

Consecrated virgins in Acadiana: How the Catholic Church is quietly reviving this ancient role By KEN STICKNEY | Staff writer



JENNINGS — Alicia Pousson did not choose her vocation. It came as a gift from God, she said.

By profession, Pousson, 34, of Iota works as a case manager for people with developmental disabilities for Imperial Calcasieu Human Services Authority in Lake Charles. Her religious vocation, though, is that of a “consecrated virgin living in the world,” an ancient role dating to the second century that has been quietly revived in the Catholic Church over the past 50 years.

In that role, women through their diocesan bishops are consecrated as brides to Jesus Christ according to church rite. In Pousson’s case, Bishop Douglas Dehotel consecrated her in a Mass celebrated Sept. 15, 2018 at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Lafayette and attended by family, friends, church officials and the public. The Mass, she said, included elements of any ordination and wedding.

“I was in a wedding gown,” she said. “I was without a veil until the Prayer of Consecration. The bishop put the veil on my head and a wedding ring on my finger. The bishop gave me the Liturgy of the Hours.”

The homily, written by early church fathers, was read aloud.

“It was a beautiful homily that talks about the gift the virgin gives to the church and what her responsibilities are,” Pousson said.

Consecrated virgins support themselves, provide their own insurance and benefits, and dedicate much of their lives to prayer for the church, its priests and in other roles related to their parish or diocese. While prayer is the chief role, consecrated virgins might also consider other roles on behalf of the church and diocese. They routinely meet with the bishop.

"The consecrated virgin is Mary in the world," she said of her role. "Mary was humble, spent lots of time in prayer and followed Jesus. She was sort of in the background, for the most part."

Consecrated virgins do not wear a habit or anything that would make them distinguishable from other people. But, she said, they are witnesses to Jesus Christ and examples to the world.

"It's very common for people to say 'Oh, you are a nun.' No, I am not a nun."

Pousson relishes her role, which took some time to discern and understand. She said she herself was not aware of the vocation while growing up in Iota, where she lived with her parents, Arlen Michael Pousson, a retired farmer, and Dolores Pousson, Iota's town clerk.

She had cerebral palsy as an infant and uses a wheelchair. But she graduated from Iota public schools, earned degrees at LSU-Eunice and McNeese State University, including a master's in psychology, and expected to eventually raise a family of her own. That didn't happen.

She said she never "seriously" dated and, by 25, did not think in those terms. Instead, she said, she began to wonder what else God might have in mind for her. This role, for virgins who have never married, seemed right.

She'd thought about becoming a nun, but her physical challenge presented an obstacle. She said she inquired about possibilities with one religious order, but their facilities could not accommodate her reliance on a wheelchair and walker.

But Pousson said she had read a blog that mentioned the consecrated virgin vocation, which seemed to fit her life: She could remain within her support system in Iota and her physical challenge was not a barrier to the role's responsibilities. That, she said, set her "heart on fire" to embrace a role she'd only recently heard about.

It took preparation. Pousson said she met with the Rev. Michael Champagne of the Community of Jesus Crucified for three years before her consecration. Preparation included study, meetings and prayer.

She retains not only family ties but also her friendships. There is one other consecrated virgin in the diocese, she said. They talk and text often.

The New Testament alludes to consecrated life in Matthew 19:12 and in Corinthians 7:25-40. Consecrated virgins have special affinity for Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote about the consecrated role in 110 AD.

Pousson said consecrated virgins predate monastic religious life. Sts. Agnes, Agatha, Cecilia and Lucy were among early saints recognized as consecrated virgins.

The vocation returned to the church following Vatican II in 1970. Today, Pousson said, there are four consecrated virgins in Louisiana; Catholic News Agency said in a 2017 story that there are fewer than 3,000 in the world and some 235 in the United States.

Sister Celeste Larrouque, SEC, Lafayette's diocesan director of religious brothers and sisters and delegate for consecrated life, said dioceses have only recently caught on to the vocation and how to go about informing people about it. She said while the role of consecrated virgins was revived under Pope Paul VI, St. John Paul II, who was pope from 1978 to 2005, was especially supportive.

"We are all trying to find ways to articulate it and include it more," she said.

Larrouque said the vocation may grow because it affords women the opportunity to serve God in their home diocese without vows to a specific religious order, which resonates with some women's sense of independence.

"It's easier to recruit for the priesthood," Larrouque said. "There are a lot of traditions associated with that."

Times have changed, and this vocation bears that out, she said. Whereas the faithful used to pray for vocations for priests and nuns, she said now they also pray for vocations to consecrated life.

Pousson said the vocation is perpetual. Married people stay married until death parts them; consecrated virgins, she said, never lose their mission.

"I accepted the call; I didn't choose it," she said. "God presented it to me and I had to say yes to it."

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