

CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS

By Fr. Bernard Hwang, S.T.D.

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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 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 *Canticle 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 beau-

tiful 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

(Is 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.

By Fr. Bernard Hwang, S.T.D.