

From Elizabeth Lee, consecrated virgin of the Diocese of Fall River (MA)

I rejoiced when I first learned about the release of the document *Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago!* It had been a long time coming since the days when we had first spoken about it in Rome at the gathering with Pope Benedict XVI in 2008. I was encouraged by most of the sections of the document and concluded it would be a useful teaching tool to assist others in understanding the vocation of consecrated virginity. I did have concerns, though, particularly with paragraph #88. In the *Introduction to the Rite*, we read that, "the woman must not have publicly or manifestly lived in a state contrary to chastity." I see this as a clear and unambiguous statement, even (and especially) in these days of lax sexual and social mores, that a woman, to be consecrated, must physically be a virgin.

In reading the historical context of the vocation in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, they were very clear about the necessity of physical virginity if a woman was to receive the Consecration. One cannot consecrate the virginity of a non-virgin, since the referenced virginity is not extant to be consecrated. Saints died to protect this physical virginal integrity.

In addition to discussing this document with other consecrated virgins, who were as surprised as I was to see an obvious fact of the vocation sidelined, I also spoke with lay women about paragraph #88. Most were just as surprised. Some thought it could perhaps be a reference to "spiritual virginity," or "virginity of the heart." These terms are sometimes used to describe a woman who is not a physical virgin, but desires a renewal of purity following, perhaps, a fall or a period of living in sin. Yet, *spiritual virginity* is not really a coherent concept; following her intimate sexual encounter with a man, it is not appropriate to refer to her as virginal, either in body or heart.

Certainly, the woman who has a sexual encounter can repent of her wrongdoing, and ardently seek the Lord with great generosity, like Mary Magdalene, and perhaps love the Lord to a degree even greater than a woman who may be a physical virgin. But the repentant and virtuous Magdalene could not have become a consecrated virgin; her path was a different one, beautiful and important in its own way in the Lord's plan. A woman who has lost her physical virginity may pursue bodily and *spiritual chas4ty*, but not virginity. Mary, the model of virginity, both spiritual and physical, put it very simply when she said, "...I know not man."

The Holy Spirit is the giver of all gifts and we each have different and distinct gifts to return to God for His Glory and for the good of our neighbor. We must not sideline this *physical and spiritual* gift of God, for He confers it in our day to build up His body, the Church. The body of Christ was virginal, His mother was virginal, and the life of the consecrated virgin is also meant to witness to this fruitful virginity, solely given over to God all our days. We truly depend on each other's gifts and rather than comparing or denying them, we should rejoice in them, each for the other.

In the end we are judged on love. At a time in our society when virginity is attacked in public and on university campuses, our loving witness is much needed in the world. The document, *Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago*, needs to be looked at again, revised and corrected. Those of us with personal involvement in the vocation of consecrated virginity ought to consider writing to the Prefect in Rome and perhaps asking our bishop to do so as well. By continuing to clearly instruct others, and by holding to the essentials of our vocation, we can help oversee the proper formation of those who may be discerning and questioning, and perhaps also lessen the hurt of those who may be led astray due to misinformation.