

BISHOP'S COLUMN

Consecrated virgins living in the world

03 November 2023

by Bishop James Conley

One of the principal themes of the Second Vatican Council was the “universal call to holiness.” This is the idea that everyone, not just priests and religious sisters, are called to become saints. St. Teresa of Kolkata, when asked by journalists what it was like to be a living saint, quipped: “holiness is not a luxury for the few but a duty of every Christian—even journalists!” By virtue of our baptism, and aided by prayer, the sacraments and a life charity, everyone is given sufficient graces to live holy lives.

We live out this call to holiness in a variety of vocations. A majority of the baptized are called to the vocation of marriage. Some, however, are called to the vocation of priesthood and the consecrated life. Those who are called to the consecrated life may become members of religious communities of men or women, both active and contemplative; monastic, or engaged in various apostolates, founded by saints and holy men and women to whom the Lord has given special charisms, such as teaching, health care, or service to the poor.

Among those women who are called to the consecrated life, there is a unique and little known form of consecrated life; the vocation of a consecrated virgin living in the midst of the world. This is actually an ancient form of consecrated life which has its origins in apostolic times, but has been restored only since the Second Vatican Council. I would like to focus my column, therefore, on the vocation of a consecrated virgin living in the midst of the world. I will use as a guide, the “Rite of Consecration,” taken from the liturgical ceremony given to us by Holy Mother the Church.

First, a bit of history. In the early centuries, we know that many Christians were persecuted for their faith. The witness of martyrdom, those men and women who gave their lives for Jesus and his Church, was the highest expression of the vocation to holiness.

Later, after the age of martyrdom, hermits went into the desert or entered monastic communities to follow the call to holiness. At the same time, there were those called by the Lord to live as “virgins in the world,” rather than in

monasteries or remote deserts. These were women who were consecrated to a life of virginity, who lived in the midst of the world and who flourished in the early centuries of the Church. The Fathers of the Church spoke eloquently about this vocation.

Consecrated virginity became so rooted in the fabric of the Church that it was eventually given the name *Order*, analogous to those of bishops, priests, deacons and widows. In fact, the *Order of Virgins* developed from the Gospel witness of women who freely gave up everything to follow the Lord. With the passage of the centuries and the growth of monastic and religious institutes, consecrated virgins became less common in the life of the Church or were eventually absorbed into monasticism.

A change began to occur in the 20th century. The Second Vatican Council document on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, contained the statement, “the rite for the consecration of virgins at present found in the Roman pontifical is to be revised” SC, 80.

The increased interest in the vocation of consecrated virginity and the aforementioned directive from Vatican II, led to the publication of a solemn rite constituting the candidate “a sacred person, a surpassing sign of the Church’s love for Christ, and an eschatological image of the world to come and the glory of the heavenly Bride of Christ” [from the *Introduction to the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*].

Accordingly, in 1970, Pope St. Paul VI published the Rite of Consecration to the Life of Virginity for women living in the world. The Order of Virgins was also included in the 1983 code of Canon Law (Canon 604) for the Latin Church and in the canons for the Oriental Churches.

These documents teach that the candidate is to be consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to a rite approved by the Church. She is betrothed mystically to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church. She thus enters a public state of consecrated life in the Church. The consecrated virgin lives her life individually or perhaps with her family, under the direction of the diocesan bishop. She does not live in a community as a religious sister or nun, but she lives out her vocation that is virginal in its integrity, feminine in its receptivity, and spousal in its intimacy. The consecrated virgin also has a spiritual and maternal fruitfulness flowing from the love of the divine spouse.

Additionally, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* contains three paragraphs on this vocation (CCC 922-924). Pope St. John Paul II gave witness to the flowering

of the ancient Order of Virgins by writing about it in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, (cf. VC, 7, given 25 March 1996).

The Rite of Consecration to the Life of Virginity for women living in the world consists of the following parts; a) the calling of the candidate; b) the homily or address, in which the candidate and the people are instructed on the gift of virginity; c) the examination in which the bishop asks the candidate about her willingness to persevere in her intention and to receive the consecration; d) the Litany, in which prayer is offered to God the Father and the intercession of the Virgin Mary and all the Saints is invoked; e) the renewal of the intention of chastity (or the making of religious profession); f) the Solemn Blessing or consecration, by which the Church asks the heavenly Father to pour out the gifts of the Holy Spirit on the candidate; g) the presentation of the insignia of consecration: ring, veil, and breviary, to symbolize a spiritual dedication.

The bishop then poses three questions to the candidate during the ceremony; 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?

The consecrated virgin is constituted a sacred person in the Church. No particular service or spirituality is imposed. The gift of a life of perpetual virginity is to be harmonized with the other gifts God has given to the woman in creative freedom. The consecrated virgin's time is spent in works of penance and of mercy, in apostolic activity, and in prayer. She is called to a deep prayer and sacramental life, and is strongly advised to recite the Liturgy of the Hours daily.

While she is a consecrated person, the consecrated virgin remains in the secular state, providing completely for her own material needs, medical care, and retirement. The diocese is not financially responsible for her living.

The consecrated virgin does not wear a habit or a veil, nor does she use the title of "sister." She witnesses subtly, but publicly and powerfully, by her virginal life, to her exclusive spousal relationship with Jesus Christ. A consecrated virgin does wear a ring, indicating her spousal commitment. Her comportment, modesty in dress, and simplicity of life, point to her commitment to following Christ her Bridegroom, in the virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience.

How might a woman today in the Diocese of Lincoln discern a vocation to consecrated virginity? After careful discernment with her pastor and/or spiritual

director, a virgin who feels drawn to the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world, should contact her bishop or diocesan vocation director.

The candidate then would be invited to express her intentions to the bishop, her motivation for petitioning for a vocation to a life of consecrated virginity, her aptitudes for this state in life, and her dispositions and preparation intellectually and spiritually to enter in to formation for a life of consecrated virginity. She is called to a true, stable, and profound desire to live the life of a consecrated virgin in the world, adhering to the full teachings of the Catholic Church. Her motivation should not be tainted by pride or a fear of marriage, nor the mere desire to remain single, nor a desire for a status in the Church. Her intentions and desires should be confirmed by the example of her life, and an invitation from Christ to be His virgin bride living in the world. It is up to the bishop and those who assist him to assist her in the discernment of her vocation.

A correct motivation, however, is not sufficient to guarantee that one can live the life of a consecrated virgin in the world. She should be mature in her affections, able to live a life as an individual, and be able to be formed through prayer. It should be clear that she is a person of stability. She may support herself by any legitimate work. Although some consecrated virgins are employed by the Church, many are not.

She could be admitted by the bishop to a time of formation, usually at least two years, during which the candidate would become very familiar with the meaning, the nature, the specific depths, the obligations, and the graces of the state of consecrated virginity in the Church.

She should be able to maintain a life of prayer, asceticism, ongoing growth, and the gift of herself in service to God and her brothers and sisters in Christ. The candidate would be expected to make an annual spiritual retreat.

Although a precise number is not available, there are over 260 consecrated virgins in the United States and approximately 5,000 living in every part of the world.

I am happy to say that we have one candidate who has begun her formation to a life of consecrated virginity in the Diocese of Lincoln. I invite those women who are sensing a call to this beautiful vocation, to contact me directly at the Chancery, or through our diocesan office of vocations.

Editor's note: for more, see the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins (USACV) at consecratedvirgins.org.