



SPIRITUALITY

A Consecrated Virgin: A Path Less Traveled

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By **Lori Hadacek Chaplin** On Nov 4, 2019

Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron and Karen Ervin during her formal consecration ceremony. Photo courtesy of Karen Ervin

There are approximately 3,000 publicly consecrated virgins in the world, with France, Italy, Argentina, and the United States having the highest percentages (in that order). This tally does not include those women privately consecrated, however. Consecrating one's virginity goes all the way back to the early Church — Sts. Agatha, Agnes, and Lucy were all consecrated virgins.

Why don't these women choose to become nuns? Three modern-day consecrated virgins — Minh Huynh, Karen Webb, and Karen Ervin — answer this question and offer us a fascinating glimpse into their lives and motivations.

MINH HUYNH

Living in poverty after emigrating from Vietnam to the United States may have helped Minhhang (Minh) Huynh to detach from the things of the world. She says she never cared

about looking beautiful, wearing makeup, or having fancy clothes, and she wasn't charmed by popular culture. Huynh also couldn't picture herself dating or getting married.

In sacred art, she met God

A trip to Italy after graduating college opened Huynh's eyes to Catholicism through sacred art. Here she not only discovered her gift for painting but also experienced God's love, and so began her conversion from a nominal Buddhist to the Catholic faith in 1998.

Much to the chagrin of her Huynh family, their daughter began living like a nun — embracing poverty, simplicity, and humility — and she started looking into various religious orders. However, it became clear to Huynh that her highly independent nature would make it difficult for her to adjust to the life of a nun.

"It wasn't that I didn't want to join; it was that I was not made to join," she tells *Catholic Digest*. "My spiritual adviser [Abbot John Eudes Bamberger from The Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard, New York] said, 'You are so strong, and you have so many gifts; it seems like God wants you to live in the world.'"

A new path

Abbot Bamberger helped Huynh discern that God had a different, less traveled path for her — the life of a lay consecrated virgin.

"The abbot, my spiritual father, prepared me carefully for nine years to live the life, and I took temporary vows yearly," she shares.

In 2008, Huynh took a perpetual vow, with Abbot Bamberger as her witness. "I could live humbly, just like the first consecrated virgin saints did before there were monasteries and convents," she explains. "I did not worry too much about any formality."

While Huynh chose to make a private vow of virginity in a small ceremony, women who want to belong to the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins must be publicly consecrated by their bishops in accord with the approved liturgical rite called the "Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity."



Minh Huynh painting — traditionally called writing — an icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Photo courtesy of Minh Huynh

KAREN WEBB

For years Karen Webb from Rochester, New York, annually made private vows of virginity supervised by her spiritual director. Then, in 2007 she made a public consecration before her congregation and bishop. She tells *Catholic Digest*, "It was the result of a long period of just run-of-the-mill prayer, seeking, and discernment beginning when I was in my 20s and ending in consecration at age 44."

Why not religious life?

Sixteen years earlier, Webb — thinking she had a vocation to the religious life — joined the Sisters of Life. "[Though they are] a simply wonderful group of sisters, it quickly became clear to me that being in a religious order was not my calling, so I decided to leave shortly after novitiate began," Webb, who is a member of USACV, explains.

"I'm so glad I entered an order first — both because I learned quite a bit about religious life, and also because I always would have wondered whether or not I was supposed to be a religious sister."

Consecrated virgins — a vocation

Even so, there was a time of confusion for Webb after discerning out of religious life. She still felt the desire to offer her life to Jesus, but she was frustrated that there was no way to express it formally. That is, until she discovered in a theology class that privately vowed virginity and publicly consecrated virgins are also considered vocations.

"I was surprised, and immediately I started investigating what these vocations meant and praying about what God wanted me to do with this knowledge," Webb says.

KAREN ERVIN

For Karen Ervin from Wixom, Michigan, discerning the call to the life of a consecrated virgin was not easy. As a young girl she had felt God wanted her to be a nun, but out of fear she rejected the call.

Ervin tells *Catholic Digest*, "As I grew older, I also grew more discontent with my life. St. Augustine says that the heart is restless until it rests in God, and I know this to be true."

A peace washed over Ervin once she began actively discerning religious life, but none of the religious communities she visited resonated with her. "I went to seek the advice of a professor at Sacred Heart [Major] Seminary [in Detroit] about what to do next. It was through her that I first heard there was such a vocation as consecrated virginity," Ervin recalls. "My heart flooded with joy as she talked about the vocation. No other vocation had elicited such a response from my heart."

Attending a retreat with consecrated virgins confirmed to Ervin that she was on the right path, and so began her seven years of formation.

God alone satisfies

On June 24, 2017, dressed in wedding attire, Ervin was consecrated in a formal ceremony along with two other women by Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron at the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Detroit. She chose the route of a formal consecration because she felt God calling her to make a public witness of perpetual virginity.

"I think that a public consecration allows the Church to celebrate virginity and testify to the reality that God alone satisfies the desires of every human person," Ervin shares.

She continues, "This culture never talks about God, let alone virginity, anymore, and if they do, it's turned into a scandal or seen as unnatural. For this reason I think my consecration really touched people in a powerful way; they saw something good for a change in my radical love for God and pledge of virginity to him."

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Symbolism

In her public consecration, Ervin witnessed to the world the spousal relationship with God meant for each of us in heaven. "I wore a wedding dress, and the Church gave me a veil, a ring, and the Liturgy of the Hours. Each signifies the relationship I have with God and the Church. The veil shows my singular devotion in service to the Church; the ring marks me in fidelity as his bride, and the Liturgy of the Hours is my call to pray without ceasing," she explains.

Those women who make a public consecration promise to pray the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office) morning and evening. They are also encouraged to attend daily Mass and cultivate a prayer life.

The life of a consecrated virgin

Though Huynh feels called to cover her head with a scarf, a consecrated virgin doesn't typically wear a veil or habit to distinguish herself, nor does she go by the title of "Sister." Most dress normally but modestly. The consecrated virgin also typically lives out her vocation individually rather than communally. She has a job, and she pursues an apostolate that reflects her God-given gifts.

In Huynh's case, she earns her living as an iconographer, (*OurLadyofNewHelfta.com*), and she works at the duplicating center of the State University of New York Geneseo. She also pursues her calling by working with the elderly and 70 homeschooled children.

Webb manages the finances for two connecting parishes, and though she has had to stop for a time because of the demands of her church work, she has always felt called to apologetics and teaching Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults with adults and teens.

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Ervin is the principal of St. Catherine of Siena Academy, an all-girls Catholic high school in Wixom, Michigan. Her students are aware that she is a consecrated virgin.

"As a bride of Christ and principal of an all-girls school, I have a unique opportunity to cultivate a faith community where our Catholic identity and love for Jesus can be normalized," she explains. "To do this, I try to put into practice my credo to be in the world and not of it by integrating faith into daily life. To be in the world, I wear 'normal' clothes, earrings, makeup, and sometimes nail polish, and my students will comment on it. My use of the elements of the world make a loving relationship with Jesus seem real and attainable for them."

One student told Ervin, "You're holy, cool, and smart." The girl seemed surprised that those three characteristics could go together.

With her students, Ervin has noticed, "Every time I open my heart to be vulnerable about my life, the gift of virginity, and my devotion to Jesus, I open theirs, too."

Who is called?

Catholic Digest asked Judith Stegman, president of the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins, about the characteristics and signs that indicate a woman should begin discerning a call to become a consecrated virgin.

Stegman paints this picture: "Often a woman is attracted at a young age to the lives of the virgin saints, and [she] finds herself attracted to prayer and to being with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. She will often experience [a] desire for a mystical betrothal to Christ; she desires to give herself entirely to Christ. She is drawn to his Most Sacred Heart, and she wants only to follow his will and please him in every detail of her life."

She continues, "She is happy for others who are called to the married life or to religious life, and she sees that these could be a path for her, but the strongest draw she feels is to live for and with Jesus alone."

Besides the obvious fact that she must be a virgin and love the Church, Stegman explains, "[The woman that's called to be a consecrated virgin] is drawn to develop all the gifts that God has given her and to pursue her work or profession as a way to serve him."

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