

# Consecrated Virginity

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During the last ten years, a new form of Christian lifestyle has begun to be lived out – that of the consecrated virgin living in the world. At a time when many people are searching for ways of ministry in the Church that allow for real depth of commitment combined with real freedom of expression, it has escaped many people's notice that the Church now gives her blessing to the ancient lifestyle of consecrated virginity. The consecrated virgin is a deeply committed woman who publicly vows to remain celibate for life, in order to give all her loving energies to Christ and his Church. But she keeps a real freedom of lifestyle, always choosing where, how and with whom she will live; she is thus free to follow the creative leading of the Holy Spirit in a way unprecedented among women religious in recent centuries.

The life of virginity has existed from earliest times. Christ claimed this lifestyle, according to Matthew, with his rather stark statement: "There are eunuchs who have made themselves that way for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can". (Mat 19:12). He too apparently valued the lifestyle for the freedom it gave him – freedom to spend whole nights in prayer without depriving a loving wife of his attentions, and freedom to live how, where and with whom he liked, in order to best do his Father's work.

St Paul, as "one who, by the Lord's mercy has stayed faithful" to his Master's celibate lifestyle (I Cor 7:25), several times describes virginity with tenderness and simplicity. "Simple devotion to Christ" is the mark of a "chaste virgin" (2 Cor 11:2-4). He blesses marriage as a living out of Christ's marriage to his Church, but acknowledges the freedom that celibacy can give: "An unmarried woman, like a young girl, can devote herself to the Lord's affairs. All she need worry about is being holy in body and spirit". (I Cor 7:34).

In the Church of the apostles, women of all walks of life were valued members of the community: household women like Lydia (Acts 16:14), and Priscilla and her husband, who together instructed the convert Apollos (Acts 18), and widows too, like the widows of Jaffa who were standing round the dead Tabitha's bed and watched Paul bring her to life (Acts 9:36). In the local Church up

to the time of Ignatius of Antioch, we must think of men and women, married, single and bereaved, preachers, teachers and deacons, mothers, virgins and widows, those concerned with healing and welfare, organized not in the pyramidal, authority-based structure that we have known ever since that time, but arranged in a circular pattern around Christ their leader, giving of their gifts to one another and to those outside the company of believers.

The concept of the virgin in the Church was sharpened by the Roman persecutions. Men and women died heroic deaths, and eyewitnesses recorded their dying words, sharing them with one another in encouragement. The next generation of celibate women saw themselves as successors to the virgin martyrs. In the rite of consecration, drawn up in the fourth century, the newly-consecrated virgin sings in the dying words of the martyr Agnes moments before her death: "What I longed for, I see. What I hoped for, I hold. I have loved him on earth with all my heart, and now I am one with him in heaven".

Consecrated virgins flourished in the Church of the fourth and fifth centuries. Augustine, Jerome and others wrote treatises about them. Pope Leo the Great wrote a long and beautiful consecratory preface which remains the heart of the rite of consecration to this day. He begins: "Loving Father, chaste bodies are your temples; you delight in sinless hearts". He begs the Lord to accept these women's vows and their hearts": "You inspire them to take this vow; now they give you their hearts". Leo describes the life of the virgin in words that beautifully develop Paul's theme of "simple devotion to Christ":

“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.”

His preface ends with some of the most beautiful words written by this poet and man of prayer. He prays to Christ:

“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.”<sup>1</sup>

The spread of monastic life among men and women in the sixth century introduced a new duality in the role of women in the Church. Some women remained, as always, servants of the Church within their local community. Others went apart into religious communities. Both could make vows as consecrated virgins, though from this time onwards, the hierarchy tended to consider organized religious life as safer and more desirable. The English medieval Church was particularly rich and varied in its styles of Christian living, and there were always a large number of anchorites, anchoresses and other vowed men and women. Julian of Norwich was one of many women who lived in a tiny house adjoining the local Church, caring and praying for whoever came to see her. Priests and monks wrote many sensitive expositions of prayer and holy living for these women. One such consecrated woman was Christina of Markyate, who lived in the twelfth century. She could not enter a religious community because her parents forbade it, and the bishop sided with her parents. So she ran away and lived among a group of hermits, men and women, around St Alban’s. She and the abbot became good friends, and the monks of St Alban’s monastery came to her for guidance. After some years, she made her vows in their monastery. Women joined her at Markyate, and she was eventually asked to become abbess at St Clement’s in York.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike today, it was common for men to choose this lifestyle. Again, unlike many of us today, these individuals were not so worried about ecclesiastical recognition of their choice of life. Stephen of Muret, also in the twelfth century, began his way of life after visiting a monastery in Calabria. He went up a mountainside near Muret, and made his vows to God. His biographer describes his unique way of doing so: “He had a ring with which he espoused himself to Christ, saying: “I, Stephen, renounce the devil and all his pomps, and devote myself to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God three, living and true”. He also wrote out this formula and placed it on his head saying: “I, Stephen, promise to serve God in this desert in the Catholic faith and for this cause I place this form upon my head and this ring on my finger, that at the day of my death it may be unto me according to my promise . . . I ask you, Lord, to restore to me the wedding garment and count me among the sons of the Church at the wedding feast of

your Son".<sup>3</sup> Maybe he had watched the consecration of some women, for placing a crown on the head and a ring on the finger are both part of the rite. The ancient words of the rite are actually more beautiful than Stephen's: when the virgin is crowned, she sings, "My Lord Jesus Christ has crowned me as his bride", and when the ring is put on her finger she exclaims, "I am wedded to him whom angels serve; sun and moon marvel at his beauty".

From the time of the Reformation onwards, fear and prudence led the hierarchy to countenance less and less variety of lifestyle. Monastic life was seen as the basic lifestyle for religious women. Active congregations gradually emerged, growing out of bands of pious women gathered together by priests like Vincent de Paul in the seventeenth century. Vincent's Sisters of Charity, who worked among the sick and the poor, were the first congregation of women to be freed from enclosure. But consecrated virginity lived out in the world became a dormant lifestyle. In *Sponsa Christi* (1950), after opening with a very poetic description of religious life for women, Pius XII describes consecrated virginity as a rather decadent thing of the past: "The Church generally commended to virgins the common life understood in a wide sense, but for a long period, the Church did not wish to impose strictly monastic life even on consecrated virgins, whom she left in the world, duly honoured, but nevertheless free. However, the number of liturgically consecrated virgins living in their own homes, or in a common life that was somewhat free, constantly diminished; finally they disappeared, in some places by reason of a juridical decision, everywhere in fact. Furthermore, in general they were not brought back again, and later were even prohibited".<sup>4</sup>

But what he took away with one hand, was quietly being given back with the other. Various lay movements were surfacing in Europe, movements which Pius XII officially recognised as Secular Institutes in his Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia* in 1947. The traditional dedication of oneself to God by a vow of celibacy and the traditional freedom of lifestyle that had always described the consecrated virgin are both to be found within the framework of the secular institute. But the prevailing tone of the Church at this time, with its rather uneasy relationship between "the Church" and "the world", are reflected in the format of the secular institute. The member lives a vowed life, but lives it out almost secretly, as he or she goes about normal daily work. There is a strong central organization, so the institute will remain obedient to the hierarchy. The vow, too, becomes a private rather than a public thing: there is no question of a commitment made in and to the Church and lived out in open ministry within the Church. This is understandable, since at that time, ministry within the local

community, i.e. the parish, was seen as the preserve of the priest.

From the time of Vatican II, the atmosphere in the Church was changing. Ministry within local community came to be seen as something to be shared. A variety of ministry was encouraged; new growth was welcomed. The traditional consecration of unmarried women to a life of religious virginity was revised by formal decree of the Second Vatican Council, and published by the decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship, 31 May 1970, not only for nuns (for whom the rite was by now reserved), but also for individual women who do not live in religious community.<sup>5</sup> In the following year, 1971, all the bishops received a copy of the proposed revised rite of consecration, and four years later, in 1975, a copy of the final version. Unfortunately, bishops have not readily taken the initiative of publicising or even allowing women to consecrate themselves as virgins living in the world. Leadership has been shown by American, Canadian and French bishops, but England is rather lagging behind. As far as I am aware, there are only three consecrated virgins like myself living in the world, involved in full-time ministry in the local church, and a further four living the hermit life. Four more teach, and run a house of prayer.

Very often, lack of initiative is blamed on lack of leadership from Rome, but in this case, bishops, religious and religious-to-be are at fault, for Rome has taken the initiative both in its promulgation of the rite and in its general pastoral directives. In 1978 the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and the Sacred Congregation for Bishops jointly issued a remarkable document urging creativity in ministry, from which I quote:  
*Missionary Task and the Spirit of Initiative.*

There is urgent need of a kind of apostolic shrewdness in inventing bold and ingenious new ecclesial experiments under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, who by his very nature is *creator*.

“In particular, there is a remarkable connection between the charismatic nature of religious life and a fruitful, eager inventiveness and initiative, for, as the supreme Pontiff, Pope Paul VI rightly said, “By reason of their religious consecration, religious enjoy the utmost freedom and are able without hindrance to abandon everything and go to the ends of the earth in order to preach the Gospel. They are enterprising, and their apostolate is often marked by an originality and initiative which others can only admire” . . .

*Increase in Pastoral Activity of Women.*

In the broad field of the Church's pastoral activity, a new place, and a very important one indeed, must be assigned to women. Just as women were once the productive helpers of the apostles, so the women of today must integrate their apostolic work into the

ecclesial community by faithfully living the mystery of their created and revealed identity, and by concentrating on their growing presence in civil society.

“Religious women, then, in fidelity to their vocation, in harmony with their specific character as women, and in response also to the concrete needs of the Church and the world, should think out and propose new forms of apostolic service.”<sup>6</sup>

These are strong phrases – “apostolic shrewdness”, “bold and ingenious new ecclesial experiments”, “fruitful eager inventiveness”, “originality and initiative”, “new forms of apostolic service”; and they are words that could change the face of the Church if we truly take them to heart.

Who may receive consecration to a life of virginity? In the words of the Introduction to the Rite, “In the case of women living in the world it is required: a) that they have never married or lived in public violation of chastity; b) that by their age, prudence and universally approved character they give assurance of perseverance in a life of chastity; c) that they be admitted to this consecration by the bishop who is the Ordinary of the place”.<sup>7</sup> In practice, women seeking consecration are of two kinds: those who have not experienced religious life, for whom this is a first expression of their desire to vow themselves to God; and those previously or currently belonging to a religious community with whose aims they no longer identify, often because the community has not renewed itself at the same pace as the individual religious.

As with any newly developed lifestyle in the Church, most women now seeking consecration are those maturer women who have already experienced religious life. This raises the canonical question of dispensation and transfer. In 1980, a test case occurred, in which a sister of simple perpetual vows, a member of an apostolic congregation of religious women, living at the time in excommunication, wished to change her state by a transfer to consecrated virginity without being dispensed from her religious vows. Since this is likely to be true of a number of women seeking consecration, I quote the reply of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes:

“This Sacred Congregation has received your letter of 21 April, in which you say, among other things: “The vows made to God in the Church were a true and permanent commitment, and I am unable to even consider being dispensed from them.”

Given the life you are now living, it is understandable that you would be reluctant to give up your consecration to God. But you must remember that the vows you pronounced when you entered the Sisters of . . . were made to be lived *according to the Constitutions* of that institute. Since you no longer have the intention of

observing those Constitutions and desire, rather, to follow another rule of life, it is only right and just that you give up your public vows and your affiliations with a community whose life you no longer live.

There is an alternative, however, which we strongly recommend to you. With the approval of your bishop, you may receive the "Consecration of Virgins". In this case, we would make the provision in the indult of secularization that the dispensation from your present vows would take effect at the moment of your new consecration. Along with this consecration, you could, of course, make private vows."<sup>8</sup>

Thus it is not only possible but recommended that a woman's dispensation from her present vows should take effect at the moment of her new consecration. This eliminates that awkward limbo in which a person is marked as "ex-nun", at the mercy of a higher decision as to whether she is worthy to become a vowed woman once again. A change of state is a morally neutral act, not a bad act, and must be recognized as such.

The consecrated virgin living in the world is responsible to her bishop, but she does not have to stay in one diocese; she is free to move wherever and whenever she chooses, and free to live how and where she chooses. She has no inbuilt support system. She may choose the solitary life of a hermit (either in the city or out of it), or the shared life of Christian community in one of its many forms. I am a member of a parish team, living in the parish house along with others, priests, students, young people. For the consecrated woman who is seeking a more consistent mode of mutual support, there is a new religious community formed in America in 1970 called "Sisters for Christian Community". Its four hundred or so members choose their own lifestyle and ministry, and relate through regional co-ordinators. There are no superiors. They are thus free to be present as leaven in a local community in whatever way the Spirit urges. I quote from their Profile of 1979:  
*"Who we are: Consecrated women in ecclesial community.*

We are contemporary Christian women gathering together to manifest our commitment to Christ within a new pattern of consecrated life, as a prophetic ecclesial community . . .  
*Our special ministry: Community building.*

Our primary apostolic goal is to promote and witness Christian Community. To concur with Vatican II that the period of concentration of works is ending and that the Era of Penetration is here, we will determine our own ministry individually on the basis of our time, training and temperament. We will be yeast for Christian Community in whatever work or living structure we penetrate and permeate . . .

*Our commitment form: Serving, Loving and listening.*

We each create the contents of our own commitment formula and decide the length of time of special service according to our own vocation charisms. We may formalize our dedication with our bishop or spiritual counsellor in a public or private liturgical celebration . . .

*Our structure: Community-in-Christ.*

We recognize from the Gospel that Christ gathered together a community of believers whose charism would be mutual love and helpfulness. However, throughout the centuries the Church moved slowly into a pyramidal mode of organization. Therefore, as urged by Vatican II, our goal, as stated simply in our title, is to witness everywhere to community and service through the collegial process. By design, we are a free-form community-in-Christ. Rather than by rule and constitution, we are united by mutual concern, communication and common commitment to promoting the growth of Christian Community: the People of God/The Church Radiant.”<sup>9</sup>

There are many ways of building up “the Church Radiant”. Some of these have already been given to us; others will yet be discovered. Of those that we already possess, let us believe in the renewed invitation of the Church to its members to accept and welcome consecrated virgins, women who choose a lifestyle at once ancient and very modern. In the household of the Church, let us be wise householders, who know how to bring what is old and what is new out of the storehouse of our experience.

- 1 The Rite of Consecration to a life of virginity, p 143, from *The Rites of the Catholic Church as Revised by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council*, vol 2, pub, Pueblo, New York, 1980.
- 2 “The Relationship between hermits and communities in the West”, by Sr Benedicta Ward SLG, in *Solitude and Communion, Papers on the hermit life*, ed. Allchin, SLG Press, 1975.
- 3 “The Relationship between hermits and communities in the West”.
- 4 *Sponsa Christi*, by Pius XII, 1950.
- 5 Preface, p ix, *The Rites of the Catholic Church as Revised by Decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council*, vol 2.
- 6 *Document on the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious*, 1978. Issued jointly by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and the Sacred Congregation for Bishops, quoted by Joseph Gallen SJ in *Review for Religious*, vol 39, 1980/1.
- 7 Introduction to the Rite of Consecration to a life of Virginity, article 5, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church as Revised by Decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council*, vol 2.
- 8 “Transfer to Consecrated Virginity”, Canon No 632, from *Canon Law for Religious after Vatican II* by Joseph Gallen SJ, in *Review for Religious*, Vol 40, 1981/1.
- 9 *Profile of SFCC, Sisters for Christian Community*, 1979, Srs Evelyn M Hill and Marilyn L Sieg SFCC, International Communication Co-ordinators, P.O. Box 5444, Madison, Wisconsin 53705, U S A.