

Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago

On June 8, 2018, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life issued the Instruction [*Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago*](#) for the *Ordo Virginum*.

The Instruction responds to many questions that have been raised about the *Ordo Virginum* over the years since the 1970 revision of the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity. In particular, the document rightly emphasizes the consecrated virgin's mystical espousal to Christ as key to this bridal vocation of love that images the relationship between Christ and the Church. The document also discusses in depth the relationship of the consecrated virgin to her diocesan bishop and the bishop's role in her life. The United States Association of Consecrated Virgins is pleased that the formation materials we have prepared for this vocation over the years are directly in line with the Instruction.

As we closed our annual convocation held this year in Miami, Florida, officers of the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins published a preliminary [statement](#) focused on our concern with number 88 of *Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago*. While the Instruction offers many important clarifications for the vocation of consecrated virginity, it was our immediate experience that the Instruction raised questions about what is perhaps the most fundamental, essential, and distinguishing element of the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world: the requirement that the woman to be consecrated be a virgin.

Paragraph 88 appears to state that bodily virginity, while important, is not an *essential* prerequisite for admittance to the *Ordo Virginum*, and it is this assertion alone that we focused upon in our preliminary statement. When a virgin offers her virginity to Christ, she offers her integral virginity – physical and spiritual. A woman who does not have the gift of virginity to offer may offer a complete gift of self to Christ, but she is not offering a gift of virginity. A gift of one's integral virginity to Christ is a gift of both body and spirit, and one cannot offer to Christ what one does not have to offer.

Some have asked us if paragraph 88 might be read as simply allowing room for discernment in the case of a woman whose virginity has been lost against her will. In response, we note that if a woman has been violated against her will and has not knowingly and willingly given up her virginity, most would hold that she remains eligible for consecration as a virgin. It is true that such a case would require depth of "good judgment and insight" carried out in individual discernment with the bishop, as is discussed in number 88.

It is not such cases, however, that are most common, and if the intention of paragraph 88 is to address situations such as rape, it seems that the paragraph could have done so directly, without compromising the essential and natural requirement of physical virginity for the consecration of a virgin.

Immediately after the Instruction ESI was issued, we began to receive comments from readers stating, "Whoa! Physical virginity is no longer required for the consecration of virgins!" In our society, questions of eligibility for the consecration of virgins are raised by those who have given up their virginity, perhaps only one time, and who have later begun again to live an exemplary chaste life. In faithfulness to the long tradition of the Church, ESI 88 could have indicated that these women do not have the gift of virginity to offer to Christ. They may make a private vow of chastity, or enter another form of consecrated life, but the consecration of virgins is not open to them. In a confusing statement, however,

n. 88 seems to state that physical virginity is not an essential prerequisite for the consecration of virgins.

St. Thomas Aquinas explains that while penance can recover virtue in regard to what is formal, it cannot change what is material. Thus, he said, “a person who has lost virginity by sin, recovers by repenting, not the matter of virginity, but the purpose of virginity . . . For God cannot make that which is done not to have been done.” (ST, II-II, Q 152, AD, Ad 3). Saint Thomas concurs with St. Jerome’s assessment that “although God can do all things, He cannot raise up a virgin after she has fallen.” (Jerome, letter #22 to Eustochium).

The *Ordo Virginum* is comprised of those who are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the rite of consecration to a life of virginity (canon 604). The virgin constitutes “a special eschatological image of the Heavenly Bride and of the life to come, when the Church will at last fully live her love for Christ the Bridegroom.” (John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* 7). Bodily and spiritual virginity – both – are essential to the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world in order to image the relationship of the virgin Church to her virgin Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. “Lord,” the consecrating bishop prays during the Prayer of Consecration of a virgin, “look with favor on your handmaids. They place in your hands their resolve to live in chastity. You prompt them in this, their intention; now they give you their hearts . . . Among your many gifts you give to some the grace of virginity.” (Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity, 24).

Readers may also be interested in a [commentary](#) by Dr. Jeff Mirus of Catholicculture.org, which discusses the broader repercussions of raising questions about virginity as a natural foundation for the vocation of consecrated virginity.

Likewise, readers may be interested in a thesis written by Judith M. Stegman for a Masters in Theology: “Virginal Chastity in the Consecrated Virgin.” If interested, please contact president@consecratedvirgins.org.

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