whole Church is tending.[24]

In the Gospel, many of Christ's words and actions shed light on the meaning of this special vocation. But for an overall picture of its essential characteristics, it is singularly helpful to fix our gaze on Christ's radiant face in the mystery of the Transfiguration. A whole ancient spiritual tradition refers to this "icon" when it links the contemplative life to the prayer of Jesus "on the mountain." [25] Even the "active" dimensions of consecrated life can in a way be included here, for the Transfiguration is not only the revelation of Christ's glory, but also a preparation for facing Christ's Cross. It involves both "going up the mountain" and "coming down the mountain." The disciples who have enjoyed this intimacy with the Master, surrounded for a moment by the splendor of the Trinitarian life and of the communion of saints, and as it were caught up in the horizon of eternity, are immediately brought back to daily reality, where they see "Jesus only," in the lowliness of his human nature and are invited to return to the valley, to share with him the toil of God's plan and to set off courageously on the way of the Cross.

"And He Was Transfigured Before Them."

15. ",And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.' When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise, and have no fear.' And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only .

"And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, 'Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead'" (Mt. 17:1-9).

The event of the Transfiguration mark decisive moment in the ministry of Jesus . It is a revelatory event which strengthens the faith in the disciples' hearts, prepares them for the tragedy of the Cross and prefigures the glory of the Resurrection. This mystery is constantly relived by the Church, the people on its way to the eschatological encounter with its Lord. Like the three chosen disciples, the Church contemplates the transfigured face of Christ in order to be confirmed in faith and to avoid being dismayed at his disfigured face on the Cross. In both cases, she is the Bride before her Spouse, sharing in his mystery and surrounded by his light.

This light shines on all the Church's children. All are equally called to follow Christ, to discover in him the ultimate meaning of their lives, until they are able to say with the apostle: 'For to me, to live is Christ' (Phil. 1:21). But those who are called to the consecrated life have a special experience of the light which shines forth from the Incarnate Word, For the profession of the evangelical counsels makes them a kind of sign and prophetic statement for the community of the brethren and for the world; consequently they can echo in a particular way the ecstatic words spoken by Peter: "Lord, it is well that we are here" (Mt. 17:4). These words bespeak the Christocentric orientation of the whole Christian life. But they also eloquently express the radical, nature of the vocation to the consecrated life: How good it is for us to be with you, to devote ourselves to you, to make you the one focus of our lives! Truly those who have been given the grace of this special communion of love with Christ feel as it were caught up in his splendor: He is "the fairest of the sons of men" (Ps 45:2), the one beyond compare.

"This is my beloved Son": listen to him!

16. The three disciples caught up in ecstasy hear the Father's call to listen to Christ, to place all their trust in him, to make him the center of their lives. The words from on high give new depth to the invitation by which Jesus himself at the beginning of his public life called them to follow him, to leave their ordinary lives behind and to enter into a close relationship to him. It is precisely this special grace of intimacy which in the consecrated life makes possible and even demands the total gift of self in the profession of the evangelical counsels. The counsels, more than a simple renunciation, are a specific acceptance of the mystery of Christ lived within the Church.

In the unity of the Christian life, the various vocations are like so many rays of the one light of Christ, whose radiance "brightens the countenance of the Church." [26] The laity, by virtue of the secular character of their

vocation, reflect the mystery of the Incarnate Word particularly insofar as he is the Alpha and the Omega of the world, the foundation and measure of the value of all created things. Sacred ministers, for their part, are living images of Christ the Head and Shepherd, who guides his people during this time of "already and not yet," as they await his coming in glory. It is the duty of the consecrated life, to show that the Incarnate Son of God is the eschatological goal toward which all things tend, the splendor before which every other light pales and the infinite beauty which alone can fully satisfy the human heart. In the consecrated life, then, it is not only a matter of following Christ with one's whole heart, of loving him "more than father or mother, more than son or daughter" (cf. Mt. 10:37)— for this is required of every disciple— but of living and expressing this by conforming one's whole existence to Christ, in an all-encompassing commitment which foreshadows the eschatological perfection to the extent that this is possible in time and in accordance with the different charisms.

By professing the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons not only make Christ the whole meaning of their lives, but strive to reproduce in themselves as far as possible "that form of life which he, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world." [27] By embracing chastity, they make their own the pure love of Christ and proclaim to the world that he is the Only Begotten Son, who is one with the Father (cf. Jn. 10:30, 14:11). By imitating Christ's poverty, they profess that he is the Son who receives everything from the Father and gives everything back to the Father in love (cf. Jn. 17:7, 10). By accepting through the sacrifice of their own freedom the mystery of Christ's filial obedience, they profess that he is infinitely beloved and loving, as the one who delights only in the will of the Father (cf. Jn. 4:34), to whom he is perfectly united and on whom he depends for everything.

By this profound "configuration" to the mystery of Christ, the consecrated life brings about in a special way that, *confessio Trinitatis*, which is the mark of all Christian life; it acknowledges with wonder the sublime beauty of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and bears joyful witness to his loving concern for every human being.

I. In Praise of the Trinity

"A *Patre ad Patrem*": God's initiative

17. Contemplation of the glory of the Lord Jesus in the icon of the Transfiguration reveals to consecrated persons first of all the Father, the creator and giver of every good thing, who draws his creatures to himself (cf. Jn. 6:44) with a special love and for a special mission. "This is my beloved Son: listen to him!" (cf. Mt. 17:5). In response to this call and the interior attraction which accompanies it, those who are called entrust themselves to the love of God, who wishes them to be exclusively at his service, and they consecrate themselves totally to him and to his plan of salvation (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-34).

This is the meaning of the call to the consecrated life: It is an initiative coming wholly from the Father (cf. Jn. 15: 16), who asks those whom he has chosen to respond with complete and exclusive devotion. [28] The experience of this gracious love of God is so deep and so powerful that the person called senses the need to respond by unconditionally dedicating his or her life to God, consecrating to him all things present and future, and placing them in his hands. This is why, with St. Thomas, we come to understand the identity of the consecrated person, beginning with his or her complete self-offering, as being comparable to a genuine holocaust. [29]

"Per Filium": in the footsteps of the Son

18. The Son, who is the way which leads to the Father (cf. Jn. 14:6), calls all those whom the Father has given to him (cf. Jn. 17:9) to make the following of himself the whole purpose of their lives. But of some, those called to the consecrated life, he asks a total commitment, one which involves leaving everything behind (cf. Mt. 19:27) in order to live at his side^[30] and to follow him wherever he goes (cf. Rv. 14:4). In the countenance of Jesus, the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) and the reflection of the Father's glory (cf. Heb. 1:3), we glimpse the depths of an eternal and infinite love which is at the very root of our being.^[31] Those who let themselves be seized by this love cannot help abandoning everything to follow him (cf. Mk. 1:16-20; 2:14; 10:21, 28). Like St. Paul, they consider all else as loss "because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ, by comparison with which they do not hesitate to count all things as "refuse, in order that they "may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8). They strive to become one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life. This leaving of everything and following the Lord (cf. Lk. 18:28) is a worthy program of life for all whom he calls in every age.

The evangelical counsels, by which Christ invites some people to share his experience as the chaste, poor and obedient one, call for and make manifest in those who accept them an explicit desire to be totally conformed to him. Living "in obedience, with nothing of one's own and in chastity,"^[32] consecrated persons profess that Jesus is the model in whom every virtue comes to perfection. His way of living in chastity, poverty and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called divine, for it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. This is why Christian tradition has always spoken of the objective superiority of the consecrated life.

Nor can it be denied that the practice of the evangelical counsels is also a particularly profound and fruitful way of sharing in Christ's mission, in imitation of the example of Mary of Nazareth, the first disciple, who willingly put herself at the service of God's plan by the total gift of self. Every mission begins with the attitude expressed by Mary at the Annunciation: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk. 1:38).

"In Spiritu": consecrated by the Holy Spirit

19. "A bright cloud overshadowed them" (Mt. 17:5). A significant spiritual interpretation of the Transfiguration sees this cloud as an image of the Holy Spirit.^[33]

Like the whole of Christian life, the call to the consecrated life is closely linked to the working of the Holy Spirit. In every age the Spirit enables new men and women to recognize the appeal of such a demanding choice. Through his power, they relive, in a way, the experience of the prophet Jeremiah: "You have seduced me, Lord, and I have let myself be seduced (Jer. 20:7). It is the Spirit who awakens the desire to respond fully; it is he who guides the growth of this desire, helping it to mature into a positive response and sustaining it as it is faithfully translated into action; it is he who shapes and molds the hearts of those who are called, configuring them to Christ, the chaste, poor and obedient one, and prompting them to make his mission their own. By allowing them selves to be guided by the Spirit on an endless journey of purification, they become, day after day, conformed to Christ, the prolongation in history of a special presence of the risen Lord.

With penetrating insight, the Fathers of the Church have called this spiritual path, *philokalia*, or, love of the divine beauty, which is the reflection of the divine goodness. Those who by the power of the Holy Spirit are led progressively into full configuration to Christ reflect in themselves a ray of the unapproachable light. During their earthly pilgrimage, they press on toward the inexhaustible source of light. The consecrated life thus becomes a particularly profound expression of the Church as the Bride who, prompted by the Spirit to imitate her Spouse, stands before him "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27).

The same Spirit, far from removing from the life of humanity those whom the Father has called, puts them at the service of their brothers and sisters in accordance with their particular state of life and inspires them to undertake special tasks in response to the needs of the Church and the world by means of the charisms proper to the various Institutes. Hence many different forms of the consecrated life have arisen whereby the Church is "adorned by the various gifts of her children ... like a bride made beautiful for her Spouse (cf. Rv. 21:2)"[34] and is enriched by the means necessary for carrying out her mission in the world.

The evangelical counsels, gift of the Trinity

20. The evangelical counsels are thus above all, a gift of the Holy Trinity. The consecrated life proclaims what the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, brings about by his love, his goodness and his beauty. In fact, "the religious state reveals the transcendence of the Kingdom of God and its requirements over all earthly things. To all people it shows wonderfully at work within the Church the surpassing greatness of the force of Christ the King and the boundless power of the Holy Spirit."[35]

The first duty of the consecrated life is to make visible, the marvels wrought by God in the frail humanity of those who are called. They bear witness to these marvels not so much in words as by the eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world. To people's astonishment they respond by proclaiming the wonders of grace accomplished by the Lord in those whom he loves. To the degree that consecrated persons let themselves be guided by the Spirit to the heights of perfection they can exclaim:

"I see the beauty of your grace, I contemplate its radiance, I reflect its light; I am caught up in its ineffable splendor; I am taken outside myself as I think of myself; I see how I was and what I have become. O wonder! I am vigilant, I am full of respect for myself, of reverence and of fear, as I would be were I before you; I do not know what to do, I am seized by fear, I do not know where to sit, where to go, where to put these members which are yours; in what deeds, in what works shall I use them, these amazing divine marvels!"[36]

The consecrated life thus becomes one of the tangible seals which the Trinity impresses upon history, so that people can sense with longing the attraction of divine beauty.

Reflection of Trinitarian life in the evangelical counsels

21. The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the Holy Trinity, the source of holiness. They are in fact an expression of the love of the Son for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. By practicing the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person lives with particular intensity the Trinitarian and Christological dimension which marks the whole of Christian life.

The chastity, of celibates and virgins as a manifestation of dedication to God with an undivided heart, (cf. 1

Cor. 7:32-34) is a reflection of the infinite love, which links the three Divine Persons in the mysterious depths of the life of the Trinity, the love to which the Incarnate Word bears witness even to the point of giving his life, the love "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:5), which evokes a response of total love for God and the brethren.

Poverty proclaims that God is man's only real treasure. When poverty is lived according to the example of Christ who, "though he was rich ... became poor" (2 Cor. 8:9), it becomes an expression of that total gift of self, which the three Divine Persons make to one another. This gift overflows into creation and is fully revealed in the Incarnation of the Word and in His redemptive death.

Obedience, practiced in imitation of Christ, whose food was to do the Father's will (cf. Jn. 4:34), shows the liberating beauty of a dependence which is not servile but filial, marked by a deep sense of responsibility and animated by mutual trust, which is a reflection in history of the loving harmony, between the three Divine Persons.

The consecrated life is thus called constantly to deepen the gift of the evangelical counsels with a love which grows ever more genuine and strong in the Trinitarian, dimension: love for Christ, which leads to closeness with him; love for the Holy Spirit, who opens our hearts to his inspiration; love for the Father, the first origin and supreme goal of the consecrated life.[37] The consecrated life thus becomes a confession and a sign of the Trinity, whose mystery is held up to the Church as the model and source of every form of Christian life.

Even fraternal life, whereby consecrated persons strive to live in Christ with "one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32), is put forward as an eloquent witness to the Trinity. It proclaims the Father, who desires to make all of humanity one family. It proclaims the Incarnate Son, who gathers the redeemed into unity, pointing the way by his example, his prayer, his words and above all his death, which is the source of reconciliation for a divided and scattered humanity. It proclaims the Holy Spirit, as the principle of unity in the Church, wherein he ceaselessly raises up spiritual families and fraternal communities.

Consecrated Like Christ for the Kingdom of God

22. The consecrated life, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, "constitutes a closer imitation and an abiding reenactment in the Church"[38] of the way of life which Jesus, the supreme consecrated one and missionary of the Father for the sake of his Kingdom, embraced and proposed to his disciples (cf. Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20; Lk. 5:10-11; Jn. 15:16). In the light of Jesus' consecration, we can see in the initiative of the Father, the source of all holiness, the ultimate origin of the consecrated life. Jesus is the one whom "God anointed ... with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38), the one "whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world" (Jn. 10:36). Accepting his consecration by the Father, the Son in turn consecrates himself to the Father for the sake of humanity (cf. Jn. 17:19). His life of virginity, obedience and poverty expresses his complete filial acceptance of the Father's plan (cf. Jn. 10:30; 14:11). His perfect offering confers an aspect of consecration upon all the events of His earthly existence.

Jesus is the exemplar of obedience, who came down from heaven not to do his own will but the will of the one who sent him (cf. Jn. 6:38; Heb. 10:5, 7). He places his way of living and acting in the hands of the Father (cf. Lk. 2:49). In filial obedience, he assumes the condition of a servant: He "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ... and became obedient unto death, even death on a Cross" (Phil. 2:7-8). In this attitude of submissiveness to the Father, Christ lives his life as a virgin even while affirming and defending the

dignity and sanctity of married life. He thus reveals the sublime excellence and mysterious spiritual fruitfulness of virginity. His full acceptance of the Father's plan is also seen in his detachment from earthly goods: "Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). The depth of his poverty is revealed in the perfect offering of all that is his to the Father.

The consecrated life truly constitutes a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting, as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren. It is a living tradition of the Savior's life and message.

II. Between Easter and Fulfillment

From Tabor to Calvary

23. The dazzling event of the Transfiguration is a preparation for the tragic but no less glorious event of Calvary. Peter, James and John contemplate the Lord Jesus together with Moses and Elijah, with whom, according to the evangelist Luke, Jesus speaks "of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:31). The eyes of the Apostles are therefore fixed upon Jesus, who is thinking of the Cross (cf. Lk. 9:43-45). There his virginal love for the Father and for all mankind will attain its highest expression. His poverty will reach complete self-emptying, his obedience the giving of his life.

The disciples are invited to contemplate Jesus raised up on the Cross where, in his silence and solitude, "the Word come forth from silence"[39] prophetically affirms the absolute transcendence of God over all created things; in his own flesh he conquers our sin and draws every man and every woman to himself, giving to all the new life of the Resurrection (cf. Jn. 12:32; 19:34, 37). It is in the contemplation of the Crucified Christ that all vocations find their inspiration. From this contemplation, together with the primordial gift of the Spirit, all gifts, and in particular the gift of the consecrated life, take their origin.

After Mary, the Mother of Jesus, it is John who receives this gift. John is the disciple whom Jesus loved, the witness who together with Mary stood at the foot of the Cross (cf. Jn. 19:26-27). His decision to consecrate himself totally is the fruit of the divine love which envelops him, sustains him and fills his heart. John, together with Mary, is among the first in a long line of men and women who, from the beginning of the Church until the end, are touched by God's love and feel called to follow the Lamb, once sacrificed and now alive, wherever he goes (cf. Rv. 14:1-5).[40]

The Paschal dimension of the consecrated life

24. In the different forms of life inspired by the Spirit throughout history, consecrated persons discover that the more they stand at the foot of the Cross of Christ, the more immediately and profoundly they experience the truth of God, who is love. It is precisely on the Cross that the One who in death appears to human eyes as disfigured and without beauty, so much so that the bystanders cover their faces (cf. Is. 53:2-3), fully reveals the beauty and power of God's love. St. Augustine says:

"Beautiful is God, the Word with God.... He is beautiful in heaven, beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb, beautiful in his parents' arms, beautiful in his miracles, beautiful in his sufferings; beautiful in inviting to life, beautiful in not worrying about death, beautiful in giving up his life and beautiful in taking it up again; he is beautiful on the Cross, beautiful in the tomb, beautiful in heaven. Listen to the song with understanding, and

let not the weakness of the flesh distract your eyes from the splendor of his beauty."[41]

The consecrated life reflects the splendor of this love because, by its fidelity to the mystery of the Cross, it confesses that it believes and lives by the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In this way it helps the Church to remain aware that, the Cross is the superabundance of God's love poured out upon this world, and that it is the great sign of Christ's saving presence, especially in the midst of difficulties and trials. This is the testimony given constantly and with deeply admirable courage by a great number of consecrated persons, many of whom live in difficult situations, even suffering persecution and martyrdom. Their fidelity to the one Love is revealed and confirmed in the humility of a hidden life, in the acceptance of sufferings for the sake of completing in their own flesh "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col. 1:24), in silent sacrifice and abandonment to God's holy will and in serene fidelity even as their strength and personal authority wane. Fidelity to God also inspires devotion to neighbor, a devotion which consecrated persons live out not without sacrifice by constantly interceding for the needs of their brothers and sisters, generously serving the poor and the sick, sharing the hardships of others and participating in the concerns and trials of the Church.

Witnesses to Christ in the World

25. The Paschal Mystery is also the wellspring of the Church's missionary nature, which is reflected in the whole of the Church's life. It is expressed in a distinctive way in the consecrated life. Over and above the charisms proper to those Institutes which are devoted to the mission *ad gentes*, or which are engaged in ordinary apostolic activity, it can be said that the sense of mission is at the very heart of every form of consecrated life. To the extent that consecrated persons live a life completely devoted to the Father (cf. Lk. 2:49; Jn. 4:34), held fast by Christ (cf. Jn. 15:16; Gal. 1:15-16) and animated by the Spirit (cf. Lk. 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:4), they cooperate effectively in the mission of the Lord Jesus (cf. Jn 20:21) and contribute in a particularly profound way to the renewal of the world.

The first missionary duty of consecrated persons is to themselves, and they fulfill it by opening their hearts to the promptings of the Spirit of Christ. Their witness helps the whole Church to remember that the most important thing is to serve God freely, through Christ's grace which is communicated to believers through the gift of the Spirit. Thus they proclaim to the world the peace which comes from the Father, the dedication witnessed to by the Son and the joy which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Consecrated persons will be missionaries above all by continually deepening their awareness of having been called and chosen by God, to whom they must therefore direct and offer everything that they are and have, freeing themselves from the obstacles which could hinder the totality of their response. In this way they will become true signs of Christ in the world. Their lifestyle too must clearly show the ideal which they profess and thus present itself as a living sign of God and as an eloquent, albeit often silent, proclamation of the Gospel.

The Church must always seek to make her presence visible in everyday life, especially in contemporary culture, which is often very secularized and yet sensitive to the language of signs. In this regard the Church has a right to expect a significant contribution from consecrated persons, called as they are in every situation to bear clear witness that they belong to Christ.

Since the habit is a sign of consecration, poverty and membership in a particular Religious family, I join the Fathers of the Synod in strongly recommending to men and women religious that they wear their proper

habit, suitably adapted to the conditions of time and place.[42] Where valid reasons of their apostolate call for it, religious, in conformity with the norms of their Institute, may also dress in a simple and modest manner with an appropriate symbol, in such a way that their consecration is recognizable.

Institutes which from their origin or by provision of their constitutions do not have a specific habit should ensure that the dress of their members corresponds in dignity and simplicity to the nature of their vocation.[43]

Eschatological dimension of the consecrated life

26. Since the demands of the apostolate today are increasingly urgent and since involvement in temporal affairs risks becoming ever more absorbing, it is particularly opportune to draw attention once more to the eschatological nature of the consecrated life.

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt. 6:21). The unique treasure of the Kingdom gives rise to desire, anticipation, commitment and witness. In the early Church, the expectation of the Lord's coming was lived in a particularly intense way. With the passing of the centuries, the Church has not ceased to foster this attitude of hope: She has continued to invite the faithful to look to the salvation which is waiting to be revealed, "for the form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:31; cf. 1 Pt. 1:3-6).[44]

It is in this perspective that we can understand more clearly the role, of consecrated life as an eschatological sign,. In fact it has constantly been taught that the consecrated life is a foreshadowing of the future Kingdom. The Second Vatican Council proposes this teaching anew when it states that consecration better "foretells the resurrected state and the glory of the heavenly Kingdom." [45] It does this above all by means of the vow of virginity, which tradition has always understood as an anticipation of the world to come, already at work for the total transformation of man.

Those who have dedicated their lives to Christ cannot fail to live in the hope of meeting him, in order to be with him forever. Hence the ardent expectation and desire to "be plunged into the Fire of Love which burns in them and which is none other than the Holy Spirit," [46] an expectation and desire sustained by the gifts which the Lord freely bestows on those who yearn for the things that are above (cf. Col. 3:1).

Immersed in the things of the Lord, the consecrated person remembers that "here we have no lasting city" (Heb. 13:14), for "our commonwealth is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). The one thing necessary is to seek God's "Kingdom and his righteousness" (Mt. 6:33), with unceasing prayer for the Lord's coming.

Active expectation: commitment and watchfulness

27. "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rv. 22:20). This expectation is anything but passive,; Although directed toward the future Kingdom, it expresses itself in work and mission, that the Kingdom may become present here and now through the spirit of the Beatitudes, a spirit capable of giving rise in human society to effective aspirations for justice, peace, solidarity and forgiveness.

This is clearly shown by the history of the consecrated life, which has always borne abundant fruit even for this world. By their charisms, consecrated persons become signs of the Spirit pointing to a new future enlightened by faith and by Christian hope. Eschatological expectation becomes mission, so that the

Kingdom may become ever more fully established here and now. The prayer "Come, Lord Jesus!" is accompanied by another: "Thy Kingdom come!" (Mt. 6:10).

Those who vigilantly await the fulfillment of Christ's promises are able to bring hope to their brothers and sisters who are often discouraged and pessimistic about the future. Theirs is a hope founded on God's promise contained in the revealed word: The history of humanity is moving toward "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rv. 21:1), where the Lord "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rv. 21:4).

The consecrated life is at the service of this definitive manifestation of the divine glory, when all flesh will see the salvation of God (cf. Lk. 3:6; Is. 40:5). The Christian East emphasizes this dimension when it considers monks as angels of God, on earth who proclaim the renewal of the world in Christ. In the West, monasticism is the celebration of memory and expectation: memory, of the wonders God has wrought and expectation, of the final fulfillment of our hope. Monasticism and the contemplative life are a constant reminder that the primacy of God gives full meaning and joy to human lives, because men and women are made for God, and their hearts are restless until they rest in him.[47]

The Virgin Mary, model of consecration and discipleship

28. Mary is the one who from the moment of her Immaculate Conception most perfectly reflects the divine beauty. "All beautiful" is the title with which the Church invokes her. "The relationship with Mary most holy, which for every believer stems from his or her union with Christ, is even more pronounced in the life of consecrated persons.... Mary's presence is of fundamental importance both for the spiritual life of each consecrated person and for the solidity, unity and progress of the whole community.[48]

Mary in fact is the sublime example of perfect consecration, since she belongs completely to God and is totally devoted to him. Chosen by the Lord, who wished to accomplish in her the mystery of the Incarnation, she reminds consecrated persons of the primacy of God's initiative. At the same time, having given her assent to the divine Word made flesh in her, Mary is the model of the acceptance of grace, by human creatures.

Having lived with Jesus and Joseph in the hidden years of Nazareth, and present at her Son's side at crucial moments of his public life, the Blessed Virgin teaches unconditional discipleship and diligent service. In Mary, "the temple of the Holy Spirit,"[49] all the splendor of the new creation shines forth. Consecrated life looks to her as the sublime model of consecration to the Father, union with the Son and openness to the Spirit, in the knowledge that acceptance of the "virginal and humble life"[50] of Christ also means imitation of Mary's way of life.

In the Blessed Virgin Mary consecrated persons also find a Mother who is altogether unique,. Indeed, if the new motherhood conferred on Mary at Calvary is a gift for all Christians, it has a specific value for those who have completely consecrated their lives to Christ. "Behold your mother!" (Jn. 19:27): Jesus' words to the disciple "whom he loved" (Jn. 19:26) are particularly significant for the lives of consecrated persons. They, like John, are called to take the Blessed Virgin Mary to themselves (cf. Jn. 19:27), loving her and imitating her in the radical manner which befits their vocation, and experiencing in return her special motherly love. The Blessed Virgin shares with them the love which enables them to offer their lives every day for Christ and to cooperate with him in the salvation of the world. Hence a filial relationship to Mary is the royal road to

fidelity to one's vocation and a most effective help for advancing in that vocation and living it fully.[51]

III. In the Church and for the Church

"It is well that we are here": the consecrated life in the mystery of the Church

29. In the episode of the Transfiguration, Peter speaks on behalf of the other Apostles: "It is well that we are here" (Mt. 17:4). The experience of Christ's glory, though completely filling his mind and heart, does not set him apart but rather unites him more closely to the "we" of the Apostles.

This dimension of "we" invites us to consider the place which the consecrated life occupies in the mystery of the Church,. In recent years theological reflection on the nature of the consecrated life has deepened the new insights which emerged from the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. In the light of that teaching it has been recognized that the profession of the evangelical counsels indisputably belongs to the life and holiness of the Church .[52] This means that the consecrated life, present in the Church from the beginning, can never fail to be one of her essential and characteristic elements, for it expresses her very nature.

This is clearly seen from the fact that the profession of the evangelical counsels is intimately connected with the mystery of Christ and has the duty of making somehow present the way of life which Jesus himself chose and indicated as an absolute eschatological value. Jesus himself, by calling some men and women to abandon everything in order to follow him, established this type of life which, under the guidance of the Spirit, would gradually develop down the centuries into the various forms of the consecrated life. The idea of a Church made up only of sacred ministers and lay people does not therefore conform to the intentions of her divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament.

New and special consecration

30. In the Church's tradition religious profession is considered to be a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received in Baptism, inasmuch as it is the means by which the close union with Christ already begun in Baptism develops in the gift of a fuller, more explicit and authentic configuration to him through the profession of the evangelical counsels.[53]

This further consecration, however, differs in a special way from baptismal consecration, of which it is not a necessary consequence.[54] In fact, all those reborn in Christ are called to live out with the strength which is the Spirit's gift the chastity appropriate to their state of life, obedience to God and to the Church, and a reasonable detachment from material possessions: For all are called to holiness, which consists in the perfection of love.[55] But baptism in itself does not include the call to celibacy or virginity, the renunciation of possessions or obedience to a superior, in the form proper to the evangelical counsels. The profession of the evangelical counsels thus presupposes a particular gift of God not given to everyone, as Jesus himself emphasizes with respect to voluntary celibacy (cf. Mt. 19:10-12).

This call is accompanied, moreover, by a specific gift of the Holy Spirit, so that consecrated persons can respond to their vocation and mission. For this reason, as the liturgies of the East and West testify in the rite of monastic or religious profession and the consecration of virgins, the Church invokes the gift of the Holy Spirit upon those who have been chosen and joins their oblation to the sacrifice of Christ.[56]

The profession of the evangelical counsels is also a development of the grace of the Sacrament of Confirmation, but it goes beyond the ordinary demands of the consecration received in Confirmation by virtue of a special gift of the Spirit which opens the way to new possibilities and fruits of holiness and apostolic work. This can clearly be seen from the history of the consecrated life.

As for priests who profess the evangelical counsels, experience itself shows that the Sacrament of Holy Orders finds a particular fruitfulness in this consecration, inasmuch as it requires and fosters a closer union with the Lord. The priest who professes the evangelical counsels is especially favored in that he reproduces in his life the fullness of the mystery of Christ, thanks also to the specific spirituality of his Institute and the apostolic dimension of its proper charism. In the priest, in fact, the vocation to the priesthood and the vocation to the consecrated life converge in a profound and dynamic unity.

Also of immeasurable value is the contribution made to the Church's life by religious priests completely devoted to contemplation. Especially in the celebration of the Eucharist they carry out an act of the Church and for the Church, to which they join the offering of themselves, in communion with Christ, who offers himself to the Father for the salvation of the whole world.[57]

Relationships between states of Christian life

31. The different ways of life which, in accordance with the plan of the Lord Jesus, make up the life of the Church have mutual relationships which merit consideration.

By virtue of their rebirth in Christ, all the faithful share a common dignity; all are called to holiness; all cooperate in the building up of the one Body of Christ, each in accordance with the proper vocation and gift which he or she has received from the Spirit (cf. Rom. 12:3-8).[58] The equal dignity of all members of the Church is the work of the Spirit, is rooted in Baptism and Confirmation, and is strengthened by the Eucharist. But diversity is also a work of the Spirit. It is he who establishes the Church as an organic communion in the diversity of vocations, charisms and ministries.[59]

The vocations to the lay life, to the ordained ministry and to the consecrated life can be considered paradigmatic inasmuch as all particular vocations considered separately or as a whole, are in one way or another derived from them or lead back to them in accordance with the richness of God's gift. These vocations are also at the service of one another for the growth of the Body of Christ in history and for its mission in the world. Everyone in the Church is consecrated in Baptism and Confirmation, but the ordained ministry and the consecrated life each presuppose a distinct vocation and a specific form of consecration, with a view to a particular mission.

For the mission of the lay faithful, whose proper task is to "seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God,"[60] the consecration of Baptism and Confirmation common to all members of the People of God is a sufficient foundation. In addition to this basic consecration, ordained ministers, receive the consecration of ordination in order to carry on the apostolic ministry in time. Consecrated persons, who embrace the evangelical counsels, receive a new and special consecration which, without being sacramental, commits them to making their own—in chastity, poverty and obedience—the way of life practiced personally by Jesus and proposed by him to his disciples. Although these different categories are a manifestation of the one mystery of Christ, the lay faithful have as their specific but not exclusive characteristic activity in the world; the clergy, ministry; consecrated men and

women, special conformity to Christ chaste, poor and obedient.

The special value of consecrated life

32. Within this harmonious constellation of gifts, each of the fundamental states of life is entrusted with the task of expressing in its own way one or other aspect of the one mystery of Christ. While the lay life has a particular mission, of ensuring that the Gospel message is proclaimed in the temporal sphere, in the sphere of ecclesial communion an indispensable ministry is carried out by those in Holy Orders, and in a special way by Bishops. The latter have the task of guiding the People of God by the teaching of the word, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of sacred power in the service of ecclesial communion, which is an organic communion, hierarchically structured.[61]

As a way of showing forth the Church's holiness, it is to be recognized that the consecrated life, which mirrors Christ's own way of life, has an objective superiority,. Precisely for this reason, it is an especially rich manifestation of Gospel values and a more complete expression of the Church's purpose, which is the sanctification of humanity. The consecrated life proclaims and in a certain way anticipates the future age, when the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven, already present in its first fruits and in mystery [62] will be achieved and when the children of the resurrection will take neither wife nor husband, but will be like the angels of God (cf. Mt. 22:30).

The Church has always taught the pre-eminence of perfect chastity for the sake of the Kingdom [63] and rightly considers it the "door" of the whole consecrated life.[64] She also shows great esteem for the vocation to marriage, which makes spouses "witnesses to and cooperators in the fruitfulness of Holy Mother Church, who signify and share in the love with which Christ has loved his Bride and because of which he delivered himself up on her behalf."[65]

In this perspective, common to all consecrated life, there are many different but complementary paths. Men and women Religious completely devoted to contemplation, are in a special way an image of Christ praying on the mountain.[66] Consecrated persons engaged in the active life, manifest Christ "in his proclamation of the Kingdom of God to the multitudes, in his healing of the sick and the suffering, in his work of converting sinners to a better life, in his solicitude for youth and his goodness to all."[67] Consecrated persons in Secular Institutes contribute in a special way to the coming of the Kingdom of God; they unite in a distinctive synthesis the value of consecration and that of being in the world. As they live their consecration in the world and from the world [68] "they strive to imbue everything with an evangelical spirit for the strengthening and growth of the Body of Christ."[69] For this purpose they share in the Church's evangelizing mission through their personal witness of Christian living, their commitment to ordering temporal affairs according to God's plan and their cooperation in service of the ecclesial community, in accordance with the secular way of life which is proper to them.[70]

Bearing witness to the Gospel of the Beatitudes

33. A particular duty of the consecrated life is to remind the baptized of the fundamental values of the Gospel, by bearing "splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the Beatitudes."[71] The consecrated life thus continually fosters in the People of God an awareness of the need to respond with holiness of life to the love of God poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:5), by reflecting in their conduct the sacramental consecration which is brought about by

God's power in Baptism, Confirmation or Holy Orders. In fact it is necessary to pass from the holiness communicated in the sacraments to the holiness of daily life. The consecrated life, by its very existence in the Church, seeks to serve the consecration of the lives of all the faithful, clergy and laity alike.

Nor must it be forgotten that consecrated persons themselves are helped by the witness of the other vocations to live fully and completely their union with the mystery of Christ and the Church in its many different dimensions. By virtue of this mutual enrichment, the mission of consecrated persons becomes more eloquent and effective: This mission is to remind their other brothers and sisters to keep their eyes fixed on the peace which is to come and to strive for the definitive happiness found in God.

The living image of the Church as Bride

34. In the consecrated life particular importance attaches to the spousal meaning, which recalls the Church's duty to be completely and exclusively devoted to her Spouse, from whom she receives every good thing. This spousal dimension, which is part of all consecrated life, has a particular meaning for women, who find therein their feminine identity and as it were discover the special genius of their relationship with the Lord.

A moving sign of this is seen in the New Testament passage which portrays Mary with the Apostles in the Upper Room, in prayerful expectation of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:13-14). We can see here a vivid image of the Church as Bride, fully attentive to her Bridegroom and ready to accept his gift. In Peter and the other Apostles there emerges above all the aspect of fruitfulness as it is expressed in ecclesial ministry, which becomes an instrument of the Spirit for bringing new sons and daughters to birth through the preaching of the word, the celebration of the Sacraments and the giving of pastoral care. In Mary the aspect of spousal receptivity is particularly clear; it is under this aspect that the Church, through her perfect virginal life, brings divine life to fruition within herself.

The consecrated life has always been seen primarily in terms of Mary— Virgin and Bride. This virginal love is the source of a particular fruitfulness which fosters the birth and growth of divine life in people's hearts.[72] Following in the footsteps of Mary, the New Eve, consecrated persons express their spiritual fruitfulness by becoming receptive to the word, in order to contribute to the growth of a new humanity by their unconditional dedication and their living witness. Thus the Church fully reveals her motherhood both in the communication of divine grace entrusted to Peter and in the responsible acceptance of God's gift, exemplified by Mary.

God's people, for their part, find in the ordained ministry the means of salvation and in the consecrated life the incentive to make a full and loving response through all the different forms of Christian service.[73]

IV. Guided by the Spirit of Holiness

A "transfigured" life: the call to holiness

35. "When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were filled with fear (Mt. 17:6). In the episode of the Transfiguration the synoptic Gospels, with varying nuances, point out the fear which overcomes the disciples. Their fascination at the transfigured face of Christ does not prevent them from being fearful before the divine Majesty which overshadows them. Whenever human beings become aware of the glory of God, they also become aware of their own insignificance and experience a sense of fear. Such fear is salutary. It

reminds man of God's perfection and at the same time urges him on with a pressing call to "holiness."

All the sons and daughters of the Church, called by God to "listen to Christ, necessarily feel a deep need for conversion and holiness,. But, as the Synod emphasized, this need in the first place challenges the consecrated life. In fact the vocation of consecrated persons to seek first the Kingdom of God is first and foremost a call to complete conversion, in self-renunciation, in order to live fully for the Lord, so that God may be all in all. Called to contemplate and bear witness to the transfigured face of Christ, consecrated men and women are also called to a "transfigured" existence.

The Final Report, of the Second Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops made a significant observation in this regard:

"Holy men and women have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult circumstances throughout the Church's history. Today we have a tremendous need of saints, for whom we must assiduously implore God. The Institutes of Consecrated Life, through the profession of the evangelical counsels, must be conscious of their special mission in today's Church, and we must encourage them in that mission.[74] The Fathers of the Ninth Assembly of the Synod of Bishops echoed this conviction: "Throughout the Church's history, consecrated life has been a living presence of the Spirit's work, a kind of privileged milieu for absolute love of God and of neighbor, for witness to the divine plan of gathering all humanity into the civilization of love, the great family of the children of God.[75]

The Church has always seen in the profession of the evangelical counsels a special path to holiness. The very expressions used to describe it—the school of the Lord's service, the school of love and holiness, the way or state of perfection— indicate the effectiveness and the wealth of means which are proper to this form of evangelical life and the particular commitment made by those who embrace it.[76] It is not by chance that there have been so many consecrated persons down the centuries who have left behind eloquent testimonies of holiness and have undertaken particularly generous and demanding works of evangelization and service.

Faithfulness to the charism

36. In Christian discipleship and love for the person of Christ, there are a number of points concerning the growth of holiness in the consecrated life which merit particular emphasis today.

In the first place, there is the need for fidelity to the founding charism, and subsequent spiritual heritage of each Institute. It is precisely in this fidelity to the inspiration of the founders and foundresses, an inspiration which is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, that the essential elements of the consecrated life can be more readily discerned and more fervently put into practice.

Fundamental to every charism is a threefold orientation. First, charisms lead to the Father, in the filial desire to seek his will through a process of unceasing conversion, wherein obedience is the source of true freedom, chastity expresses the yearning of a heart unsatisfied by any finite love and poverty nourishes that hunger and thirst for justice which God has promised to satisfy (cf. Mt. 5:6). Consequently the charism of each Institute will lead the consecrated person to belong wholly to God, to speak with God or about God, as is said of St. Dominic [77] so that he or she can taste the goodness of the Lord (cf. Ps 34:8) in every situation.

Second, the charisms of the consecrated life also lead to the Son, fostering an intimate and joyful communion

of life with him in the school of his generous service of God and neighbor. Thus the attitude of consecrated persons is progressively conformed to Christ; they learn detachment from externals, from the tumult of the senses, from all that keeps man from that freedom which allows him to be grasped by the Spirit." [78] As a result, consecrated persons are enabled to take up the mission of Christ, working and suffering with him in the spreading of his Kingdom.

Finally, every charism leads to the Holy Spirit, insofar as it prepares individuals to let themselves be guided and sustained by him, both in their personal spiritual journeys and in their lives of communion and apostolic work, in order to embody that attitude of service which should inspire the true Christian's every choice.

In fact it is this threefold relationship which emerges in every founding charism, though with the specific nuances of the various patterns of living. This is so because in every charism there predominates a profound desire to be conformed to Christ to give witness to some aspect of his mystery." [79] This specific aspect is meant to take shape and develop according to the most authentic tradition of the Institute as present in its Rule, Constitutions and Statutes. [80]

Creative fidelity

37. Institutes of Consecrated Life are thus invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world. [81] This invitation is first of all a call to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties of daily life. But it is also a call to pursue competence in personal work and to develop a dynamic fidelity to their mission, adapting forms if need be to new situations and different needs in complete openness to God's inspiration and to the Church's discernment. But all must be fully convinced that the quest for ever greater conformity to the Lord is the guarantee of any renewal which seeks to remain faithful to an Institute's original inspiration. [82]

In this spirit there is a pressing need today for every Institute to return to the Rule, since the Rule and Constitutions provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship in accordance with a specific charism confirmed by the Church. A greater regard for the Rule will not fail to offer consecrated persons a reliable criterion in their search for the appropriate forms of a witness which is capable of responding to the needs of the times without departing from an Institute's initial inspiration.

Prayer and asceticism: spiritual combat

38. The call to holiness is accepted and can be cultivated only in the silence of adoration, before the infinite transcendence of God: "We must confess that we all have need of this silence, filled with the presence of him who is adored: in theology, so as to exploit fully its own sapiential and spiritual soul; in prayer, so that we may never forget that seeing God means coming down the mountain with a face so radiant that we are obliged to cover it with a veil (cf. Ex. 34:33); in commitment, so that we will refuse to be locked in a struggle without love and forgiveness. All, believers and nonbelievers alike, need to learn a silence that allows the Other to speak when and how he wishes, and allows us to understand his words." [83] In practice this involves great fidelity to liturgical and personal prayer, to periods devoted to mental prayer and contemplation, to Eucharist adoration, to monthly retreats and to spiritual exercises.

There is also a need to rediscover the ascetic practices, typical of the spiritual tradition of the Church and of

the individual's own Institute. These have been and continue to be a powerful aid to authentic progress in holiness. Asceticism, by helping to master and correct the inclinations of human nature wounded by sin, is truly indispensable if consecrated persons are to remain faithful to their own vocation and follow Jesus on the way of the Cross.

It is also necessary to recognize and overcome certain temptations which sometimes by diabolical deceit present themselves under the appearance of good. Thus, for example, the legitimate need to be familiar with today's society in order to respond to its challenges can lead to a surrender to passing fashions, with a consequent lessening of spiritual fervor or a succumbing to discouragement. The possibility of a deeper spiritual formation might lead consecrated persons to feel somehow superior to other members of the faithful, while the urgent need for appropriate and necessary training can turn into a frantic quest for efficiency, as if apostolic service depended primarily on human means rather than on God. The praiseworthy desire to become close to the men and women of our day, believers and nonbelievers, rich and poor, can lead to the adoption of a secularized lifestyle or the promotion of human values in a merely horizontal direction. Sharing in the legitimate aspirations of one's own nation or culture could lead to embracing forms of nationalism or accepting customs which instead need to be purified and elevated in the light of the Gospel.

The path to holiness thus involves the acceptance of spiritual combat. This is a demanding reality which is not always given due attention today. Tradition has often seen an image of this spiritual combat in Jacob's wrestling with the mystery of God, whom he confronts in order to receive his blessing and to see him (cf. Gn. 32:23-31). In this episode from the beginnings of biblical history, consecrated persons can recognize a symbol of the asceticism which they need in order to open their hearts to the Lord and to their brothers and sisters.

Fostering holiness

39. Today a renewed commitment to holiness by consecrated persons is more necessary than ever, also as a means of promoting and supporting every Christian's desire for perfection. "It is therefore necessary to inspire in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbor, especially the most needy." [84]

To the degree that they deepen their friendship with God, consecrated persons become better prepared to help their brothers and sisters through valuable spiritual activities such as schools of prayer, spiritual exercises and retreats, days of recollection, spiritual dialogue and direction. In this way people are helped to grow in prayer and will then be better able to discern God's will in their lives and to commit themselves to the courageous and sometimes heroic demands which faith makes of them. Consecrated persons "at the deepest level of their being ... are caught up in the dynamism of the Church's life, which is thirsty for the divine Absolute and called to holiness. It is to this holiness that they bear witness." [85] The fact that all are called to become saints cannot fail to inspire more and more those who by their very choice of life have the mission of reminding others of that call.

"Rise, and have no fear": a renewed trust

40. "Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise, and have no fear'" (Mt. 17:7). Like the three Apostles in the episode of the Transfiguration, consecrated persons know from experience that their lives are not always marked by the fervor which makes us exclaim: "It is well that we are here" (Mt. 17:4). But it is always a life

"touched" by the hand of Christ, a life where his voice is heard, a life sustained by his grace.

"Rise, and have no fear." Obviously, the Master's encouragement is addressed to every Christian. All the more does it apply to those called to "leave everything" and thus to "risk everything" for Christ. This is particularly true whenever one descends from the "mountain" with the Master and sets off on the road which leads from Tabor to Calvary.

When Luke relates that Moses and Elijah were speaking with Christ about his Paschal Mystery, it is significant that he uses the term departure (*exodos*): "They spoke about his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:31). Exodus is a basic term in revelation; it evokes the whole of salvation history and expresses the deep meaning of the Paschal Mystery. It is a theme particularly dear to the spirituality of the consecrated life and well expresses its meaning. It inevitably includes everything that pertains to the *mysterium crucis*. But this difficult "exodus journey," when viewed from the perspective of Tabor, is seen to be a road situated between two lights: the anticipatory light of the Transfiguration and the definitive light of the Resurrection.

From the standpoint of the Christian life as a whole, the vocation to the consecrated life is, despite its renunciations and trials, and indeed because of them, a path "of light", over which the Redeemer keeps constant watch: "Rise, and have no fear."

CHAPTER 2: "SIGNUM FRATERNITATIS"

Consecrated Life as a Sign of Communion in the Church

I. Permanent Values

In the image of the Trinity

41. During his earthly life, the Lord Jesus called those whom he wished in order to have them at his side and to train them to live according to his example, for the Father and for the mission which he had received from the Father (cf. Mk. 3: 13-15). He thus inaugurated the new family which down the centuries would include all those ready to "do the will of God" (cf. Mk. 3:32-35). After the Ascension, as a result of the gift of the Spirit, a fraternal community formed around the Apostles gathered in the praise of God and in a concrete experience of communion (cf. Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-

35). The life of that community and even more the experience of complete sharing with Christ lived out by the Twelve have always been the model to which the Church has looked, whenever she has sought to return to her original fervor and to resume with fresh evangelical vigor her journey through history.[86]

The Church is essentially a mystery of communion, "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." [87] The fraternal life seeks to reflect the depth and richness of this mystery, taking shape as a human community in which the Trinity dwells, in order to extend in history the gifts of communion proper to the three divine Persons. Many are the settings and the ways in which fraternal communion is expressed in the life of the Church. The consecrated life can certainly be credited with having effectively helped to keep alive in the Church the obligation of fraternity as a form of witness to the Trinity. By constantly promoting fraternal love, also in the form of common life, the consecrated life has shown that

sharing in the Trinitarian communion can change human relationships, and create a new type of solidarity. In this way it speaks to people both of the beauty of fraternal communion and of the ways which actually lead to it. Consecrated persons live "for" God and "from" God, and precisely for this reason they are able to bear witness to the reconciling power of grace, which overcomes the divisive tendencies present in the human heart and in society.

Fraternal life in love

42. The fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion. It is practiced with special care in Religious Institutes and in Societies of Apostolic Life, where community living acquires special significance.[88] Nor is the dimension of fraternal communion alien to Secular Institutes or even to forms of the consecrated life lived individually. Hermits, in their profound solitude, do not withdraw from ecclesial communion but serve that communion by their specific charism of contemplation. Consecrated virgins in the world live out their consecration in a special relationship of communion with the particular and universal Church. The same is true of consecrated widows and widowers.

All these people, by practicing evangelical discipleship, commit themselves to fulfilling the Lord's "new commandment," to love one another as he has loved us (cf. Jn. 13:34). Love led Christ to the gift of self, even to the supreme sacrifice of the Cross. So too, among his disciples, there can be no true unity without that unconditional mutual love, which demands a readiness to serve others generously, a willingness to welcome them as they are, without "judging" them (cf. Mt. 7:1-2) and an ability to forgive up to "70 times seven" (Mt. 18:22). Consecrated persons, who become "of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32) through the love poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:5), experience an interior call to share everything in common: material goods and spiritual experiences, talents and inspirations, apostolic ideals and charitable service: "In community life, the power of the Holy Spirit at work in one individual passes at the same time to all. Here not only does each enjoy his own gift, but makes it abound by sharing it with others; and each one enjoys the fruits of the other's gift as if they were his own." [89]

In community life, then, it should in some way be evident that, more than an instrument for carrying out a specific mission, fraternal communion is a God-enlightened space, in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord (cf. Mt. 18:20).[90] This comes about through the mutual love of all the members of the community, a love nourished by the word and by the Eucharist, purified in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and sustained by prayer for unity, the special gift of the Spirit to those who obediently listen to the Gospel. It is the Spirit himself who leads the soul to the experience of communion with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Jn. 1:3), a communion which is the source of fraternal life. It is the Spirit who guides communities of the consecrated life in carrying out their mission of service to the Church and to all humanity, in accordance with their original inspiration.

In this perspective, special importance attaches to Chapters (or similar meetings), whether particular or general, at which Institutes are called to elect Superiors according to the norms set out in their Constitutions, and to discern, in the light of the Spirit, the best ways to preserve and adapt their charism and their spiritual patrimony to changing historical and cultural situations.[91]

The task of authority

43. In the consecrated life the role of Superiors, including local Superiors, has always been of great

importance for the spiritual life and for mission. In these years of change and experimentation, the need to revise this office has sometimes been felt. But it should be recognized that those who exercise authority cannot renounce their obligation as those first responsible, for the community, as guides of their brothers and sisters in the spiritual and apostolic life.

In an atmosphere strongly affected by individualism, it is not an easy thing to foster recognition and acceptance of the role which authority plays for the benefit of all. Nevertheless, its importance must be reaffirmed as essential for strengthening fraternal communion and in order not to render vain the obedience professed. While authority must be above all fraternal and spiritual, and while those entrusted with it must know how to involve their brothers and sisters in the decision-making process, it should still be remembered that the final word belongs to authority, and consequently that authority has the right to see that decisions taken are respected.[92]

The role of the elderly

44. Caring for the elderly and the sick has an important place in the fraternal life, especially at times like the present when in some parts of the world the percentage of elderly consecrated persons is increasing. The care and concern which these persons deserve arises not only from a clear obligation of charity and gratitude, but also from an awareness that their witness greatly serves the Church and their own Institutes, and that their mission continues to be worthwhile and meritorious even when for reasons of age or infirmity they have had to abandon their specific apostolate. The elderly and the sick have a great deal to give, in wisdom and experience to the community, if only the community can remain close to them with concern and an ability to listen.

More than in any activity, the apostolate consists in the witness of one's own complete dedication to the Lord's saving will, a dedication nourished by the practice of prayer and of penance. The elderly are called in many ways to live out their vocation: by persevering prayer, by patient acceptance of their condition and by their readiness to serve as spiritual directors, confessors or mentors in prayer.[93]

In the image of the apostolic community

45. The fraternal life plays a fundamental role in the spiritual journey of consecrated persons, both for their constant renewal and for the full accomplishment of their mission in the world. This is evident from the theological motivations which sustain it and is amply confirmed by experience. I therefore exhort consecrated men and women to commit themselves to strengthening their fraternal life, following the example of the first Christians in Jerusalem, who were assiduous in accepting the teaching of the Apostles, in common prayer, in celebrating the Eucharist and in sharing whatever goods of nature and grace they had (cf. Acts 2:42-47). Above all I call upon men and women religious and members of Societies of Apostolic Life to show generous mutual love, expressing it in ways which are in keeping with the nature of each Institute, so that every community will be revealed as a luminous sign of the new Jerusalem, "the dwelling of God with men" (Rv. 21:3).

The whole Church greatly depends on the witness of communities filled "with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52). She wishes to hold up before the world the example of communities in which solitude is overcome through concern for one another, in which communication inspires in everyone a sense of shared responsibility and in which wounds are healed through forgiveness and each person's commitment to

communion is strengthened. The nature of the charism in communities of this kind directs their energies, sustains their fidelity and directs the apostolic work of all toward the one mission. If the Church is to reveal her true face to today's world, she urgently needs such fraternal communities, which by their very existence contribute to the new evangelization inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the "new commandment."

"Sentire Cum Ecclesia"

46. A great task also belongs to the consecrated life in the light of the teaching about the Church as communion so strongly proposed by the Second Vatican Council. Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practice the spirituality of communion [94] as "witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design." [95] The sense of ecclesial communion, developing into a spirituality of communion, promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension. The life of communion in fact "becomes a sign, for all the world and a compelling force, that leads people to faith in Christ.... In this way communion leads to mission, and itself becomes mission, indeed, communion begets communion: In essence it is a communion that is missionary." [96]

In founders and foundresses we see a constant and lively sense of the Church, which they manifest by their full participation in all aspects of the Church's life and in their ready obedience to the Bishops and especially to the Roman Pontiff. Against this background of love toward Holy Church (1 Tm. 3:15), we readily understand the devotion of St. Francis of Assisi for "the Lord Pope," [97] the daughterly outspokenness of St. Catherine of Siena toward the one whom she called "sweet Christ on earth," [98] the apostolic obedience and the *sentire cum ecclesia*, of St. Ignatius Loyola [99] and the joyful profession of faith made by St. Teresa of Avila: "I am a daughter of the Church." [100] We can also understand the deep desire of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus: "In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love." [101] These testimonies are representative of the full ecclesial communion which the Saints, founders and foundresses have shared in diverse and often difficult times and circumstances. They are examples which consecrated persons need constantly to recall if they are to resist the particularly strong centrifugal and disruptive forces at work today.

A distinctive aspect of ecclesial communion is allegiance of mind and heart to the Magisterium of the Bishops, an allegiance which must be lived honestly and clearly testified to before the People of God by all consecrated persons, especially those involved in theological research, teaching, publishing, catechesis and the use of the means of social communication. [102] Because consecrated persons have a special place in the Church, their attitude in this regard is of immense importance for the whole People of God. Their witness of filial love will give power and forcefulness to their apostolic activity which, in the context of the prophetic mission of all the baptized, is generally distinguished by special forms of cooperation with the Hierarchy. [103] In a specific way, through the richness of their charisms, consecrated persons help the Church to reveal ever more deeply her nature as the sacrament "of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind." [104]

Fraternity in the universal Church

47. Consecrated persons are called to be a leaven of communion at the service of the mission of the universal Church by the very fact that the manifold charisms of their respective Institutes are granted by the Holy Spirit for the good of the entire Mystical Body, whose upbuilding they must serve (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-11).

Significantly, "the more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31), the "greatest of all" (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13), as the apostle says, is charity, which brings all diversity into one and strengthens everyone to support one another in apostolic zeal. This, precisely, is the scope of the particular bond of communion, which the different Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life have with the Successor of Peter in his ministry of unity and missionary universality. The history of spirituality amply illustrates this bond and shows its providential function both in safeguarding the specific identity of the consecrated life and in advancing the missionary expansion of the Gospel. The vigorous spread of the Gospel message, the firm rooting of the Church in so many areas of the world and the Christian springtime which the young Churches are experiencing today would be unthinkable—as the Synod Fathers observed—without the contribution of numerous Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Down the centuries they have maintained strong bonds of communion with the Successors of Peter, who found in them a generous readiness to devote themselves to the Church's missionary activity with an availability which, when necessary, went as far as heroism.

All this brings out the character of universality and communion, proper to Institutes of Consecrated Life and to Societies of Apostolic Life. Because of their supradiocesan character, grounded in their special relation to the Petrine ministry, they are also at the service of cooperation between the particular Churches [105] since they can effectively promote an "exchange of gifts" among them and thus contribute to an inculturation of the Gospel which purifies, strengthens and ennobles the treasures found in the cultures of all peoples.[106] Today too the flowering of vocations to the consecrated life in the younger Churches demonstrates the ability of the consecrated life to make present in Catholic unity the needs of different peoples and cultures.

The consecrated life and the particular Church

48. Again, a significant role is played by consecrated persons within the particular Churches. On the basis of the Council's teaching on the Church as communion and mystery, and on the particular Churches as portions of the People of God in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative,"[107] this aspect of the consecrated life has been systematically explored and codified in various postconciliar documents. These texts bring out clearly the fundamental importance of cooperation between consecrated persons and Bishops for the organic development of diocesan pastoral life. The charisms of the consecrated life can greatly contribute to the building up of charity in the particular Churches .

The various ways of living the evangelical counsels are in fact the expression and fruit of spiritual gifts received by founders and foundresses. As such, they constitute an "experience of the Spirit, transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth." [108] The identity of each Institute is bound up with a particular spirituality and apostolate, which takes shape in a specific tradition marked by objective elements.[109] For this reason the Church is concerned that Institutes should grow and develop in accordance with the spirit of their founders and foundresses, and their own sound traditions.[110]

Consequently, each Institute is recognized as having a rightful autonomy, enabling it to follow its own discipline and to keep intact its spiritual and apostolic patrimony. It is the responsibility of local Ordinaries to preserve and safeguard this autonomy.[111] Thus Bishops are asked to welcome and esteem the charisms of the consecrated life and to give them a place in the pastoral plans of the Diocese. They should have a particular concern for Institutes of diocesan right, which are entrusted to the special care of the local Bishop. A Diocese which lacked the consecrated life would not only be deprived of many spiritual gifts, of suitable

places for people to seek God, of specific apostolic activities and pastoral approaches, but it would also risk a great weakening of that missionary spirit which is characteristic of the majority of Institutes.[112] There is a duty then to respond to the gift of the consecrated life which the Spirit awakens in the particular Churches by welcoming it with generosity and thanksgiving.

Fruitful and ordered ecclesial communion

49. The Bishop is the father and pastor of the particular Church in its entirety. It is his task to discern and respect individual charisms, and to promote and coordinate them. In his pastoral charity he will therefore welcome the charism of the consecrated life as a grace which is not restricted to any one Institute, but which benefits the whole Church. Bishops will thus seek to support and help consecrated persons so that, in communion with the Church, they open themselves to spiritual and pastoral initiatives responding to the needs of our time, while remaining faithful to their founding charism. For their part, consecrated persons will not fail to cooperate generously with the particular Churches as much as they can and with respect for their own charism, working in full communion with the Bishop, in the areas of evangelization, catechesis and parish life.

It is helpful to recall that in coordinating their service to the universal Church with their service to the particular Churches Institutes may not invoke rightful autonomy, or even the exemption which a number of them enjoy [113] in order to justify choices which actually conflict with the demands of organic communion called for by a healthy ecclesial life. Instead, the pastoral initiatives of consecrated persons should be determined and carried out in cordial and open dialogue between Bishops and Superiors of the different Institutes. Special attention by Bishops to the vocation and mission of Institutes, and respect by the latter for the ministry of Bishops with ready acceptance of their concrete pastoral directives for the life of the Diocese: These are two intimately linked expressions of that one ecclesial charity by which all work to build up the organic communion — charismatic and at the same time hierarchically structured—of the whole People of God.

A constant dialogue animated by charity

50. Constant dialogue between Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and Bishops is most valuable in order to promote mutual understanding, which is the necessary precondition for effective cooperation, especially in pastoral matters. Thanks to regular contacts of this kind, Superiors, both men and women, can inform Bishops about the apostolic undertakings which they are planning in Dioceses, in order to agree on the necessary practical arrangements. In the same way, it is helpful for delegates of the Conferences of Major Superiors to be invited to meetings of the Bishops' Conferences and, in turn, for delegates of the Episcopal Conferences to be invited to attend the Conferences of Major Superiors following predetermined formats. It would be a great help if, where they do not yet exist, mixed commissions of Bishops and Major Superior [114] were set up at the national level for the joint study of problems of common interest. Likewise, better reciprocal knowledge will result if the theology and the spirituality of the consecrated life are made part of the theological preparation of diocesan priests, and if adequate attention to the theology of the particular Church and to the spirituality of the diocesan clergy is included in the formation of consecrated persons.[115]

Finally, it is reassuring to mention that at the Synod not only were there many interventions on the doctrine of communion, but great satisfaction was expressed for the experience of dialogue conducted in a climate of

mutual trust and openness between the Bishops and the men and women religious present. This led to a desire that "this spiritual experience of communion and cooperation be extended to the whole Church," even after the Synod.[116] It is my hope too that all will grow in the understanding and spirituality of communion.

Fraternity in a divided and unjust world

51. The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing a dialogue in charity, especially where today's world is torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence. Placed as they are within the world's different societies — societies frequently marked by conflicting passions and interests, seeking unity but uncertain about the ways to attain it—communities of consecrated life, where persons of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, signs that dialogue is always possible, and that communion can bring differences into harmony.

Consecrated men and women are sent forth to proclaim by the witness of their lives the value of Christian fraternity and the transforming power of the Good News [117] which makes it possible to see all people as sons and daughters of God, and inspires a self-giving love toward everyone, especially the least of our brothers and sisters. Such communities are places of hope and of the discovery of the Beatitudes, where love, drawing strength from prayer, the wellspring of communion, is called to become a pattern of life and source of joy.

In an age characterized by the globalization of problems and the return of the idols of nationalism, international Institutes especially are called to uphold and to bear witness to the sense of communion between peoples, races and cultures. In a climate of fraternity, an openness to the global dimension of problems will not detract from the richness of particular gifts nor will the affirmation of a particular gift conflict with other gifts or with unity itself. International Institutes can achieve this effectively inasmuch as they have to face in a creative way the challenge of inculturation while at the same time preserving their identity.

Communion among different Institutes

52. Fraternal spiritual relations and mutual cooperation among different Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are sustained and nourished by the sense of ecclesial communion. Those who are united by a common commitment to the following of Christ and are inspired by the same Spirit cannot fail to manifest visibly, as branches of the one Vine, the fullness of the Gospel of love. Mindful of the spiritual friendship which often united founders and foundresses during their lives, consecrated persons, while remaining faithful to the character of their own Institute, are called to practice a fraternity which is exemplary and which will serve to encourage the other members of the Church in the daily task of bearing witness to the Gospel.

St. Bernard's words about the various Religious Orders remain ever timely: "I admire them all. I belong to one of them by observance, but to all of them by charity. We all need one another: The spiritual good which I do not own and possess, I receive from others.... In this exile, the Church is still on pilgrimage and is, in a certain sense, plural: She is a single plurality and a plural unity. All our diversities, which make manifest the richness of God's gifts, will continue to exist in the one house of the Father, which has many rooms. Now there is a division of graces; then there will be distinctions of glory. Unity, both here and there, consists in

one and the same charity." [118]

Co-ordinating Bodies

53. A significant contribution to communion can be made by the Conferences of Major Superiors and by the Conferences of Secular Institutes. Encouraged and regulated by the Second Vatican Council [119] and by subsequent document 120] these bodies have as their principal purpose the promotion of the consecrated life within the framework of the Church's mission.

By means of these bodies, Institutes express the communion which unites them, and they seek the means to reinforce that communion with respect and esteem for the uniqueness of their different charisms, which reflect the mystery of the Church and the richness of divine wisdom. [121] I encourage Institutes of Consecrated Life to work together, especially in those countries where particularly difficult situations increase the temptation for them to withdraw into themselves, to the detriment of the consecrated life itself and of the Church. Rather, these Institutes should help one another in trying to discern God's plan in this troubled moment of history in order better to respond to it with appropriate works of the apostolate. [122] In the perspective of a communion open to the challenges of our time, Superiors, men and women, "working in harmony with the Bishops," should seek "to make use of the accomplishments of the best members of each Institute and to offer services which not only help to overcome eventual limits, but which create a valid style of formation in consecrated life." [123]

I exhort the Conferences of Major Superiors and the Conferences of Secular Institutes to maintain frequent and regular contacts with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life as a sign of their communion with the Holy See. An active and trusting relationship ought also to be maintained with the Episcopal Conference of each country. In the spirit of the document *Mutuae Relationes*, these contacts should be established on a stable basis in order to provide for constant and timely coordination of initiatives as they come up. If all of this is done with perseverance and a spirit of faithful adherence to the directives of the Magisterium, the organizations which promote coordination and communion will prove to be particularly helpful in formulating solutions which avoid misunderstandings and tensions both on the theoretical and practical levels. [124] In this way they will make a positive contribution not only to the growth of communion between Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Bishops, but also to the advancement of the mission of the particular Churches .

Communion and Cooperation With Laity

54. In recent years, one of the fruits of the teaching on the Church as communion has been the growing awareness that her members can and must unite their efforts, with a view to cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church's mission. This helps to give a clearer and more complete picture of the Church herself, while rendering more effective the response to the great challenges of our time, thanks to the combined contributions of the various gifts.

Contacts with the laity, in the case of monastic or contemplative Institutes, take the form of a relationship that is primarily spiritual, while for Institutes involved in works of the apostolate these contacts also translate into forms of pastoral cooperation. Members of Secular Institutes, lay or clerical, relate to other members of the faithful at the level of everyday life. Today, often as a result of new situations, many Institutes have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with the laity. The laity are therefore invited to share more

intensely in the spirituality and mission of these Institutes. We may say that, in the light of certain historical experiences such as those of the Secular or Third Orders, a new chapter, rich in hope, has begun in the history of relations between consecrated persons and the laity.

For a renewed spiritual and apostolic dynamism

55. These new experiences of communion and cooperation should be encouraged for various reasons. They can in fact give rise to the spread of a fruitful spirituality beyond the confines of the Institute, which will then be in a position to ensure the continuity in the Church of the services typical of the Institute. Another positive consequence will be to facilitate more intense cooperation between consecrated persons and the laity in view of the Institute's mission. Moved by the examples of holiness of the consecrated members, lay men and women will experience at firsthand the spirit of the evangelical counsels and will thus be encouraged to live and bear witness to the spirit of the Beatitudes in order to transform the world according to God's design.[125]

The participation of the laity often brings unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism, leading to a more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from it directions for new activities in the apostolate. In whatever activity or ministry they are involved, consecrated persons should remember that before all else they must be expert guides in the spiritual life, and in this perspective they should cultivate "the most precious gift: the spirit." [126] For their part, the laity should offer Religious families the invaluable contribution of their "being in the world" and their specific service.

Associates and lay volunteers

56. A significant expression of lay people's sharing in the richness of the consecrated life is their participation in various Institutes under the new form of so-called associate members or, in response to conditions present in certain cultures, as people who share fully for a certain period of time the Institute's community life and its particular dedication to contemplation or the apostolate. This should always be done in such a way that the identity of the Institute in its internal life is not harmed.[127]

This voluntary service, which draws from the richness of the consecrated life, should be held in great esteem; it is however necessary to provide proper formation so that, besides being competent, volunteers always have supernaturally motivated intentions and, in their projects, a strong sense of community and of the Church.[128] Moreover, it should be borne in mind that initiatives involving laypersons at the decision-making level, in order to be considered the work of a specific Institute, must promote the ends of that Institute and be carried out under its responsibility. Therefore, if laypersons take on a directive role, they will be accountable for their actions to the competent Superiors. It is necessary for all this to be examined and regulated by special directives in each Institute, to be approved by higher authority; these directives should indicate the respective responsibilities of the Institute itself, of its communities, associate members and volunteers.

Consecrated persons, sent by their Superiors and remaining subject to them, can take part in specific forms of cooperation in lay initiatives, particularly in organizations and institutions which work with those on the margins of society and which have the purpose of alleviating human suffering. Such collaboration, if prompted and sustained by a clear and strong Christian identity and respectful of the particular character of the consecrated life, can make the radiant power of the Gospel shine forth brightly even in the darkest

situations of human life.

In recent years many consecrated persons have become members of one or other of the ecclesial movements, which have spread in our time. From these experiences, those involved usually draw benefit, especially in the area of spiritual renewal. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that in certain cases this involvement causes uneasiness and disorientation at the personal or community level, especially when these experiences come into conflict with the demands of the common life or of the Institute's spirituality. It is therefore necessary to take care that membership in these ecclesial movements does not endanger the charism or discipline of the Institute of origin [129] and that all is done with the permission of Superiors and with the full intention of accepting their decisions.

The dignity and role of consecrated women

57. The Church fully reveals her varied- spiritual richness when she overcomes all discrimination and welcomes as a true blessing the gifts lavished by God upon both men and women, considering them in their equal dignity. By virtue of their dedication lived in fullness and in joy, consecrated women are called in a very special way to be signs of God's tender love toward the human race, and to be special witnesses to the mystery of the Church, Virgin, Bride and Mother.[130] This mission of theirs was noted by the Synod, in which many consecrated women participated and made their voices heard. Those voices were listened to and appreciated. Thanks also to their contribution, useful directions for the Church's life and her evangelizing mission have emerged. Certainly the validity of many assertions relating to the position of women in different sectors of society and of the Church cannot be denied. It is equally important to point out that women's new self-awareness also helps men to reconsider their way of looking at things, the way they understand themselves, where they place themselves in history and how they interpret it, and the way they organize social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial life.

Having received from Christ a message of liberation, the Church has the mission to proclaim this message prophetically, promoting ways of thinking and acting which correspond to the mind of the Lord. In this context the consecrated woman, on the basis of her experience of the Church and as a woman in the Church, can help eliminate certain one-sided perspectives which do not fully recognize her dignity and her specific contribution to the Church's life and pastoral and missionary activity. Consecrated women therefore rightly aspire to have their identity, ability, mission and responsibility more clearly recognized, both in the awareness of the Church and in everyday life.

Likewise, the future of the new evangelization, as of all other forms of missionary activity, is unthinkable without a renewed contribution from women, especially consecrated women.

New possibilities of presence and action

58. It is therefore urgently necessary to take certain concrete steps, beginning by providing room for women to participate, in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves.

Moreover, the formation of consecrated women, no less than that of men, should be adapted to modern needs and should provide sufficient time and suitable institutional opportunities for a systematic education extending to all areas from the theological-pastoral to the professional. Pastoral and catechetical formation,

always important, is particularly relevant in view of the new evangelization, which calls for new forms of participation also on the part of women.

Clearly a more solid formation, while helping consecrated women to understand better their own gifts, cannot but encourage within the Church the reciprocity which is needed. In the field of theological, cultural and spiritual studies, much can be expected from the genius of women, not only in relation to specific aspects of feminine consecrated life, but also in understanding the faith in all its expressions. In this regard the history of spirituality owes much to saints like Teresa of Jesus and Catherine of Siena, the first two women to be given the title "Doctor of the Church," and to so many other mystics for the exploration of the mystery of God and their analysis of his action in believers! The Church depends a great deal on consecrated women for new efforts in fostering Christian doctrine and morals, family and social life, and especially in everything that affects the dignity of women and respect for human life.[131] In fact, "women, occupy a place in thought and action which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a 'new feminism' which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination' in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation.[132]

There is reason to hope that a fuller acknowledgment of the mission of women will provide feminine consecrated life with a heightened awareness of its specific role and increased dedication to the cause of the Kingdom of God. This will be expressed in many different works such as involvement in evangelization, educational activities, participation in the formation of future priests and consecrated persons, animating Christian communities, giving spiritual support and promoting the fundamental values of life and peace. To consecrated women and their extraordinary capacity for dedication, I once again express the gratitude and admiration of the whole Church, which supports them so that they will live their vocation fully and joyfully, and feel called to the great task of helping to educate the woman of today.

II. Continuity in the Work of the Spirit: Faithfulness in the Course of Change

Cloistered nuns

59. The monastic life of women and the cloister deserve special attention because of the great esteem in which the Christian community holds this type of life, which is a sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord, whom she loves above all things. Indeed, the life of cloistered nuns, devoted in a special way to prayer, to asceticism and diligent progress in the spiritual life, "is nothing other than a journey to the heavenly Jerusalem and an anticipation of the eschatological Church immutable in its possession and contemplation of God"[133] In the light of this vocation and ecclesial mission, the cloister responds to the need, felt as paramount, to be with the Lord,. Choosing an enclosed space where they will live their lives, cloistered nuns share in Christ's emptying of himself by means of a radical poverty expressed in their renunciation not only of things but also of "space," of contacts, of so many benefits of creation. This particular way of offering up the "body" allows them to enter more fully into the Eucharist mystery. They offer themselves with Jesus for the world's salvation. Their offering, besides its elements of sacrifice and expiation, takes on the aspect of thanksgiving to the Father by sharing in the thanksgiving of the beloved Son.

Rooted in this profound spiritual aspiration, the cloister is not only an ascetic practice of very great value, but as a way of living Christ's Passover,[134] From being an experience of "death," it becomes a

superabundance of life, representing a joyful proclamation and prophetic anticipation of the possibility offered to every person and to the whole of humanity to live solely for God in Christ Jesus (cf. Rom. 6: 11). The cloister brings to mind that place in the heart, where every person is called to union with the Lord. Accepted as a gift and chosen as a free response of love, the cloister is the place of spiritual communion with God and with the brethren, where the limitation of space and contacts works to the advantage of interiorizing Gospel values (cf. Jn. 13:34; Mt. 5:3, 8).

Even in the simplicity of their life, cloistered communities, set like cities on a hilltop or lights on a lampstand (cf. Mt. 5:14-15), visibly represent the goal toward which the entire community of the Church travels. "Eager to act and yet devoted to contemplation,"[135] the Church advances down the paths of time with her eyes fixed on the future restoration of all things in Christ, when she will appear "in glory with her Spouse (cf. Col. 3:1-

4),"[136] and Christ will deliver "the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power ... that God may be everything to everyone" (1 Cor. 15:24, 28).

To these dear sisters, therefore, I extend my gratitude and I encourage them to remain faithful to the cloistered life according to their particular charism. Thanks to their example, this way of life continues to draw many vocations, attracting people by the radical nature of a "spousal" existence dedicated totally to God in contemplation. As an expression of pure love, which is worth more than any work, the contemplative life generates an extraordinary apostolic and missionary effectiveness.[137]

The Synod Fathers expressed great esteem for the cloistered life while at the same time giving attention to requests made by some with respect to its concrete discipline. The Synod's suggestions in this regard and especially the desire that provision be made for giving Major Superiors more authority to grant dispensations from enclosure for just and sufficient reason [138] will be carefully considered in the light of the path of renewal already undertaken since the Second Vatican Council.[139] In this way, the various forms and degrees of cloister—from papal and constitutional cloister to monastic cloister—will better correspond to the variety of contemplative Institutes and monastic traditions.

As the Synod itself emphasized, associations, and federations, of monasteries are to be encouraged, as already recommended by Pope Pius XII and the Second Vatican Council [140] especially where there are no other effective forms of coordination or help, with a view to safeguarding and promoting the values of contemplative life. Such bodies, which must always respect the legitimate autonomy of monasteries, can in fact offer valuable help in adequately resolving common problems such as appropriate renewal, initial and continuing formation, mutual economic support and even the reorganization of the monasteries themselves.

Religious Brothers

60. According to the traditional doctrine of the Church, the consecrated life by its nature is neither lay nor clerical. [141] For this reason the "lay consecration" of both men and women constitutes a state which in its profession of the evangelical counsels is complete in itself.[142] Consequently, both for the individual and for the Church it is a value in itself apart from the sacred ministry.

Following the teaching of the Second Vatican Council [143] the Synod expressed great esteem for the kind of consecrated life in which religious brothers provide valuable services of various kinds, inside or outside the

community, participating in this way in the mission of proclaiming the Gospel and bearing witness to it with charity in everyday life. Indeed, some of these services can be considered ecclesial ministries, granted by legitimate authority. This requires an appropriate and integral formation: human, spiritual, theological, pastoral and professional.

According to the terminology currently in use, Institutes which by reason of their founders' design or by legitimate tradition have a character and purpose which do not entail the exercise of Holy Orders are called "Lay Institutes".[144] Nonetheless the Synod pointed out that this terminology does not adequately express the particular nature of the vocation of the members of these Religious Institutes. In fact, although they perform many works in common with the lay faithful, these men do so insofar as they are consecrated and thereby express the spirit of total self-giving to Christ and the Church, in accordance with their specific charism.

For this reason the Synod Fathers, in order to avoid ambiguity and confusion with the secular state of the lay faithful [145] proposed the term Religious Institutes of Brothers,[146] This proposal is significant, especially when we consider that the term "brother" suggests a rich spirituality. "These Religious are called to be brothers of Christ, deeply united with him, 'the firstborn among many brothers' (Rom. 8:29); brothers to one another in mutual love and working together in the Church in the same service of what is good; brothers to everyone in their witness to Christ's love for all, especially the lowliest, the neediest; brothers for a greater brotherhood in the Church." [147] By living in a special way this aspect of Christian and consecrated life, Religious Brothers are an effective reminder to Religious Priests themselves of the fundamental dimension of brotherhood in Christ, to be lived among themselves and with every man and woman, and they proclaim to all the Lord's words: "And you are all brothers" (Mt. 23:8).

In these Religious Institutes of brothers nothing prevents certain members from receiving Holy Orders for the priestly service of the religious community, provided that this is approved by the General Chapter.[148] However, the Second Vatican Council does not give any explicit encouragement for this, precisely because it wishes Institutes of Brothers to remain faithful to their vocation and mission. The same holds true with regard to assuming the office of Superior, since that office reflects in a special way the nature of the Institute itself.

The vocation of Brothers in what are known as clerical Institutes is different since, according to the design of the founder or by reason of legitimate tradition, these Institutes presuppose the exercise of holy orders, are governed by clerics and as such are approved by Church authority.[149] In these Institutes the sacred ministry is constitutive of the charism itself and determines its nature, purpose and spirit" The Presence of Brothers constitutes a different form of participation in an Institute's mission, through services rendered both within the community and in the apostolate in collaboration with those who exercise the priestly ministry.

Mixed Institutes

61. Some Religious Institutes, which in the founder's original design were envisaged as a brotherhood in which all the members, priests and those who were not priests, were considered equal among themselves, have acquired a different form with the passing of time. It is necessary that these Institutes, known as mixed, evaluate on the basis of a deeper understanding of their founding charism whether it is appropriate and possible to return to their original inspiration.

The Synod Fathers expressed the hope that in these Institutes all the religious would be recognized as having equal rights and obligations, with the exception of those which stem from Holy Orders.[150] A special Commission has been established to examine and resolve the problems connected with this issue; it is necessary to await this Commission's conclusions before coming to suitable decisions in accordance with what will be authoritatively determined.

New Forms of the evangelical life

62. The Spirit, who at different times has inspired numerous forms of consecrated life, does not cease to assist the Church, whether by fostering in already existing Institutes a commitment to renewed faithfulness to the founding charism or by giving new charisms to men and women of our own day so that they can start institutions responding to the challenges of our times. A sign of this divine intervention is to be found in the so-called new Foundations, which display new characteristics compared to those of traditional Foundations.

The originality of the new communities often consists in the fact that they are composed of mixed groups of men and women, of clerics and laypersons, of married couples and celibates, all of whom pursue a particular style of life. These communities are sometimes inspired by one or other traditional form adapted to the needs of modern society. Their commitment to the evangelical life also takes on different forms, while, as a general rule, they are all characterized by an intense aspiration to community life, poverty and prayer. Both clerics and laypersons share in the duties of governing according to the responsibilities assigned to them, and the apostolate focuses on the demands of the new evangelization.

If on one hand there is reason to rejoice at the Holy Spirit's action, there is on the other a need for discernment regarding these charisms. A fundamental principle when speaking of the consecrated life is that the specific features of the new communities and their styles of life must be founded on the essential theological and canonical elements proper to the consecrated life.[151] This discernment is necessary at both the local and universal level in order to manifest a common obedience to the one Spirit. In Dioceses, Bishops should examine the witness of life and the orthodoxy of the founders of such communities, their spirituality, the ecclesial awareness shown in carrying out their mission, the methods of formation and the manner of incorporation into the community. They should wisely evaluate possible weaknesses, watching patiently for the sign of results (cf. Mt. 7:16), so that they may acknowledge the authenticity of the charism.[152] In a special way Bishops are required to determine, according to clearly established criteria, the suitability of any members of these communities who wish to receive Holy Orders.[153]

Worthy of praise are those forms of commitment which some Christian married couples assume in certain associations and movements. They confirm by means of a vow the obligation of chastity proper to the married state and, without neglecting their duties toward their children, profess poverty and obedience. [154] They do so with the intention of bringing to the perfection of charity their love, already "consecrated" in the Sacrament of Matrimony.[155] However, by reason of the above-mentioned principle of discernment, these forms of commitment cannot be included in the specific category of the consecrated life. This necessary clarification regarding the nature of such experiences in no way intends to underestimate this particular path of holiness, from which the action of the Holy Spirit, infinitely rich in gifts and inspirations, is certainly not absent.

In view of such a wealth of gifts and creative energies, it seems appropriate to set up a Commission to deal with questions relating to new forms of consecrated life,. The purpose of this Commission will be to

determine criteria of authenticity which will help discernment and decision making.[156] Among its other tasks, this Commission will evaluate in the light of the experience of recent decades which new forms of consecration can, with pastoral prudence and to the advantage of all, be officially approved by Church authority in order to be proposed to the faithful who are seeking a more perfect Christian life.

New associations of evangelical life are not alternatives, to already existing Institutions, which continue to hold the pre-eminent place assigned to them by tradition. Nonetheless, the new forms are also a gift of the Spirit, enabling the Church to follow her Lord in a constant outpouring of generosity, attentive to God's invitations revealed through the signs of the times. Thus the Church appears before the world with many forms of holiness and service, as "a kind of instrument or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of mankind." [157] The older Institutes, many of which have been tested by the severest of hardships, which they have accepted courageously down the centuries, can be enriched through dialogue and an exchange of gifts with the Foundations appearing in our own day.

In this way the vigor of the different forms of consecrated life, from the oldest to the most recent, as well as the vitality of the new communities will renew faithfulness to the Holy Spirit, who is the source of communion and unceasing newness of life.

III. Looking to the Future

Difficulties and future prospects

63. The changes taking place in society and the decrease in the number of vocations are weighing heavily on the consecrated life in some regions of the world. The apostolic works of many Institutes and their very presence in certain local Churches are endangered. As has already occurred at other times in history, there are Institutes which even run the risk of disappearing altogether. The universal Church is profoundly grateful for the great contribution which these Institutes have made to building her up through their witness and service.[158] The trials of the present do not take away from their merits and the positive results of their efforts.

For other Institutes, there is the problem of reassessing their apostolate. This task, which is difficult and often painful, requires study and discernment in the light of certain criteria. For example, it is necessary to safeguard the significance of an Institute's own charism, to foster community life, to be attentive to the needs of both the universal and particular Church, to show concern for what the world neglects, and to respond generously and boldly to the new forms of poverty through concrete efforts, even if necessarily on a small scale, and above all in the most abandoned areas.[159]

The various difficulties stemming from the decline in personnel and apostolate must in no way lead to a loss of confidence in the evangelical vitality of the consecrated life, which will always be present and active in the Church. While individual Institutes have no claim to permanence, the consecrated life itself will continue to sustain among the faithful the response of love toward God and neighbor. Thus it is necessary to distinguish the historical destiny, of a specific Institute or form of consecrated life from the ecclesial mission, of the consecrated life as such. The former is affected by changing circumstances; the latter is destined to perdure.

This is true of both the contemplative and apostolic forms of consecrated life. On the whole, under the ever

creative guidance of the Spirit the consecrated life is destined to remain a shining witness to the inseparable unity of love of God and love of neighbor. It appears as the living memory of the fruitfulness of God's love. New situations of difficulty are therefore to be faced with the serenity of those who know that what is required of each individual is not success, but commitment to faithfulness. What must be avoided at all costs is the actual breakdown of the consecrated life, a collapse which is not measured by a decrease in numbers but by a failure to cling steadfastly to the Lord and to personal vocation and mission. Rather, by persevering faithfully in the consecrated life, consecrated persons confess with great effectiveness before the world their unwavering trust in the Lord of history, in whose hands are the history and destiny of individuals, institutions and peoples, and therefore also the realization in time of his gifts. Sad situations of crisis invite consecrated persons courageously to proclaim their faith in Christ's Death and Resurrection that they may become a visible sign of the passage from death to life.

Fresh efforts in the promotion of vocations

64. The mission of the consecrated life, as well as the vitality of Institutes, undoubtedly depends on the faithful commitment with which consecrated persons respond to their vocation. But they have a future to the extent that still other men and women generously welcome the Lord's call. The problem of vocations is a real challenge which directly concerns the various Institutes but also involves the whole Church. Great spiritual and material energies are being expended in the sphere of vocational promotion, but the results do not always match expectations and efforts. Thus, while vocations to the consecrated life are flourishing in the young Churches and in those which suffered persecution at the hands of totalitarian regimes, they are lacking in countries traditionally rich in vocations, including vocations for the missions.

This difficult situation puts consecrated persons to the test. Sometimes they ask themselves: Have we perhaps lost the capacity to attract new vocations? They must have confidence in the Lord Jesus, who continues to call men and women to follow him. They must entrust themselves to the Holy Spirit, who inspires and bestows the charisms of the consecrated life. Therefore, while we rejoice in the action of the Spirit who rejuvenates the Bride of Christ by enabling the consecrated life to flourish in many nations, we must also pray unceasingly to the Lord of the harvest that he will send workers to his Church in order to meet the needs of the new evangelization (cf. Mt. 9:37-38). Besides promoting prayer for vocations, it is essential to act, by means of explicit presentation and appropriate catechesis, with a view to encouraging in those called to the consecrated life that free, willing and generous response which carries into effect the grace of vocation.

The invitation of Jesus, "Come and see" (Jn. 1:39), is the golden rule, of pastoral work for promoting vocations even today. Following the example of founders and foundresses, this work aims at presenting the attraction of the person of the Lord Jesus, and the beauty of the total gift of self for the sake of the Gospel. A primary responsibility of all consecrated men and women is therefore to propose with courage, by word and example, the ideal of the following of Christ and then to support the response to the Spirit's action in the heart of those who are called.

After the enthusiasm of the first meeting with Christ, there comes the constant struggle of everyday life, a struggle which turns a vocation into a tale of friendship with the Lord. In view of this, the pastoral work of promoting vocations should make use of suitable help such as spiritual direction, in order to nourish that personal response of love of the Lord which is the necessary condition for becoming disciples and apostles of his Kingdom. Moreover, if the flourishing of vocations evident in some parts of the world justifies optimism

and hope, the lack of them in other areas must not lead either to discouragement or to the temptation to practice lax and unwise recruitment. The task of promoting vocations should increasingly express a joint commitment of the whole Church .[160] It calls for the active collaboration of pastors, religious, families and teachers as required in something which forms an integral part of the overall pastoral plan of every particular Church. In every Diocese there should be this common endeavor, which coordinates and promotes the efforts of everyone, not jeopardizing, but rather supporting, the vocational activity of each Institute.[161]

The effective cooperation of the whole People of God, with the support of Providence, cannot but give rise to an abundance of divine gifts. Christian solidarity should abound in meeting the needs of vocational formation in countries which are economically poorer. The recruitment of vocations in these countries should be carried out by the various Institutes in full accord with the Churches of the region and on the basis of an active and long-term involvement in their pastoral life.[162] The most authentic way to support the Spirit's action is for Institutes to invest their best resources generously in vocational work, especially by their serious involvement in working with youth.

Commitment to initial formation

65. The Synod Assembly paid special attention to the formation, of those who wish to consecrate themselves to the Lord[163] and recognized its decisive importance. The primary objective, of the formation process is to prepare people for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church's mission. To say yes to the Lord's call by taking personal responsibility for maturing in one's vocation is the inescapable duty of all who have been called. One's whole life must be open to the action of the Holy Spirit, traveling the road of formation with generosity and accepting in faith the means of grace offered by the Lord and the Church.[164]

Formation should therefore have a profound effect on individuals, so that their every attitude and action at important moments as well as in the ordinary events of life will show that they belong completely and joyfully to God.[165] Since the very purpose of consecrated life is conformity to the Lord Jesus in his total self-giving[166] this must also be the principal objective of formation. Formation is a path of gradual identification with the attitude of Christ toward the Father.

If this is the purpose of the consecrated life, the manner of preparing for it should include and express the character of wholeness,. Formation should involve the whole person[167] in every aspect of the personality, in behavior and intentions. Precisely because it aims at the transformation of the whole person, it is clear that the commitment of formation never, ends. Indeed, at every stage of life, consecrated persons must be offered opportunities to grow in their commitment to the charism and mission of their Institute.

For formation to be complete, it must include every aspect of Christian life. It must therefore provide a human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation which pays special attention to the harmonious integration of all its various aspects. Sufficient time should be reserved for initial formation, understood as a process of development which passes through every stage of personal maturity—from the psychological and spiritual to the theological and pastoral. In the case of those studying for the priesthood, this initial formation coincides with and fits well into a specific course of studies as part of a broader formation program.

The work of those responsible for formation

66. God the Father, through the unceasing gift of Christ and the Spirit, is the educator par excellence, of those who consecrate themselves to him. But in this work he makes use of human instruments, placing more mature brothers and sisters at the side of those whom he calls. Formation then is a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women. Those in charge of formation must therefore be very familiar with the path of seeking God, so as to be able to accompany others on this journey.

Sensitive to the action of grace, they will also be able to point out those obstacles which are less obvious. But above all they will disclose the beauty of following Christ and the value of the charism by which this is accomplished. They will combine the illumination of spiritual wisdom with the light shed by human means, which can be a help both in discerning the call and in forming the new man or woman until they are genuinely free. The chief instrument of formation is personal dialogue, a practice of irreplaceable and commendable effectiveness which should take place regularly and with a certain frequency.

Because sensitive tasks are involved, the training of suitable directors of formation who will fulfill their task in a spirit of communion with the whole Church is very important. It will be helpful to establish appropriate structures for the training of those responsible for formation, preferably in places where they can be in contact with the culture in which their pastoral service will later be carried out. In the work of formation, the more solidly established Institutes should help those of more recent foundation by contributing some of their best members.[168]

Formation in community and for the apostolate

67. Since formation must also have a communal, dimension, the community is the chief place of formation in Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Initiation into the hardships and joys of community life takes place in the community itself. Through the fraternal life each one learns to live with those whom God has put at his or her side, accepting their positive traits along with their differences and limitations. Each one learns to share the gifts received for the building up of all, because "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (I Cor. 12:7).[169] At the same time, from the moment of initial formation community life must disclose the essential missionary dimension of consecration. Thus, during the period of initial formation, Institutes of Consecrated Life do well to provide practical experiences which are prudently followed by the one responsible for formation, enabling candidates to test in the context of the local culture their skills for the apostolate, their ability to adapt and their spirit of initiative.

On the one hand, it is important for consecrated persons gradually to develop a critical judgment based on the Gospel regarding the positive and negative values of their own culture and of the culture in which they will eventually work. On the other hand, they must be trained in the difficult art of interior harmony, of the interaction between love of God and love of one's brothers and sisters; they must likewise learn that prayer is the soul of the apostolate, but also that the apostolate animates and inspires prayer.

The need for a complete and updated "ratio"

68. A definite period of formation extending up to final profession is recommended both for women's Institutes and for men's Institutes as regards Religious Brothers. Essentially, this is also true for cloistered communities, which ought to set up suitable programs aimed at imparting a genuine preparation for the

contemplative life and its particular mission in the Church.

The Synod Fathers earnestly asked all Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to draw up as soon as possible, a *ratio institutionis*, that is, a formation program inspired by their particular charism presenting clearly and in all its stages the course to be followed in order to assimilate fully the spirituality of the respective Institute. The ratio, responds to a pressing need today. On the one hand it shows how to pass on the Institute's spirit so that it will be lived in its integrity by future generations in different cultures and geographical regions; on the other hand it explains to consecrated persons how to live that spirit in the different stages of life on the way to full maturity of faith in Christ.

While it is true that the renewal of the consecrated life depends primarily on formation, it is equally certain that this training is in turn linked to the ability to establish a method characterized by spiritual and pedagogical wisdom, which will gradually lead those wishing to consecrate themselves to put on the mind of Christ the Lord. Formation is a dynamic process by means of which individuals are converted to the Word of God in the depths of their being and at the same time learn how to discover the signs of God in earthly realities. At a time when religious values are increasingly being ignored by society, this plan of formation is doubly important: As a result of it, consecrated persons will not only continue to "see" God with the eyes of faith in a world which ignores his presence, but will also be effective in making his presence in some way "perceptible" through the witness of their charism.

Continuing formation

69. Continuing formation, whether in Institutes of apostolic or contemplative life, is an intrinsic requirement of religious consecration. As mentioned above, the formation process is not limited to the initial phase. Due to human limitations, the consecrated person can never claim to have completely brought to life the "new creature" who in every circumstance of life reflects the very mind of Christ. Initial, formation, then, should be closely connected with continuing, formation, thereby creating a readiness on everyone's part to let themselves be formed every day of their lives.[170]

Consequently, it will be very important for every Institute to provide as part of its *ratio institutionis*, a precise and systematic description of its plan of continuing formation. The chief purpose of this plan is to provide all consecrated persons with a program which encompasses their whole life. None are exempt from the obligation to grow humanly and as Religious; by the same token, no one can be overconfident and live in self-sufficient isolation. At no stage of life can people feel so secure and committed that they do not need to give careful attention to ensuring perseverance in faithfulness; just as there is no age at which a person has completely achieved maturity.

In a constant search for faithfulness

70. There is a youthfulness of spirit which lasts through time; it arises from the fact that at every stage of life a person seeks and finds a new task to fulfill, a particular way of being, of serving and of loving.[171]

In the consecrated life the first years of full involvement in the apostolate, are a critical stage marked by the passage from a supervised life to a situation of full responsibility for one's work,. It is important that young consecrated persons be supported and accompanied by a brother or sister who helps them to live to the full

the freshness of their love and enthusiasm for Christ.

The next stage can present the risk of routine, and the subsequent temptation to give in to disappointment because of meager results. Middle-aged consecrated persons must therefore be helped, in the light of the Gospel and the charism of their Institute, to renew their original decision and not confuse the completeness of their dedication with the degree of good results. This will enable them to give a fresh impulse and new motivations to their decision. This is the time to search for what is essential.

The stage of maturity, while it brings personal growth, can also bring the danger of a certain individualism, accompanied either by a fear of not being in line with the times or by forms of inflexibility, self-centeredness or diminished enthusiasm. At this point continuing formation is aimed at helping not only to bring back a higher level of spiritual and apostolic life, but also at discovering the special characteristics of this stage of life. For at this time, after refining certain features of the personality, the gift of self is made to God more genuinely and with greater generosity; it extends to others with greater serenity and wisdom as well as with greater simplicity and richness of grace. This is the gift and experience of spiritual fatherhood and motherhood.

Advanced age, poses new problems, which can be prepared for by a discerning program of spiritual support. The gradual withdrawal from activity, sometimes caused by sickness or forced immobility, can be a very formative experience. Often a time of suffering, advanced age nonetheless offers to elderly consecrated persons the chance to be transformed by the Paschal experience[172] by being configured to the Crucified Christ, who fulfills the Father's will in all things and abandons himself into the Father's hands even to the surrendering of his spirit to him. This configuration represents a new way of living one's consecration which is not tied to effectiveness in carrying out administrative responsibilities or apostolic work.

When the moment finally comes for uniting oneself to the supreme hour of the Lord's passion, the consecrated person knows that the Father is now bringing to completion the mysterious process of formation which began many years before. Death will then be awaited and prepared for as the supreme act of love and self-offering.

It should be added that, independently of the different stages of life, any period can present critical situations due to external factors—such as a change of place or assignment, difficulties in work or lack of success in the apostolate, misunderstandings and feelings of alienation—or resulting from more directly personal factors such as physical or mental illness, spiritual aridity, deaths, difficulties in interpersonal relations, strong temptations, crises of faith or identity, or feelings of uselessness. When fidelity becomes more difficult, the individual must be offered the support of greater trust and deeper love at both the personal and community levels. At such times the sensitive closeness of the Superior is most essential. Great comfort can also come from the valuable help of a brother or sister, whose concerned and caring presence can lead to a rediscovery of the meaning of the covenant which God originally established and which he has no intention of breaking. The person undergoing such a trial will then accept purification and hardship as essential to the following of Christ crucified. The trial itself will appear as a providential means of being formed by the Father's hands and as a struggle which is not only psychological, carried out by the "I" in relation to itself and its weaknesses, but also religious, touched each day by the presence of God and the power of the Cross!

Dimensions of continuing formation

71. If the subject of formation is the individual at every stage of life, the object of formation is the whole person, called to seek and love God "with all one's heart, and with all one's soul, and with all one's might" (cf. Dt. 6:5), and one's neighbor as oneself (cf. Lv. 19:18; Mt. 22:37-39). Love of God and of the brethren is a powerful force which can ceaselessly inspire the process of growth and fidelity. Life in the Spirit, is clearly of primary importance. Living in the Spirit, consecrated persons discover their own identity and find profound peace; they grow more attentive to the daily challenges of the word of God, and they allow themselves to be guided by the original inspiration of their Institute. Under the action of the Spirit, they resolutely keep times for prayer, silence and solitude, and they never cease to ask the Almighty for the gift of wisdom in the struggles of everyday life (cf. Wis. 9:10).

The human and fraternal dimensions, of the consecrated life call for self-knowledge and the awareness of personal limitations so as to offer its members the inspiration and support needed on the path toward perfect freedom. In present-day circumstances, special importance must be given to the interior freedom of consecrated persons, their affective maturity, their ability to communicate with others, especially in their own community, their serenity of spirit, their compassion for those who are suffering, their love for the truth and a correspondence between their actions and their words.

The apostolic dimension, opens the hearts and minds of consecrated persons and prepares them for constant effort in the apostolate as the sign that it is the love of Christ which urges them on (cf. 2 Cor. 5:14). In practice, this will involve updating the methods and objectives of apostolic works in fidelity to the spirit and aims of the founder or foundress and to subsequently emerging traditions, with continuous attention to changing historical and cultural conditions at the general and local levels where the apostolate is carried out.

The cultural and professional dimensions, based upon a solid theological training which provides the means for wise discernment, involve continual updating and special interest in the different areas to which each charism is directed. Consecrated persons must therefore keep themselves as intellectually open and adaptable as possible so that the apostolate will be envisaged and carried out according to the needs of their own time, making use of the means provided by cultural progress.

Finally, all these elements are united in the dimension of the charism, proper to each Institute, as it were in a synthesis which calls for a constant deepening of one's own special consecration in all its aspects, not only apostolic but also ascetical and mystical. This means that each member should study diligently the spirit, history and mission of the Institute to which he or she belongs in order to advance the personal and communal assimilation of its charism.[173]

CHAPTER 3: "SERVITIUM CARITATIS"

Consecrated Life: Manifestation of God's Love in the World

Consecrated for mission

72. In the image of Jesus, the beloved Son "whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world" (Jn. 10:36), those whom God calls to follow him are also consecrated and sent into the world to imitate his example and to continue his mission. Fundamentally, this is true of every disciple. In a special way, however, it is true of those who, in the manner that characterizes the consecrated life, are called to follow Christ "more closely" and to make him the "all" of their lives. The task of devoting themselves wholly to "mission", is

therefore included in their call; indeed, by the action of the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of every vocation and charism, consecrated life itself is a mission, as was the whole of Jesus' life. The profession of the evangelical counsels, which makes a person totally free for the service of the Gospel, is important also from this point of view. It can therefore be said that sense of mission is essential to every Institute, not only those dedicated to the active apostolic life, but also those dedicated to the contemplative life.

Indeed, more than in external works, the mission consists in making Christ present to the world through personal witness. This is the challenge, this is the primary task of the consecrated life! The more consecrated persons allow themselves to be conformed to Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in the world for the salvation of all.

Thus it can be said that consecrated persons are "in mission" by virtue of their very consecration, to which they bear witness in accordance with the ideal of their Institute. When the founding charism provides for pastoral activities, it is obvious that the witness of life and the witness of works of the apostolate and human development are equally necessary: Both mirror Christ who is at one and the same time consecrated to the glory of the Father and sent into the world for the salvation of his brothers and sisters.[174]

Religious life, moreover, continues the mission of Christ with another feature specifically its own: fraternal life in community for the sake of the mission,. Thus, men and women religious will be all the more committed to the apostolate the more personal their dedication to the Lord Jesus is, the more fraternal their community life and the more ardent their involvement in the Institute's specific mission.

At the service of God and humanity

73. The consecrated life has the prophetic task of recalling and serving the divine plan for humanity, as it is announced in Scripture and as it emerges from an attentive reading of the signs of God's providential action in history. This is the plan for the salvation and reconciliation of humanity (cf. Col. 2:20-22). To carry out this service appropriately, consecrated persons must have a profound experience of God and be aware of the challenges of their time, understanding the profound theological meaning of these challenges through a discernment made with the help of the Spirit. In fact, it is often through historical events that we discern God's hidden call to work according to his plan by active and effective involvement in the events of our time.[175]

Discerning the signs of the times, as the Council affirms, must be done in the light of the Gospel, so as to "respond to the perennial questions which people ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other." [176] It is necessary, therefore, to be open to the interior promptings of the Holy Spirit, who invites us to understand in depth the designs of Providence. He calls consecrated men and women to present new answers to the new problems of today's world. These are divine pleas which only souls accustomed to following God's will in everything can assimilate faithfully and then translate courageously into choices which are consistent with the original charism and which correspond to the demands of the concrete historical situation.

Faced with the many and pressing problems which sometimes seem to compromise or even overwhelm the consecrated life, those called to it cannot fail to feel the commitment to bear in their hearts and in their prayer the entire world's needs, while at the same time they work with zeal in the fields determined by the founding charism. Clearly, their dedication must be guided by supernatural discernment, which distinguishes what is

of the Spirit from that which is contrary to him (cf. Gal. 5:16-17, 22; 1 Jn. 4:6). By means of fidelity to the Rules and Constitutions, this discernment safeguards full communion with the Church.[177]

In this way the consecrated life will not be limited to reading the signs of the times but will also contribute to elaborating and putting into effect few initiatives of evangelization, for present-day situations. All this will be done in the certainty of faith that the Spirit can give satisfactory replies even to the most difficult questions. In this regard, we would do well to remember what the great champions of apostolic activity have always taught, namely, that we need to trust in God as if everything depended on him and at the same time to work generously as if everything depended on us.

Ecclesial co-operation and apostolic spirituality

74. Everything must be done in communion and dialogue, with all other sectors of the Church. The challenges of evangelization are such that they cannot be effectively faced without the cooperation both in discernment and action of all the Church's members. It is difficult for individuals to provide a definitive answer; but such an answer can arise from encounter and dialogue. In particular, effective communion among those graced with different charisms will ensure both mutual enrichment and more fruitful results in the mission in hand. The experience of recent years widely confirms that "dialogue is the new name of charity,"[178] especially charity within the Church. Dialogue helps us to see the true implications of problems and allows them to be addressed with greater hope of success. The consecrated life, by the very fact that it promotes the value of fraternal life, provides a privileged experience of dialogue. It can therefore contribute to creating a climate of mutual acceptance in which the Church's various components, feeling that they are valued for what they are, come together in ecclesial communion in a more convinced manner, ready to undertake the great universal mission.

Institutes involved in one or other form of the apostolate must therefore foster solid spirituality of action, seeing God in all things and all things in God. In fact, "it is necessary to know that just as a well-ordered life tends to pass from the active to the contemplative, so the soul generally returns with profit from the contemplative life to the active life in order more perfectly to sustain the active life with the flame ignited in contemplation. Thus, the active life ought to lead to contemplation and sometimes, from what we see interiorly, contemplation should more effectively call us back to action." [179] Jesus himself gave us the perfect example of how we can link communion with the Father to an intensely active life. Without a constant search for this unity, the danger of an interior breakdown, of confusion and discouragement, lurks always near. Today as yesterday the close union between contemplation and action will allow the most difficult missions to be undertaken.

I. Love to the End

Loving with the heart of Christ

75. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. And during supper ... Jesus rose ... and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded" (Jn. 13:1-2, 4-5).

In the washing of feet Jesus reveals the depth of God's love for humanity: In Jesus, God places himself at the service of human beings! At the same time he reveals the meaning of the Christian life and, even more, of the

consecrated life, which in is a life of self-giving love, of practical and generous service. In its commitment to following the Son of man, who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mt. 20:28), the consecrated life, at least in the best periods of its long history, has been characterized by this "washing of feet," that is, by service directed in particular to the poorest and neediest. If, on the one hand, the consecrated life contemplates the sublime mystery of the Word in the bosom of the Father (cf. Jn. 1:1), on the other hand it follows the Word who became flesh (cf. Jn. 1:14), lowering himself, humbling himself in order to serve others. Even today those who follow Christ on the path of the evangelical counsels intend to go where Christ went and to do what he did.

He continually calls new disciples to himself, both men and women, to communicate to them by an outpouring of the Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:5) the divine agape, his way of loving, and to urge them thus to serve others in the humble gift of themselves, far from all self-interest. Peter, overcome by the light of the Transfiguration, exclaims: "Lord, it is well that we are here" (Mt. 17:4), but he is invited to return to the byways of the world in order to continue serving the Kingdom of God: "Come down, Peter! You wanted to rest up on the mountain: Come down. Preach the word of God, be insistent both when it is timely and when it is not; reprove, exhort, give encouragement using all your forbearance and ability to teach. Work, spend yourself, accept even sufferings and torments, in order that, through the brightness and beauty of good works, you may possess in charity what is symbolized in the Lord's white garments." [180] The fact that consecrated persons fix their gaze on the Lord's countenance does not diminish their commitment on behalf of humanity; on the contrary, it strengthens this commitment, enabling it to have an impact on history, in order to free history from all that disfigures it.

The quest for divine beauty impels consecrated persons to care for the deformed image of God on the faces of their brothers and sisters, faces disfigured by hunger, faces disillusioned by political promises, faces humiliated by seeing their culture despised, faces frightened by constant and indiscriminate violence, the anguished faces of minors, the hurt and humiliated faces of women, the tired faces of migrants who are not given a warm welcome, the faces of the elderly who are without even the minimum conditions for a dignified life. [181] The consecrated life thus shows with the eloquence of works that divine charity is the foundation and stimulus of freely given and active love. St. Vincent de Paul was deeply convinced of this when he explained to the Daughters of Charity this program of life: The spirit of the Society consists in giving yourselves to God in order to love our Lord and to serve him in the person of the materially and spiritually poor, in their houses and elsewhere, in order to teach poor young girls, children, in general anybody whom Divine Providence sends you. [182]

Today, among the possible works of charity, certainly the one which in a special way shows the world this love "to the end" is the fervent proclamation of Jesus Christ to those who do not yet know him, to those who have forgotten him and to the poor in a preferential way.

The specific contribution of the consecrated life to evangelization

76. The specific contribution of consecrated persons, both men and women, to evangelization is first of all the witness of a life given totally to God and to their brothers and sisters in imitation of the Savior, who out of love for humanity made himself a servant. In the work of salvation, in fact, everything comes from sharing in the divine agape. Consecrated persons make visible in their consecration and total dedication the loving and saving presence of Christ, the one consecrated by the Father, sent in mission. [183] Allowing themselves to be won over by him (cf. Phil. 3:12), they prepare to become in a certain way a prolongation of his

humanity.[184] The consecrated life eloquently shows that the more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers.[185]

The first evangelization: proclaiming Christ to the nations

77. Those who love God, the Father of all, cannot fail to love their fellow human beings, whom they recognize as brothers and sisters. Precisely for this reason, they cannot remain indifferent to the fact that many men and women do not know the full manifestation of God's love in Christ. The result, in obedience to Christ's commandment, is the missionary drive *ad gentes*, which every committed Christian shares with the Church, which is missionary by nature. This drive is felt above all by the members of Institutes, whether of the contemplative or of the active life.[186] Consecrated persons, in fact, have the task of making present even among non Christians[187] Christ who is chaste, poor, obedient, prayerful and missionary.[188] While remaining ever faithful to their charism, they must know that they have a special share in the Church's missionary activity in virtue of their interior consecration made to God.[189] The desire so often expressed by Therese of Lisieux, "to love you and make you loved," the ardent longing of St. Francis Xavier that many, "meditating on what the Lord God will expect from them and from the talents he has given them, would be converted using the right means and the spiritual exercises to know and feel within themselves the divine will, and so, adapting themselves more to that will than to their own inclinations, they would say: 'Lord, here I am, what do you want me to do? Lead me wherever you will,'"[190] and other similar testimonies of countless holy men and women manifest the unsuppressible missionary drive which distinguishes and ennoble the consecrated life.

Present in every part of the world

78. The love of Christ impels us" (2 Cor. 5:14): The members of every Institute should be able to repeat this truth with St. Paul because the task of the consecrated life is to work in every part of the world in order to consolidate and expand the Kingdom of Christ, bringing the proclamation of the Gospel even to the most far-off regions.[191] In fact, the history of the missions testifies to the great contribution made by consecrated men and women to the evangelization of peoples: from ancient monastic Families to recent Foundations committed exclusively to the mission *ad gentes*, from Institutes of active life to those devoted to contemplation.[192] Countless consecrated persons have given their whole lives in this primary activity of the Church, which is "essential and never-ending"[193] because it is addressed to the growing number of those who do not know Christ.

Today too this duty continues to present a pressing call to Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life: They are expected to make the greatest possible contribution to the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ. Also those Institutes which are being established and are at work in the younger Churches are invited to open themselves to the mission among non-Christians, inside and outside their own countries of origin. Despite the understandable difficulties which some of them will meet, it is good to remind everyone that just as "faith is strengthened when it is given to others,"[194] so the mission strengthens the consecrated life, gives it new enthusiasm and new motivation, and elicits faithfulness. For its part, missionary activity offers ample room for all the different forms of the consecrated life.

The Church's mission *ad gentes*, offers consecrated women, religious brothers and members of Secular Institutes special and extraordinary opportunities for a particularly fruitful apostolate. The members of Secular Institutes, by their presence in fields more suited to the lay vocation, can engage in the valuable work

of evangelizing all sectors of society as well as the structures and the very laws which regulate it. Moreover, they can bear witness to Gospel values, living in contact with those who do not yet know Jesus, thus making a specific contribution to the mission.

It should be emphasized that in countries where non-Christian religions are firmly established, the presence of the consecrated life is of great importance, whether through its educational, charitable and cultural activities or through the witness of the contemplative life. For this reason the establishment of communities devoted to contemplation should be encouraged in the new Churches, since "the contemplative life belongs to the fullness of the Church's presence." [195] It is necessary, then, to use appropriate means to foster an equitable distribution of the various forms of consecrated life in order to give new momentum to evangelization, either by sending missionaries or by Institutes of Consecrated Life giving special help to poorer Dioceses. [196]

The proclamation of Christ and inculturation

79. The proclamation of Christ "is the permanent priority of mission" [197] and is directed toward conversion, that is, to full and sincere allegiance to Christ and his Gospel. [198] In the context of missionary activity the process of inculturation and interreligious dialogue have a role to play. The challenge of inculturation ought to be taken up by consecrated persons as a call to fruitful cooperation with grace in facing cultural diversity. This presupposes serious personal preparation, mature gifts of discernment, faithful adherence to the indispensable criteria of doctrinal orthodoxy, moral integrity and ecclesial communion. [199] Supported by the charism of their founders and foundresses, many consecrated persons have been able to approach cultures other than their own with the attitude of Jesus, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7). With patient and courageous efforts to initiate dialogue, they have been successful in establishing contact with the most diverse peoples, proclaiming to all of them the way of salvation. Today too, many consecrated persons are looking for and are finding in the history of individuals and of entire peoples the traces of God's presence, a presence guiding all humanity toward the discernment of the signs of his saving will. Such a search proves to be advantageous for consecrated persons themselves: The values discovered in the different civilizations can in fact prompt them to deepen their own understanding of the Christian tradition of contemplation, community sharing, hospitality, respect for persons and attention to the environment.

A genuine inculturation requires attitudes similar to those of the Lord when he became man and walked among us in love and meekness. In this sense the consecrated life makes its members particularly well-suited to face the complex work of inculturation, because it accustoms them to being detached from things, even from many features of their own culture. Applying themselves with these attitudes to the study and understanding of other cultures, consecrated persons can better discern the real values in them and the best way to accept them and perfect them with the help of their own charism. [200] However, it should not be forgotten that in many ancient cultures religious expression is so deeply ingrained that religion often represents the transcendent dimension of the culture itself. In this case true inculturation necessarily entails a serious and open interreligious dialogue, which "is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*," and "does not dispense from evangelization." [201]

The inculturation of the consecrated life

80. For its part, the consecrated life itself is the bearer of Gospel values, and where it is authentically lived it

can make an innovative contribution in meeting the challenges of inculturation. As a sign of the primacy of God and his Kingdom, it can through dialogue elicit a positive reaction in people's consciences. If the consecrated life maintains its prophetic impact, it serves as a Gospel leaven within a culture, purifying and perfecting it. This is demonstrated by the lives of many saints who in different periods of history were able to immerse themselves in their time without being overcome by it, but opening new paths to the people of their generation. The Gospel way of life is an important source for proposing a new cultural model. A great many founders and foundresses, perceiving certain needs of their time with all the limitations which they themselves recognized, have given these needs an answer which has become an innovative cultural proposal.

Communities of Religious Institutes and of Societies of Apostolic Life can in fact offer concrete and effective cultural proposals when they bear witness to the evangelical manner of practicing mutual acceptance in diversity and of exercising authority, and when they give an example of sharing material and spiritual goods, of being truly international, of cooperating with other Institutes and of listening to the men and women of our time. The manner of thinking and acting of those who follow Christ more closely gives rise to a true and proper point of reference for culture; it serves to point out all that is inhuman; it bears witness that God alone strengthens and perfects values. In turn, a genuine inculturation will help consecrated persons to live the radical nature of the Gospel according to the charism of their Institute and the character of the people with whom they come into contact. This fruitful relationship can give rise to ways of life and pastoral approaches which can bring enrichment to the whole Institute, provided that they are consistent with the founding charism and with the unifying action of the Holy Spirit. In this process, which entails discernment, courage, dialogue and the challenge of the Gospel, a guarantee of being on the right path is offered by the Holy See, whose task it is to encourage the evangelization of cultures as well as to authenticate developments and to sanction results in the area of inculturation.[202] This is "a difficult and delicate task, since it raises the question of the Church's fidelity to the Gospel and the Apostolic Tradition amid the constant evolution of cultures." [203]

The new evangelization

81. If the great challenges which modern history poses to the new evangelization are to be faced successfully, what is needed above all is a consecrated life which is continually open to challenge by the revealed word and the signs of the times.[204] The memory of the great evangelizers, both men and women, who were themselves profoundly evangelized, shows that in order to face the world of today it is necessary to have people who are lovingly dedicated to the Lord and his Gospel. "Consecrated persons, because of their specific vocation, are called to manifest the unity between self-evangelization and witness, between interior renewal and apostolic fervor, between being and acting, showing that dynamism arises always from the first element of each of these pairs." [205] The new evangelization, like that of all times, will be effective if it proclaims from the rooftops what it has first lived in intimacy with the Lord. It calls for strong personalities inspired by saintly fervor. The new evangelization demands that consecrated persons have a thorough awareness of the theological significance of the challenges of our time. These challenges must be weighed with careful joint discernment, with a view to renewing the mission. Courage in proclaiming the Lord Jesus must be accompanied by trust in Providence, which is at work in the world and which "orders everything, even human differences, for the greater good of the Church." [206]

Important elements enabling Institutes to play a successful part in new evangelization are fidelity to the founding charism, communion with all those who in the Church are involved in the same undertaking, especially the Bishops, and cooperation with all people of good will. All this requires a careful discernment

of the calls which the Holy Spirit makes to each Institute, whether in areas where no great immediate progress is foreseen or in other areas where a consoling rebirth is anticipated. In every place and circumstance consecrated persons should be zealous heralds of Jesus Christ, ready to respond with the wisdom of the Gospel to the questions posed today by the anxieties and the urgent needs of the human heart.

Preference for the poor and the promotion of justice

82. At the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus announces that the Spirit has consecrated him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, to give sight back to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to declare a year of favor from the Lord (cf. Lk. 4:16-19). Taking up the Lord's mission as her own, the Church proclaims the Gospel to every man and woman, committing herself to their integral salvation. But with special attention, in a true "preferential option," she turns to those who are in situations of greater weakness, and therefore in greater need. "The poor," in varied states of affliction, are the oppressed, those on the margin of society, the elderly, the sick, the young, any and all who are considered and treated as "the least."

The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. All of Christ's disciples are therefore held to this option; but those who wish to follow the Lord more closely, imitating his attitudes, cannot but feel involved in a very special way. The sincerity of their response to Christ's love will lead them to live a life of poverty and to embrace the cause of the poor. For each Institute, according to its charism, this involves adopting a simple and austere way of life, both as individuals and as a community. Strengthened by this living witness and in ways consistent with their choice of life, and maintaining their independence vis-à-vis political ideologies, consecrated persons will be able to denounce the injustices committed against so many sons and daughters of God, and commit themselves to the promotion of justice in the society where they work.[207] In this way, even in present circumstances, through the witness of countless consecrated persons there will be a renewal of that dedication which was characteristic of the founders and foundresses who spent their lives serving the Lord in the poor. Christ "is poor on earth in the person of his poor.... As God he is rich, as man he is poor. With his humanity he has gone up to heaven and, prosperous, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and yet, here on earth, still poor, he suffers hunger, thirst and nakedness." [208]

The Gospel is made effective through charity, which is the Church's glory and the sign of her faithfulness to the Lord. This is demonstrated by the whole history of the consecrated life, which can be considered a living exegesis of Jesus' words: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40). Many Institutes, especially in modern times, were established precisely to address one or other of the needs of the poor. But even when such a purpose was not the determining factor, concern and care for the needy—expressed in prayer, assistance and hospitality—was always a normal part of every form of the consecrated life, even of the contemplative life. And how could it be otherwise, since the Christ encountered in contemplation is the same who lives and suffers in the poor? In this sense the history of the consecrated life is rich with marvelous and sometimes ingenious examples. St. Paulinus of Nola, after distributing his belongings to the poor in order to consecrate himself fully to God, built the cells of his monastery above a hospice for the poor. He rejoiced at the thought of this singular "exchange of gifts": The poor whom he helped strengthened with their prayers the very "foundations" of his house, wholly dedicated to the praise of God.[209] St. Vincent de Paul, for his part, loved to say that when one is obliged to leave prayer to attend to a poor person in need, that prayer is not really interrupted because "one leaves God to serve God." [210]

Serving the poor is an act of evangelization and at the same time a seal of Gospel authenticity and a catalyst

for permanent conversion in the consecrated life, since, as St. Gregory the Great says, "when charity lovingly stoops to provide even for the smallest needs of our neighbor, then does it suddenly surge upward to the highest peaks. And when in great kindness it bends to the most extreme needs, then with much vigor does it resume its soaring to the heights." [211]

Care of the sick

83. Following a glorious tradition, a great number of consecrated persons, above all women, carry out their apostolate in the field of health care, according to the charism of their respective Institutes. Down the centuries many consecrated persons have given their lives, in service to victims of contagious diseases, confirming the truth that dedication to the point of heroism belongs to the prophetic nature of the consecrated life.

The Church looks with admiration and gratitude upon the many consecrated persons who by caring for the sick and the suffering contribute in a significant way to her mission. They carry on the ministry of mercy of Christ, who "went about doing good and healing all" (Acts 10:38). In the footsteps of the Divine Samaritan, physician of souls and bodies [212] and following the example of their respective founders and foundresses, those consecrated persons committed to this ministry by the charism of their Institute should persevere in their witness of love toward the sick, devoting themselves to them with profound understanding and compassion. They should give a special place in their ministry to the poorest and most abandoned of the sick such as the elderly and those who are handicapped, marginalized or terminally ill, and to the victims of drug abuse and the new contagious diseases. Consecrated persons should encourage the sick themselves to offer their sufferings in communion with Christ, crucified and glorified for the salvation of all. [213] Indeed they should strengthen in the sick the awareness of being able to carry out a pastoral ministry of their own, through the specific charism of the Cross, by means of their prayer and their testimony in word and deed. [214]

Moreover, the Church reminds consecrated men and women that a part of their mission is to evangelize the health care centers, in which they work, striving to spread the light of Gospel values to the way of living, suffering and dying of the people of our day. They should endeavor to make the practice of medicine more human and increase their knowledge of bioethics at the service of the Gospel of life. Above all, therefore, they should foster respect for the person and for human life from conception to its natural end, in full conformity with the moral teaching of the Church. [215] For this purpose they should set up centers of formation [216] and cooperate closely with those ecclesial bodies entrusted with the pastoral ministry of health care.

II. A Prophetic Witness in the Face of Great Challenges

The prophetic character of the consecrated life

84. The prophetic character of the consecrated life was strongly emphasized by the Synod Fathers. It takes the shape of a special form of sharing in Christ's prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole People of God. There is a prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life as such, resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and of the subsequent dedication to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life. The sign value which the Second Vatican Council acknowledges in the consecrated life [217] is expressed in prophetic witness to the primacy which God and the truths of the

Gospel have in the Christian life. Because of this pre-eminence, nothing can come before personal love of Christ and of the poor in whom he lives.[218]

The Patristic tradition has seen a model of monastic religious life in Elijah, courageous prophet and friend of God.[219] He lived in God's presence and contemplated his passing by in silence; he interceded for the people and boldly announced God's will; he defended God's sovereignty and came to the defense of the poor against the powerful of the world (cf. 1 Kgs. 18-19). In the history of the Church, alongside other Christians there have been men and women consecrated to God who, through a special gift of the Holy Spirit, have carried out a genuinely prophetic ministry, speaking in the name of God to all, even to the pastors of the Church. True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history. Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard his word in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin. Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom.[220]

Significance for the contemporary world

85. In our world, where it often seems that the signs of God's presence have been lost from sight, a convincing prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary. In the first place this should entail the affirmation of the primacy of God and of eternal life, as evidenced in the following and imitation of the chaste, poor and obedient Christ, who was completely consecrated to the glory of God and to the love of his brethren. The fraternal life is itself prophetic in a society which, sometimes without realizing it, has a profound yearning for a brotherhood which knows no borders. Consecrated persons are being asked to bear witness everywhere with the boldness of a prophet who is unafraid of risking even his life.

Prophecy derives a particularly persuasive power from consistency between proclamation and life,. Consecrated persons will be faithful to their mission in the Church and the world if they can renew themselves constantly in the light of the word of God.[221] Thus will they be able to enrich the other faithful with the charismatic gifts they have received and, in turn, let themselves be challenged by the prophetic stimulus which comes from other sectors of the Church. In this exchange of gifts, guaranteed by full harmony with the Church's Magisterium and discipline, there will shine forth the action of the Holy Spirit, who "gives [the Church] a unity of fellowship and service; he furnishes and directs her with various gifts, both hierarchical and charismatic."[222]

Faithfulness to the point of martyrdom

86. In this century, as in other periods of history, consecrated men and women have borne witness to Christ the Lord with the gift of their own lives. Thousands of them have been forced into the catacombs by the persecution of totalitarian regimes or of violent groups, or have been harassed while engaged in missionary activity, in action on behalf of the poor, in assisting the sick and the marginalized; yet they lived and continue to live their consecration in prolonged and heroic suffering, and often with the shedding of their blood, being perfectly configured to the Crucified Lord. The Church has already officially recognized the holiness of some of these men and women, honoring them as martyrs for Christ. They enlighten us by their

example, they intercede that we may be faithful and they await us in glory.

There is a widespread desire that the memory of so many witnesses to the faith will remain in the consciousness of the Church as an invitation to celebrate and imitate them. The Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life can contribute to this endeavor by gathering the names, of all those consecrated persons who deserve to be inscribed in the Martyrology of the 20th century and by compiling testimonies about them .[223]

The major challenges facing the consecrated life

87. The prophetic task of the consecrated life is brought into play by three major challenges, addressed to the Church herself: They are the same challenges as ever, posed in new ways and perhaps more radically by contemporary society, at least in some parts of the world. These challenges relate directly to the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, impelling the Church and consecrated persons in particular to clarify and testify to the profound anthropological significance, of the counsels. The decision to follow the counsels, far from involving an impoverishment of truly human values, leads instead to their transformation. The evangelical counsels should not be considered as a denial of the values inherent in sexuality, in the legitimate desire to possess material goods or to make decisions for oneself. Insofar as these inclinations are based on nature, they are good in themselves. Human beings, however, weakened as they are by original sin, run the risk of acting on them in a way which transgresses the moral norms. The profession of chastity, poverty and obedience is a warning not to underestimate the wound of original sin and, while affirming the value of created goods, it relativizes them, by pointing to God as the absolute good. Thus, while those who follow the evangelical counsels seek holiness for themselves, they propose, so to speak, a spiritual "therapy" for humanity, because they reject the idolatry of anything created and in a certain way they make visible the living God. The consecrated life, especially in difficult times, is a blessing for human life and for the life of the Church.

The challenge of consecrated chastity

88. The first challenge, is that of a hedonistic culture, which separates sexuality from all objective moral norms, often treating it as a mere diversion and a consumer good and, with the complicity of the means of social communication, justifying a kind of idolatry of the sexual instinct. The consequences of this are before everyone's eyes: transgressions of every kind, with resulting psychic and moral suffering on the part of individuals and families. The reply, of the consecrated life is above all in the joyful living of perfect chastity, as a witness to the power of God's love manifested in the weakness of the human condition. The consecrated person attests that what many have believed impossible becomes, with the Lord's grace, possible and truly liberating. Yes, in Christ it is possible to love God with all one's heart, putting him above every other love, and thus to love every creature with the freedom of God! This testimony is more necessary than ever today, precisely because it is so little understood by our world. It is offered to everyone—young people, engaged couples, husbands and wives and Christian families—in order to show that the power of God's love can accomplish great things, precisely within the context of human love. It is a witness which also meets a growing need for interior honesty in human relationships.

The consecrated life must present to today's world examples of chastity lived by men and women who show balance, self-mastery, an enterprising spirit, and psychological and affective maturity.[224] Thanks to this witness, human love is offered a stable point of reference: the pure love which consecrated persons draw

from the contemplation of Trinitarian love, revealed to us in Christ. Precisely because they are immersed in this mystery, consecrated persons feel themselves capable of a radical and universal love, which gives them the strength for the self-mastery and discipline necessary in order not to fall under the domination of the senses and instincts. Consecrated chastity thus appears as a joyful and liberating experience. Enlightened by faith in the Risen Lord and by the prospect of the new heavens and the new earth (cf. Rv. 21:1), it offers a priceless incentive in the task of educating to that chastity which corresponds to other states of life as well.

The challenge of poverty

89. Another challenge, today is that of a materialism which craves possessions, heedless of the needs and sufferings of the weakest, and lacking any concern for the balance of natural resources. The reply, of the consecrated life is found in the profession of evangelical poverty, which can be lived in different ways and is often expressed in an active involvement in the promotion of solidarity and charity. How many Institutes devote themselves to education, training and professional formation, preparing young people and those no longer young to become builders of their own future! How many consecrated persons give themselves without reserve in the service of the most disadvantaged people on earth! How many of them work to train future educators and leaders of society so that they in turn will be committed to eliminating structures of oppression and to promoting projects of solidarity for the benefit of the poor! Consecrated persons fight to overcome hunger and its causes; they inspire the activities of voluntary associations and humanitarian organizations; and they work with public and private bodies to promote a fair distribution of international aid. Nations truly owe a great deal to these enterprising agents of charity, whose tireless generosity has contributed and continues to contribute greatly to making the world more human.

Evangelical poverty at the service of the poor

90. Even before being a service on behalf of the poor, evangelical poverty is a value in itself, since it recalls the first of the Beatitudes in the imitation of the poor Christ.[225] Its primary meaning, in fact, is to attest that God is the true wealth of the human heart. Precisely for this reason evangelical poverty forcefully challenges the idolatry of money, making a prophetic appeal as it were to society, which in so many parts of the developed world risks losing the sense of proportion and the very meaning of things. Thus, today more than in other ages, the call of evangelical poverty is being felt also among those who are aware of the scarcity of the planet's resources and who invoke respect for and the conservation of creation by reducing consumption, by living more simply and by placing a necessary brake on their own desires.

Consecrated persons are therefore asked to bear a renewed and vigorous evangelical witness to self-denial and restraint in a form of fraternal life inspired by principles of simplicity and hospitality, also as an example to those who are indifferent to the needs of their neighbor. This witness will of course be accompanied by preferential love for the poor, and will be shown especially by sharing the conditions of life of the most neglected. There are many communities which live and work among the poor and the marginalized; they embrace their conditions of life and share in their sufferings, problems and perils.

Outstanding pages in the history of evangelical solidarity and heroic dedication have been written by consecrated persons in these years of profound changes and great injustices, of hopes and disappointments, of striking victories and bitter defeats. And pages no less significant have been written and are still being written by very many other consecrated persons, who live to the full their life "hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3) for the salvation of the world, freely giving of themselves and spending their lives for causes which are

little appreciated and even less extolled. In these various and complementary ways, the consecrated life shares in the radical poverty embraced by the Lord and fulfills its specific role in the saving mystery of his Incarnation and redeeming Death.[226]

The challenge of freedom in obedience

91. The third challenge, comes from those motions of freedom, which separate this fundamental human good from its essential relationship to the truth and to moral norms.[227] In effect, the promotion of freedom is a genuine value closely connected with respect for the human person. But who does not see the aberrant consequences of injustice and even violence in the life of individuals and of peoples to which the distorted use of freedom leads?

An effective response, to this situation is the obedience which marks the consecrated life,. In an especially vigorous way this obedience reposes the obedience of Christ to the Father and, taking this mystery as its point of departure, testifies that there is no contradiction between obedience and freedom,. Indeed, the Son's attitude discloses the mystery of human freedom as the path of obedience to the Father's will and the mystery of obedience as the path to the gradual conquest of true freedom. It is precisely this mystery which consecrated persons wish to acknowledge by this particular vow. By obedience they intend to show their awareness of being children of the Father, as a result of which they wish to take the Father's will as their daily bread (cf. Jn. 4:34), as their rock, their joy, their shield and their fortress (cf. Ps. 18:2). Thus they show that they are growing in the full truth about themselves, remaining in touch with the source of their existence and therefore offering this most consoling message: "The lovers of your law have great peace; they never stumble" (Ps. 118:165).

Carrying out together the Father's will

92. This testimony of consecration takes on special meaning in religious life because of the community dimension, which marks it. The fraternal life is the privileged place in which to discern and accept God's will, and to walk together with one mind and heart. Obedience, enlivened by charity, unites the members of an Institute in the same witness and the same mission, while respecting the diversity of gifts and individual personalities. In community life which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, each individual engages in a fruitful dialogue with the others in order to discover the Father's will. At the same time, together they recognize in the one who presides an expression of the fatherhood of God and the exercise of authority received from God, at the service of discernment and communion.[228]

Life in community is thus the particular sign before the Church and society of the bond which comes from the same call and the common desire—notwithstanding differences of race and origin, language and culture—to be obedient to that call. Contrary to the spirit of discord and division, authority and obedience shine like a sign of that unique fatherhood which comes from God, of the brotherhood born of the Spirit, of the interior freedom of those who put their trust in God despite the human limitations of those who represent him. Through this obedience, which some people make their rule of life, the happiness promised by Jesus to "those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk. 11:28) is experienced and proclaimed for the good of all. Moreover, those who obey have the guarantee of truly taking part in the mission, of following the Lord and not pursuing their own desires or wishes. In this way we can know that we are guided by the Spirit of the Lord and sustained even in the midst of great hardships by his steadfast hand (cf. Acts 20:22-23).

A decisive commitment to the spiritual life

93. One of the concerns frequently expressed at the Synod was that the consecrated life should be nourished from the wellspring of a sound and deep spirituality,. This is a primary requirement inscribed in the very essence of the consecrated life by the fact that, just as every other baptized person, and indeed even more so, those who profess the evangelical counsels must aspire with all their strength to the perfection of charity.[229] This commitment is clearly evidenced in the many examples of holy founders and foundresses, and of so many consecrated persons who have borne faithful witness to Christ to the point of martyrdom. To tend toward holiness: This is in summary the program of every consecrated life, particularly in the perspective of its renewal on the threshold of the Third Millennium. The starting point of such a program lies in leaving everything behind for the sake of Christ (cf. Mt. 4:18-22, 19:21, 27; Lk. 5:11), preferring him above all things in order to share fully in his Paschal Mystery.

St. Paul understood this well when he said: "Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord ... that I may know him and the power of his Resurrection" (Phil. 3:8, 10). This is the path marked out from the beginning by the Apostles, as testified to in the Christian tradition of the East and the West: "Those who now follow Jesus, leaving everything for his sake, remind us of the Apostles who, in answer to his invitation, gave up everything. As a result, it has become traditional to speak of religious life *apostolica vivendi forma*. [230] The same tradition has also emphasized in the consecrated life the aspect of a particular covenant with God, indeed of a spousal covenant with Christ, of which St. Paul was a master by his example (cf. 1 Cor. 7:7) and by his teaching, proposed under the Spirit's guidance (cf. 1 Cor. 7:40).

We may say that the spiritual life, understood as life in Christ or life according to the Spirit, presents itself as a path of increasing faithfulness on which the consecrated person is guided by the Spirit and configured by him to Christ, in full communion of love and service in the Church.

All these elements, which take shape in the different forms of the consecrated life, give rise to a specific spirituality, that is, a concrete program of relations with God and one's surroundings marked by specific spiritual emphases and choices of apostolate, which accentuate and represent one or another aspect of the one mystery of Christ. When the Church approves a form of consecrated life or an Institute, she confirms that in its spiritual and apostolic charism are found all the objective requisites for achieving personal and communal perfection according to the Gospel.

The spiritual life must therefore have first place in the program of Families of consecrated life in such a way that every Institute and community will be a school of true evangelical spirituality. Apostolic fruitfulness, generosity in love of the poor and the ability to attract vocations among the younger generation depend on this priority and its growth in personal and communal commitment. It is precisely the spiritual quality of the consecrated life, which can inspire the men and women of our day, who themselves are thirsting for absolute values. In this way the consecrated life will become an attractive witness.

Listening to the word of God

94. The word of God is the first source of all Christian spirituality. It gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God and with his saving and sanctifying will. It is for this reason that from the very beginning of Institutes of Consecrated Life, and in a special way in monasticism, what is called *lectio divina*, has been

held in the highest regard. By its means the word of God is brought to bear on life, on which it projects the light of that wisdom which is a gift of the Spirit. Although the whole of sacred Scripture is "profitable for teaching" (2 Tm. 3:16), and is "the pure and perennial source of spiritual life,"[231] the writings of the New Testament deserve special veneration, especially the Gospels, which are "the heart of all the Scriptures." [232] It is therefore of great benefit for consecrated persons to meditate regularly on the Gospel texts and the New Testament writings which describe the words and example of Christ and Mary and the *apostolica vivendi forma*. Founders and foundresses were inspired by these texts in accepting their vocation and in discerning the charism and mission of their Institutes.

Meditation on the Bible in common, is of great value. When practiced according to the possibilities and circumstances of life in community, this meditation leads to a joyful sharing of the riches drawn from the word of God, thanks to which brothers or sisters grow together and help one another to make progress in the spiritual life. Indeed it would be helpful if this practice were also encouraged among other members of the People of God, priests and laity alike. This will lead in ways proper to each person's particular gifts to setting up schools of prayer, of spirituality and of prayerful reading of the Scriptures, in which God "speaks to people as friends (cf. Ex. 33:11; Jn. 15:14-15) and lives among them (cf. Bar 3:38), so that he may invite and draw them into fellowship with himself." [233]

As the Church's spiritual tradition teaches, meditation on God's word and on the mysteries of Christ in particular gives rise to fervor in contemplation and the ardor of apostolic activity. Both in contemplative and active religious life it has always been men and women of prayer, those who truly interpret and put into practice the will of God, who do great works. From familiarity with God's word they draw the light needed for that individual and communal discernment which helps them to seek the ways of the Lord in the signs of the times. In this way they acquire a kind of supernatural intuition, which allows them to avoid being conformed to the mentality of this world, but rather to be renewed in their own mind in order to discern God's will about what is good, perfect and pleasing to him (cf. Rom. 12:2).

In communion with Christ

95. An indispensable means of effectively sustaining communion with Christ is assuredly the Sacred Liturgy, and especially the celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours.

In the first place, the Eucharist, "contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ himself, our Passover and living bread who, through his very flesh, made vital and vitalizing by the Holy Spirit, offers life" to the human family. [234] This is the heart of the Church's life and also of the consecrated life. How can those who are called through the profession of the evangelical counsels to choose Christ as the only meaning of their lives not desire to establish an ever more profound communion with him by sharing daily in the Sacrament which makes him present, in the sacrifice which actualizes the gift of his love on Golgotha, the banquet which nourishes and sustains God's pilgrim people? By its very nature the Eucharist is at the center of the consecrated life, both for individuals and for communities. It is the daily viaticum and source of the spiritual life for the individual and for the Institute. By means of the Eucharist all consecrated persons are called to live Christ's Paschal Mystery, uniting themselves to him by offering their own lives to the Father through the Holy Spirit. Frequent and prolonged adoration of Christ present in the Eucharist enables us in some way to relive Peter's experience at the Transfiguration: "It is well that we are here." In the celebration of the mystery of the Lord's Body and Blood, the unity and charity of those who have consecrated their lives

to God are strengthened and increased.

Alongside the Eucharist and intimately connected with it, the liturgy of the Hours, celebrated in union with the prayer of the Church either in community or individually according to the nature of each Institute, expresses the call proper to consecrated persons to raise their hearts in praise and intercession.

The Eucharist is also closely connected with the commitment to continual conversion and necessary purification which consecrated persons bring to maturity in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. By their frequent encounter with God's mercy, they purify and renew their hearts, and through the humble recognition of their sins, achieve openness in their relationship with him. The joyful experience of sacramental forgiveness on the journey shared with one's brothers and sisters makes the heart eager to learn and encourages growth in faithfulness.

Confident and humble recourse to spiritual direction is of great help on the path of fidelity to the Gospel, especially in the period of formation and at certain other times in life. Through it individuals are helped to respond with generosity to the movements of the Spirit and to direct themselves resolutely toward holiness.

Finally, I exhort all consecrated persons, according to their own traditions, to renew daily their spiritual union with the Blessed Virgin Mary, reliving with her the mysteries of her Son, especially by saying the Rosary.

III. Some New Fields of Mission

Presence in the world of Education

96. The Church has always recognized that education is an essential dimension of her mission. The Master of her inner life is the Holy Spirit, who penetrates the innermost depths of every human heart and knows the secret unfolding of history. The whole Church is enlivened by the Holy Spirit and with him carries out her educational work. Within the Church, however, consecrated persons have a specific duty. They are called to bring to bear on the world of education their radical witness to the values of the Kingdom, proposed to everyone in expectation of the definitive meeting with the Lord of history. Because of their special consecration, their particular experience of the gifts of the Spirit, their constant listening to the word of God, their practice of discernment, their rich heritage of pedagogical traditions built up since the establishment of their Institute and their profound grasp of spiritual truth (cf. Eph. 2:17), consecrated persons are able to be especially effective in educational activities and to offer a specific contribution to the work of other educators.

Equipped with this charism, consecrated persons can give life to educational undertakings permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity in which young people are helped to mature humanly under the action of the Spirit.[235] In this way a community of learning becomes an experience of grace, where the teaching program contributes to uniting into a harmonious whole the human and the divine, the Gospel and culture, faith and life.

The history of the Church from antiquity down to our own day is full of admirable examples of consecrated persons who have sought and continue to seek holiness through their involvement in education, while at the same time proposing holiness as the goal of education. Indeed, many of them have achieved the perfection of

charity through teaching. This is one of the most precious gifts which consecrated persons today can offer to young people, instructing them in a way that is full of love, according to the wise counsel of St. John Bosco: "Young people should not only be loved, but should also know that they are loved." [236]

Need for a renewed commitment in the field of education

97. With respectful sensitivity and missionary boldness, consecrated men and women should show that faith in Jesus Christ enlightens the whole enterprise of education, never disparaging human values but rather confirming and elevating them. Thus do consecrated persons become witnesses and instruments of the power of the incarnation and the vitality of the Spirit. This task of theirs is one of the most significant manifestations of that Motherhood which the Church, in the image of Mary, exercises on behalf of all her children. [237]

It is for this reason that the Synod emphatically urged consecrated persons to take up again, wherever possible, the mission of education in schools of every kind and level and in universities and institutions of higher learning. [238] Making my own the proposal of the Synod, I warmly invite members of Institutes devoted to education to be faithful to their founding charism and to their traditions, knowing that the preferential love for the poor finds a special application in the choice of means capable of freeing people from that grave form of poverty which is the lack of cultural and religious training.

Because of the importance that Catholic and ecclesiastical universities and faculties have in the field of education and evangelization, Institutes which are responsible for their direction should be conscious of their responsibility. They should ensure the preservation of their unique Catholic identity in complete fidelity to the Church's Magisterium, all the while engaging in active dialogue with present-day cultural trends. Moreover, depending on the circumstances, the members of these Institutes and Societies should readily become involved in the educational structures of the state. Members of Secular Institutes in particular, because of their specific calling, are called to this kind of cooperation.

Evangelizing culture

98. Institutes of Consecrated Life have always had great influence in the formation and transmission of culture. This was true in the Middle Ages, when monasteries became places for the study of the cultural riches of the past and for the development of a new humanistic and Christian culture. The same has happened every time the light of the Gospel has spread to new nations and peoples. Many consecrated persons have been promoters of culture and frequently have studied and defended indigenous cultures. The need to contribute to the promotion of culture and to the dialogue between culture and faith is deeply felt in the Church today. [239]

Consecrated persons cannot fail to feel challenged by this pressing need. In their proclamation of the word of God, they too are called to discover the methods most suited to the needs of the different social groups and various professional categories, so that the light of Christ will penetrate all sectors of society and the leaven of salvation will transform society from within, fostering the growth of a culture imbued with Gospel values. [240] At the threshold of the Third Christian Millennium, such a commitment will enable consecrated men and women to renew their response to the will of God, who reaches out to all those who, knowingly or not, are searching for the truth and the life (cf. Acts 17:27).

But in addition to this service of others, within the consecrated life itself there is a need for a renewed and loving commitment to the intellectual life, for dedication to study as a means of integral formation and as a path of asceticism which is extraordinarily timely in the face of present-day cultural diversity. A lessened commitment to study can have grave consequences for the apostolate by giving rise to a sense of marginalization and inferiority or encouraging superficiality and rash initiatives.

With all respect for the diversity of charisms and the actual resources of individual Institutes, the commitment to study cannot be limited to initial formation or to the gaining of academic degrees and professional qualifications. Rather, study is an expression of the unquenchable desire for an ever deeper knowledge of God, the source of light and all human truth. Consequently, a commitment to study does not isolate consecrated persons in an abstract intellectualism or confine them within a suffocating narcissism; rather, it is an incentive to dialogue and cooperation, a training in the capacity for judgment, a stimulus to contemplation and prayer in the constant quest for the presence and activity of God in the complex reality of today's world.

When they allow themselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, consecrated persons can broaden the horizons of narrow human aspirations and at the same time understand more deeply people and their life stories, going beyond the most obvious but often superficial aspects. Countless challenges are today emerging in the world of ideas, in new areas as well as those in which the consecrated life has traditionally been present. There is an urgent need to maintain fruitful contacts with all cultural realities with a watchful and critical attitude, but also with confident attention to those who face the particular difficulties of intellectual work, especially when, in response to the unprecedented problems of our times, new efforts of analysis and synthesis have to be attempted.[241] A serious and effective evangelization of these new areas where culture is developed and transmitted cannot take place without active cooperation with the laity involved in them.

Presence in the field of social communications

99. Just as in the past consecrated persons successfully used all kinds of means at the service of evangelization and skillfully met difficulties, today too they are challenged anew by the need to bear witness to the Gospel through the communications media. The media, thanks to impressive developments in technology, have reached every corner of the earth. Consecrated persons, especially those who have the institutional charism of working in this field, have a duty to learn the language of the media in order to speak effectively of Christ to our contemporaries, interpreting their "joys and hopes, their griefs and anxieties,"[242] and thus contributing to the building up of a society in which all people sense that they are brothers and sisters making their way to God.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to be vigilant with regard to the distorted use of the media, especially given their extraordinary power of persuasion. The problems which can result for the consecrated life should not be ignored; instead they should be faced with careful discernment.[243] The Church's response is above all educational: It aims at promoting a correct understanding of the dynamics underlying the media and a careful ethical assessment of their programs, as well as the development of healthy habits in their use.[244] In this work of education, aimed at training discerning listeners and expert communicators, consecrated persons are called to offer their specific witness regarding the relative nature of all created realities. In this way they help people to use the media wisely and in accordance with God's plan, but also to free themselves from an

obsessive interest in "the form of this world which is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:31).

All efforts in this important new field of the apostolate should be encouraged, so that the Gospel of Christ may be proclaimed also through these modern means. The various Institutes should be ready to cooperate by contributing resources and personnel in order to implement joint projects in all sectors of social communications. Furthermore, consecrated persons, especially members of Secular Institutes, should willingly lend their help, wherever pastorally appropriate, for the religious formation of leaders and workers in the field of public and private social communications. This should be done in order to offset the inappropriate use of the media and to promote higher quality programs, the contents of which will be respectful of the moral law and rich in human and Christian values.

IV. Engaged in Dialogue With Everyone

At the service of Christian unity

100. Christ's prayer to the Father before his Passion, that his disciples may be one (cf. Jn. 17:21-23), lives on in the Church's prayer and activity. How can those called to the consecrated life not feel themselves involved? The wound of disunity still existing between believers in Christ, and the urgent need to pray and work for the promotion of Christian unity were deeply felt at the Synod. The ecumenical sensitivity of consecrated persons is heightened also by the awareness that in other Churches and Ecclesial Communities monasticism has been preserved and is flourishing, as is the case in the Eastern Churches, and that there is a renewal of the profession of the evangelical counsels, as in the Anglican Communion and in the Communities of the Reformation.

The Synod emphasized the close connection between the consecrated life and the cause of ecumenism, and the urgent need for a more intense witness in this area. Since the soul of ecumenism is prayer and conversion [245], Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life certainly have a special duty to foster this commitment. There is an urgent need for consecrated persons to give more space in their lives to ecumenical prayer and genuine evangelical witness, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit the walls of division and prejudice between Christians can be broken down.

Forms of ecumenical dialogue

101. Sharing of the *lectio divina*, in the search for the truth, a participation in common prayer, in which the Lord assures us of his presence (cf. Mt. 18:20), the dialogue of friendship and charity which makes us feel how pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity (cf. Ps. 133), cordial hospitality shown to brothers and sisters of the various Christian confessions, mutual knowledge and the exchange of gifts, cooperation in common undertakings of service and of witness: These are among the many forms of ecumenical dialogue. They are actions pleasing to our common Father which show the will to journey together toward perfect unity along the path of truth and love.[246] Likewise, the knowledge of the history, doctrine, liturgy, and charitable and apostolic activity of other Christians cannot but help to make ecumenical activity ever more fruitful.[247]

I wish to encourage those Institutes which, either because they were founded for this purpose or because of a later calling, are dedicated to promoting Christian unity and therefore foster initiatives of study and concrete action. Indeed, no Institute of consecrated life should feel itself dispensed from working for this cause. My thoughts likewise turn to the Eastern Catholic Churches with the hope that also through the monastic life of

both men and women—the flourishing of which is a grace to be constantly prayed for —they may help to bring about unity with the Orthodox Churches through the dialogue of charity and the sharing of a common spirituality, itself the heritage of the undivided Church of the first millennium.

In a special way I entrust to the monasteries of contemplative life the spiritual ecumenism of prayer, conversion of heart and charity. To this end I encourage their presence wherever Christian communities of different confessions live side by side, so that their total devotion to the "one thing needful" (cf. Lk. 10:42)—to the worship of God and to intercession for the salvation of the world, together with their witness of evangelical life according to their special charisms — will inspire everyone to abide, after the image of the Trinity, in that unity which Jesus willed and asked of the Father for all his disciples.

Interreligious dialogue

102. Because "interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission,"[248] Institutes of Consecrated Life cannot exempt themselves from involvement also in this field, each in accordance with its own charism and following the directives of ecclesiastical authority. The first form of evangelization in relation to our brothers and sisters of other religions should be the testimony of a life of poverty, humility and chastity, imbued with fraternal love for all. At the same time, the freedom of spirit proper to the consecrated life will favor that "dialogue of life"[249] which embodies a basic model of mission and of the proclamation of Christ's Gospel. In order to foster reciprocal knowledge, respect and charity, Religious Institutes can also promote appropriate forms of dialogue, marked by cordial friendship and mutual sincerity with the monastic communities of other religions.

Another area for cooperation with men and women of different religious traditions is that of a share a concern for human life, extending from compassion for those who are suffering physically and spiritually to commitment to justice, peace and the protection of God's creation. In these areas, Institutes of active life especially will seek an understanding with members of other religions, through that "dialogue of action"[250] which prepares the way for more profound exchanges.

A particular field for successful common action with people of other religious traditions is that of efforts to promote the dignity of women,. In view of the equality and authentic complementarity of men and women, a valuable service can be rendered above all by consecrated women.[251]

These and other ways in which consecrated persons are engaged in the service of interreligious dialogue require an appropriate training, both in initial formation and in continuing formation. They require study and research [252] since in this very delicate area a profound knowledge of Christianity and of other religions is needed, accompanied by solid faith and by spiritual and personal maturity.

Spirituality as a response to the search for the sacred and the desire for God

103. Because of the very nature of their choice, all who embrace the consecrated life, men and women alike, become privileged partners in the search for God which has always stirred the human heart and has led to the different forms of asceticism and spirituality. Today in many places this search is insistently emerging as a response to cultural forces which tend to marginalize the religious dimension of life, if not actually to deny it.

When consecrated persons live consistently and fully their freely assumed commitments, they are able to

offer a response to the longings of their contemporaries and can help to free them from solutions which are for the most part illusory and often involve a denial of the saving Incarnation of Christ (cf. 1 Jn. 4:2-3) such as those proposed, for example, by the sects. By practicing a personal and communal asceticism which purifies and transfigures their entire existence, they bear witness against the temptation to self-centeredness and sensuality, to the true nature of the search for God. They constitute a warning against confusing that search with a subtle search for self or a flight into gnosticism. Every consecrated person is committed to strengthening the interior life, which in no way involves withdrawal from reality or a turning in upon oneself. Listening in obedience to the word, of which the Church is the guardian and interpreter, the consecrated person points to Christ loved above all things and to the mystery of the Trinity as the response to the profound longings of the human heart and the ultimate goal of every religious journey sincerely open to transcendence.

For this reason, consecrated persons are in duty bound to offer a generous welcome and spiritual support to all those who, moved by a thirst for God and a desire to live the demands of faith, turn to them.[253]

CONCLUSION

Unbounded generosity

104. Many people today are puzzled and ask: What is the point of the consecrated life? Why embrace this kind of life when there are so many urgent needs in the areas of charity and of evangelization itself to which one can respond even without assuming the particular commitments of the consecrated life? Is the consecrated life not a kind of "waste" of human energies which might be used more efficiently for a greater good, for the benefit of humanity and the Church?

These questions are asked more frequently in our day as a consequence of a utilitarian and technocratic culture which is inclined to assess the importance of things and even of people in relation to their immediate "usefulness." But such questions have always existed, as is eloquently demonstrated by the Gospel episode of the anointing at Bethany: "Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment" (Jn. 12:3). When Judas, using the needs of the poor as an excuse, complained about such waste, Jesus replied: "Let her alone!" (Jn. 12:7).

This is the perennially valid response to the question which many people, even in good faith, are asking about the relevance of the consecrated life: Could one not invest one's life in a more efficient and reasonable way for the betterment of society? This is how Jesus replies: "Let her alone!" Those who have been given the priceless gift of following the Lord Jesus more closely consider it obvious that he can and must be loved with an undivided heart, that one can devote to him one's whole life and not merely certain actions or occasional moments or activities. The precious ointment poured out as a pure act of love and thus transcending all "utilitarian" considerations is a sign of unbounded generosity, as expressed in a life spent in loving and serving the Lord in order to devote oneself to his person and his Mystical Body. From such a life "poured out" without reserve there spreads a fragrance which fills the whole house. The house of God, the Church, today no less than in the past is adorned and enriched by the presence of the consecrated life.

What in people's eyes can seem a waste is, for the individuals captivated in the depths of their heart by the beauty and goodness of the Lord, an obvious response of love, a joyful expression of gratitude for having

been admitted in a unique way to the knowledge of the Son and to a sharing in his divine mission in the world.

"If any of God's children were to know and taste divine love, the uncreated God, the incarnate God, the God who endured suffering, the God who is the supreme good, they would give themselves completely to him, they would withdraw not only from other creatures but even from their very selves and with all their being would love this God of love to the point of being completely transformed into the God-man, who is the supreme Beloved." [254]

The consecrated life in the service of the Kingdom of God

105. "What would become of the world if there were no Religious?" [255] Beyond all superficial assessments of its usefulness, the consecrated life is important precisely in its being unbounded generosity and love, and this all the more so in a world which risks being suffocated in the whirlpool of the ephemeral. "Without this concrete sign there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the salvific paradox of the Gospel would be blunted and that the 'salt' of faith would lose its savor in a world undergoing secularization." [256] The Church and society itself need people capable of devoting themselves totally to God and to others for the love of God.

The Church can in no way renounce the consecrated life, for it eloquently expresses her inmost nature as "Bride." In the consecrated life the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world finds fresh enthusiasm and power. There is a need for people able to show the fatherly face of God and the motherly face of the Church, people who spend their lives so that others can have life and hope. The Church needs consecrated persons who, even before committing themselves to the service of this or that noble cause, allow themselves to be transformed by God's grace and conform themselves fully to the Gospel.

The whole Church finds in her hands this great gift and gratefully devotes herself to promoting it with respect, with prayer and with the explicit invitation to accept it. It is important that Bishops, priests and deacons, convinced of the evangelical superiority of this kind of life, should strive to discover and encourage the seeds of vocation through preaching, discernment and wise spiritual guidance. All the faithful are asked to pray constantly for consecrated persons, that their fervor and their capacity to love may grow continually and thus contribute to spreading in today's society the fragrance of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 2:15). The whole Christian community—pastors, laity and consecrated persons—is responsible for the consecrated life and for welcoming and supporting new vocations. [257]

To young people

106. To you young people, I say: If you hear the Lord's call, do not reject it! Dare to become part of the great movements of holiness which renowned saints have launched in their following of Christ. Cultivate the ideals proper to your age, but readily accept God's plan for you if he invites you to seek holiness in the consecrated life. Admire all God's works in the world, but be ready to fix your eyes on the things destined never to pass away.

The Third Millennium awaits the contribution of the faith and creativity of great numbers of young consecrated persons that the world may be made more peaceful and able to welcome God and, in him, all his

sons and daughters.

To families

107. I address you, Christian families. Parents, give thanks to the Lord if he has called one of your children to the consecrated life. It is to be considered a great honor—as it always has been—that the Lord should look upon a family and choose to invite one of its members to set out on the path of the evangelical counsels! Cherish the desire to give the Lord one of your children so that God's love can spread in the world. What fruit of conjugal love could be more beautiful than this?

We must remember that if parents do not live the values of the Gospel, the young man or woman will find it very difficult to discern the calling, to understand the need for the sacrifices which must be faced and to appreciate the beauty of the goal to be achieved. For it is in the family that young people have their first experience of Gospel values and of the love which gives itself to God and to others. They also need to be trained in the responsible use of their own freedom so that they will be prepared to live, as their vocation demands, in accordance with the loftiest spiritual realities.

I pray that you Christian families, united with the Lord through prayer and the sacramental life, will create homes where vocations are welcomed.

To men and women of good will

108. To all the men and women who are willing to listen to my voice, I wish to address an invitation to seek the paths which lead to the living and true God, including the path marked out by the consecrated life. Consecrated persons bear witness to the fact that "whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a man." [258] How many consecrated men and women have bent down and continue to bend down as good Samaritans over the countless wounds of the brothers and sisters whom they meet on their way!

Look at these people seized by Christ, who show that in self-mastery, sustained by grace and God's love, lies the remedy for the craving to possess, to seek pleasure, to dominate. Do not forget the charisms which have shaped remarkable "seekers of God" and benefactors of humanity, who have provided sure paths for those who seek God with a sincere heart. Consider the great number of saints who have flourished in this way of life; consider the good done to the world in the past and in the present by those who have devoted themselves to God! Does not this world of ours need joyful witnesses and prophets of the beneficent power of God's love? Does it not also need men and women who, by their lives and their work, are able to sow seeds of peace and fraternity? [259]

To consecrated persons

109. But it is above all to you consecrated women and men that at the end of this exhortation I appeal with trust: Live to the full your dedication to God, so that this world may never be without a ray of divine beauty to lighten the path of human existence. Christians, immersed in the cares and concerns of this world but also called to holiness, need to discover in you purified hearts which in faith "see" God, people docile to the working of the Holy Spirit who resolutely press on in fidelity to the charism of their call and mission.

You know well that you have set out on a journey of continual conversion, of exclusive dedication to the love of God and of your brothers and sisters, in order to bear ever more splendid witness to the grace which transfigures Christian life. The world and the Church seek authentic witnesses to Christ. And the consecrated life is a gift which God offers in order that everyone can recognize the "one thing necessary" (cf. Lk. 10:42). To bear witness to Christ by one's life, works and words is the particular mission of the consecrated life in the Church and in the world.

You know the one in whom you have put your trust (cf. 2 Tm. 1:12): Give him everything! Young people will not be deceived; When they come to you, they want to see what they do not see elsewhere. An immense task awaits you in the future: In a special way young consecrated persons, by witnessing to their consecration, can lead their contemporaries to a renewal of their lives.[260] An impassioned love of Jesus Christ is a powerful attraction for those other young people whom Christ in his goodness is calling to follow him closely and forever. Our contemporaries want to see in consecrated persons the joy which comes from being with the Lord.

Consecrated women and men, old and young alike, live faithfully your commitment to God in mutual edification and mutual support! Despite the difficulties you may occasionally encounter, and despite the lessening of esteem for the consecrated life in certain quarters, you have the task of once more inviting the men and women of our time to lift their eyes, not to let themselves be overwhelmed by everyday things, to let themselves be captivated by the fascination of God and of his Son's Gospel. Do not forget that you, in a very special way, can and must say that you not only belong to Christ but that "you have become Christ!"[261]

Looking to the future

110. You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished,! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.

Make your lives a fervent expectation of Christ; go forth to meet him like the wise virgins setting out to meet the Bridegroom. Be always ready, faithful to Christ, the Church, to your Institute and to the men and women of our time.[262] In this way you will day by day be renewed in Christ, in order with his Spirit to build fraternal communities, to join him in washing the feet of the poor and to contribute in your own unique way to the transfiguration of the world.

As it enters the new Millennium, may our world, entrusted to human hands, become ever more human and just, a sign and anticipation of the world to come in which the Lord, humble and glorified, poor and exalted, will be the full and lasting joy for us and for our brothers and sisters, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Prayer to the Holy Trinity

111. Most Holy Trinity, blessed and the source of all blessedness, bless your sons and daughters whom you have called to praise the greatness of your love, your merciful goodness and your beauty.

Father most Holy, sanctify the sons and daughters who have consecrated themselves to you for the glory of your name. Enfold them with your power, enabling them to bear witness that you are the Origin of all things,

the one Source of love and freedom. We thank you for the gift of the consecrated life, which in faith seeks you and in its universal mission invites all people to draw near to you.

Jesus our Savior, Incarnate Word, as you have entrusted your own way of life to those whom you have called, continue to draw to yourself men and women who will be, for the people of our time, dispensers of mercy, heralds of your return, living signs of the Resurrection and of its treasures of virginity, poverty and obedience. May no tribulation separate them from you and from your love!

Holy Spirit, Love poured into our hearts, who grant grace and inspiration to our minds, the perennial source of life, who bring to fulfillment the mission of Christ by means of many charisms, we pray to you for all consecrated persons. Fill their hearts with the deep certainty of having been chosen to love, to praise and to serve. Enable them to savor your friendship, fill them with your joy and consolation, help them to overcome moments of difficulty and to rise up again with trust after they have fallen; make them mirrors of the divine beauty. Give them the courage to face the challenges of our time and the grace to bring to all mankind the goodness and loving kindness of our Savior Jesus Christ (cf. Ti. 3:4).

Invocation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

112. Mary, image of the Church, the Bride without spot or wrinkle which by imitating you "preserves with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity,"[263] sustain consecrated persons on their journey toward the sole and eternal Blessedness.

To you, Virgin of the Visitation, do we entrust them, that they may go forth to meet human needs, to bring help, but above all to bring Jesus. Teach them to proclaim the mighty things which the Lord accomplishes in the world, that all peoples may extol the greatness of his name. Support them in their work for the poor, the hungry, those without hope, the little ones and all who seek your Son with a sincere heart.

To you, our Mother, who desire the spiritual and apostolic renewal of your sons and daughters in a response of love and complete dedication to Christ, we address our confident prayer. You who did the will of the Father, ever ready in obedience, courageous in poverty and receptive in fruitful virginity, obtain from your Divine Son that all who have received the gift of following him in the consecrated life may be enabled to bear witness to that gift by their transfigured lives as they joyfully make their way with all their brothers and sisters toward our heavenly homeland and the light which will never grow dim.

We ask you this that in everyone and in everything glory, adoration and love may be given to the Most High Lord of all things, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Given in Rome, at St. Peter's, on March 25, the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, in the year 1996, the 18th of my Pontificate.

ENDNOTES

1 Cf. Proposition 2.

- 2 Vatican Council II, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, 18.
- 3 Cf. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 44; Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio*, (June 29, 1971), No. 7: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 63 (1971), 501-502; Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (Dec. 8, 1975), 69: AAS 68 (1976), 59.
- 4 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 44.
- 5 Cf. John Paul II, General Audience Address Sept. 28, 1994, No. 5: L'Osservatore Romano Sept. 29, 1994, 4.
- 6 Cf. Proposition 1.
- 7 Cf. St. Francis de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, Part 1, Ch. 3.
- 8 *Lumen Gentium*, 43.
- 9 Cf. John Paul II, Homily at the Closing Session of the '94 Synod of Bishops (Oct. 29, 1994), No. 3: L'Osservatore Romano, Oct. 30 1994, 5.
- 10 Cf. 1994 Synod of Bishops, Final Message (Oct. 27, 1994), VII: L'Osservatore Romano, Oct. 29, 1994, 7.
- 11 Cf. Proposition 5.B.
- 12 Cf. Rule, 4, 21 and 72, 11.
- 13 Proposition 12.
- 14 Cf. Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, Canon 570.
- 15 Cf. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 7; *Ad Gentes*, 40.
- 16 Cf. Proposition 6.
- 17 Cf. Proposition 4.
- 18 Cf. Proposition 7.
- 19 Cf. Proposition 11.
- 20 Cf. Proposition 14.
- 21 Cf. Code of Canon Law, Canon 605; Eastern Canon 571; Proposition 13.

22 Cf. Propositions 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 13, 28 29, 30, 35 and 48.

23 Cf. Proposition 3.A and B.

24 Cf. Proposition 3.C.

25 Cf. Cassian: "*Secessit tamen solus in monte orare, per hoc scilicet nos instruens suae secessionis exemplo ... ut similiter secedamus*" (Collationes, 10, 6.; Patrologia Latina, 49, 827), St. Jerome: "*Et Christum quaeras in solitudine et ores solus in monte cum Iesu*" (*Epistula ad Paulinum*, 58, 4, 2: PL 22, 582); William of Saint-Thierry: "[*Vita solitaria*] *ab ipso Domino familiarissime celebrata, ab eius discipulis ipso praesente concupita: cuius transfigurationis gloriam cum vidissent qui cum eo in monte sancto erant, continuo Petrus ... optimum sibi iudicavit in hoc semper esse*", (*Ad Fratres de Monte Dei*, I, 1: PL 184, 310).

26 *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

27 Ibid . 44.

28 Cf. Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, Instruction on Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate (May 31, 1985), 5.

29 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 186, a. 1.

30 Cf. Proposition 16.

31 Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptionis Donum*, (March 25, 1984), No. 3: AAS 76 (1984), 515-517.

32 St. Francis of Assisi, *Regula Bullata*, I, 1.

33 "*Tota Trinitas apparuit: Pater in voce, Filius in homine, Spiritus in nube clara*": *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 45, a. 4, ad 2.

34 *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1.

35 *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

36 Symeon the New Theologian, Hymns, II, verses 19-27.; Sources Chretienne, 156, 178-179.

37 Cf. John Paul II, General Audience Address Nov. 9, 1994, No. 4: L'Osservatore Romano, Nov. 10, 1994, 4.

38 *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

39 St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Magnesians, 8, 2: *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F.S. Funk, II, 237.

40 Cf. Proposition 3.

41 Expositions on the Book of Psalms, 44, 3: PL 36, 495-496.

42 Cf. Proposition 25; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 17.

43 Cf. Proposition 25.

44 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

45 Ibid . 44.

46 Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Le ciel dans la foi. Traite Spirituel*, I, 14: *Oeuvres Completes*, (Paris 1991), 106.

47 Cf. St. Augustine, Confession, 1, 1: *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina, 27.1.

48 John Paul II, General Audience Address, March 29 1995, No. 1: L'Osservatore Romano, March 30 1995, 4.

49 *Lumen Gentium*, 53.

50 Ibid . 46.

51 Cf. Proposition 55.

52 *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

53 Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptionis Donum*, 7.

54 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 44; John Paul II, General Audience Address, Oct. 26, 1994, No. 5: L'Osservatore Romano, Oct. 27, 1994, 4.

55 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

56 Roman Ritual, Rite of Religious Profession: Solemn Blessing or Consecration of Professed Men, 67, and Solemn Blessing or Consecration of Professed Women, 72, Roman Pontifical, Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity: Solemn Blessing, 38; *Eucologion Sive Rituale Graecorum, Officium Parvi Habitum id est Mandiae*, 384-385; *Pontificale Iuxta Ritum Ecclesiae Syrorum Occidentalium id est Antiochiae, Ordo Rituum Monasticorum*, (Vatican City: Polyglot Press, 1942), 307-309.

57 Cf. St. Peter Damian, *Liber qui appellatur "Dominus vobiscum" ad Leonem eremitam*: PL 145, 231-252.

58 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 32; Canon 208; Eastern Canon 11.

59 Cf. Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, 4; *Lumen Gentium*, 4, 12, 13; Pastoral Constitution on the Church in

the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 32, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 3; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, (Dec. 30, 1988), Nos. 20-21: AAS 81 (1989), 425-428; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion, *Communio Notio*, (May 28, 1992), No. 15: AAS 85 (1993), 847.

60 *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

61 Cf. *ibid.* . 12; *Christifideles Laici*, 20-21.

62 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 5.

63 Cf. Ecumenical Council of Trent, Session XXIV, Canon 10: Denz. Schon. 1810; Pius XII, Encyclical *acra Virginitas*, (March 25, 1954): AAS 46 (1954), 176.

64 Cf. Proposition 17.

65 *Lumen Gentium*, 41.

66 Cf. *ibid.* . 46.

67 *Ibid.*

68 Cf. Pius XII, *Motu Propri Primo Feliciter*, (March 12, 1948), No. 6: AAS 40 (1948), 285.

69 Canon 713.1 cf. Eastern Canon 563.2.

70 Cf. Canon 713.2. "Clerical members" are specifically addressed in Canon 713.3.

71 *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

72 St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, *Manuscripts Autobiographiques*, B, 2: "To be your bride, O Jesus ... to be, in union with you, a mother of souls."

73 Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 8, 10, 12.

74 1985 Synod of Bishops, Final Report, *Ecclesia sub verbo Dei mysteria Christi celebrans pro salute mundi*, (Dec. 7, 1985), II, A, 4: *Enchiridion Vaticanum*, 9, 1753.

75 1994 Synod of Bishops, Final Message, IX.

76 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 184, a. 5, ad 2; II-II, q. 186, a. 2, ad 1.

77 Cf. *Libellus de Principiis Ordinis Praedicatorum. Acta Canonizationis Sancti Dominici: Monumenta Ordinis Praedicatorum Historica*, 16 (1935), 30.

- 78 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Orientale Lumen*, (May 2, 1995), No. 12: AAS 87 (1995), 758.
- 79 Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and Congregation for Bishops, Directives for Mutual Relations Between Bishops and Religious in the Church, *Mutuae Relationes*, (May 14, 1978), No. 51: AAS 70 (1978), 500.
- 80 Cf. Proposition 26.
- 81 Cf. Proposition 27.
- 82 *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2
- 83 *Orientale Lumen*, 16.
- 84 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, (Nov. 10, 1994), No. 42: AAS 87 (1995), 32.
- 85 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 69.
- 86 Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 15; St. Augustine, *Regula ad Servos Dei*, 1, 1: PL 32, 1372.
- 87 St. Cyprian, "On the Lord's Prayer," 23: PL 4, 553; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 4.
- 88 Cf. Proposition 20.
- 89 St. Basil, Long Rule, Question 7: *Patrologia Graeca*, 31, 931.
- 90 Ibid . Short Rule, Question 225: PG 31, 1231.
- 91 Cf. "Essential Elements," 51; Canon 631.1, Eastern Canon 512.1.
- 92 Cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Instruction on Fraternal Life in Community, *Congregavit Nos in Unum Christi Amor*, (Feb. 2, 1994), Nos. 47-53: Rome, 1994; Canon 618; Proposition 19.
- 93 Cf. "Fraternal Life in Community," 68; Proposition 21.
- 94 Cf. Proposition 28.
- 95 Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, "Religious and Human Promotion" (Aug. 12, 1980), No. 11, 24: L'Osservatore Romano, English ed . (Jan. 26, 1981), 11.
- 96 *Christifideles Laici*, 31-32.
- 97 *Regula Bullata*, 1, 1.

- 98 Letters, 109 171, 196.
- 99 Cf. Rule 13 at the end of the Spiritual Exercises,.
- 100 Sayings, 217.
- 101 *Manuscripts Autobiographiques*, B, 3 v.
- 102 Cf. Proposition 30.A.
- 103 Cf. *Redemptionis Donum*, 15.
- 104 *Lumen Gentium*, 1.
- 105 "Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion," 16.
- 106 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 13.
- 107 Vatican Council II, Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church *Christus Dominus*, 11.
- 108 *Mutuae Relationes*, 11.
- 109 Cf. *ibid.*
- 110 Cf. Canon 576.
- 111 Cf. Canon 586; *Mutuae Relationes*, 13.
- 112 Cf. *Ad Gentes*, 18.
- 113 Cf. Canons 586.2 and 591; Eastern Canon 412.2.
- 114 Cf. Proposition 29.4.
- 115 Cf. Proposition 49.B.
- 116 Proposition 54.
- 117 Cf. "Fraternal Life in Community," 56.
- 118 Apologia to William of St. Thierry, IV, 8: PL 182, 903-904.
- 119 Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 23.
- 120 Cf. *Mutuae Relationes*, 21, 61; Canons 708-709.

121 *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1; *Lumen Gentium*, 46.

122 *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

123 John Paul II, "Message to the Conference of Religious of Brazil" (July 11, 1986), 4:*Insegnamenti*, IX/2 (1986), 237; cf. Proposition 31.

124 Cf. *Mutuae Relationes*, 63, 65.

125 *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

126 St. Anthony Mary Zaccaria, Writings, Sermon II (Rome 1975), 129.

127 Cf. Proposition 33.A and C.

128 Cf. Proposition 33.B.

129 Cf. "Fraternal Life in Community," 62; *ibid* . Directives on Formation in Religious Institute *Potissimum Institutioni*, (Feb. 2, 1990), 92-93: AAS 82 (1990), 123-124.

130 Cf. Proposition 9.A.

131 Cf. Proposition 9.

132 John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, (March 25, 1995), No. 99: AAS 87 (1995), 514.

133 Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns, *Venite Seorsum*, (Aug. 15, 1969), V: AAS 61 (1969), 685.

134 Cf. *ibid* . I.

135 Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2.

136 *Lumen Gentium*, 6.

137 Cf. St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 29, 1.

138 Cf. Canon 667.4; Proposition 22.4.

139 Cf. Paul VI, *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae*, (June 8, 1966), II, Nos. 30-31: AAS 58 (1966), 780; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 7 and 16; *Venite Seorsum*, VI.

140 Cf. Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi*, (Nov. 21, 1950) VII: AAS 43 (1951), 18-19; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 22.

141 Cf. Canon 588.1.

142 Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 10.

143 Cf. *ibid.* . 8, 10.

144 Cf. *ibid.* . 10; Canon 588.3.

145 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

146 Cf. Proposition 8.

147 John Paul II, General Audience Address, Feb. 22, 1995, No. 6: L'Osservatore Romano (English ed.), March 1, 1995, 11.

148 Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 10.

149 Cf. Canon 588.2.

150 Cf. Proposition 10; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 15.

151 Cf. Canon 573; Eastern Canon 410.

152 Cf. Proposition 13.B.

153 Cf. Proposition 13.C.

154 Cf. Proposition 13.A.

155 Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

156 Cf. Proposition 13.B.

157 *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

158 Cf. Proposition 24.

159 Cf. "Fraternal Life in Community," 67.

160 Cf. Proposition 48 A

161 Cf. Proposition 48.B.

162 Cf. Proposition 48.C.

- 163 Cf. Proposition 49.A.
- 164 Cf. *Potissimum Institutioni*, 29.
- 165 Cf. Proposition 49 B.
- 166 Cf. "Essential Elements," 45.
- 167 Cf. Canon 607.1.
- 168 Cf. Proposition 50.
- 169 Cf. "Fraternal Life in Community," 32-33.
- 170 Cf. Proposition 51.
- 171 Cf. "Fraternal Life in Community," 43-45.
- 172 Cf. *Potissimum Institutioni*, 70.
- 173 Cf. *ibid*, 68.
- 174 *Lumen Gentium*, 46.
- 175 Cf. Proposition 35.A.
- 176 *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.
- 177 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 12.
- 178 Paul VI, Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, (Aug. 6, 1964), III: AAS 56 (1964), 639.
- 179 St. Gregory the Great, Homilies on Ezekiel, Book II, II, 11: PL 76, 954-955.
- 180 St. Augustine, Sermon 78, 6: PL 38, 492.
- 181 Cf. Fourth General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, "New Evangelization, Human Promotion and Christian Culture," (CELAM, 1992), 178.
- 182 Conference "On the Spirit of the Society" (Feb. 9, 1653):*Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents*, ed. Coste, Vol. IX (Paris, 1923), 592.
- 183 Cf. "Essential Elements," 23-24.
- 184 Cf. Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, *O Mon Dieu, Trinite Que J'Adore, Oeuvres Completes*, (Paris

1991), 199-200.

185 Cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 69.

186 Cf. Proposition 37.A.

187 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 46; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 69.

188 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 44 and 46.

189 Cf. *Ad Gentes*, 18 and 40.

190 Letter from Cochin to members of the society in Rome (Jan. 15, 1544): *Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu*, 67 (1944), 166-167.

191 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

192 Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, (Dec. 7, 1990), No. 69: AAS 83 (1991), 317-318; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 927.

193 *Redemptoris Missio*, 31.

194 Ibid . 2.

195 *Ad Gentes*, 18; *Redemptoris Missio*, 69.

196 Cf. Proposition 38.

197 *Redemptoris Missio*, 44.

198 Cf. ibid . 46.

199 Cf. ibid . 52-54.

200 Cf. Proposition 40.A

201 *Redemptoris Missio*, 55; cf. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, instruction "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Perspectives" (May 19, 1991), 4546: AAS 84 (1992), 429-430.

202 Cf. Proposition 40.B

203 John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, (Sept. 14, 1995), No. 62: L'Osservatore Romano, Sept. 16, 1995, 5.

- 204 Cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15.
- 205 1994 Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Ante Disceptationem*, No. 22: L'Osservatore Romano, Oct. 3-4, 1994, 12.
- 206 John XXIII, Opening Speech to Vatican Council II (Oct. 11, 1962): AAS 54 (1962), 789.
- 207 Cf. Proposition 18.
- 208 St. Augustine, Sermon 123, 3-4: PL 38, 685-686.
- 209 Cf. Poem XXI, 386-394; PL 61, 587.
- 210 Conference "On the Rules" (May 30, 1647): *Correspondance, Etretiens, Documents*, 319.
- 211 St. Gregory the Great, The Pastoral Rule, 2,5: PL 77, 33.
- 212 Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, (Feb. 11, 1984), 28-30: AAS 76 (1984), 242-248.
- 213 Cf. *ibid.* . 18; *Christifideles Laici*, 52-53.
- 214 Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, (March 25, 1992), No. 77: AAS 84 (1992), 794-795.
- 215 Cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 78-101.
- 216 Cf. Proposition 43.
- 217 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 44.
- 218 Homily closing the 1994 Synod of Bishops, 3.
- 219 Cf. St. Athanasius, Life of St. Anthony, 7: PG 26, 854.
- 220 Cf. Proposition 39.A.
- 221 Cf. Propositions 15.A and 39.C
- 222 *Lumen Gentium*, 4; cf. Vatican II Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priest *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.
- 223 Cf. Proposition 53; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 37.
- 224 Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.
- 225 Cf. Proposition 18.A.

- 226 Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 13.
- 227 Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, (Aug. 6, 1993), 31-35: AAS 85 (1993), 1158-1162.
- 228 Cf. Proposition 19.A; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14.
- 229 Cf. Proposition 15.
- 230 John Paul II, General Audience Address, Feb. 8, 1995, No. 2 L'Osservatore Romano (English ed.), Feb. 15, 1995, 11.
- 231 Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, 21; cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 6.
- 232 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 125; cf. *Dei Verbum*, 18.
- 233 *Dei Verbum*, 2.
- 234 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5.
- 235 Cf. Vatican II, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis*, 8.
- 236 *Scritti Pedagogici e Spirituali*, (Rome, 1987), 294.
- 237 Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia Christiana*, (April 15, 1979), II: AAS 71 (1979), 471.
- 238 Cf. Proposition 41.
- 239 Cf. *Sapientia Christiana*, II.
- 240 Cf. Proposition 36.
- 241 Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 5.
- 242 Ibid . 1.
- 243 Cf. "Fraternal Life in Community," 34.
- 244 Cf. John Paul II, Message for 1994 World Communications Day (Jan. 24, 1994): L'Osservatore Romano (English ed.), Feb. 2, 1994, 3.
- 245 Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Et Unum Sint*, (May 25, 1995) No. 21 AAS 87 (1995), 934.
- 246 Cf. *ibid* . 28.
- 247 Cf. Proposition 45.

- 248 *Redemptoris Missio*, 55.
- 249 "Dialogue and Proclamation," 42a.
- 250 Ibid . 42b.
- 251 Cf. Proposition 46.
- 252 "Dialogue and Proclamation," 42c.
- 253 Cf. Proposition 47.
- 254 Blessed Angela of Foligno, *Il Libro della Beata Angela da Foligno*, (Grottaferrata, 1985), 683.
- 255 St. Teresa of Avila, *Autobiography*, Ch. 32, 11.
- 256 *Evangelica Testificatio*, 3.
- 257 Cf. Proposition 48.
- 258 *Gaudium et Spes*, 41.
- 259 Cf. *Evangelica Testificatio*, 53; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 69.
- 260 Cf. Proposition 16.
- 261 St. Augustine, *Treatise on St. John's Gospel*, XXI, 8: PL 35, 1568.
- 262 "Religious and Human Promotion," 13-21.
- 263 *Lumen Gentium*, 64.

Words of greeting for the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI.
Audience for the *Virgines consecratae* May 15, 2008
María Luisa Öfele – *Virgo consecrata* in the Diocese of Regensburg, Germany

Your Holiness!

Filled with joy and a deep spirit of thanksgiving, consecrated virgins from fifty-two countries find ourselves gathered here today by the Successor of Peter. We would like to thank you with all our heart for the gift of this encounter, which we have awaited in prayer and in joyful hope! Many consecrated virgins who could not be present for the international congress and the pilgrimage are at this moment united in prayer with your Holiness and with all of us here in Rome.

From apostolic times the Lord has called Christian women “to cling only to him with greater freedom of heart, body, and spirit”¹. “The rite for the consecration of virgins is one of the most treasured in the Roman liturgy”². Like the sacrament of marriage, it speaks of the bond between Christ and his Church and of the beauty of the betrothal with Christ. Through a solemn rite of the Church the virgin becomes a consecrated person. She becomes an ecclesial sign, for the Church herself is before all else virgin and spouse.

The nuptial relationship with the glorified Christ in the *ordo virginum* is a charism which the Holy Spirit gives to the Church. It is not a thing to be possessed but rather a gift received, ordered to the building up of the Church in her innermost being. Holy Father, we thank you today for this gift which we have received through the service of the Church. This gift commits us in every stage of our life and unites us to the Church in the urgent cry, “Come! (...) come, Lord Jesus!” (cf. Rev 22: 17a; 20b)

Consecrated virginity is never a private, personal decision but rather “a gift of God in the Church and for the Church” (Cardinal Ratzinger). As the “bride of Christ”, invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb, the *virgo consecrata* belongs to Christ and to his Church. We are “espoused to him, whom the angels serve” and before whose glory “sun and moon stand in wonder”.³ The mystical marriage which lies at the heart of the prayer of consecration is the determining factor in the life of us *virgines consecratae* in the whole world and in every single diocese.

Holy Father, today we renew our fidelity to you, the Successor of Peter, to all bishops and to the Magisterium of the Church. Through the celebration of the Eucharist and of the liturgy of the Church, through meditation on the Word of God and through prayer, we live out our service to the Church. In union with the Church and under the protection of Blessed Mary, Virgin and Mother, we want to bear witness “to God’s love and be a convincing sign of the Kingdom of heaven”⁴, „to the praise of God’s glory“ (Eph 1:14) and for the salvation of all people.

The bridegroom calls, “Listen, (...) understand; pay me careful heed” (Ps 45:11a). Our response is and always shall be an answer springing from that faith which we daily renew in communion with the whole Church. We ask you, Holy Father, to confirm us in the faith, so that we may “find all things in possessing” Christ, whom we have “chosen above all others” and to whom we have given ourselves wholly and forever⁵

¹ Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, second edition, Rome 1994, Nr. 922

² Decree of Promulgation of the revised Rite of Consecration; Congregation for Divine Worship; May 31, 1970; AAS 62 (1970): 650

³ Antiphon after the handing over of the insignia in the Rite of Consecration

⁴ Cf. from the Examination in the Rite of Consecration

⁵ Cf. Prayer of Consecration

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS
IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS-PILGRIMAGE
OF THE ORDO VIRGINUM (THE ORDER OF VIRGINS)**

Clementine Hall
Thursday, 15 May 2008

Very Dear Sisters,

I greet and welcome with joy each one of you, consecrated with the "*solemn consecration as a bride of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (*Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World [RCV]*, n. 17), on the occasion of the International Pilgrimage and Congress of the *Ordo Virginum*, for which you are gathered in Rome during these days. In particular, I greet and thank Cardinal Franc Rodé for his cordial greeting and his dedication to this initiative, while I address my heartfelt thanks to the Organizing Committee. In choosing the theme for these days you were inspired by one of my affirmations which sums up what I have already had the opportunity to say concerning your state as women who live consecrated virginity in the world: *A gift in the Church and for the Church*. In this light I would like to strengthen you in your vocation and invite you to develop, from day to day, your understanding of a charism that is as luminous and fruitful in the eyes of the faith as it is obscure and futile in those of the world.

Imitate the Mother of God; desire to be called and to be handmaids of the Lord" (*RCV*, n. 16). The Order of Virgins is a special expression of consecrated life that blossomed anew in the Church after the Second Vatican Council (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, n. 7). Its roots, however, are ancient; they date back to the dawn of apostolic times when, with unheard of daring, certain women began to open their hearts to the desire for consecrated virginity, in other words, to the desire to give the whole of their being to God, which had had its first extraordinary fulfilment in the Virgin of Nazareth and her "yes". In the thought of the Fathers Mary was the prototype of Christian virgins and their perception highlighted the newness of this new state of life, to which a free choice of love gave access.

"They have chosen you [Lord] above all things; may they find all things in possessing you" (cf. *RCV*, n. 24). Your charism must reflect the intensity but also the freshness of its origins. It is founded on the simple Gospel invitation: "He who is able to receive this, let him receive it" (Mt 19: 12), and on St Paul's recommendations of virginity for the Kingdom (I Cor 7: 25-35). Yet the whole of the Christian mystery shines out in it. When your charism came into being it did not take shape in accordance with specific ways of life. Rather, it was institutionalized little by little until it became a true and proper solemn, public consecration, conferred by the Bishop in an evocative liturgical rite which made the consecrated woman the *sponsa Christi*, an image of the Church as Bride.

Dearest friends, your vocation is deeply rooted in the particular Church to which you belong: it is your Bishops' task to recognize the charism of virginity in you, to consecrate you and, possibly, to encourage you on your way, in order *to teach you fear of the Lord*, as they commit themselves to do during the solemn liturgy of consecration. From the sphere of the Diocese with its traditions, its Saints, its values, its limits and its problems you broaden your horizons to the universal Church, sharing above all in her liturgical prayer, which is also entrusted to you so that "*the praise of our heavenly Father be always on your lips; pray without ceasing*", (*RCV*, n. 28). In this way your prayerful "I" will gradually be enlarged, until there is no longer anything except a great "we" in the prayer. This is ecclesial prayer and the true liturgy. May you open yourselves in your dialogue with God to a dialogue with all creatures, for whom you will find you are mothers, mothers of the children of God (cf. *RCV*, n. 28).

However, your ideal, truly lofty in itself, demands no special external change. Each consecrated person normally remains in her own life context. It is a way that seems to lack the specific characteristics of religious life, and above all that of obedience. For you, however, love becomes the *sequela*: your charism entails a total gift to Christ, an assimilation of the Bridegroom who implicitly asks for the observance of the evangelical counsels in order to keep your fidelity to him unstained (cf. *RCV*, n. 26). Being with Christ demands interiority, but at the same time opens a person to communicating with the brethren: your mission is grafted on this. An essential "rule of life" defines the commitment that each one of you assumes, with the Bishop's consent, at both the spiritual and existential levels. These are personal journeys. There are among you different approaches and different ways of living the gift of consecrated virginity and this becomes much more obvious in the course of an international meeting such as this, which has gathered you together during these days. I urge you to go beyond external appearances, experiencing the mystery of God's tenderness which each one of you bears in herself and recognizing one another as sisters, even in your diversity.

The Holy Father's Address continues on page 7

May 15, 2008 Address of the Holy Father continued:

Our Holy Father

That your whole life may be a faithful witness of God's love and a convincing sign of the kingdom of heaven" (RCV, n. 17). Take care always to radiate the dignity of being a bride of Christ, expressing the newness of Christian existence and the serene expectation of future life. Thus, with your own upright life you will be stars to guide the world on its journey. The choice of virginal life, in fact, is a reference to the transient nature of earthly things and an anticipation of future rewards. Be witnesses of attentive and lively expectation, of joy and of the peace that characterizes those who abandon themselves to God's love. May you be present in the world, yet pilgrims bound for the Kingdom. Indeed, the consecrated virgin is identified with that bride who, in unison with the Spirit, invokes the coming of the Lord: "The Spirit and the Bride say "Come"" (Rv 22: 17).

As I take my leave of you I entrust you to Mary; and I make my own the words of St Ambrose, who sung the praises of Christian virginity, addressing them to you: "May there be in each one the soul of Mary to magnify the Lord; may there be in each one the Spirit of Mary to exult in God. If there is only one Mother of Christ according to the flesh, Christ on the other hand, according to the faith, is the fruit of all, since every soul receives the Word of God so that, immaculate and immune to vice, she may preserve her chastity with irreproachable modesty" (*Comment on St Luke*, 2, 26: PL 15, 1642).

With this heartfelt wish, I bless you.

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**THE CONSECRATED VIRGEN
LIVES MANIFESTS THE WEDDED LOVE
OF THE CHURCH FOR CHRIST**

Fr. Ignazio Maria Calabuig

In order to adequately illustrate the subject assigned to me -The Consecrated Virgin Lives and Manifests the Wedded Love of the Church for Christ - it seems proper to invert the order of the two terms “Consecrated Virgin” and “Church” as it appears in the title of this report.

I want to state that from -the point of view of research and of writing, I prefer to reflect first on the wedded love of the Church for Christ in order to verify how the Consecrated Virgin is a living and visible expression of that love.

I. SOME ASSUMPTIONS

1.1 THE CHURCH BRIDE

I take for granted an essential element of my supposition: in the mysterious supernatural relationship between Christ and the Church, Christ is the bridegroom, the Church is the bride. In other words: the Church and theology use the metaphor of love and conjugal union to designate the *mystery of love*, that is the intimate communion which by virtue of the mystery of the incarnation and of the death-resurrection takes place between the incarnate Word, and the new People of God. This is the language of the Bible, of the patristic Tradition, of the Liturgy, of the Magisterium. This is the point of view of the mystics and great spiritual writers in every age, as well as of theologians who illustrate the nature of the Church as “*the mystery of communion.*”

The voices which reach us from these various sources are innumerable, meaningful, exciting. It is not possible here to give even a short summary. However, I will quote some passages so that these authoritative messages may introduce us to the subject of my lecture. Thus, our memory stimulated by such readings, may recall other passages that combined together may create that spiritual climate necessary to help us in our research. It will be a pleasant discovery for us to see the condescendence of the Incarnate Word toward the Church to which he unites himself in a mystical wedding, and the filial love of the Christian community for the Church as mother.

The theme of the wedded love of God for mankind and of his freely given and jealous affection for his people are mentioned in almost every page of the Bible. Read for instance the famous words of Hosea (2: 16-18 and 21-22), the pages in which Isaiah extols God’s compassionate love for Jerusalem, his city-spouse (54:1-8), and speaks so lovingly of her beauty (62:1-5), the pages of-the Synoptic in which Jesus is recognized and greeted as the Messiah-Bridegroom (Mat 9:11-15; 25:1-13; Luke 12:36), the passages from the Gospel of St. John where the symbol of marriage is frequently quoted, (2:1-12; 3:29-30; 12:1-8; 20:11-18), the basic passage in the Letter to the Ephesians 2:21-33 and that in 2 Cor 11:2. I will only mention the vision of the Book of Revelations (19:6-8,) in which the kingdom of God is represented as the wedding of Christ with the Church, and as the full manifestation of the Covenant and wedded love of Christ for his Church:

*The Lord is king,
our God the Almighty!
Let us rejoice and be glad, and give him glory!
For this is the -wedding day of the Lamb;
his bride has prepared herself for the wedding.
She has been given a dress to wear,
made of finest linen, brilliant white! (Rev. 18:6-8)*

In the patristic literature we find an abundance of such passages, as for instance that of St. Ambrose (397), taken from the precious blood let: *De Mysteries*. Here, the theme of the wedded love between Christ and the Church is developed with reference to the sacramental experience of baptism:

..... Christ,
seeing his Church in white garments,
or seeing the soul
clean and washed by the layer of regeneration, says:
*“Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved,
ah, you are beautiful. (4:1)
Come from Lebanon, my bride,
come from Lebanon, come.” (4:8)*

And God tells her again,
*“How beautiful you are,
how pleasing, my love, my delight.” (7:7)*
And the Church answers,

*“I would lead you,
bring you in
to the home of my mother.” (8:6)*

Whence the Lord Jesus,
also attracted by the desire of such great love,
by the very beauty of her comeliness and grace,
since there is no longer the foulness of sin in those who are washed,
says to the Church,
*“Set me as a seal on your heart,
as a seal on your arm.” (8:7),*
that is, you are comely,
you are all fair,
“Set me as a seal on your heart.”¹

The liturgy, too, is very much aware of the mystery of the Church as Spouse. It reflects the conviction of our belief that in the celebration of divine mysteries, “Christ always associates the

¹ De Mysteriis 7, 37, 39.

Church with himself *as* — his most beloved spouse.”² The theme of the spouse has exercised a significant influence in the latest changes in the liturgy, particularly in the ritual of the profession of religious, of the consecration of virgins, of the dedication of churches, and in some ritual prayers in the missal and in the Liturgy of the Hours on the occasion of the Feast of the Mother of the Lord. I will limit myself to quote one passage from the Preface of the Roman Liturgy:

Your house of prayer
is also the promise of the Church in heaven.
Here your love is always at work,
preparing the Church on earth
for its heavenly glory
as the sinless bride of Christ,
the joyful mother of a great company of saints.³

The Magisterium never ceased throughout the centuries to remind people that the Church is the spouse of Christ, even though this theme has never been studied in depth. When Vatican II reviewed the Biblical figures that divine Revelation has used to teach what is “the intimate nature of the Church,”⁴ it placed that of the Spouse of Christ at the very top of the list.

The Church... which is called “that Jerusalem which is above: and “our mother” (Gal. 4:26; Rev. 12:17), is described as the spotless spouse of the spotless lamb (Rev. 19:7-21:2 and 9; 22:17). It is she whom Christ “loved and for whom he delivered himself up that he might sanctify her” (Eph. 5:26). It is she whom he unites to himself by an unbreakable alliance, and whom he constantly “nourishes and cherishes” (Eph 5:29). It is she whom, once purified, he willed to be joined to himself, subject in love and fidelity (Eph. 5:24), and whom, finally, he filled with heavenly gifts for all eternity, in order that we may know the love of God and of Christ for us, a love which surpasses all understanding (Eph. 3:19).⁵

If we could possibly dialogue with the Church and ask her: “Who are you? What do you say about yourself?”, she, from the depths of the knowledge of herself, would state her identity and answer joyfully, “I am the Bride of Christ.” I have quoted here only a few passages, and I regret that I had to omit many others that would have helped us to explore, with respect and admiration, the mystery of the wedded love between Christ and the Church and, consequently, of the nuptial relationship between the Lord and the Consecrated Virgin.

1.2. THE CHURCH: WEDDED MOTHER AND VIRGIN

The metaphor of the bride is as we have seen the one which more faithfully introduces the believer to understand the mystery of the relationship between Christ and the Church. However, the metaphor of the bride must necessarily be integrated with that of the *mother* and that of the *virgin*.

² II Vatican Council. Constitution of Most Sacred Council, 7.

³ Roman Missal (Paul VI 1975). Common of the Dedication of a Church outside the dedicated church.

⁴ Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium, 6.

⁵ Ibid.

The Church, by the very fact that it is the “bride of Christ,” is “fertile Mother” and “untouched virgin.” The patristic and liturgical literature of the Church offers a large number of references on this subject. Among liturgical references to this subject there is one that is particularly meaningful, namely the ritual homily of the *Order for the Consecration of Virgins*, and the prayer of the dedication of a church:

Our Lord himself taught us the high calling of such a life, consecrated to God and chosen for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. By his whole life, and especially by his labors, his preaching, and above all by his paschal mystery, he brought his Church into being. He desired it to be a virgin, a bride, and a mother: a virgin, to keep the faith whole and entire; a bride, to be one with him forever; and a mother, to raise up the family of the Church.⁶

The Church is fruitful,
made holy by the blood of Christ:
a bride made radiant with his glory,
a virgin splendid in the wholeness of her faith,
a mother blessed through the power of the Spirit.⁷

The Church fulfills in itself and elevates to a higher level the mystery of Israel. The community of Israel’s children that was called the “Spouse of Yahweh,” was at the same time the *Virgin Sion* (Lam 1:15; 2:13; Jeremiah 31:21) and the *Mother Sion* (Ps 86:4-7) spiritual fatherland of mankind. In the same way, the ecclesial community is a universal Mother and untouched Virgin. Her maternity does no harm to her virginity because she, like the Mother of the Lord, generates by the power of the Spirit.

In the Church, as Spouse of Christ, virginity and faithful love open her maternal heart to embracing all peoples. As Christ is the first born of a multitude of brothers (Rom 8:29) so maternity - that is the generation of divine life - demands the radical virginity of the heart. The Spirit manifests himself only where there is no lie, no cheating, no duplicity.

The Church then is at the same time a virgin, a spouse, and a mother. To these three qualifications we may add others such as disciple, servant, queen. *Disciple*, because the Church, in an attitude of listening and receiving, places herself at the feet of her only Master (Mat 23:8); *servant*, because with Christ and under Christ she is engaged in the service of the work of salvation; *queen*, because she is called to share — as the bride of Christ — in the glorious royalty of the King of Glory.”⁸

1.3 REALITY, SIGN, METAPHOR

At this point, in order to avoid misunderstandings, it is necessary to remember that the nuptial status of the Church is shared by the whole Church in so far as it is the mystical body and the

⁶ Order for the Consecration of Virgins.

⁷ The Common for the Dedication of a Church.

⁸ Roman Missal hymn: *Glory to God*.

people of God. In her, all its members — men and women, married and un-married — share in the status and dignity of the *spouse of Christ*.

However, at the symbolic, historical, and linguistic level, the ecclesial designation of “Spouse of Christ” becomes more visible in the woman and, particularly, in the consecrated virgin. In fact within the terms of the metaphor of the Christ-Bridegroom and the Church-Spouse, the consecrated virgin dedicating herself entirely, body and soul, to the love and exclusive service of Christ, manifests in a better way the condition of the Church that is totally and exclusively dedicated to Christ and his Kingdom. She is a sign. But obviously, not merely a conventional sign.

The consecrated virgin is the symbol of the wedded status of the Church not because of a verbal or symbolic agreement, but by virtue of her existential status and by her Christian choice: she makes visible the invisible reality of the “Church Spouse of Christ.”

1.4 THE CONSECRATED VIRGIN, “SPOUSE OF CHRIST”

Until now our discourse about the “Church Spouse of Christ” has only dealt with her complex reality as the mystical body of Christ. But now is the time to speak about the “consecrated virgin as spouse of Christ.” But our treatment of this subject will be short because, as the Fathers of the Church remark, what is said of the “Church Spouse” must be also said of each consecrated virgin. She is “Spouse of Christ” not on the basis of a subjective choice, but because through her personal choice and the intervention of the Spirit by means of the official consecration, she participates more intimately in the wedded life of the Church. Through her baptism the virgin is already part of the mystery of the “Church Spouse of Christ,” but now, with her consecration — which implies totality, perpetuity, and action of the spirit — she becomes even more profoundly a part of that great mystery, a partaker, and at the same time, an eminently visible sign of it.

Continuing Church tradition, the Roman Ritual of 1970 “in a prominent way, without hesitation or concessions to emotionalism; reaffirms the unanimous doctrine of the Popes and the continuous interpretation of the liturgy by stating that the specific element of the *consecration of a virgin* is the particular nuptial relationship that is established between Christ and the Virgin.”⁹ Texts are explicit. In the ritual homily in a paragraph inspired by the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the bishop tells the virgins:

The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, through baptism has already made you temples of God’s glory and children of the Father. Today through our ministry he anoints you with a new grace and consecrates you to God by a new title. He gives each one of you the dignity of being a bride of Christ and binds you to the Son of God in a covenant to last forever.¹⁰

We must re-affirm again the traditional doctrine that, in the order of grace, the consecrated virgin is the *spouse of Christ*. But, in doing so, we must avoid two dangers.

⁹ I.M. Calabuig - R. Barbieri: *Consecration of Virgins*.

¹⁰ Order of Consecrated Virgins.

In the first place, we must avoid unduly restricting to the consecrated virgins alone the condition of spouse of Christ. In reality this condition belongs to every baptized person. St. Bernard writes (+ 1153):

“Although none of us, my brethren, will be so presumptuous as to dare to call his soul the spouse of Christ, nevertheless, as we are members of the Church which rightly glories in this title, and in the reality corresponding to this title, we at least may justly claim a participation in that high prerogative.”¹¹

The reason given by St. Bernard to support his statement that every faithful shares in the nuptial condition and dignity as spouse of Christ is that every faithful “belongs to the Church.”

The consecrated virgin is the “spouse of Christ” not in opposition to the other members of the Church, but in a deeper sense. She is already the “spouse of Christ” by baptism, but now she goes a step further as she voluntarily renounces earthly nuptials. Thus the gift of the Spirit enables her to deepen her resolution to live a life exclusively dedicated to the love of Christ and to the service of the Kingdom. In this way she becomes the “visible sign” of the wedded condition of the Church.

The second danger to avoid is forgetting that the expression “spouse of Christ” is a metaphor. What is real is the intimate communion of grace, of divine life, and of love which exists between Christ and the consecrated virgin. In order to express this indescribable reality, both theology and even ecclesial “poetry,” following the example of the Bible, are using the metaphor of bride-bridgroom.

The use of this metaphor is legitimate because no other metaphor like this one of wedded life helps to understand the sublime greatness of the communion of love and of grace existing between Christ and the consecrated virgin. However, there is the risk of forgetting that every metaphor consists in two parts: namely, a really symbolic meaning and a negative part asserting “what is not.” We may be inclined to forget the symbolic meaning and to accept “what is not” as a reality. In other words, using a metaphor we may forget the words it *is like*, and simply say *it is*, thus completely altering its meaning.

I am saying this to avoid diluting the importance of the “supernatural reality” of the communion of grace between Christ and the consecrated virgin. I believe that such reality is of far higher value than that expressed by the metaphor of bride and bridegroom. However, to avoid the danger of developing a theological or ascetic discourse on a mere metaphor, it is necessary to be very careful. The purpose of this metaphor is to help penetrate the meaning of the mystery.

Experience shows that the consecrated virgins who have built their lives on the basis of a “wedded relationship” with Christ are the first to use this metaphor with discretion in order not to make banal or ambiguous what is solemn and limpid and not to reduce to a trite outline what is a point of constant and ideal reference.

¹¹ Sermons super Cantica Cantorum, Sermo XII, 11, in Sancti Bernardi opera, I, Romae, Editiones Cistercienses, 1957, p.67.

II LOVE – A SIGN

Now I have to explain how the consecrated virgin lives and makes visible the mystery of the wedded love of the Church for Christ. Wedded love is reciprocal: it consists in, A) Christ's love for the Church and B) in the Church's love for Christ.

A) In theological literature one meets very frequently pages which praise and explain Christ's love for the Church. For instance, reflect on the following page of Pope Paul VI who offers us an authoritative synthesis of a doctrine which has remained valid through the long history of Christian spirituality:

What does the allegory of the *nuptials of the Lamb* (Rev.19:7-9) teach us? It authorizes us to call the Church the *Spouse of Christ*, and so it teaches us that the love Jesus has had for the Church is a love somehow symbolic of human nuptials, but infinitely greater and much more substantial. Let the mystics and theologians tell us more about the ultimate union between Christ and humanity that derives from the Incarnation, a nuptial union, Word and flesh ("*conjunctio nuptialis, verbum et caro*") as St. Augustine wrote, PL36, 495).

This intimate union also flows from the sacrifice of the Redemption, *he gave himself for her* (the Church) (Eph 2:5). It has often been said that the Church is a mystery; yes, but now we may know the nature of this mystery: it is a mystery of charity, of God falling in love through Christ and the Holy Spirit with humanity that is with the Church. The epigraph of the Church might be "*God so loved the world*" (John 3:16), "*because of his great love*" (Eph 2:4) or also *Christ loved us* (Eph 5:2, 2 The 2:15) as above.

The allegory of the nuptials of the Lamb also teaches us the intimate and, indissoluble union along with the distinction between Christ and the Church. It teaches us that the Church is not the beginning and the end in herself: she belongs to Christ, from him she receives her dignity, her power to sanctify, her humble and sublime royalty. It teaches us that the Church is not only an instrument of salvation but the terminal point of salvation because the design and the charity of the Lord are fulfilled in her; she is the glorification (apotheosis) of victorious humanity in heaven. (See the hymn for the dedication of a Church, (*Sponsaeque ritu cingeris...*). She is the meeting point of the love of Christ for us, the gift of the nuptials, that is the holy Church ("*Nuptiarum donurn, id est sanctam ecclesiam.*"). So wrote St. Gregory the Great. - Hom. 38, PL 76, 1287.¹²

B) Love of the Church for Christ. Pages extolling the wedded love of the Church for Christ are more rarely found in Christian literature. This is probably due to a kind of modesty deriving from the awareness that the ecclesial community has of the weakness and limitations of its love in comparison with the infinite love of Christ. The Church knows she is "holy" because of the presence of Christ in her, the presence of the Holy of God (2 Mac 1:24) and of the Spirit of holiness. But she also knows that she is formed by weak and sinful men and women. This is why St. Hillary (+ 367) did not hesitate to speak of the "sinful Church" ("*Ecclesia peccatrix*").¹³

¹² Pope Paul VI at his General Audience, June 15, 1966.

¹³ von Balthasar, *Sponsa Verbi*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 1969, pp. 189-283.

2.1 WEDDED LOVE

There is no doubt that the metaphor of the spouse — if used with caution — is particularly suitable to express the characteristics of the love of the Church and, consequently, of the consecrated virgin for Christ: a wedded love.

Wedded love is, by its very nature, *total and exclusive*, because it is the gift of oneself without reservation and with an undivided heart to the person loved; a love in *perpetuity*, because it does not want to cease, but rather, projecting itself towards the future wants to live the entire cycle of life and continue even after death; *fruitful*, because open to life; *unifying*, because it makes the lover “one and the same thing” with the beloved, experiencing the same feelings, imitating the life style and shares tasks and worries; “*strong as death*” (Song 8:6); *invaluable*, because love is “the flame of the Lord” (Song 8:6), and therefore it cannot be bought with money: “Were one to offer all he owns to purchase love, he would be soundly mocked.” (Song 8:7).

This is genuine wedded love. This is by analog the kind of love of the consecrated virgin for Christ. As the bride of the Song of Songs tells her lover, so the consecrated virgin tells her Lord: “I belong to my lover!” (Song 7:11)

As I was saying, wedded life tends to make a person who is loved assume the feelings and the lifestyle of the beloved and to share the tasks and worries of life. In my opinion, the modalities with which the consecrated virgin must *live and manifest* her love from Christ derives from this point. In this sense the metaphor of the *bride* leads to that of the *disciple*: the consecrated virgin is the bride who takes her bridegroom as her *life-teacher*, and she listens with loving attention to the words that come from his mouth. She is the devoted disciple who places herself with love at the feet of the Master (Luke 10:39) and hangs on the lips of Jesus as a bride on that of her bridegroom.

In the light of this wedded-discipleship, and according to the writings of the fathers of the Church, of the liturgy and of the Magisterium, as an “ideal picture” of how the consecrated virgin should live for the love of Christ and be a sign of the love of the Church for the Lord. This stimulating “ideal painting” is a good point of reference to which every consecrated virgin may refer to, starting from her lay condition, and with which she may compare her existential situation, her forces, her sensibility, and her culture; in it she hears the voice of the Spirit and the directives of the Church.

2.2 LOVE FOR THE WORD OF GOD

The documents of Vatican II when treating the importance of the role of sacred Scripture in the life of the Church refer to the Church as a Spouse.

*The Spouse of the Incarnate Word, which is the Church, is taught by the Holy Spirit. She strives to reach day by day a more profound understanding of the sacred Scriptures, in order to provide her children with food from the divine words.*¹⁴

¹⁴ Dogmatic Constitution, Dei Verbum, 23.

This statement is very meaningful: the Church sees herself in the sacred Scripture in the twofold role of: *spouse* who hears the voice of her bridegroom through these books of sacred Scripture; and in the role of *mother* who finds in sacred Scripture the nourishing food for her children.

It is not difficult to understand, the nuptial attitude of the Church in the Bible. The Church knows from her Lord that the whole sacred Scripture is his word and finds in him her fulfillment (Luke 24:27-44). In the pages of the Bible the Church hears again the words of Christ that are “spirit and life.” (Job 6:63) In the Gospel’s description of Jesus as meek and humble of heart, she sees him as the good shepherd, the King of peace, the good Samaritan; in it she sees the face of her bridegroom; in the love dialogues of the *Song of Songs* she recognizes the beginning of her uninterrupted dialogue with the Lord, and she feels that the praises of nuptials as described in Psalm 44 (verse 45) are written for her; in the pages of the Gospel she reads the story of her wedding celebrated in the womb of the Virgin Mary, consummated on the tree of the Cross; bearing fruits at dawn of the Third Day; in the sacred text she contemplates her own radiant face as that of a young betrothed, a spouse “adorning herself with jewels (Isaiah 61:10); a prophecy of the “new Jerusalem “coming down out of heaven from God, *beautiful as a bride, prepared to meet her husband.*” (Rev. 2:21)

For the Church-spouse it is not difficult to read the whole Scripture — so tragic and attractive, so harsh and gentle — as a diary of her wedded life with Christ. The Church will never cease reading and venerating sacred Scripture because it will never cease to love and adore Christ.

The consecrated virgin shares the love of the Church-spouse for Sacred Scripture because of her special status as bride. In fact, the consecrated virgin is a living and visible sign of the love of the Church for sacred Scripture.

The will of the Church is clear: never let sacred Scripture fall from the hands of the consecrated virgin. She must regard it as the “Book of her Bridegroom,” as her favorite book to be read daily. Practically speaking, it is necessary for the consecrated virgin to grow in the knowledge of the Bible, to become familiar with the ecclesial system of interpretation so of the sacred text, to remain faithful to the old Christian practice of the *lectio divina*, that is, the reading of the divine Word. Furthermore, the Church suggests further steps, such as introducing and guiding her brothers and sisters to the knowledge of sacred Scripture.

The Bible is the book of life for every Christian. The famous words of St. Jerome: “Ignorance of the Bible is ignorance of Christ,”¹⁵ apply to every Christian. But if a consecrated virgin were guilty of such ignorance she would be guilty of failure in her nuptial vocation and in her role as the visible sign of the love of the Church-spouse for her bridegroom. Many are the feminine figures that have inspired consecrated virgins and have fostered their love for Sacred Scripture. Two of them are particularly prominent: Mary of Nazareth, the holy Mother of the Incarnate Word and faithful guardian of the Word of Life (Luke 2:19-51) and Mary of Bethany, the favorite follower of Jesus, who in defiance of the customs of her country placed herself at the foot of the Master (Luke 10:39) to listen in the attitude of a disciple to his words of grace (Luke 4:22).

¹⁵ Commentary on Esaiam: CCL 73, p. 1.

2.3 LOVE FOR THE “SALVIFIC MYSTERIES” OF CHRIST.

The celebration of the mysteries of salvation in certain days of the year and according to the different liturgical times is a fruit of the nuptial love of the Church for Christ. Speaking of the Liturgy, Vatican II says:

Holy Mother Church considers her duty to celebrate in certain dates through the year the memorial of the work of salvation of her divine Spouse.¹⁶

Thus the nuptial love of the Church for Christ is the very basis of the liturgical cult for the salvific mysteries of Christ as well as for the veneration of the Word.

The metaphor of the Spouse is very effective and pertinent in this case. Any spouse who has profoundly loved her husband remembers certain anniversary dates and important events with deep gratitude and affection. But in our case, reality is far superior to the metaphor: the Church by memorializing such anniversaries makes them present as the salvific events in the life of her bridegroom. They are remembered so that the Church-spouse through faith and worship may share in them, may benefit by their salutary effects in order to tell again her bridegroom of her immense love.

Here it would be interesting to document and illustrate how the Church celebrates the various “mysteries” of the life of Christ as “nuptial moments” of the life of Christ. I have to limit myself to remember only the greatest feasts, such as the Annunciation (March 25), the Incarnation of the Word, Christmas (December 25), the Epiphany (January 6), Easter, when the passion and resurrection are re-interpreted and celebrated from different points of view and with different emphasis, as mysteries integrating the “mystery of nuptials” between Christ and the Church.

Allow me to give only one example. On the feast day of the Epiphany, the Church still repeats the old antiphon:

Three mysteries mark this holy day:
today the star leads the Magi to the infant Christ;
today water is changed into wine for the wedding feast;
today Christ wills to be baptized by John in the river Jordan
to bring us salvation.
Alleluia.¹⁷

The Church-spouse observing the memorial of the salvific events of her bridegroom celebrates and lives again her own nuptials with him. So, according to an old principle, the feelings of the Mother, that is “the Church-spouse, are reflected and prolonged in her daughter, the consecrated virgin, and they permeate her spirituality.

¹⁶ Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy, n° 102.

¹⁷ Liturgy of the Hours, antiphon at Benedictus. This antiphon became part of the Roman liturgy at the end of the 7th century or the beginning of the 8th.

History teaches that consecrated virgins, through all centuries, have always had a very special attention and love for the liturgy. This did not happen by chance. In my opinion this was due to two concomitant facts: On one hand, the awareness that consecrated virgins have always had of their *nuptial condition*; on the other hand, to the *nuptial character* of the salvific events celebrated in the liturgy. By celebrating the sacred mysteries, the consecrated virgin consciously places herself as a spouse in front of Christ, her divine Bridegroom.

After her admission to the “Order of Virgins” by the diocesan Bishop, the consecrated virgin is strictly tied up to the local Church, and she does not have a particular spirituality. Hers is the spirituality of the Church-spouse without any other additions or cuts: it is the liturgical spirituality lived in the nuptial dimension.

This is an important element and an integral part of the life of the consecrated virgin. On this important occasion of the restoration of the “Order of Virgins” this important element must be clearly re-affirmed and vigorously practiced because it would be disgraceful if some consecrated virgin would neglect the source of pure water were and drink instead from rivulets that might be polluted.

2.4 EUCHARISTIC LOVE, NUPTIAL-SACRAMENTAL LIFE

In order to make present and live again the “salvific mysteries” of her Bridegroom, the Church celebrates the Eucharistic sacrifice as a complex memorial of the salvific Event. In fact, it was Christ himself who commanded his apostles to ritually repeat the celebration of the new and definite Passover: “*Do this in memory of me.*” (Luke 22:19 and 1 Cor. 11:24-26.) We are all aware of the strict rapport between the Church and the Eucharist: there is no Church without Eucharist, and no Eucharist without Church. The heart of the Church is the Eucharist.

For my purpose, I must remind the readers that the Church lives and celebrates the Eucharist with a nuptial heart, as a supreme expression of her nuptial alliance (covenant) with Christ. Once more we must remember that when the Magisterium illustrates the immense gifts of the Savior to his Church — and such is the Eucharist — it uses the metaphor of the rapport between bride and bridegroom. Vatican II in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical *Mystery of Faith* speaking of the Eucharist say:

“At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his holy Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust it to his beloved Spouse, the Church, as a memorial of his death and resurrection.”¹⁸

“The Catholic Church has always regarded as a most precious treasure the ineffable gift of the Eucharist which she has received from Christ her bridegroom as a pledge of his boundless love.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Constitution of the Holy Council, 103.

¹⁹ Pope Paul VI Apostolic Letter on *The Mystery of Faith* (initial paragraph), in *Acts of the Holy See*, 57, p.753.

The Church knows that the Eucharist, in so far as it is a memorial of the new and eternal Covenant, is a nuptial gift; she knows that the Eucharist in its twofold aspect as “sacred meal” and “sacramental sacrifice” has an intrinsic nuptial value.

The “sacred meal” is a nuptial banquet. Its Biblical roots are to be found in the wedding in Cana (John, 2: 1-12), where Jesus manifests himself as the Messianic bridegroom to the community of his disciples, the bride, to whom he offers the “better wine”, namely the Spirit and the Gospel of the New Covenant.

The “sacramental sacrifice” is the memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ:
— of the redeeming act, through which the Bridegroom sacrificing his life for the bride so that she can purify herself of any impurity in his blood, and may appear in his eyes, “a glorious Church, holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle.” (Eph 5:27)
— of the victory of his life over death, of the risen Lord who in the Garden (John 20:5) — the new Eden — appears to Mary of Magdala, in whom is figured the bride of the Canticle who, meeting her beloved, embraces him strongly (Song 3:4.) Here we see the outline of the face of the Church-spouse.

The Church-spouse is an expert in celebrating the Eucharist; she is accustomed to hold in her bridal hands the body of her Risen Christ; on the altar, she wears with the same grace the priestly vestments and the candid bridal dress.

Patristic references to the Eucharist as the “nuptial gift” of Christ to the Church are very numerous and, bear out an extraordinary nuptial spirituality.²⁰

St. Ambrose explains to the neophytes the meaning of Eucharistic communion in the light of the Song of Songs:

You have come to the Altar,
the Lord Jesus calls you, and says
let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth (1:1).
Do you want to apply these words to Christ?
Nothing sweeter than that.
Do you want to apply them to your soul?
Nothing more gentle. *Kiss me.*
He sees that you are clean from sin,
because your faults have been washed away.
Therefore he judges you worthy of heavenly sacraments
and he invites you to a heavenly banquet:
Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth
...your soul...
sees herself purified from all her sins,
and therefore worthy of approaching the altar of Christ...
she sees the marvelous sacraments and says

²⁰ An interesting anthology of patristic passages has been prepared by Fr. Melon in *The Excitement of the Eucharist in the Nuptial Spirituality of the Fathers in the Supper of the Lord*, “Word: Spirit and Life,” #7, 1983, pp. 215-231.

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,
that is let Christ impress his kiss on me.*²¹

The Church, as a bride, celebrates the Eucharist in the most intense way and according to its most profound meaning uniting the offering of herself to the sacrifice of Christ. Every member of the Church celebrates the Eucharist, but probably nobody lives it as the consecrated virgin lives its existential offering.

In the consecrated virgins, the Church-spouse acquires a Eucharistic dimension:

You are the most exquisite part of the body of the Church,
you are the hosts *who are acceptable to God*
taken out of the total Body of Christ
and consecrated on the heavenly altars.²²

Not only the Eucharist but the whole complex of the sacraments of Christian initiation are part of the nuptial dowry that Christ brings to the Church. An old Spanish Christmas song says:

He gave the Bridegroom to the Bride,
He gave Christ to the Church,
his gifts,
living waters
to wash herself and become pleasant,
oil of gladness,
the perfumed oil of Confirmation,
to be anointed.
He called her to his banquet table,
he fed her with the flour of wheat,
made her inebriated with the sweetest wine.
He gave her justice as her ornament;
a multi-colored garment resplendent with virtue.
He gave his life for her,
he enriched her with his death,
freely accepted and conquering.
He gave all of himself to the Church,
As garment, food, drink.²³

The consecrated virgin manifests with her life the love of the Church-spouse for the Eucharist: she “concelebrates” the divine mysteries with a wedded love, she often, takes care of material details regarding the ritual celebration, often visits the Tabernacle where the body of the Lord is kept, and easily grasps the link between the Eucharistic Body and the mystical Body. Thus, her love for the Eucharistic sacrament is often transformed into acts of charity for the members of

²¹ St. Ambrose. *De Sacramentis*, V, 5-7. St Leander of Seville: letter to his sister Florentina.

²² St Leander of Seville: letter to his sister Florentina.

²³ Christmas Mass. Toledo (Spain) Missal.

the Body of Christ. Because of all this, I believe that in our days the consecrated virgin, publicly dedicated to the service of the local Church, must be considered *by right* a candidate to the ministry of the Holy Eucharist (**Note:** dubious translation for the Italian because the only person who has the right to the ministry of the Holy Eucharist is the ordained minister).

2.5 LOVE FOR PRAYER

According to the command of the Lord (Luke 18:1) and of the Apostle (1 Tim 5:17), the whole Church in every one of its members must be a “praying community”. But prayer, seen in its nuptial connotation proper to the Church, easily assumes in the consecrated virgin the form of a conversation between the bride and her spouse. It is an old and also contemporary practice: the consecrated virgin often closes the door of her room to pray secretly to her Lord and God. (Mat 6:6)

However, her prayer in so far as it is the voice of the Church, has a public character. V. Grossi, illustrating the doctrine of Ambrose of Milan, writes, “The consecrated virgin possessing an immaculate spirit has a particular task in her being church, namely to unite all men for the praise of Christ. The virgin is the figure of the Church and it has an ecclesial dimension not only because she in the service of the Church, but because she realizes it in herself, in her nature of “uniting-receiving-calling” people to glorify God.”²⁴ Here is a very meaningful passage from St. Ambrose:

Mary, too, took a tambourine in her hands (Exo 15:20)
and directed the choirs with virginal modesty.
But think whom she represented.
Probably the Church
who like a virgin,
has united to herself assemblies of devout faithful
in her immaculate spirit to direct them in the singing of divine psalms.²⁵

Therefore, according to St. Ambrose, Mary, the sister of Moses, directing the choirs after crossing the Red Sea, was a figure of the Church. The consecrated virgin, gathering together the people for the singing of psalms, “realizes in herself and expresses one of the essential dimensions of the Church.”²⁶

Consecrated virgins, as an expression of the praying community, do not have institutionalized or particular devotions: they pray in the name of the Church and using the Church’s prayers. Thus, they fulfill on one hand the obligation imposed by the Church, and on the other hand they share in the highest honor of the *Spouse of Christ* because, by praising the Lord, they are in front of the throne of God.²⁷

²⁴ V. Grossi: *La verginità negli scritti dei Padri*, in AAVV: *Il celibato per il Regno*, Milano, Ed. Ancora, 1977, p.154.

²⁵ *De Virginibus*, I, 31-32.

²⁶ V. Grossi. *La verginità nei scritti dei Padri. op.cit.* p. 155.

²⁷ see Constitution of the Sacred Council, 85.

According to the Rite for the consecration of virgins, the celebrant pronounces the following words as he hands over to them the book of the Liturgical hours:

Receive the book of the liturgy of the hours,
the prayers of the Church;
may the praise of our heavenly Father be always on your lips;
pray without ceasing
for the salvation of the whole world. ²⁸

CONCLUSION

According to the design of God, in the order of grace, the Church is Virgin, Bride, Mother. These connotations belong strictly to her nature, her mystery. As a Virgin Bride and Mother, the Church places herself before God – Father, Son and Spirit – and in front of humanity.

Her nuptial condition is realized above all in her rapport with Christ, the Incarnate Word, true God and true Man, only Mediator and universal Savior. In fact, according to Sacred Scriptures, Tradition, the Magisterium, and the liturgy, the Church is “Christ’s Spouse.” This metaphor indicates an intimate union and a love which is indissoluble, fertile in the field of grace, and through which the Church shares in the gifts of her divine Lord.

This nuptial condition is realized in all members of the Church, in all the baptized persons. But the virginal and nuptial status of the Church does not shine in all baptized people because they are not a sign.

The nuptial and virginal status of the Church is made visible in those who through a gift of God, renouncing earthly nuptials, embrace the celibate status for the Kingdom, for the love of Jesus.

Among these disciples of both sexes, the consecrated virgins stand out. As a “group” or “category” they constitute a peculiar “order”; the “Order of Virgins”, which is a characteristic ecclesial institution.

Through a gift and a call from God and through the intervention of the Church, a virgin joins the “Order of Virgins”. It is the Diocesan Bishop who admits the virgin to the consecration: the consecrated virgin is firmly bound to the Church.

In the rite of consecration, the consecrated virgin, through a “new anointment of the Spirit”, receives the “sacrament of virginity” and becomes a visible sign of the “Church, virgin and spouse.”

The *nuptial* dimension and the *ecclesial* dimension profoundly permeate all the Christian Life and the discipleship of the consecrated virgin:

— *nuptial* is her rapport to Christ; her whole way of life, her ascetic practices, her love, her dedication to the Kingdom.

²⁸ Order of Consecrated Virgins, p.79.

— *ecclesial-nuptials* is her prayer, based on the Bible seen as “the book of the Spouse”, the Eucharist “nuptial sacrament”, the Liturgy of the Hours, the “voice of the bride for her spouse.”

“May Christ Be Your Total and Exclusive Love”

International Conference of Consecrated Virgins, Rome

In audience with Pope John Paul II, 2 June 1995

My dear Sisters,

1. This audience fills me with joy, for it offers me the opportunity to meet with you on the occasion of the international convention which has been promoted in order to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the promulgation, which occurred on May 31, 1970, of the up-dated Ritual of the Consecration of Virgins. I greet the organizers of the convention and all of you who have gathered here today.

Vatican Council II determined the revision of the rite of the Consecration of Virgins, present in the Roman Pontifical (cf. Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 80). This was to entail not only a diligent revision of the liturgical formulas and ritual gestures, but also a restoration of a rite that, with respect to women who do not belong to institutes of consecrated life, had fallen into disuse for many centuries. Along with this rite, the “*Ordo virginum*” was also reinstated, which was to find its own juridical configuration, distinct from that of institutes, in Can. 599 of the new Code of Canon Law. This renewed rite, and reinstated “*Ordo*” are a two-fold gift of the Lord to His Church. You exalt at such a gift, thanking the Lord for it. On this occasion, you seek to draw from it a motive and inspiration for renewing your fervor and commitment.

2. On my part, I would like to speak to you with the same affectionate warmth with which bishops of old used to speak to the virgins of their churches: for example, the warmth of Methodius of Olympia, the first cantor of Christian virginity; that of Athanasius of Alexandria and of Cyprian of Carthage, who considered consecrated virgins an elect portion of Christ’s flock; that of John Chrysostom, whose writings are rich in ideas to nourish the spiritual life of virgins. Ambrose of Milan, whose works bear witness to an extraordinary pastoral care for consecrated virgins; Augustine of Hippo, that keen, profound theologian of virginity embraced for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Mt 19:12); the great, holy Pontiff Leo I, with all probability the author of the admirable prayer of consecration *Deus castorum corporum*; and Leander of Seville who wrote a beautiful letter to his sister Fiorentina on the occasion of her virginal consecration. This is an episcopal tradition to which I willingly join myself.
3. On this meaningful occasion, I am happy to stress some fundamental directives that can guide your special vocation in the Church and in the world.

Love Christ, the meaning of your life. For the consecrated virgin, as St. Leander of Seville affirms, Christ is everything: “spouse, brother, friend, inheritance, reward, God and Lord” (*Regula sancti Leandri*, Introd.).

The mystery of the Incarnation was seen by the Holy Fathers in a spousal light, following the interpretation given by the Apostle Paul on the Lord’s death: “Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). The event of the resurrection was also seen as a nuptial encounter between the Risen Lord and the new messianic community, for which reason the Easter Vigil was celebrated as the “nuptial night of the Church” (St. Asterio Amaseno, *Homilia XIX, in Psalmum V oratio V*).

The entire life of Christ was therefore placed under the sign of the mystery of His nuptials with the Church (cf. Eph 5:32). You, too, dear Sisters, belong to that mystery through the gift of the Holy Spirit and in virtue of a “new spiritual anointing” (cf. *Pontificale Romanum, Ordo consecrationis virginum*, n. 16).

Answer Christ's infinity love with your total and exclusive love. Love Him as He desires to be love in your concrete life: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (Jn 14:15; cf. 14:21). Love Him as is fitting to your spousal condition: assuming His same sentiments (cf. Phil 2:5); sharing His way of life consisting in humility and meekness, love and mercy, service and joyful availability, untiring zeal for the glory of the Father and the salvation of the human race.

The state of consecrated virginity makes the praise of Christ more spontaneous, listening to His word quicker, service to Him more joyful, and the occasion of offering Him the homage of your love more frequent. Yet *consecrated virginity is not a privilege, but rather a gift of God*, which implies a strong commitment in following Him and being His disciple.

The following of the Lamb in Heaven (cf. Rev 14:6) begins on earth, walking down the narrow path (cf. Mt 7:14). Your *sequela Christi* will be more radical, the greater your love is for Christ and the more lucid your awareness of the meaning of virginal consecration. In the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, dealing with the “Gospel ideal of virginity,” I recalled that “in (consecrated) virginity is expressed . . . the radical nature of the Gospel,, which consists in leaving everything and following Christ” (n. 20).

Your being *disciples of Christ* will be more intense, the more you are convinced that Jesus is the one Teacher (cf. Mt 23:8), whose words are “spirit and life.” Dear Sisters, remember that your place is, like that of Mary of Bethany (cf. Lk 10:39), at the feet of Jesus, listening to the words of grace that come forth from His mouth (cf. Lk 4:22).

Love the Church, your Mother. Through the solemn rite presided over by the diocesan bishop (*Ordo consecrationis virginum, Praenotanda*, n. 6, page 8), you have received from the Church the gift of consecration. You are dedicated to its service. You ought to feel ever bound to the Church by a strict tie.

According to the teaching of the Fathers, in receiving from the Lord the “Consecration of virginity,” virgins become a visible sign of the virginity of the Church, the instrument of its fruitfulness and witness of its fidelity to Christ. Virgins are also a reminder of the orientation of the Church towards the future goods and a warning to keep this eschatological tension alive.

It is also the task of virgins to become an active hand of the generosity of the local church, the voice of its prayer, an expression of its mercy, a help for its poor, a consolation for its afflicted sons and daughters, and a support for its orphans and widows. We could say that at the time of the Father the *pietas* and *caritas* of the Church were expressed to a great part through the heart and hands of consecrated virgins.

These are lines of commitment that still remain valid today. I myself underlined the anthropological value of the virginal choice carried out in the Church. It is a way in which the consecrated virgin “realizes her personality as woman.” “In freely chosen virginity the woman confirms herself as a person, as a being that the Creator desired for Himself right from the beginning, and she realizes at the same time the personal value of her own womanliness” (*Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 20).

Not less than the woman who follows the path of matrimony, the consecrated virgin is capable of living and expressing spousal love. “In a similar love” she becomes in the Church a gift for God, for Christ the Redeemer, and for every brother and sister.

Love the children of God. Your total and exclusive love for Christ does not exempt you from love towards all men and women, your brothers and sisters, for the horizons of your charity—precisely because you belong to the Lord—are the same as the horizons of Christ.

According to the Apostle, the virgin “gives her mind to the Lord’s affairs and to being holy in body and spirit” (I Cor 7:34). She seeks “the things that are above, which Christ is, sitting at God’s right hand” (Col 3:1). And yet this does not estrange you from the great values of creation and from the longings of humanity, nor from the suffering of the earthly city, from its conflicts and from the sorrows caused by war, famine, disease, and the wide-spread “culture of death.” Have a merciful heart and share in the sufferings of the brethren. Commit yourselves to the defense of life, the promotion of women and respect for their liberty and dignity.

You are well aware: “You who are virgins for Christ” become “mothers in the spirit” (*Ordo consecrationum virginum*, n. 16), cooperating with love in the evangelization of man and his promotion.

Love Mary of Nazareth, the first fruits of Christian virginity. Humble and poor, “the promised spouse of Joseph” (Mt 1:18), a just man “of the house of David” (Lk 1:27), Mary became by a singular privilege and by her fidelity to the Lord’s call, the Virgin Mother of the Son of God.

Mary is thus the perfect icon of the Church as a mystery of communion and love, an icon of its being *Virgin, Spouse and Mother*.

As St. Leander of Seville observes, Mary is also “the culminating point and prototype of virginity.” In body and soul she was fully what you desire to be with all your strength: virgins in body and soul, spouses through total and exclusive adherence to the love of Christ, mothers through the gift of the Spirit.

My dear Sisters, Mary is your Mother, Sister and Teacher. Learn from her to fulfill God’s will and to accept His salvific plan, to keep His word and to bring all events of life to it, to sing His praises for His “great works” in favor of humanity, to share in the mystery of suffering, to bring Christ to all men and to intercede for those in need.

Be with Mary in the nuptial room where there is rejoicing and where Christ manifests Himself to His disciples as the messianic Spouse. Be with Mary at the foot of the Cross, where Christ offers His life for the Church. Remain with her in the Cenacle, the house of the Spirit, who is poured out as divine Love in the Church, His Spouse.

Persevere faithfully in your vocation with the help of the most holy Virgin. May the examples of the holy Virgins who enriched the life of the Church in every century inspire you.

May the assurance of my constant prayer together with a special blessing accompany you.

CONSECRATED VIRGINS FOR TODAY'S CHURCH

by Sr. Sharon Holland, IHM

from *Informationes s.c.r.i.s.*, Bollentino d'informazione

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In all probability, consecrated virgins represent the oldest form of dedication in a total following of Jesus Christ. The early virgins, out of love for Him, and sometimes at the cost of their lives, chose not to marry in order to dedicate themselves totally to prayer and to service of others in the Christian community. Their male counterparts, the ascetics, were less numerous and less well known.¹ Like the widows who dedicated themselves to prayer and service, the virgins were considered a distinct group in the early Church, referred to as an *ordo* or order.

Decline and Revival of the Rite for Virgins Living in the World

Over the centuries, the use of the rite of consecration was quite completely reversed, becoming common in monasteries of nuns with solemn vows and gradually disappearing from use among women remaining in their secular condition. By the time of Lateran Council II (1139), during the Pontificate of Innocent II, the practice of consecrating women living in the world had ended. It was after the First World War that requests were again received for permission to use the consecration of virgins for individual women remaining in their secular condition of life. The question of whether this was expedient was taken up in the February 25, 1927 Plenary Meeting of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and received a negative response.² Thus, when Pope Pius XII stated in *Sponsa Christi* that the rite was reserved to nuns, he was simply stating a fact.³

Authors gave various explanations for the 1927 decision, although these are not expressed in the response itself. Some judged practice was obsolete and noted the silence of the 1917 Code. Some believed that Church authority did not favor innovations and that the consecration of virgins living in the world would be an affront to religious. Others spoke of the danger which would be faced by such consecrated women living in their own homes, while still others pointed out that only religious institutes and societies permitted such a public or quasi-public juridic state. The author collecting these opinions notes that what the 1983 Code now provides for simply was not mature when those authors were considering the matter.⁴

A simple statement from Vatican Council II threw the matter wide open again. In its first document, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (4 December 1963)

¹ See M. Dortel-Claudot, "Ascètes et Vierges des Premiers Siècles". *Vie Consacrée*, 48 (1976) 142-30.

² "Negative et nihil innovetur". *AAS*, 19 (1927) 138-139.

³ Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution, *Sponsa Christi* and General Statutes. 21 November 1950. *AAS*, 43 (1951) 5-24; *CLD*, 3:221-248. Statutes, Art. III, § 3 states: "The ancient solemn formulae for the consecration of Virgins, which are in the Roman Pontifical, are reserved to Nuns". See D. M. Hout, "La Consecration des Vierges" *Informationes SCRIS*, 9 (1983) 159; Eng. Ed., *Consecrated Life*, p. 294.

⁴ T. de Urquira, "Circa Ordinem Consecrationis Virginum Quaestiones Tres". *CpR* 64 (1983) 142-169. On this point see pp.146-133.

we read: “The rite of the Consecration of Virgins contained in the Roman Pontific is to be revised” (n° 80).

The subsequent instructions on the implementation of that Constitution did not address the point further. However, in 1970, the revised Rite was published under the authority of Pope Paul IV. The Decree from the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship (31 May 1970), permitted the new Rite to go into use, where possible, on 6 January 1971. Vernacular versions and adaptations were to be prepared by episcopal conferences and sent to the Sacred Congregation for confirmation.

The Rite of Consecration

It is noted in the Decree that this Rite of Consecration is viewed as a precious treasure in the Roman liturgy because Christ bequeathed sacred virginity as a legacy to His Spouse. Indeed, from apostolic times, virgins dedicated their chastity to God, thus adorning the Mystical Body and enriching it with fecundity. Touching the central elements of the Rite, the Decree notes that from ancient times the Church “has been wont to strengthen the pious and arduous resolve of virgins by a solemn prayer of consecration”. Over the centuries, the ceremony was embellished to ever more clearly demonstrate the significance of sacred virgins “as the image of the Church espoused to Christ”.⁵

This image of the Church, perhaps less frequently cited today than others, such as the “People of God”, is nevertheless also found in the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* (21 November 1964). In the terminology of Apocalypse, the Church is the spotless spouse of the spotless lamb. In the terminology of Ephesians, Christ loves the Church and has delivered himself up for her sanctification; He unites the Church to himself in an unbreakable alliance. Christ nourishes and cherishes the Church. He fills the Church with heavenly gifts for all eternity, “in order that we may know the love of God and of Christ for us, a love which surpasses all understanding (cfr. Eph. 3:19)” (LG 6).

The consecrated virgin is to image just this Church, the spouse of Christ. In the homily which the Rite offers to the Bishop, the same imagery is contained: the Church is the Bride of Christ, and the Fathers and Doctors of the Church give this title to those who live a life of virginity as a sign of the world to come.

Likewise, in the Bishop’s examination of the candidate for consecration, this central spirit and image is present. Three questions are posed:

1. Are you resolved to persevere to the end of your days in the holy state of virginity and in the service of God and his Church?
2. Are you resolved to follow Christ in the spirit of the Gospel that your whole life may be a faithful witness to God’s love and a convincing sign of the kingdom of heaven?

⁵ *CLD* 7: 421-425. See also *AAS*, 62 (1970) 659; *CpR* 51 (1970) 373-375; *Notitiae* 6 (1970) 314-316. Except in the case of *AAS*, which published only the Decree, the “Norms” or Introduction to the Rite also appear in the other places cited.

3. Are you resolved to accept solemn consecration as a bride of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

A short time later in the Rite, the candidate renews her resolution (the *propositum*) in a more synthetic form:

Father, receive my resolution to follow Christ in a life of perfect chastity which with God's help, I here profess before you and God's people.

Then follows the solemn prayer of consecration sung or recited over the candidates by the Bishop with extended hands. It recognizes before God their "resolve to live in chastity". The grace of virginity is recognized as a gift of the Spirit and while praising it, the prayer proclaims that "the honor of marriage is in no way lessened". The virgins renounce the joys of human marriage, cherishing what it foreshadows.

The gift of the Spirit is invoked to provide the virgins "modesty with right judgment, kindness with true wisdom, gentleness with strength of character, freedom with the grace of chastity".

The Bishop prays that the Lord may be all for them: "their glory, their joy, their whole desire... their comfort in sorrow, their wisdom in perplexity, their protection in the midst of injustice, their patience in adversity, their riches in poverty, their food in fasting, their remedy in time of sickness". Since they have chosen Christ above all things, the Bishop prays that they will find all things in possessing him.

The *propositum* of the candidate and the prayer of consecration by the Bishop are the central elements of the Rite. These are placed within the context of the Eucharistic celebration, for which there is a ritual Mass. Other elements of the prayers and symbols, some of which are optional, enhance the central symbolism of bride of Christ, imaging the Church espoused to Christ. These symbols include the veil, the ring and the book of the Liturgy of the Hours.

Criteria

In the strength of this imagery reflecting the theological nature of the vocation of the consecrated virgin, one can understand the criteria for being admitted. For women living in the world, the introductory norms state the following:

- a) that they have never married or lived in public or open violation of chastity;
- b) that by their age, prudence, and universally approved character they give assurance of perseverance in a life of chastity dedicated to the service of the Church and of their neighbor;
- c) that they be admitted to this consecration by the bishop who is the ordinary of the place.

The first point is the same for nuns receiving the consecration. For them, the other requirements are perpetual profession and that their religious family has permission to use the Rite.

Consecrated Virgins in the Code

The 1983 Code of Canon Law for the Latin Church reiterates some of the key elements of the Rite in canon 604.

§ 1 Similar to these forms of consecrated life is the order of virgins, who, expressing the holy resolution of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, are mystically betrothed to Christ, the Son of God, and are dedicated to the service of the Church.

§ 2 In order to observe their resolution more faithfully and to perform by mutual assistance service to the Church which is in harmony with their proper state, virgins can be associated together.

This canon, unlike that for hermits, did not appear in the 1977 draft of the canons. It appears in the discussion of the *coetus* in their fifth session, held 28 May to 1 June, 1979.

Discussion of whether to use the word *ordo* or *status* seemed to hinge on whether or not one viewed this as a state of life. For some, the *propositum* of the virgins was inadequate juridically. The absence of the vows of poverty and obedience raised doubts for some as to whether this was a public state of consecrated life in the Church. Others, speaking of the *propositum* of chastity as a vow, made in a solemn ceremony according to the Rite of the Church, insisted that it surely constituted a public vow and a public state in the Church, although one entered into as an individual. The suggestions included the addition of reference to a closer following of Christ.

In the end, the decisions regarding the first article of the canon were: (1) the term *ordo* rather than *status*; (2) the insertion of the words *iuxta probatum ritum liturgicum*; (3) the phrase *ab Episcopo diocesano* rather than *ab Episcopo eiuve delegato* and (4) a revised order of the wording to include the insertion of *Christum pressius sequendi*.

Discussion of the canon's second article ranged from the recommendation to omit it entirely, to providing for public associations erected by competent authority. If associations were public, it was observed, they would need statutes. One consulter deemed the word "freely" important, lest Bishops seek to prohibit their formation.

The Secretary of the Code Commission saw, in addition to the canons on associations of the faithful, an eventual possibility of a specific form of consecrated life developing, insofar as provision was made for poverty and obedience in statutes approved by authority.

At the point of decision making, the *coetus* was also asked to vote on suppressing the second article. The vote was 5 *placet* and 6 *non placet*. The subsequent vote, on a text essentially that of the actual canon, received 7 votes of *placet*.⁶

The canon as we have it today stresses two fundamental elements of this vocation: consecration and service. There is clear echo of the spirituality developed in the Rite. The virgins are

⁶ *Comm.* 11 (1979) 331-334.

consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to a rite approved by the Church; they are betrothed mystically to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church.

Contemporary Questions

Despite the antiquity of the vocation, the publication of the Rite and the subsequent inclusion of its use in the Code of Canon Law, both gave rise to practical, theological and juridic questions.

Those Who May Receive the Consecration

Although, as seen above, the criteria for reception of the consecration are quite clear, there were subsequent questions. The introduction to the Rite makes clear that neither in the case of nuns, nor in that of women living in the world, may the consecration be conferred upon widows. In the early Church, there was also the order of widows and today certain efforts are being made to restore some comparable rite for them. Likewise, whether in the monastery or in the world, those who have lived in public or open violation of chastity may not be admitted to the consecration. The historical roots of this practice, reflected anew in the virginal images from Scripture, help clarify the distinctive nature of this vocation and its requirements which are different from those of religious institutes.

In a 1971 response from the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, it was affirmed that women in secular institutes might use the Rite. The reply does not discuss the potential incongruity between the public nature of the consecration of virgins and the leaven imagery typical of secular institutes. There is the similarity of consecrated persons living in the midst of the world and there is diversity of practice among secular institutes regarding the practice of discretion. Nevertheless, this appears to be a question which merits further reflection.

The same 1971 response also clarified that the Rite was not intended for use by men. Nevertheless the Dicastery expressed openness to the possible development of a parallel rite should interest be expressed.⁷

Another question touching on the use the Rite has arisen in the case of women requesting indults of departure from religious institutes. Occasionally there is the question of whether this may be handled as a transfer between one state of consecrated life and another. In brief, it must be stated that there cannot be a transfer, in the ordinary sense of canon 684, because there is no institute or society on the part of the virgin. Nevertheless, a sort of analogy may be used.

Transfers between two institutes of the same kind are handled by the supreme moderators (c. 684 § 1). When there are two types of institutes, such as religious and secular or societies of apostolic life, the Holy See or the Diocesan Bishop becomes involved (c. 684 § 5). In moving between incorporation in an institute or society and the consecration of virgins, a further step is involved.

In practice, if a religious wishes to leave her institute and become a consecrated virgin, she must receive an indult of departure from her religious institute. Often such a person has been out on

⁷ *Notitiae* 7 (1971) 108-109.

exclaustration for a time, has investigated this vocation and has made contact with a bishop about it. If that is the case, and if the bishop is disposed to receive the woman for the consecration of virgins, the indult can be granted to take effect at the time of the consecration. Actually, however, bishops are usually encouraged to proceed carefully, even with women who have considerable spiritual formation. This is a distinct vocation in the Church. A person in transition who wishes to maintain her personal consecration to God, in service to the Church, but outside an institute to which she has belonged, would often do better to receive an indult of departure, make a private vow of chastity, and then take time for discerning her next step. A Bishop may well wish to insist on such a time of preparation and discernment before accepting the individual who is leaving a corporate form of public consecration in the Church, for this individual one.

It may also occur that one, who has lived as a consecrated virgin for some time, seeks entry into a religious institute. Once again, a simple transfer process (which of itself requires three years of probation cf. c. 684 § 2) is not sufficient. While the consecrated virgin would not need to be dispensed from her consecrated state of life, it would be expected that she would discuss the matter with her bishop; later, if seeking admission to the religious institute, she would present a letter from him. Such a person needs to enter the congregation in the normal way, making a novitiate.⁸

While it is true that the consecrated virgin has spiritual experience and perpetual commitment in consecrated chastity, she is not accustomed to community life lived in common, and she has not been living the vows of religious poverty or religious obedience. She needs to learn the history, spirituality and mission of the institute and discern her vocation to live it, according to the institute's constitutions. Likewise, the institute has the same right and obligation to discern with her.

The “Propositum”

Another question which arose immediately after the Rite's publication, and which continues to raise questions, is the nature and effect of the *propositum*, and the prayer of consecration. Some of the questions placed before the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship sought to draw comparisons between religious with simple vows and consecrated virgins. One query asked whether or not there might be gradations of consecration and if so, which was the highest. In response the Dicastery asserted that there are not gradations of consecration, determined by different rites.⁹ This was followed by the question of whether a vow was necessary to consecration or if some other form of commitment, such as a promise, would be sufficient if accepted by the Church. The response clarified that strictly speaking, a vow in the technical sense used today is not necessary. It is, however, the response continues, indispensable that the person have the intention of offering him/herself to God in a total and perpetual way, and that this be accepted by the Church.¹⁰ In the context of the Rite for the Consecration of Virgins, this response reflects the two-fold movement of the renewal of the *propositum* by the virgin, and the prayer of consecration by the Bishop.

⁸ In such a case, the Superior General may wish to make use of the exception provided individual novices in c. 647. § 2.

⁹ *Notitiae* 7 (1971) 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

De Urquiri, however, finds a lacuna in the revised Rite regarding the actual nature of the commitment. He argues that the *propositum* and a vow are not wholly synonymous. There cannot be a vow without the intent, but the converse, he insists, is not necessarily true. In this context, however, he notes that since the time of St. Jerome in the fifth century, the general understanding has been that the *sacrum virginitatis propositum* was understood as a general vow of religion — not an explicit vow, but an implicit one. He also calls attention to the fact that the canons do not include this consecration with the perpetual public vow of chastity in religious institutes which constitutes an impediment to valid marriage (cf. c. 1088).¹¹

Also writing at the time of the revised Code, Hout, warned against trying to put the ancient practice (the *propositum*) into today's categories of vows. The consecrated virgin, he states, enters a public state of virginity; a public state of consecration.¹²

As has been seen above, those drafting the canon on this subject also had doubts. Nevertheless, the combined expression of the *propositum* in the words of the Rite and the Bishops response in the prayer of consecration, seem to reflect the understanding noted from the time of St. Jerome, and to clearly indicate a public state of consecrated life in the Church.

The very nature of the vocation and the Rite itself make clear that the fundamental way of life is that of consecrated virginity. It should also be clear that the Rite is not a religious profession and does not call for vows of poverty or obedience, or living “according to the constitutions of X”. It is a life of consecrated virginity... of charity... of prayer and service of the Church. Consecrated virgins do not make vows of poverty and obedience, but united to Christ and the Church in a special way through heir virginity, they must be exemplary in that evangelical detachment from material things, and that obedience to God and the Church which is required of all of the Baptized (cfr. VC 30)

The Minister of the Rite

Despite the emphasis on the role of the Bishop and the Rite's expressed preference for the ceremony being celebrated in the Cathedral, doubts have been raised about the minister. The Rite states that the minister is the bishop who is the Ordinary of the place. Canon 604 states the same, using the revised language of the Code, the Diocesan Bishop. Although some, including de Urquiri, express the opinion that this could be delegated to a priest as extraordinary minister¹³, taking into consideration the entire symbolism of the bond with the local Church, represented by the Diocesan Bishop, it becomes clear that much would be lost by delegation. The Rite states clearly that the Diocesan Bishop is the minister. As noted above, one of the decisions in drafting the canon was to remove reference to another being delegated by him for this celebration. Hout states that it is the use of the Pontificals imposed by the liturgical rite which requires the bishop as minister, more than the necessity of orders or the power of government. As chief pastor of the

¹¹ De Urquiri, pp. 156-157.

¹² Hout, p. 164-163; *CL* p. 299.

¹³ De Urquiri, pp. 158-159.

local Church, it belongs to the Diocesan Bishop to choose and consecrate for the service of the diocese.¹⁴

It could be concluded then that the delegation of a priest would not invalidate the consecration, but would be inadequate in its symbolism. On a practical note, since this is a relatively infrequent ceremony for which considerable time of preparation is needed and which does not have to take place according to a specific time sequence, under normal circumstances it would not seem necessary to delegate the role of Minister. If this should be necessary, delegation to another Bishop would be more appropriate.

Relationship to the Diocese

As has been seen, among the qualifications listed in the introduction to the Rite for a woman living in the world who wishes to receive the consecration ‘of virgins, is that her age, prudence and universally approved character give assurance of her perseverance in the life of chastity “dedicated to the service of the Church” and of her neighbor. Earlier in the same Introduction, when speaking of the principal duties of such women, it is noted that their consecration of their chastity in this vocation is for the sake of a more fervent love of Christ and “of greater freedom in the service of their brothers and sisters”. To this end they spend their lives in works of penance and mercy, in apostolic activity and in prayer “according to their state of life and spiritual gifts”. The one specific note added here is a strong exhortation to celebrate the liturgy of the hours daily, especially morning and evening prayer.

In the primitive Church, surely some of the early consecrated virgins were women of Christian households which provided their support. While today, some may have personal funds at their disposal both for ‘their own support and for works of charity among the poor, the normal situation is that a consecrated virgin must earn her living, secure provision for her medical care in ways available to other individuals, and provide, at least modestly, for her own future. If an individual is in the service of the local Church in a full time work, she would need to receive the salary or stipend another person would receive. If she earns her living through a secular job, she will probably volunteer her free time in the service of the diocese or parish according to her gifts and the needs of the Church.

Practical questions regarding the finances of a consecrated virgin and the diocese’s responsibility for her in that area, find a response in the fact that this is an individual vocation to consecration, and, as distinct from religious, is a secular one. There is no religious community of goods into which they put all that they receive and from which they receive what is needed. In a way more similar to members of a secular institute, the consecrated virgins earn their living and spend themselves in the service of the local Church. One is reminded of St. Paul who wished to earn his own way while bringing the Good News.

Through consecration there is a particular bond with the Bishop and with the particular Church. It is, however, less juridically specified than the bond referred to as the incardination of a diocesan priest. The latter has an obligation of obedience to his Bishop in being assigned to

¹⁴ Hout, p 168; *CL*, pp. 302-303.

priestly duties, and in turn, he has a right to be supported in his material, as well as spiritual, needs, through the local Church. This is not the situation of the consecrated virgin.

How each consecrated virgin will exercise her responsibility of service in works of mercy, prayer, sacrifice and apostolic activity, and how she will earn her living, are elements of the conversation which must take place prior to being admitted to consecration. Consecrated virgins may be working as university professors, parish secretaries, nurses or pastoral ministers; they may be working in purely secular jobs during the day and volunteering their services in a variety of charitable works on behalf of the sick, elderly, handicapped or homeless in their time off. Wherever they are, they will be present as one consecrated, bearing witness to the love of God for all, made visible and mirrored in Christ's love for the Church.

All of this does not suggest, however, that after admitting a candidate and presiding at the Rite of Consecration the Bishop has no further responsibility toward the consecrated virgin. As pastor local Church he is concerned for the promotion of vocations of all kinds, for the spiritual well-being of all members of his flock. For those who have been received by him for consecration at the service of the Church, he must express special pastoral and spiritual concern. Many encourage that the Bishop have a regular, perhaps annual, conversation with each consecrated virgin, regarding her life of consecration and her areas of service in the Church.

A bishop will most probably call upon the more mature to participate in the formation and preparation of other consecrated virgins. He may discover areas of service in the diocese for which they are particularly apt, and call upon them for their assistance. While it is presumed that a consecrated virgin will have another spiritual director, not all regular contact with the diocesan bishop should be delegated to others, such as a vicar for consecrated life. A well prepared colloquium can be of benefit to both the bishop and the individual consecrated virgin.

Several years of experience have given rise to further practical questions about this relationship with the local Church. A woman is admitted and consecrated by the bishop of the place, but it can happen that she must move to another place. The law does not provide details, but since this is a public state of consecration in the Church, it would seem right to request of the consecrating bishop a letter introducing her to the new Bishop. In some dioceses, it is the practice to give a certificate or letter testifying to the fact, on the occasion of her consecration. This would include the date, diocese and consecrating bishop. Providing this at the time of the Rite would avoid future problems if that bishop is no longer there when the need of a document arises. Likewise, notification of the Church of Baptism would be appropriate.

In recent years, consecrated virgins have also encountered the problem of the bishop of a new residence not being familiar with or favorable to this vocation. Likewise it may happen that a new bishop in the original diocese has less interest or experience with the Rite. First of all, it must be stated that the fact of the woman's public state of consecration in the Church is in no way changed, nor are her fundamental obligations of prayer and service. Because this vocation is less familiar than that of priesthood and religious life, there is a more awkward situation. Nevertheless, the Church's formal recognition of and provision for the vocation is clear, and patient efforts must continue to make it better known and observed. In some places, materials

are being placed at the disposition of Bishops and vicars for consecrated life in order to assist with the process of discernment, formation and consecration.¹⁵

Discernment and Formation

It worthwhile noting that the Code does not require a “rule of life” for consecrated, virgins as it does for hermits who wish to be recognized as living a consecrated life (c. 603). Nevertheless, a Bishop who must discern whether or not to admit a women to consecration will want to know about her way of life, her spirituality, her pray her proposed way of serving the local Church. As an individually lived vocation, there is no need for uniformity of practice, beyond the urging found in the Introduction to the Rite to pray the morning and evening prayer of the Church.

The discernment of this vocation presents a significant challenge. One must study the Introduction to the Rite and the Rite itself. There are, as we have seen, norms which exclude certain persons from receiving it. A woman seeking some form of individual consecration may not know the whole spirituality expressed in the Rite, but she, and the one guiding her in discernment, must experience an openness to this expression of spirituality. It is truly scriptural and has a very long tradition in the Church. Spousal imagery is not as common today as it once was. It is not suited to every woman who leaves a monastery of nuns or an institute dedicated to apostolic works, but wishes to continue a consecrated life. It is not the answer for everyone wants to dedicate herself to God and the service of the Church.

In a word, this is a distinct vocation. Women throughout the world experience and respond to this specific call with its elements: a witness to the Church as spouse of Christ, a life of consecrated virginity, a life of prayer and service in the Church, lived with neither the support and the obligations of a religious community, nor the regular contacts which flow from belonging to a secular institute. These must be strong and dedicated women, mature in their singleness of purpose.

Without specifics, the Rite speaks of age, prudence and a universally approved character as necessary traits of candidates. It does not state an age, as does the Code for religious and for secular institutes, but these requirements suggest a certain maturity. The fact that the Rite of Consecration is at once a definitive act, suggests that there be a fairly lengthy time of formation and preparation. Some bishops require a number of years living the life of a consecrated virgin, but obliged under a private vow of chastity, before admitting a woman to the public rite.

If certain analogies are sought from the canons on consecrated life, the most logical choice would probably be those for secular institutes. Because of the similarity of life-style as an individual in a secular setting, longer periods of formation and temporary commitment are required than is the case for religious.

Surely as a part of formation, before and after consecration, there will need to be spiritual direction for growth in prayer and all aspects of the spiritual life. A deepened study of the Rite,

¹⁵ The United States Association of Consecrated Virgins has prepared a “Formation Packet” which includes a copy of the Rite, conferences and articles, recommendations regarding discernment, excerpts from the writings of the Fathers of the Church and from more recent Church documents, personal testimonies and bibliography.

supplemented by related doctrine will assist the candidate in interiorization of the meaning of Christian virginity, and of the Church, particularly under this image as spouse of Christ. Likewise, assistance in how to pray the psalms will enrich the morning and evening prayer of the consecrated virgin, and formation in the liturgy of the Church will make sacramental practice more fruitful. Because love of Jesus is central to all, all that fosters growth in this love and its expression in prayer and service of others will enable joy and perseverance in this very particular vocation.

Associations

As has been seen, during the meetings of the *coetus* which formulated the new canon, there was difference of opinion regarding the provision for associations. The text itself clearly leaves associations optional. The right of the consecrated virgins reflects that enjoyed by all of the Christian faithful to form and govern associations for some appropriate purpose (cfr. c. 215).

The broad purposes for which such an association would be formed and to which individuals might choose to belong, are expressed in canon 604: to observe their resolution more faithfully and to perform by mutual assistance service to the church. The statutes of any such association would have to express more clearly how this would be done, in particular with reference to their service to the Church, since these are not normally envisioned as institutes of consecrated life with a common mission.¹⁶

The canon speaks of service to the Church “in harmony with their proper state”. As has been seen, their state is that of publicly consecrated persons in the Church and as persons who have received that consecration as individuals, remaining in their secular condition. Associations of consecrated virgins would seem more analogous to clerical associations than to institutes of consecrated life. The original concept of *ordo* as a category of persons such as the order of virgins, of widows, and of penitents, maintained the identity of the individual within that category while recognizing the group as having its particular place in the Church.

To more closely imitate that original practice, when associations of consecrated virgins are formed, their statutes should be prepared primarily on the basis of the canons regulating associations of the Christian faithful (cc. 298-329) and should avoid the temptation to borrow from the structures of religious institutes. The statutes will reflect the purposes given in the canon and further specify in what ways the association will seek to fulfill those purposes. These may include various forms of communications, the publication of materials useful for formation before and after consecration, the sharing of news and information, and the planning of gatherings such as retreats and conferences.

Depending on circumstances, associations may actually be formed on a diocesan, regional or national basis (cfr. c. 312). However, once erected, actual membership in the association remains voluntary for each individual. While already being a consecrated virgin would be a requirement for membership, not all who receive the consecration are obliged to belong to an

¹⁶ The 1998 *Annuario Pontificio* lists one association of consecrated virgins in the category “Other Institutes of Consecrated Life”. That Argentine association, known as “Servidoras”, was conceived as a n association of consecrated virgins with a particular apostolic direction, well before the canon was written.

association. Some, in view of the distinct and individual nature of their consecrated vocation do not wish to risk being confused with religious or secular institute members. Others benefit from the mutual support and encouragement provided by an association.

The statutes of an association as envisioned by the canon, should in no way change the nature of the vocation as presented in the Rite. The moderator of an association should not be presented in such a way as to have authority over individual members, as in an institute of consecrated life. The statutes should neither add to the obedience already due to God and the Church, nor to poverty, guided by the Gospel norm for one following Christ, but not involving a religious community of goods.

It is not surprising that there continues to be discussion regarding the advisability of forming associations. During the Code revision process, some wished to omit all reference to associations for fear of their being developed into a new form of consecrated life. On the other hand, some questioned if the consecration of virgins is truly a form of consecrated life at all, because it does not include vows of poverty and obedience.¹⁷

In his extensive study of the consecration of virgins, A. Jiménez includes a skeletal outline for statutes of an association in the sense of c. 604 §2. In a note he observes that his intention was to do a comparative study of existing statutes, but he received none in response to his requests. Thus he offers his reflections without presenting the results as a model to be followed. He begins from the principle that this vocation is an individual form of consecrated life and that each member of an association retains her autonomy and individuality.¹⁸

Because the experience of the renewed Rite is relatively limited, and experience with associations is even more so, it would seem advisable that statutes — especially if being prepared at the national level — be approved provisionally for a specified period of years. This builds in a useful evaluation on the part of both the members and the episcopal conference. The same could certainly be useful at the diocesan level, although in that case there is more possibility of concrete collaboration between the persons interested and the Bishop in the preparation of the statutes.

Neither the members of an association, nor the Bishop should pressure an individual to join the association. Likewise, the association cannot in any way replace or impede that fundamental relationship of each consecrated virgin with the diocesan bishop and the diocese. These are her primary relationships; the association is to foster and support them.

Conclusion

In May, 1995, a pilgrimage and international congress was held in Rome to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of the revised Rite for the consecration of virgins. Participants visited the major basilicas, participated in special liturgies, heard conferences and shared in discussions. Pope John Paul II received the group in a special audience.

¹⁷ *Comm.* 11 (1979) 332.

¹⁸ See A. Jiménez Echave: *El Orde de Las Virgenes Consagradas. Comentario al Canon 604*. Rome: Instituto della Vita Consacrata “Claretianum”, 1997.

The women present were of various ages and cultures. Most did not wear any visible identifying sign of their state or use a religious title. Some were former religious, but it was noted that there are now increasing numbers of “first vocations” to this form of consecration. Many expressed the experience of Bishops moving gradually toward the full use of the Rite in the cathedral, as is recommended in the Rite since the vocation often is not well known in the local Church. Some spoke of spiritual direction from their bishop, some of annual meetings, and some of being delegated to the care of others. Most live within the same diocese in ways diverse one from the other, while at least one bishop had set up norms which almost seem like a rule of life.

Due to the very nature of the vocation as an individual one, there had been difficulty in communicating with consecrated virgins throughout the world, to provide them with information regarding the event in Rome. They had to depend on informal networks of communication, in addition to the hope that Bishops would pass the information on to the consecrated virgins in their dioceses.

In the booklet recording the Acts of the Congress, there are national reports from twenty of the countries represented. These came from Eastern and Western Europe, North and South America, from two countries of Africa and from the Middle East.

France stood out, claiming about 300 consecrated virgins. There they have benefited greatly from the services of a member of the Episcopal Conference’s Commission for Religious, named as liaison for them.

Argentina’s report claimed about 200 consecrated virgins. They have benefited from the assistance of a priest of the diocese of Buenos Aires who has been given particular responsibility for them. The report from Buenos Aires expressed the belief that they were the first diocese in the world to use this form of consecration, beginning in May 1973. It was reported that Argentine dioceses give a document officially witnessing to the fact of the consecration and that it is also registered in the books of the archdiocese as public proof of the individual’s state.

In his audience with the consecrated virgins on June 2, 1995, Pope John Paul II focused his remarks on love. Love Christ, the reason for your life, he exhorted. Return Christ’s infinite love with your own total and exclusive love. Love the Church. Here the Pope’s words echo the ancient tradition of the vocation: “It is also the task of virgins to be the hard-working hands of the local Church’s generosity, the voice of her prayer, the expression of her mercy, the relief of her poor, the comfort of her suffering sons and daughters, and the support of her orphans and widows”. The consecrated virgins are to have a merciful heart, sharing the sufferings of others, and committing themselves to the defense of life, the advancement of women and respect for their freedom and dignity.

Finally, the consecrated virgins are urged to love Mary of Nazareth, perfect icon of the Church as mystery of communion and love.¹⁹

¹⁹ *L’Osservatore Romano*, 3 giugno 1995, p. 5; Eng. Ed. 14 June 1995.

In 1996, the consecrated virgins also found their place in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*. Their Vocation is recognized as “a special eschatological image of the Heavenly Bride and of the life to come...”. The Holy Father adds: “Consecrated by the diocesan Bishop, these women acquire a particular link with the Church, which they are committed to serve while remaining in the world” (*VC* 7).

Consecrated virgins are a renewed gift of the Spirit for today’s Church as it enters a new millennium.

Frequently Asked Questions

PARAPHRASE OF QUESTION/ANSWER PERIOD
INFORMATIONAL RETREAT, 14 JUNE 1997
WITH MOST REV. RAYMOND L. BURKE

1. What is the one essential of the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world?
The theological virtue of love—"laying down one's life for one's brothers"
2. Can praying the Rosary replace praying the Divine Office?
Only when one can't pray the Office for some legitimate reason
3. As episcopal moderator will you help our bishops understand the true nature of the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world?
Yes.
4. Should we renew our Consecration each year?
The Consecration is received once per life. Each year one can reflect on the day of Consecration and offer ourselves again, but only God can "renew." One can re-read the Prayer of Consecration of a Virgin from the Mass and reflect on it throughout the day. It is God who consecrates; the virgin offers herself.
5. Can the Bishop dispense the Consecration?
No, the Bishop cannot dispense the Consecration.
6. What should we do if our bishop does not understand the Consecration?
Ask him to contact me [Bishop Burke].
7. What is the main work of the consecrated virgin?
Primarily, the work of the consecrated virgin is prayer. She should pray for families, priests, and Christian unity.
8. Could a consecrated virgin have the Blessed Sacrament reserved in her home?
Her bishop must give permission for it and there must be a fitting place. Mass should be celebrated two times monthly to keep before our eyes the connection between the Mass and the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament.
9. Can one be consecrated in a diocese outside of one's own?
No, but one should progress toward the Consecration with a spiritual director and prayer so that eventually one may be able to receive the Consecration properly.
10. Who is the proper community for the consecrated virgin living in the world?
Your community is your parish and you should live out your vocation in the world.
11. If one cannot pray the Divine Office, can one still be consecrated?

Yes.

12. What should one do when one travels, for instance, and cannot pray the Divine Office at the proper times?

Do it at another time.

13. Could one grow out of praying the Divine Office, as discursive prayer, and move into more contemplative prayer?

One never grows out of the Divine Office any more than one grows out of the Mass. Both are the public prayer of the Church.

14. Could a person receive a crucifix as part of the insignia during the Rite?

I would discourage adding anything to the Rite. Usually a crucifix is an insignia of mission for Sisters after they make Profession.

15. How did the bond start with the bishop and the consecrated virgin?

It started from the beginning. It is a good idea to read the Fathers of the Church as they wrote about virgins.

16. Should there be an annual review?

A review is done with the spiritual director, and this review is constant because one is always reviewing one's spiritual life. However, a meeting with the bishop of the diocese should be held about every six months and no less than once a year. This meeting should be with the consecrated virgin individually and the bishop himself, not as a group of consecrated virgins in the diocese nor delegated to someone else by the bishop. It is a good idea to write up a brief agenda for the bishop and give it to him in advance of the meeting so that he will have an idea of the topic(s) for discussion. For the bishop and the consecrated virgin, it should be a pleasant time and an appointment that each one looks forward to.

17. Is there a conflict between the three vows and the Consecration?

No. A consecrated virgin living in the world, although she does not profess the evangelical counsels of obedience and poverty as vows, still should be living in an attitude of obedience and simplicity of life with prudence.

18. What difference would the Consecration make in my life if I already have a promise of perpetual virginity?

Grace.

19. Why do the consecrated virgins not wear veils?

Part of the Rite is to show espousal to Christ and a symbol of this is the veil. She may wish to wear a veil, subsequently, during Mass or on the anniversary of her Consecration. However, to wear a veil in daily life seems to be part of a habit, and a consecrated virgin living in the world should not be wearing a habit, which is a sign of removal from the world in a Religious Institute.

20. How can one start to prepare to receive the Consecration?
 One should start with the prayer life of a consecrated virgin: Divine Office, Rosary, daily Mass, visits when possible to the Blessed Sacrament. Read the Rite of Consecration and the lives of the virgin saints.
21. Is there an age limit for woman to receive the Consecration of a Virgin?
 No, there is no upper age limit. At the other end of the scale, there is no certain age that one should have attained before one can receive the Consecration. Dioceses may choose to set a minimum age, but the important point is that the woman be of mature character, that she have lived in tranquil continence for a number of years, and that from all indications she will persevere in perpetual chastity.
22. How should one begin the process in her diocese to receive the Consecration of a Virgin?
 One normally should have had a spiritual director for some years, and it is understood that she is a practicing Catholic and accepts all the teachings of the Catholic Church. After a discernment process with her spiritual director and after having lived in tranquil celibacy for a number of years, then she can write a letter of petition to the bishop of her diocese and request that she be considered to become a candidate for the Consecration of a Virgin living in the world. The bishop will usually meet with her and work with the spiritual director to determine if she is a good candidate. If it is decided that she would be suitable for the Consecration, then she begins her Formation process. The time of Formation depends on how much the candidate already understands about the Consecration and how fast she can absorb the concepts. For each individual it will be different. The bishop of the diocese makes the final determination on whether the candidate, after her Formation, is suitable for the Consecration.
23. Can a person after having received the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World become a Religious Sister at a later date?
 This is theoretically possible, but certainly not advisable. One should discern clearly the vocation one is called to before receiving the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World. Each of these forms of consecrated life is a category in itself, as delineated in *Vita Consecrata*. Each of these forms of consecrated life lead to a perfection of life when lived properly; therefore, one should not consider hopping over from one track to another. It is important to discern properly, be formed spiritually and intellectually properly for whatever category of consecrated life one is called to, and then live that form of consecrated life to the very best one can.
24. Is the Consecration of a Virgin irrevocable?
 Yes, it is. The Consecration is not a vow that a woman makes herself, but a solemn blessing that she receives, a setting her apart as a sacred person, by the action of the Holy Spirit through the hands of the bishop. One cannot ‘undo’ a Consecration. One cannot ‘undo’ the bond of Christ with His bride.

25. Can one use 'OCV' or 'CV' after her name after she receives the Consecration of a Virgin?
No, she should not use these initials because she is not a member of a Religious Institute. The Order of Virgins is not a Religious Institute in the Church. In this use of the term 'order,' it signifies a category of consecrated life, as the various categories are listed and explained in *Vita Consecrata*.
26. Can one be called 'Sister' after having received the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World, according to Canon 604?
No, and for the same reason as given in the question above, #25.
27. Should the Consecration of a Virgin be recorded in one's baptismal record?
Yes, it should be recorded, just as one records marriages or Religious Profession. Also, she herself should receive a document testifying to her Consecration and a copy of this document should be filed in the diocesan archives. [a sample of such a document is given in this Information Packet]
28. Can the Consecration of a Virgin be delegated to a priest to perform?
It is very clear from history and from the *Roman Pontifical* that this Rite is reserved to the bishop of the diocese. The bishop of the virgin's diocese, however, may delegate it to another bishop to perform, but not to a priest.
29. What should a consecrated virgin do when she must move her residence from the diocese in which she was consecrated or in which she now lives?
She should write a letter to inform her current bishop that she will be moving and write a letter to the bishop into whose diocese she will be moving to let him know who she is and of her plans to change residence. It is helpful for the bishop of her current diocese to write a letter to the bishop into whose diocese she will move to introduce her to him.
30. Is physical virginity necessary in order to receive the Consecration of a Virgin?
Answer: Can someone offer to God what she does not have?

Questions and Answers

Questions from the membership for Bishop Burke at the April 30, 1999, Council meeting:

1. **How should consecrated virgins refer to themselves?** Bishop Burke: The Church has come to an understanding of three states of life: the clergy, the laity, and consecrated persons. So, consecrated virgins should refer to themselves as “consecrated-virgins.”
2. **A candidate currently owns a house and has lived all her life in one diocese, but has a live-in job now in another diocese. Which bishop should she petition for the Consecration?** Bishop Burke: She should consider herself a part of the diocese in which she intends to make her home.
3. **Which Hours of the Liturgy of the Hours are we obliged to pray?** Bishop Burke: My personal suggestion is that she tries to pray Office of Readings (at any time during the day), Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Night Prayer. She should pray one of the Little Hours during the day if she can. However, I would have to check on this.
4. **Can we be a god-mother for a child at Baptism? What if the child’s parents die? How to rear that child?** Bishop Burke: Certainly a consecrated virgin living in the world can be a god-mother for a child at Baptism. The Church only obliges the god-parents to see to the religious instruction of that child, should the parents die. It is not the understanding that the god-parents have to rear the child in their own household.
5. **How to answer the question about the Consecration of a Virgin for men? We are told it is unfair for it to be open to women only.** Bishop Burke: The Consecration of a Virgin is part of the principle of the supernatural building on the natural order. A bride is a woman; therefore, a “bride of Christ,” so aptly shown in the Rite, is a woman.
6. **What Canons would be appropriate to consult for permission for the Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament?** Bishop Burke: Canons 934-44 all pertain to this question, but especially Canon 934. If it be impossible because of a priest shortage in a diocese to have Mass celebrated in the oratory at least twice a month, then the local Ordinary of the diocese can take that into consideration.
7. **A spiritual director asked this question: How can the Church be supportive of your vocation of consecrated virginity lived, in the world?** Bishop Burke: One of the answers is the permission for the Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament. Another answer is that consecrated virgins be invited to diocesan functions and be on a diocesan mailing list. No doubt there will be additional responses from other consecrated virgins in the membership.
8. **Need a spiritual director recommend a person to the bishop for Consecration?** Bishop Burke: All that I require is that the spiritual director assures me that the person has indeed received regular spiritual direction. A spiritual director deals with matters of

conscience and therefore I never ask for more than the assurance that regular spiritual direction has taken place.

9. **Can the Consecration be dispensed?** Bishop Burke: In the case of religious profession, the vows are pronounced and received by the Church. In the case of consecrated virginity the virgin presents herself to the Church and she is consecrated by the Church as a virgin living in the world. The Consecration is a definitive act on the part of the Church constituting the individual in a particular state of holiness by the Church. Whereas it is fitting to speak of dispensing someone from vows or promises which he or she may have made, it does not make sense to speak of dispensing someone from an act of consecration made on the part of the Church itself.

Prayer and Work
in the Life
of a
Consecrated Virgin

BASIC PRAYER LIFE OF THE CONSECRATED VIRGIN

The basic prayer life of any consecrated virgin should include the following areas:

Models of prayer: Jesus Christ, Blessed Virgin Mary, the Church (see short explanations below)

Holy Mass: to immerse the life of virginity into the Sacrifice of Christ

Divine Office: to pray it with the whole Church

To know the different meanings or senses of Sacred Scripture: literal, spiritual, full

To be aware of the different voices of the psalms as understood in the Patristic and monastic traditions

To harmonize the Public Prayer of the Church with the private devotion and contemplation of the individual

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament: as a means of preparation for a more fruitful sharing in the Eucharistic Sacrifice

Holy Rosary: as a means to be drawn into the saving mysteries of Christ

Song of Songs: to live the spiritual and mystical senses of this book of the Bible through openness to the Holy Spirit

Vicarious atonement: to understand consecrated virginity in the light of vicarious atonement

Queen of Virgins: to ponder the perfect model of consecrated virgins in the Blessed Virgin Mary as embracing the spirit of the poor which consists of perfect trust in Divine Providence and a willingness to share all of one's blessings with those in need

Knowledge of the mystical bond between Jesus Christ and the consecrated virgin and the spiritual bond between the diocesan bishop and the consecrated virgin

+ + +

To pray like Jesus Christ

It is so simple to pray like Jesus Christ. He taught us so eloquently and simply through "The Lord's Prayer," when His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray. Jesus prayed with the psalms which were composed specifically for Him. He assumed the psalms as His own. From

the first moment when He entered into our human existence, He used Psalm 39:7 : "Behold I come to do your Will" as recorded in Hebrews 10:5-10. Psalm 21 came naturally to His lips when He was in extreme agony on the Cross: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me". When He breathed His last, He also used Psalm 30:6 "Into Thy hands I commend my spirit." If we want to pray like Jesus, we simply use the psalms to express our emotions for us. There is no human aspirations or feelings that the psalms cannot express for us in the most magnificent manner.

Throughout His life on earth, Jesus prayed often, and the words He used were pretty well recorded by the Evangelists. It is so simple to learn these magnificent prayers, assume them as our own, and use them when we find ourselves in similar situations. It is so rewarding and beneficial to get acquainted with these prayers of Jesus and have them come from our own heart. The Father will be so pleased to hear Jesus' voice again coming from us who are closely united with Him.

To pray like the Blessed Virgin Mary

To pray like Mary, we can easily assume her prayers as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. If we want our prayers to be heard, we just have to pray with Mary and like Mary, and even with her own words. Her famous prayers like her "Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum" and her "Magnificat anima mea Dominum" are models of prayer which we can learn from and adopt as our own. She will be pleased to see us pray with her and like her. By analyzing these prayers we can learn how to pray with and like our heavenly mother. She is a pilgrim of God like us. She experienced sorrow and joy like us. It is very simple to pray with her and like her.

To pray with the Church

Praying with and like the Church is so simple. The Church is our mother. Her prayer is also mainly from the psalms which were composed for her as they were for her Head and Spouse, Jesus Christ. They are her prayers. She uses the psalms as her own in the sense which God placed there for her. She prays with the sense which God has put there for her to fulfil and enjoy. It is so simple to pray with the Church once we know how the Church uses the psalms: we simply blend our voice with hers and let our hearts vibrate with her feelings and our minds with her understanding. We pray with her and harmonize our aspirations with hers. When we pray with the Church and like the Church, our prayers will always be upbeat because even our distractions and poverty are compensated for by the fervor and devotion of Christ, Mary, and the saints.

PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF A CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin LP

Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is where I find my greatest joy and deepest union with my Beloved. To think of the humility, the generosity, the initiative, the radiant goodness of God in making Himself so real, so present in this sacrament! It is here that I most fully lose myself and find Christ. It is here that love grows and overflows into my active life.

.....

This life of union with Christ needs room to grow and it is in silence that He leads me deeper into Himself. This is so difficult to maintain in our busy lives and with the pressures of the world around us. Yet how vital it is to commune with Jesus in silence. From this deep solitude I am able to drink of Jesus and He can flow through me to others. In this deep solitude my own spirit is renewed and sinks ever deeper into the riches of God.

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In a mysterious way I find I share in Mary's virginal motherhood. In some ways this is expressed by being a channel of grace to bring Christ into every situation. For me it is also expressed in working with young people in religious education. It is expressed in speaking of God's personal love and finding hungry hearts, eager to enter into this good news. Far from being sterile, I find that my life is rich with the richness of God himself. Wherever He is, life bursts forth, and I find this to be true not just in my own life, but in the lives of those I encounter.

What a rich treasure God has given me in this life of loving union with Him! May He be glorified and praised forever!

PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF A CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin MA

My focus on Our Lord as a consecrated virgin is taking on more of a role that is a bridal relationship as found in the Song of Songs. There is a greater sense of ease and excitement in being able to sit at the feet of the Master and contemplate His great love and mercy as noted in the home of Mary and Martha. I experience a greater love of the Church and of being an integral part of it as I unite spiritually with others in praying the Liturgy of the Hours. What a privilege to be able to intercede with Jesus to the Father in union with the Holy Spirit. I am united with Mary and the saints in prayer for the Church. I am an integral part of the Church as I united with Jesus in healing wounds of His Body so overtaken by indifference, disobedience, rebellion, and worldly pursuits; I do this through prayer and reparation. I lift Him up so that He can draw us to Himself. It is my desire to be in close contact with Jesus to invite and assist in the healing process left us through the Word and sacraments. I know that His Body, the Church, is being prepared more and more each day to become a more glorious bride, one that He will claim when He comes in His glory to claim His Bride.

.....

The volunteer work that I engage in revolves around the ministry of Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Six years ago, on September 14, we opened our first adoration chapel in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. This involved getting some priests to support the project; permission from the Archbishop; finding a suitable location; and then teaching, implementing, and coordinating the perpetual adoration organization. On-going movement involves vigilance in keeping the 24-hour day and night covered with committed adorers, maintaining a clean and inviting environment, and keeping the altar adorned with flowers. Monthly I prepare a Benediction service that relates to the main focus of each month. It also provides an excellent opportunity for people to receive the Sacrament of Penance and our chaplain is most gracious to offer it. My volunteer ministry has now extended to three other sites. In these, I support, affirm, and assist the head coordinators as appropriate. In my own parish I am an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist and assist with the washing and ironing of the purificators. I also facilitate a young adult prayer group each week.

.....

My occupation revolves mainly around the care of the sick in their homes as a visiting nurse. This affords me the opportunity to match my prayerful consideration in the Kingdom of God with deeds of Mercy. Since most of my clients are poor, often living in disheveled and high crime environments, I have the opportunity to accept and love them where they are without trying to make them conform to my values. It is a challenge to seek to understand them, to be an advocate in their search for healing. Despite their brokenness in many areas, they are open, accepting and often recognizing that their main consolation is God. They have a lot to teach me and often are a silent reminder of my own need for God in my brokenness. Without a lot of words, I know that I can stand in their midst and allow God to be present in areas and in ways that often are too remote for other people to enter.

PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF A CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin K. (anonymous)

First off, in my day I am confronted at Mass with the totality of Jesus' love for me. "I give you myself without reserve; I die for you to live. See, take, I feed you with my own body," my Lover says. This Love-food perfectly nourishes me for this day's calls to love.

He comes to me a hundred times, a hundred ways each day. Though I don't always feel Him, I know He is always with me. When I go to sleep, He is there; when I wake again, He is there.

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I'll tell you a story about my vocation and its meaning for others. One day the church got a call from a worried mother asking if they could please send someone to visit her daughter, whom I'll call Christy, and bring her back to the Church! Then and now, Christy had not shown interest in church. But she did accept my occasional visits. Christy was rearing four children alone. She confided that she had been repeatedly battered by an addicted boyfriend who now took her Welfare money, car, or anything else he could use.

One day seeing my ring, she asked if I were married. Usually I don't share much about my Consecration to the casual inquirer, but I did share and Christy proved to be one of those souls with an uncomplicated faith that immediately grasps the spiritual meaning of such a thing. I told her I was married to no man on earth, but to Jesus. Stunned, she wondered aloud that if I could live without sex, if I could live without a man, if God could take care of me . . . maybe He would do that for her, too. She had seen it in the Bible before--that God was like a husband to us. He could be a father to her children.

Over time since, to her credit and to God's, Christy did quit letting in the boyfriend. She acquired skills and a job to maintain her family, continues to heal inside from the wounds of her difficult life, and trusts God a little bit more.

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As a hospice social worker, in my native Michigan where contrary values are brazenly practiced, I provide care according to the value of human life from its beginning until its natural end. While our nurses and doctors work to effectively control any pain problem that patients may have, I serve the practical and emotional needs of terminally ill people and their families. Thus unburdened, a person can live the last stages of life as fully as possible.

When the moment of death comes, I continue to offer my presence. Everyday in these people I behold the Pieta: the limp, spent Jesus in a dying person; the stricken and wordless Mary in a grieving loved one. The name of my parish, the Church of the Resurrection, strengthens me to serve them as I go out from its doors each morning.

As for volunteer activities, I serve on the executive committee of my state professional

organization. At the parish, I help in the liturgies as a lay minister, lector, and singer. I occasionally spend time with a favorite two-year old so his parents can get some time away. And one of my greatest joys these days is Christy and her children. We've become closer now, and every Friday night the family and I meet to pray and learn religion, the Scriptures, practical skills like budgeting or parenting--and all about God's love for them.

PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF A CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin EL.

I have now learned to look on prayer as a seamless garment covering each day of my life, both my formal prayer time and at other times during the day. To begin my prayer each day, I place myself in Mary's hands and ask her to plunge me into the merciful, loving, purifying heart of Jesus. The greater part of my formal prayer time now follows the cycle of the liturgical year, including daily Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours. With each year, the rhythm and richness of the changing seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time have penetrated deeper into my spirit and become the basic food for my soul.

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As my love for the Mass grows each year, so does my love for Christ's presence in the Blessed Sacrament. I am blessed to have my scheduled prayer time each day before Jesus in the tabernacle. As I pray for the Liturgy of the Hours, or the Divine Office, I find now that I am not just "saying my office," but *praying* my office, looking at Jesus present to me in the Blessed Sacrament and letting the words of the psalmist speak for me to Jesus: "What else have I in heaven but you? Apart from you I want nothing on earth. My body and my heart faint for joy; God is my possession forever." (Ps 73)

I have grown to love the Office of Readings that are so in tune with each changing liturgical season and that echo and embellish the texts and the spirit of the daily liturgy. These readings, which usually include Scripture, sermons, or writings from for the Fathers of for the Church, are often for the source of my daily meditation.

Although each day I pray the Rosary and other prayers to Our Lord and Our Lady and to saints special to me, I want to share in more depth my prayer to God at different times during the day.

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With this sharpened awareness of Christ's having called me to the most intimate union of love with Him, a spousal relationship, my heart has opened wide to His presence within me. I hear the echo of His words to for the bride in the Song of Songs: "You are a garden enclosed, my sister, my bride, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up" (4:12)--where He alone can enter and rest with me and I with Him.

Indeed, my call to the total consecration of my life and being to Christ, as it is imaged so beautifully in the Song of songs, has ignited my prayer life with new fire. I know the reality of God's love calls to me and to all souls who seek Him earnestly in heartfelt love and prayer. . . .

Now my deepest prayer is to be able to respond with a burning love to the utterly overwhelming infinite love of our God, a love that is as "relentless as the nether world" and "stronger than death" itself.

PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF A CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin S.

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Consecration is a call to respond in faith to situations in which we find ourselves. Mary's fiat is a constant encouragement to look to God in all things for guidance and strength in reaching out to others so that we learn to live God's will rather than our own in responding to the reality and needs around us. We too are called to praise God in all circumstances. Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) prayer encompasses the praise of God and needs of all peoples and gives us a picture of her understanding of God--Savior, Mighty God who does great things for her (and us), Holy is His name, He shows mercy to all who honor Him, He scatters the proud-hearted and lifts up the lowly. He fills the hungry with good things and the rich sends empty away. He keeps his promise made to our ancestors. . . . And that is prayer in the spirit of Mary. For one consecrated to God her prayer is not just for the people among whom she lives, herself and those who ask for prayer. She is called to pray for the whole world. That includes those gone before her, all in the world today, and for those yet to be born. The Rite of Consecration calls her to "pray without ceasing for the salvation of the whole world" and to pray fiat--God's will be done, not mine.

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PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF THE CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin E. (anonymous)

I live my prayer life each day by rising early to say my Liturgy of the Hours and a half-hour meditation on the Scriptures before going to Mass. After Mass I go to work and, even if for brief moments, I reflect on Our Spouse's gifts to me and others throughout the day. I also offer my work as a prayer, for every act of love given is surely not insignificant. Many acts, be they thoughts, a kind word, a holding back of a response, a gentle deed, add many drops to the bucket and by the end of the day our bucket will be full. If we wait only to give large gifts, they rarely come and many days we will have nothing in our alms bucket. So then, work and prayer are not separable, but joined as one. This is what it means to live the faith we possess. We may have time for personal prayer, but all we do, think, and say is prayer. That is what it means to be consecrated. It encompasses our total being--how we dress, what we listen to or choose not to listen to, how we speak, what we glance at, how we control our sense of taste and not to indulge. All things in our lives take on a higher meaning if all aspects of our lives are elevated; therefore, we must make all events, external and internal, our prayer.

I try to grow spiritually by listening to tapes at breakfast or at a time when I am alone and can be focused to listen. Spiritual books, especially on the lives of virgin saints, are also a help. I too find a blessing in my life to belong to a community of Third Order Franciscans. We have classes taught by Friars and also do spiritual and corporal works of mercy. As a community we grow in our Catholic Faith. Prayer groups also are a benefit for many--to be able to share and give support to each other on our pilgrimage to our eternal home.

To live our Faith requires trust. This, too, can be brought into the workplace. I am sure many times we may feel impatient over an event at work, but by letting our Spouse in we can do the best we can and ask Him to take over. To avoid complaining within the company of others one can change the subject, bring up a good quality of a situation, or slip out of the conversation. A good habit I have found was at the end of the day to make a good examination of conscience and reflect on how Mary would handle the situation and how I could have better handled it in union with her Immaculate Heart. If we do these things, we will continually go forward in our work to holiness. May our Loving Spouse bless us all!

PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF A CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin A.

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To follow Jesus, obeying His command to love God and to love one's neighbor. . . . Eternal life begins here and now in knowing and loving God.

.....

Despite all our sins and faults, the first thing to do is to "Pray always," asking the Lord the "Teach us to pray." Prayer is the continuing conversation and growing communion with the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity. . . . The ancient motto, "Ora et labora" places PRAYER before work, but shows there is no prayer without work; and again we notice that WORK is placed after prayer but we see plainly there is no work without prayer.

The second thing to do is, in prayer, to suffer willingly, peacefully, gently, gladly, joyfully! In patience made perfect and in true, total surrender and in more patience and in more and more abandonment of everything to God, we discover ourselves given the grace to say Fiat!

. . . Since we are put, by God, in a specific place and we live in a certain time, we must--so as to remain in peace, for our own sakes as well as for the sake of others--persevere in our efforts to keep order in the space around us and in the use of the time we spend.

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The work one does--so as not to take from others what is needed by them--for one's own support, should be as simple as possible. If it is a complex type of work, it is to be done as simply and plainly as possible, seeking no other glory than God's, and asking no other success than that already known to us through the Cross.

PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF A CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin C. (anonymous)

1. How do you focus your prayer life as a consecrated virgin?
I focus it on Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and on the Blessed Mother. I attend daily Mass and make a Holy Hour of adoration as often as possible. I pray the Divine Office, morning and evening prayer, private prayers, meditation, *lectio divina*, and the daily Rosary. I have regular spiritual direction and receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation about every two weeks.
2. How do you see your Consecration affecting your paid work/occupation?
I feel that by my example, I show God's love for His people. Most of the people I work with know that I am a consecrated virgin.
3. How does your Consecration affect your volunteer work in the Church?
I am directress of an association called "Handmaids of Our Lady" for single, Catholic women who follow Christ after the example of Mary. Because I am a consecrated virgin, I take more seriously my prayer and service to the Church and others are affected by my example of prayer and service.

PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF A CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin M. (anonymous)

Prayer

To try to describe my prayer I use the term companion prayer or spousal prayer. I point to the teachings of St. Therese of Lisieux, for like her, my prayer is but that simple contemplative gaze in which I abandon myself to the Lord. If I am recollected and drawn up into Him, I surrender myself to Him and let Him do as He desires; just listening, adoring, attending to Him. Or, if I am excited or distressed about something, I do not fight my inability to be recollected. I take all to my Beloved, pouring out my troubles or sharing with Him my excitement. I hide nothing from Him. As I do this, I let whatever it is be my meditation and let the Lord minister to me in His goodness and love. Prayer is the essence of our relationship with God and a reflection of it. In my prayer I am just myself and I let the Lord be Himself.

In practical terms, I get up early in the morning for about an hour of *Lectio Divina* with Holy Scripture, and then I pray Morning Prayer. In the afternoon is Evening Prayer and usually some quiet time going over my day thus far with the Lord. At night I spend about 30 minutes in spiritual reading, then examen, and about 30 minutes of intercessory prayer, including Compline. If I can, I will also pray Office of Readings in the morning and Daytime Prayer, but it is not often. I go to Mass in the morning or evening, and sometimes it is a Communion Service, depending on my schedule and the local parishes' schedules. In addition to set times of prayer, I try to stay recollected throughout the day. I have a great attraction to solitude and love living alone. I have to work at making sure that it is authentic solitude, however, and not just being alone while my mind and heart are filled with noise. To help achieve this, I have chosen not to have a television or get the newspaper. I do listen to the news on the radio, and also see some TV and news whenever I visit my parents, two or three times a week.

Work/Ministry

I see my work as a ministry, not just a means of making money. As a librarian, I am an educator. I see my work as making a difference to young people or returning older students who are trying to make their lives better for themselves and their families. According to the latest statistics I have seen, only about 40% of the Anglo population get a college education and the statistics for minorities are much lower. We have a strong minority recruitment program which the libraries on campus take part in, so I see my small part in all of this as a means to help make the world a little better place. On another level I am a quiet witness to my faith in a very anti-Christian environment. Students or colleagues come to me to talk about problems or concerns, even spiritual matters. I see as my models the virgin saints who lived in the world, foremost Mary; and also Mary, Martha, and Lazarus; Catherine; Rose; Kateri. . . . They lived lives of contemplation and prayer and served the Lord in the midst of the world.

Parish Ministry

As I prepared for my Consecration and especially now living that Consecration to the Lord, I more and more desired to attend to the Lord in solitude and prayer. I used to spend a lot of hours in parish ministry, on top of my full-time job, to the point of exhaustion. I now limit my parish

involvement to one ministry at a time, and try to avoid useless meetings. Currently, our archdiocese is involved in a renewal program and that is where I am helping out. I am discerning a call to work in the area of spiritual direction and will be taking some classes in this area of ministry. It is difficult to say "No" when asked to take on more work in the parish, but I hope that by being honest with fellow parishioners as to what I am doing and what my life as a consecrated virgin is all about, that this in itself will be a witness and a ministry to them. No matter how great the needs and how few there are to help, our work must flow from our prayer. I am finding that a balanced life of prayer, work, rest, and recreation makes me a much more effective worker in the Lord's vineyard.

PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF A CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin B.

At this state of my spiritual growth as a consecrated virgin, I keep my focus on Jesus who takes care of my every need. I see Him as my Beloved Spouse who anticipates my needs and fears and is with me or sends another to be with me when I need a bit more reassurance. In the Holy Eucharist, He is my food when I try to fast from things that keep me from Him. And as the Rite so beautifully states, He is my strength, my joy, my whole desire, my patience in adversity, my wisdom in perplexity, my comfort in sorrow, my protection in the midst of injustice, my riches in poverty, and my remedy in time of sickness. . . .

In my job . . . I see or try to see Christ (not only in those I work for) but also with those who come across my path as I serve a meal, answer the door or phone, get groceries, work in the yard, go for a walk.

Through the various people in the parish and community, my call to witness the dignity and beauty of my vocation is on-going. I am nourished by the Word and Eucharist; the readings from the Mass seem at times to be lived out with all I encounter. Christ becomes alive again for others to experience when I joyfully embrace my call with fidelity and deep love.

PRAYER AND WORK IN THE LIFE OF A CONSECRATED VIRGIN

by Consecrated Virgin AA.

I have had to evaluate and balance my prayer and work life. My prayer and my action had to feed each other.

I purchased an answering machine so that when I am at home, I don't need to interrupt my formal prayer to answer nuisance calls, yet could still call those back who needed it at a later time. My apartment then became my quiet place.

I do try to develop my prayer life by reading spiritual classics and Scripture and by watching programs on EWTN. . . .

My informal prayer life usually takes the form of a reaction to the Liturgy, events in the world, in the local community, or to inspirations of the Holy Spirit. My car has a tape recorder so once I listen to the traffic report, I often put on liturgical music, church instrumental music, or the Holy Rosary. There are many sources of hearing God and I try to use all the extra time I have, including travel time for this. I notice that my prayer can be seasonal now as I travel down the parkway and am drawn to praise God for His beautiful colors and I meditate on life cycles which bring me to see His love.

Prayer inspirations also come in the form of . . . seeing or experiencing others who are far worse than I am physically and seeing how they handle their illnesses and seek God in the pain.

My prayer is for all more than for individuals. . . . In the evening when I pray Vespers, I ask the Lord to continue granting me graces to see Him in everyone and in everything. I ask mercy for those times I have failed. I ask Him to act through me and never to desert me; to increase my devotion and dedication to Him and to stay with me as I do His work. At this time I also open myself to sharing my love and my behavior during the day.

I also take a desert day once a month: sometimes in my own apartment, sometimes in a parish setting, sometimes at the monastery, and sometimes at a shrine.

At my place of work, all the staff is Jewish, so I am the only Witness for Christ--I take this very seriously.

THE PRAYER LIFE OF THE CONSECRATED VIRGIN

“Be yourself her glory, her joy, her whole desire
Be her comfort in sorrow, her wisdom in perplexity,
her protection in the midst of injustice,
her patience in adversity, her riches in poverty,
her food in fasting, her remedy in times of sickness.
She has chosen you above all things;
may she find all things in possessing you.”
(Final of the Prayer of Consecration)

The life of a consecrated virgin must bloom, shine and revolve around the Tabernacle. As the sanctuary lamp that lights constantly and leads the visitor to the Tabernacle, the Consecrated Virgin should live, consuming herself in ardent love at the feet of the Beloved, without looking for other glory than that of Jesus, that He be recognized and loved. To be the light that guides the traveler to Jesus, as was Mary, who was the cause for the first miracle of Jesus when saying: “Do as He tells you” (Jn 2:6).

If this is our main calling, to live in love of “whom we know loves us”, prayer is nothing else but to be in loving attention with the Friend, listening to him, loving him, adoring Him, being with Him, with the Trinity. In words of Saint Teresa of Jesus, prayer is nothing else but “tratar de amistad, estando muchas veces tratando a solas quien sabemos nos ama” (Vida 8:5) [“like talking to a friend, being frequently alone with somebody who we know loves us”].

The consecrated virgin, different from the cloistered nuns or the sisters in a canonical institute, does not have the security of a community and of a regulated way of life to protect her times for prayer. For this reason, within the daily chores and her professional job, it is the consecrated virgin who must make the spaces in order to never lack the necessary oil in her lamp.

But how to combine a demanding job with the prayer of the Hours, the Rosary, the Mass. and the private prayer? The answer frequently is called “time-management” and the choice of priorities. It is true that the work can be a form of prayer, and should be, for the Apostle Saint Paul insists: “Pray constantly to the Lord” (1 Thes. 5:17), and advises us that “watching over or sleeping let’s live together with Him [Christ]” (1 Thes. 5:10b).

However, our activities should stem from our intimacy with the Lord, ought to be permeated by the loving attention given to and received from our Lord during prayer. And the best example comes from the same Gospel, the same words of Jesus in the case of Martha and Mary (Lk 10:41b-42). Martha was too busy in serving the Lord; Mary in loving and adoring him, in contemplation. And Jesus clearly said to Martha: “Martha. Martha you are anxious and worried about many things. *Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.*” We have to combine both – Martha and Mary – in our lives to be able to become the prudent virgins of the Lord, the all-around brides.

He has chosen us and he has called us. We have responded with a desire to give ourselves totally and unconditionally to the Lord. It has been the Grace of the Holy Spirit for the Lord says, “many are called but few are chosen” because “only those to whom that is granted, can understand it” (Mat. 19:11). It is a gift, a charism of the Spirit in order to dedicate ourselves more freely to the things of the Lord with an undivided heart, as Saint Paul says. We have been consecrated by God, reserved for Him in an exclusive love through the diocesan bishop, who represents Christ on earth. In order for the flame of that love not to extinguish, we have to feed it with the oil of prayer. And here we come to the how.

You will ask, how can you pray with so much in your mind? First begin with a vocal prayer, maybe a short, fervent prayer or try to pray slowly the Rosary meditating on the words of the Our Father or the Hail Mary. Later help yourself with a book, or better, the Sacred Scripture to meditate and then abandon yourself in the Merciful Love of Jesus. It is not necessary to say a lot, nor to feel. Only love. Look at the crucifix, think of His pains, grief, sorrow, on –his passion and his death, in all that He suffered for you . . . in all that He went through for your love. Give him thanks and praise him. This is prayer. If the Lord wants to take you to the heights of contemplation and mystical union, He will do it at his time.

Every day at least half an hour to begin with, devote it to solitude and silence with the God that loves us, who has willed to espouse us to him so that we may be totally His. On Sundays, the days of the Lord, apply yourself more time to prayer, meditation, and spiritual reading. The effort done to be with the Beloved Spouse will be returned and with abundant Graces. “Seek first the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides” (Mat 6:33).

Whenever you can, on your way to your work or on your return, maybe when going shopping or on you way back from taking care of an urgent matter, stop by the Tabernacle, stay “alone with the Alone”, even if only a few minutes. Accompany Him and consume yourself adoring Him, like the little flame at the Tabernacle. And the rest of the time, thank Him and praise Him, as the Apostle Saint Paul commands us:

“singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your heart to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Col 3:16b-17)

Next is a series of quotations from St. Paul:

With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit. To the end be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones (Eph 6: 18).

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thess. 5:16-18)

Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another [in] psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father (Eph 5:19-20).

Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make our requests known to God. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ (Phil 4:6-7).

*Diocesan Bishop
and
the Consecrated Virgin:*

Spiritual Bond

THE DIOCESAN BISHOP AND THE CONSECRATED VIRGIN: SPIRITUAL BOND

Jesus Christ wants to build His Church. He is depending on your hearts and hands to do it.

The vocation of the consecrated virgin is intimately tied to the building up of the Church--that is, the *spiritual* flourishing of the Church. "To have a consecrated virgin in a diocese is a blessing," Archbishop Francis George, OMI, stated recently in a private conversation. Why is this vocation to be considered a blessing, a gift, to any given diocese? She is not commissioned to any particular work in the diocese or parish, so why is her vocation a blessing to a diocese?

Let us look back to history for an insight into this answer and then to theology.

Consecrated virginity flourished in the early centuries of the Church. It is obvious that these virgins were women living in the world, since as yet monastic life as we know it in later centuries had not yet come into being. The names we have of virgins from those early centuries are familiar to us from the Roman Canon of the Mass--Agnes, Cecilia, Agatha, Lucy.

The faith during those early centuries was spreading over the whole Mediterranean area and moving beyond, as into northern Europe itself. Christians were on fire with the faith, the Apostles and later their successors were preaching the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit was being poured out to bring men into the obedience of the faith. At the same time, consecrated virginity was taking hold; women were hearing the call of the Lord to give their entire selves in love to Him forever in perpetual virginity. The Church recognized this vocation; and through the power given to her, she instituted the sacramental of the Consecration of Virgins. Conferred by the bishop himself, this sacramental is a means to bring great spiritual fruitfulness to the life of perpetual virginity for the love of Jesus Christ. The Church, as the Bride of Christ, recognized in a consecrated virgin an icon of herself; the consecrated virgin is espoused to Christ forever in a sacred bond of mystical love that no power can dispense.

In addition to the fervent missionary activity of the Apostles and their successors of those early centuries and the institution of the sacramental of the Consecration of Virgins, we see yet another phenomenon during these same centuries. These were centuries of martyrs, these were centuries of persecution within pagan cultures.

Do we have any parallels today in our century? Yes, the Consecration of Virgins for women living in the world has been restored near the end of a century that has been a century of martyrs. Consecrated virgins today are living in environments that could be termed "neo-pagan." Not one country in the world can be called today a bastion of Christendom. If consecrated virgins today do not undergo a rapid martyrdom of blood, they are surely called to a slow martyrdom by the witness of their life in the world. Where they may not have to endure physical death or hateful epithets thrown at them, they must face the sneer. So, what is their value anyway in a diocese? How do they build up the Church?

We must remember that the Church was born on Calvary. With the blood and water from the open side of Christ, the Holy Spirit was poured out. The most Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Martyrs, Queen of Virgins, and the Sorrowful Mother stood under that Cross and received the first inundation of the Holy Spirit upon the Church. She was then the New Eve, as Jesus Christ was the New Adam. At the foot of the Cross, the new spiritual family, the Mystical Body of Christ, was born. Mary then became the Mother of the Church, as her Son then commissioned her.

Mary is the model of all virgins, their prototype, their Queen. Consecrated virgins today, with the grace of the Holy Spirit conferred on them through their reception of the Consecration, unite their prayer, sufferings, sacrifices, penances with Christ on the Cross so that the Church may be built up, especially in their dioceses. Their bond with their bishop, and with his co-workers the priests, is spiritual. Like Mary, they offer their lives to the Father through Jesus on the Cross so that the preaching, teaching, governing, reconciling, and consoling of the faithful and those yet outside of the fold may bear fruit. The more fervent and faithful they are in their lives, the more fruitful the fulness of the priesthood will be in their bishop, who represents Christ Himself in their diocese, and in the pastoral work of the diocesan priests.

Brief References

Brief Reference for Discernment of Consecrated Virginity Lived in the World According to Canon 604

Can. 604.1 Similar to these forms of consecrated life is the order of virgins, who, expressing the holy resolution of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, are mystically betrothed to Christ, the Son of God, and are dedicated to the service of the Church.

Can. 604.2 In order to observe their resolution more faithfully and to perform by mutual assistance service to the Church which is in harmony with their proper state, virgins can be associated together.

Theological Identity of the Vocation

From the text of the canon one may draw particular elements of the theological nature of this distinct vocation to a consecrated life in the Church:

- consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to a rite approved by the Church
- betrothed mystically to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church
- public state of consecrated life in the Church
- individual form of consecrated life, under direction of diocesan bishop

[See “Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World” in the *Roman Pontifical* and “The Consecrated Virgin Lives and Manifests the Wedded Love of the Church for Christ” by Fr. Ignazio Maria Calabuig, given in Rome, June 1995 in *Information Packet, USACV*, revised October 2001]

Criteria

The introductory norms state:

1. That they have never married or lived in public or open violation of chastity
2. That by their age, prudence, and universally approved character they give assurance of perseverance in a life of chastity dedicated to the service of the Church and of their neighbor
3. That they be admitted to this consecration by the bishop who is the ordinary of the place

It is understood that only women may receive this consecration, as they can image the bride of Christ. And, it is understood by the above norms that widows would not fit into the stated criteria.

The bishop’s examination of the candidate for Consecration, as given in the rite, shows the image of the virgin as bride of Christ and indicates the permanence of this individual vocation:

1. Are you resolved to persevere to the end of your days in the holy state of virginity and in the service of God and his Church?

2. Are you resolved to follow Christ in the spirit of the Gospel that your whole life may be a faithful witness to God's love and a convincing sign of the Kingdom of Heaven?
3. Are you resolved to accept solemn consecration as a bride of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

Central elements

- Candidate renews her resolution (the *propositum*): "Father, receive my resolution to follow Christ in a life of perfect chastity which, with God's help, I here profess before you and God's people."
- Then the solemn prayer of consecration sung or recited over the candidate by the bishop with extended hands.

These central elements are within the context of the Eucharistic celebration, for which there is a special ritual Mass.

Symbolism of bride of Christ, imaging the Church espoused to Christ:

Ring

Book of Liturgy of the Hours

Veil (optional)—It is understood that the veil, if given, is a bridal symbol and is not for everyday attire as a religious might wear a habit.

Role of the bishop and diocese

The diocesan bishop is to judge whether or not to admit an aspirant as a candidate for consecration and to assure that a program of formation is arranged for the candidate before her consecration. [See "Preparation Process" in the *Information Packet*, USACV, revised October 2001]

The rite states that the diocesan bishop is the minister, as chief pastor of the local Church. It belongs to him to choose and consecrate for service to the diocese. If delegation be necessary, the consecration may be performed by another bishop.

Because a particular bond exists between the bishop and the consecrated virgin, the bishop will want to express special pastoral and spiritual concern for her in his diocese. Many encourage the bishop to have a regular, at least annual, conversation with each consecrated virgin regarding her life of consecration and areas of service in the Church. This pleasant conversation is not spiritual direction, nor should this communication be delegated to another, such as a vicar for consecrated life. [See "The Diocesan Bishop and the Consecrated Virgin: Spiritual Bond" in the *Information Packet*, USACV, revised October 2001] The vicar for consecrated life, however, acting on behalf of the bishop, may meet with those consecrated on various matters, but their meeting should not be understood as a replacement for the one-to-one pastoral conversation of the bishop with each consecrated virgin.

After consecration, the consecrated virgin should be given a certificate of consecration and notification of her consecration should be made on her baptismal record. If she needs to move to another diocese, a letter of introduction to her new bishop would be appropriate from her current bishop, since this is a public state of consecration in the Church. [See "Copy of Patricia

Murray's document to certify her Consecration" in *Information Packet*, USACV, revised October 2001]

At no time is the diocese financially responsible for the consecrated virgin. She provides completely for her own material needs, medical care, and retirement provisions. [See Sr. Sharon Holland's "Consecrated Virgins for Today's Church," 1998, as printed in *Consecrated Life*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 257-75 and "Preparation Process" in *Information Packet*, USACV, revised October 2001]

The consecrated virgin is free to choose her own way of serving the Church, according to her natural and spiritual gifts and time available, and this area of service could be part of the regular pastoral conversation of the bishop with the consecrated virgin.

As a public person in the Church, it is appropriate for the diocese to include the consecrated virgins in diocesan communications and various activities, such as vocation events and the celebrations of the annual World Day of Consecrated Life.

Pastoral considerations

Motivation for this distinct form of consecrated life in the Church [See "Discernment" section in *Information Packet*, USACV, revised October 2001]

Formation in prayer, particularly Liturgy of the Hours [See "Basic Prayer Life Outline of the Consecrated Virgin" and "Fathers of the Church on Consecrated Virginity summarized" in the *Information Packet*, USACV, revised October 2001]

On-going spiritual direction

Because of the individual nature of this vocation to be lived in a secular setting, adequate preparation time and level of maturity are necessary.

C. 604.2 on associations of consecrated virgins

As provided for in c. 604.2, the consecrated virgin may associate with other consecrated virgins to observe her resolution more faithfully and to perform by mutual assistance service to the Church. It is for these purposes that the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins exists. In no way does the USACV replace or impede that fundamental relationship of a virgin with her local bishop or diocese. While being a consecrated virgin is a prerequisite for membership in the USACV, membership in the USACV is optional for consecrated virgins. The ecclesial purposes of the USACV are to foster communications and solidarity among consecrated virgins living within the jurisdiction of the USCCB; to encourage ongoing in-depth growth of understanding of consecrated virginity; and to promote an accurate understanding of the nature of the vocation of consecrated virginity through programs of education.

Additional helpful references

- **In the *Information Packet*, USACV, revised October 2001**

“The Vocation and Mission of Consecrated Virgins according to *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum* by the Most Rev. Pierre Raffin, OP, given in Rome, June 1995

“Diocesan Options”

“Sample ‘Preparation Process’ document”

“Consecrated Virgins for Today’s Church” by Sr. Sharon Holland, IHM

“Frequently Asked Questions” the Most Rev. Raymond L. Burke, episcopal moderator of consecrated virgins in the United States

- **Website**

The website of the United States Association of Consecrated virgins is:

<http://www.consecratedvirgins.org>

e-mail addresses:

info@consecratedvirgins.org

- **Information Conference**

Sponsored by the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins, this two-day conference is presented by the Most Rev. Raymond L. Burke and consecrated virgins from the United States. It is designed to provide those inquiring about the vocation with a deeper understanding of the history and spirituality of Consecrated Virgins Lived in the World through lecture, prayer, and personal interaction. See the USACV website for upcoming conference dates and information concerning presentations for spiritual directors and others assisting women in the discernment process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This brief reference material is based on Sr. Sharon Holland’s article “Consecrated Virgins for Today’s Church,” 1998, as printed in *Consecrated Life*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 257-75.

Reviewed by the Most Rev. Raymond L. Burke, Bishop of La Crosse and Episcopal Moderator of the consecrated virgins in the United States, July 17, 2003.

Components of the spiritual life for a consecrated virgin

1. Prayer

Liturgy of the Hours to sanctify the whole day and bring the whole world to Christ

Devotion to the Holy Eucharist

Daily Mass, if possible

Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament (Some consecrated virgins have permission from their bishop for the Blessed Sacrament to be reserved in their homes.)

Devotional life

To the Sacred Heart of Jesus

To the Immaculate Heart of Mary; a love for the Blessed Virgin Mary

Adherence to the Creed

Continual renewal of her knowledge of the faith

Deep knowledge and acceptance of the faith

Sincere habit of obedience

Willing to give an account of and witness to her Catholic faith

2. Disposition of consecrated virgin

Serenity of soul as background of her daily prayer

Deep sense of God's mercy and her participation in God's mercy by forgiving others

Praise of God as fruit of her humility

Supplication as she recognizes impediments in our lives toward God

Petition for the needs of others

Thanksgiving. Should not have self-pity nor the attitude that "It was all my own doing."

3. Meditation on the Word of God (*lectio divina*)

4. Seeks silence each day, as she realizes that Christ needs time with us alone and in solitude

5. Special joy in the company of other consecrated virgin and/or candidates

6. Discretion/prudence in spiritual life—avoids situations of temptation or discouragement. Avoids extremes or exaggeration, even in prayer life or service to the Church

7. Sense of sin and trust in God's mercy

8. Acts of penitence, reparation for sins

--by Most Rev. Raymond L. Burke
(presentation given at Information Conference, 2002, Chicago, Illinois)

United States Association
of
Consecrated Virgins

UNITED STATES ASSOCIATION OF CONSECRATED VIRGINS

The United States Association of Consecrated Virgins is an association of persons in the United States who have received the Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World, according to Canon 604 of the Code of Canon Law. The Association is formed primarily as a vehicle of exchange of information and resources among consecrated virgins, as suggested in Canon 604.2.

The Association has been recognized by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Most Rev. Raymond L. Burke, Archbishop of St. Louis, served as episcopal moderator until August 2008. The Most Rev. Earl Boyea, Bishop of Lansing, currently serves as episcopal moderator.

For information about the Association or resources available, please get in touch with

United States Association of Consecrated Virgins
300 West Ottawa Street
[Lansing, Michigan 48933-1577, USA](mailto:info@consecratedvirgins.org)

<http://www.consecratedvirgins.org>

email: info@consecratedvirgins.org

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