

Consecrated Virgins: Witnesses to Christ's Love for All Souls

Dedicated Women Serve the Church in the World

BY Susan Klemmond

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While she was attending the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., Nicole Bettini sensed a call from the Lord.

She talked with women religious but did not feel a strong desire to enter religious life. Consequently, she concluded that her call must be to marriage.

"For about three years, I prayed, 'Lord, when I walk down the aisle and my future spouse is at the altar, may he say, 'Ah, at last: bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,'" she said. "I didn't know who this guy was going to be, but I just knew, 'Lord if you can do all, you do have the perfect spouse for me.'"

Then the Lord showed Bettini, a religious education and youth-ministry coordinator at Maternity of Mary Church in St. Paul, that he himself was her perfect spouse.

In 2007, when Archbishop Harry Flynn of St. Paul and Minneapolis consecrated her as a virgin, her Bridegroom was at the altar waiting for her.

Like traditional brides, consecrated virgins wear a white dress and veil at their consecration ceremonies. But while those entering the sacrament of matrimony profess their love for a human bridegroom, women being consecrated as virgins profess their love for Christ as their spouse and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to live out a virginal, spousal relationship with him, dedicating themselves to serving the Church in the world.

Church History

The consecration of a virgin living in the world, which dates back to the earliest years of the Church, fell into disuse for centuries before it was restored after Vatican II.

Inspired especially by the Blessed Mother because it is both virginal (physical virginity is essential) and maternal, consecrated virginity is a sign of the love of the Church as a heavenly bride.

"Their life of virginity is a constant challenge to our world, which seems to so value sensibilities over true virtue and immediate gratification over patient endurance and satisfactions over real and enduring joy," said Bishop Earl Boyea of Lansing, Mich., the episcopal moderator of the U.S. Association of Consecrated Virgins (ConsecratedVirgins.org). "The virginal life is an imitation of Jesus himself, and, thus, these consecrated virgins are a reminder of how countercultural Christ was and is and how all of us every day need to work for the redemption of the whole world."

Worldwide, there are approximately 3,000 consecrated virgins, with an estimated 215 in the United States, according to the U.S. association, which currently has about 100 members. Many consecrated virgins are aged 40-60 and hold a variety of professions, according to Judith Stegman, the association's president.

Consecrated virginity is not a sacrament because there is no outward sign (unlike marriage, the consecrated virgin's spouse, Christ, is not visible). The consecration is public and permanent, per the Code of Canon Law. "Through their pledge to follow Christ more closely, virgins are consecrated to God, mystically espoused to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church" (Canon 604 on the Order of Virgins). "In itself, the state of consecrated life is neither clerical nor lay" (Canon 588), so the women remain in the secular state in the world.

According to the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity, it is "a solemn rite constituting the candidate a sacred person, a surpassing sign of the Church's love for Christ and an eschatological image of the world to come and the glory of the heavenly Bride of Christ." Thus it is open only to women because they alone can physically image a bride, Stegman explained.

The consecration rite and the bridal nature of the vocation drew Stegman to consecrated virginity. Celebrating her 20th anniversary of consecration, Stegman, a certified public accountant in East Lansing, Mich., recalled her joy when she realized she could use her gifts for the Church without entering a religious community.

"As I was walking down the aisle, at the end of [the consecration ceremony], it struck me in a powerful way that something much bigger than I just happened here," she said.

Described by Pope Benedict XVI in a 2008 address to consecrated virgins as "a gift in the Church and for the Church," consecrated virgins both cultivate their relationship with their spouse, Christ, in prayer and reception of the sacraments and serve the Church, directly and/or through their own professions. They also have a special relationship with their local bishop, who consecrates them and acts as a spiritual father.

Key differences between consecrated virgins and religious (men or women) include, first, that consecrated virgins live in the world and not in community; also, they don't make vows, but, rather, are consecrated for life. Catholics should be able to see in a consecrated virgin what they see in the Church, Bettini said. Whether they are devoting themselves to their professions or working directly for the Church, consecrated virgins serve the Church.

Janet Smith served the Church for many years as a moral theology professor at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit and as a noted speaker and author before discerning a possible call to consecrated virginity six years ago. What had been an intellectual idea became more about a personal relationship with Christ. Last year, Smith was consecrated.

"In many ways, for decades, I have put the work of the Church first in my life," said Smith, who serves as a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Family. "I was very close to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, but Jesus wanted in that mix, and he got his way."

The Lord called Magalis Aguilera to virginal consecration when she was 13. After leaving Cuba as a refugee and waiting many years for the Code of Canon Law to be updated, she was consecrated in 1986.

"To be consecrated to our Lord Jesus Christ as his spouse is the best gift and the most powerful tool a woman could receive in this world, when called to be an icon of the life to come," said Aguilera, who is a clinical psychologist in Miami.

Virginité is a gift given to God, she explained. "I made a decision for Jesus Christ, and it was a decision of love in the upper level of the theological definition of [the word] decision."

Shalina Stillely made a decision for perpetual virginité when she was 16 and not yet Catholic. Books by Sts. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross opened her heart to the Catholic Church. Twelve years later, she was consecrated.

Maybe because of her own experience, Stillely, an assistant philosophy professor at Conception Seminary College in Conception, Mo., lives out her spiritual motherhood by "praying for others before the Blessed Sacrament and trying to nourish and nurture people in their spiritual lives," she said, which involves "trying to be a good witness, being available to others — time, talent, energy."

The spousal nature of the vocation is one reason that consecrated virginité is not merely about a woman living as a single who has received a special status from the Church, Stegman said. A consecrated virgin's relationship with Christ is a witness to the love he has for every soul, Stegman added: "The consecrated virgin is here to witness on this earth to a reality that is eternal and that is offered to each person."

Consecrated virgins point the Church toward heaven, according to Pope Benedict, who, in his 2008 address to consecrated virgins in Rome, instructed them, "Take care always to radiate the dignity of being a bride of Christ, expressing the newness of Christian existence and the serene expectation of future life. Thus, with your own upright life, you will be stars to guide the world on its journey."

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