

VIRGINAL CHASTITY IN THE CONSECRATED VIRGIN

Thesis by

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to:

The Most Holy Virgin Mary of Nazareth,
Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ,
Queen of Virgins,
whose tender maternal and virginal love
is the font of virginal chastity for all generations

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The question of virginal chastity	1
The fiat of the Blessed Virgin Mary	2
The fiat of the consecrated virgin	4
Preparation of the Human Race for the Gift of Virginitv	6
Virginitv of the Most Holy Trinity	6
Pre-Christian concept of virginitv	7
Christian understanding of virginal chastity	9
Christian Virginitv as a Way of Life	16
Virgins of the early Church	16
Development of a rite of consecration to a life of virginitv	18
Renewal of the rite of consecration to a life of virginitv for women living in the world	22
A most excellent gift – the meaning of consecrated virginitv in today’s Church	23
Virginal Chastity as the Essential Prerequisite for the Consecration of a Virgin	29
Prerequisites stated in the <i>Praenotanda</i> to the Rite of Consecration	29
Virginal chastity: an essential prerequisite for consecration	33
The gift of virginitv	36

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Virginal Chastity in the Consecrated Virgin

Introduction

The question of virginal chastity

The modern Christian, upon first hearing of a vocation in the Catholic Church titled “consecrated virginity,” often does not know what to think. Even if “vocation” is understood as being a lifelong calling from God, and “consecrated” is understood to mean set apart as sacred in the eyes of God, there remains the dilemma of understanding virginity in the context of a vocation, and in the context of consecration. The person may have familiarity with the Blessed Virgin Mary and believe in the virgin birth of Christ; the person may know that Christ himself was virgin, and perhaps be able to recall names of virgin saints such as Agnes, Lucy, Agatha, and even Maria Goretti. At the same time, the person may consider that some religious sisters were not virgins, such as the widow Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, and may therefore begin to speculate about whether or not the word “virgin” is to be taken literally in this vocation of consecrated virginity. And in the context of everyday modern life, the person first hearing of the vocation of consecrated virginity may simply wonder about the meaning of a vocation that is unambiguously identified by a characteristic of sexual behavior – virginity.

The Introduction to the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity provides a most enlightening perspective, as it notes with some enthusiasm that in the rite of consecration, “the Church reveals its love of virginity.”¹ The Introduction goes on to identify virginal chastity as one of the essential prerequisites for the woman desiring consecration, stating that she must have “never married or lived in public or open violation of chastity.”² The key to comprehending why the Church lovingly embraces virginal chastity consecrated to Christ is to be found in the Virgin Mary, whose tender maternal and virginal love is the font of virginal chastity for all generations.

¹ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity* in the Roman Pontifical [Vatican City: Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments Vox Clara Committee, 2012], 3.

² *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 5a.

In fact, in these future generations, it is the state of virginal chastity itself that stands as the essential prerequisite for consecration as a virgin in the Catholic Church, just as the virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Nazareth stood as the essential prerequisite for her *fiat*.

The fiat of the Blessed Virgin Mary

In a homily at the consecration of a virgin, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger made the connection between the Annunciation event and the vocation of consecrated virginity: “The day of the Annunciation of the Lord to the Virgin Mary is the origin of Christian virginity: it is born in the moment of the ‘yes’ of the Virgin to the divine maternity.”³ In his encyclical *Sacra Virginitas*, Pope Pius XII recalled words of the Fathers of the Church, as he, too, traced the vocation of virginity to the Blessed Virgin Mary: Athanasius testified that “virginity owes its origin to Mary,” St. Augustine that “the dignity of virginity began with the Mother of the Lord,” and St. Ambrose spoke of Mary as the “teacher of virginity,” even as he exclaimed, “Oh the richness of the virginity of Mary!”⁴ The examination of the candidate during the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity asks the question, “Are you resolved to persevere to the end of your days in the holy state of virginity?” and the Prayer of Consecration offered by the Bishop during the Rite acknowledges, “Among your many gifts you give to some the grace of virginity.” The one to be consecrated as a virgin has received a grace, the gift of virginity, from her mother’s womb – she was free to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to this grace, but she who is invited to be consecrated as a virgin has received both a sanctifying and an habitual grace to live in virginity throughout her life.⁵ At the moment of her consecration, as with the Blessed Virgin Mary at the moment of the Annunciation, the virgin states her “fiat” and the Church consecrates her as bride of Christ; at that moment the virgin is wed to the Eternal Son in order to bear spiritual offspring for the Church.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, “Gift in the Church and for the Church.” Homily during the celebration of Mass at which the consecration of a virgin was conferred on Dagny Kjaergaard, Rome, Italy, March 25, 1988.

⁴ Pius XII, Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas* (1954), 64-65.

⁵ Magalis Aguilera, “Integral Virginity and the Chastity Required for the Consecrated Virgin – According to the Unchanging Tradition of the Catholic Church,” address at the annual Information Conference on the Vocation of Consecrated Virginity sponsored by the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins, DeWitt, MI, August 1, 2013.

“How can this be, since I have no husband?” asked Mary to the angel who had addressed her as “full of grace.”⁶ Pope Saint John Paul II explained in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* that in greeting Mary not by her name, “Mary,” but by the title, “full of grace,” the angel is indicating a most special blessing bestowed upon this woman. “In the mystery of Christ,” John Paul II explained, “she is present even ‘before the creation of the world,’ as one whom the Father ‘has chosen’ as Mother of his Son in the Incarnation. And, what is more, together with the Father, the Son has chosen her, entrusting her eternally to the Spirit of holiness.”⁷ “How can this be?” she asked, expressing implicitly her vocation to virginity, a virginity confirmed by the angel Gabriel’s response: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.”⁸ Gabriel’s response is clear – it is not by the physical embrace of a man that Mary will bear the child. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit who will come upon Mary’s virginity and overshadow it, that she might bear the Son of God. Gabriel’s words hearken to those of the Prophet Isaiah to Israel, “As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you; and as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall your God rejoice in you.”⁹

Mary’s response of faith, her *fiat*, her “Amen,” was spoken joyfully and without hesitation: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”¹⁰ Raniero Cantalamessa unfolds the nuptial meaning of her words:

The beauty of Mary’s act of faith lies in the fact that it is the nuptial yes of a bride to her bridegroom, uttered in total freedom. Mary is the sign and the first flowering of the nuptials between God and his people, foretold by the prophets. Therefore the prophet’s words are applied to her: ‘I will betroth you to me for ever ... I will betroth you to me in steadfast love’ (Hos. 2:16f). Faith is the wedding ring of these nuptials and God’s corresponding part is faithfulness.¹¹

⁶ Lk. 1:34, 28.

⁷ John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), 8.

⁸ Lk. 1:35.

⁹ Is. 62:5. In Mary Kay Lacke, “Mary of Nazareth, Spouse of the Holy Spirit,” address at the annual Convocation of United States Consecrated Virgins, sponsored by the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins, Mundelein, IL, July 21, 2012.

¹⁰ Lk. 1:38.

¹¹ Raniero Cantalamessa, *Mary, Mirror of the Church*, trans. Frances Lonergan Villa [Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992], 43.

Mary's fiat resounded, permitting this moment to become the fullness of time awaited from all eternity when the one true God would take on a human nature. The Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon eloquently exposed this conception of Jesus: "born of the Father before the ages according to divine nature, but in the last days the same born of the virgin Mary, Mother of God according to human nature."¹² In an address to consecrated virgins, Bishop Demetrio Fernandez explored a striking parallel between the Father and the virgin Mary. Jesus Christ was at once begotten virginally of the Father in his divinity and begotten virginally of Mary in his humanity. Mary conceived Jesus alone – the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit was not some sort of substitution for a man. Rather, Bishop Fernandez taught, the Holy Spirit, who is the Love of God, "overshadowed her and made her fruitful so that she, without the intercourse of a man, could beget and give birth to her Son."¹³

The fiat of the consecrated virgin

The consecration of a virgin parallels this overshadowing of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the moment of her fiat. The consecrated virgin, like Mary, has responded in faith to the call of God and the gift of virginity that has been bestowed on her. In the words of the Prayer of Consecration, "Those who choose chastity have looked upon the face of Christ, its origin and inspiration. They give themselves wholly to Christ, the Son of the Ever-Virgin Mary, and the heavenly Bridegroom of those who in his honor dedicate themselves to lasting virginity."¹⁴ The personal decision to live in virginity is transformed as it is given over to the will of God, explained Cardinal Ratzinger, as it is "offered, abandoned, handed over into the hands of God [so] that virginity becomes complete availability to the Lord."¹⁵ Dr. Magalis Aguilera is a consecrated virgin and clinical psychologist who is often called upon to assist in the discernment of a vocation to consecrated virginity. Dr.

¹² Henry Denzinger *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 148 (prior version is 301).

¹³ Demetrio Fernandez-Gonzalez, "The Christian Foundation of Virginity," address of the Spanish Bishop-Advisor to the Order of Virgins, Rome International Congress-Pilgrimage of Consecrated Virgins, May, 2008.

¹⁴ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, "Gift in the Church and for the Church." Homily during the celebration of Mass at which the consecration of a virgin was conferred on Dagny Kjaergaard, Rome, Italy, March 25, 1988.

Aguilera refers to the state of integral and intact chastity that must be present in the woman desiring consecration as a virgin, for the very reason that the consecrated virgin witnesses to the gift of incorruptibility given by the Eternal Father to Mary of Nazareth, that she might be the virgin mother of His Son.¹⁶

¹⁶ Magalis Aguilera, written response to inquiry from author, February 28, 2013.

Preparation of the Human Race for the Gift of Virginit

Virginit of the Most Holy Trinity

The life you seek to follow has its home in heaven. God himself is its source. It is he, infinitely pure and holy, who gives the grace of virginit. Those to whom he gives it are seen by the Fathers of the Church as images of the eternal and all-holy God. — Homily, Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginit¹⁷

Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Athanasius, Cyprian, John Chrysostom, and Gregory of Nyssa were among the Fathers of the Church who wrote treatises on the virtue of virginit, often inspired, it seems by the lives of virgins themselves. Writing in the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa, brother of the virgin-saint Macrina, explored the Trinitarian roots underlying the “surpassing excellence” of the grace of virginit:

[The grace of virginit] is comprehended in the idea of the Father incorrupt; and here at the outset is a paradox – that virginit is found in Him, who has a Son and yet without passion has begotten Him. It is included too in the nature of this Only-begotten God, who struck the first note of all this moral innocence; it shines forth equally in His pure and passionless generation. Again a paradox; that the Son should be known to us by virginit. It is seen, too, in the inherent and incorruptible purity of the Holy Spirit; for when you have named the pure and incorruptible you have named virginit.¹⁸

Ascribing virginit as a trait to the Most Holy Trinity may at first sound startling and perhaps even inappropriate, as if it might be possible for God Himself to have a sexual nature. And yet, what must be pondered is that it is God Himself who is the Antecedent, and man who is created *Imago Dei*. The Book of Genesis records the familiar words, “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them.”¹⁹ Given the reality of human physicality, procreation has been inextricably linked to this maleness and femaleness that God created. But is it necessarily so? Is it necessary to link physical union between man and woman to procreation, and, for that matter, is it necessary to link, fundamentally, maleness and femaleness to procreation? If the circumincession of the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity is viewed as the

¹⁷ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginit*, 16.

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, “On Virginit,” trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series, Vol. 5, Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893, revised and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2907.htm> [accessed May 16, 2014], 2.

¹⁹ Gen. 5:1-2.

Antecedent for the generation of human life, the paradox described by Saint Gregory of Nyssa is evident: the Trinitarian root for created human generation is virginal, and yet, at the same time, man is intrinsically created a sexual being.

Bishop Fernandez elaborates, “In the eternal generation of the Son, God the Father does not have any collaboration; the Eternal Father virginally begets his Son from all eternity.”²⁰ Thus man, created *Imago Dei*, discovers that the quality of virginity is not in opposition to man, but is an aspect of God in which man may be invited to participate. From eternity, procreation is not inextricably linked to physical union between man and woman, and maleness and femaleness are more profoundly related to fatherhood and motherhood than to physical acts of procreation. Pope Saint John Paul II [pointed](#) to this as he described the Christian virgin in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*: “By freely choosing virginity, women confirm themselves as persons, as beings whom the Creator from the beginning has willed for their own sake.”²¹

Pre-Christian concept of virginity

An argument sometimes raised against the good of virginal chastity is that the state of virginity is contrary to God’s command in Genesis, “be fruitful and multiply.”²² It is interesting to consider that this command of God was given before the fall, at a time when Adam and Eve were presumptively living in virginal chastity, and that it is not possible for a later reader to understand how virginal procreation might have taken place. Saint John Chrysostom points to another perspective on the command as he demonstrates that Scripture also shows that marriage does not always provide children, unless God is willing, and that infertility has even produced children when God has been willing.²³ The fulfillment of the command is not, in other words, solely dependent upon the action of man. But it may be argued that such responses do not directly

²⁰ Demetrio Fernandez-Gonzalez, “The Christian Foundation of Virginity,” address of the Spanish Bishop-Advisor to the Order of Virgins, Rome International Congress-Pilgrimage of Consecrated Virgins, May, 2008.

²¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 20.

²² Gen. 1:28.

²³ John Chrysostom, *On Virginity; Against Remarriage (Studies in Women and Religion, V.9)*, trans. Sally Rieger Shore (USA: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), XV, 1.

address the question: can virginal chastity, specifically chosen as a state in life, actually fulfill the ancient command of procreation? Pope Pius XII quotes Saint Cyprian as he considers the fruitfulness of the Christian virgin: “in [virgins] the glorious fecundity of our mother, the Church, finds expression and she rejoices; the more the number of virgins increases, the greater is this mother’s joy.”²⁴ There is another point that cannot be overlooked: in the Protoevangelium of Genesis, Mary, the new Eve, is already presented as virgin: there is no suggestion of a husband of the woman whose seed would bruise the serpent’s head.²⁵ Thus, the way is prepared: Mary, the new Eve, in her virginity, would become mother of a virgin-Son who would wed a virgin-Bride and bear innumerable children through the waters of Baptism. By the same faith that was shown in her fiat, John Paul II explains in *Redemptoris Mater*, the virgin Mary also discovered and accepted her role of motherhood of the sons and daughters of this Church, the virgin-Bride of her Son.²⁶ Christian virginity assuredly fulfills the ancient command of procreation, as the virgin bears spiritual children not only for an earthly kingdom, but for the eternal Kingdom of God.

Saint Jerome noted that most Old Testament examples of the virtue of continence were found in men: Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, and other prophets, while “Eve still continued to travail with children.” It was not until a virgin conceived, he said, that “the chain of the curse is broken. Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary. And thus the gift of virginity has been bestowed most richly upon women, seeing that it has had its beginning from a woman.”²⁷ Quoting again from the suggested homily of the Rite of Consecration, regarding virginity:

When the fullness of time had come, the almighty Father showed, in the mystery of the Incarnation, his love for this great virtue. In the chaste womb of the

²⁴ Pius XII, Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas* (1954), 31, quoting Saint Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, 3.

²⁵ Cf. Gen. 3: 15 and Stefano Manelli, “The Mystery of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Old Testament” in *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons*, ed. Mark I. Miravalle [USA: Seat of Wisdom Books, 2007], 9.

²⁶ John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), 20.

²⁷ Jerome, “Letter #22 To Eustochium,” trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W. G. Martley. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series, Vol. 6 [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893], Revised and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001022.htm> [accessed May 14, 2014], 21.

Blessed Virgin Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word was made flesh, in a marriage covenant uniting two natures, human and divine.²⁸

In the early Church, and today, the *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity* is reserved for women. Without doubt, a reason for this is that a woman, by her nature, is inclined to maternity, and virginity consecrated to Christ must also be oriented to fecundity, even as the virginity of Mary was divinely oriented to her Son and the sons and daughters of the Church.

The intimacy connected with spousal love is also not lost upon the virgin mother. The human love of bridegroom for bride serves to image the love of Jesus, Bridegroom, for His Virgin-Bride, the Church. *Redemptoris Mater* explains, “If the Church is the sign and instrument of intimate union with God, she is so by reason of her motherhood, because, receiving life from the Spirit, she ‘generates’ sons and daughters of the human race to a new life in Christ.”²⁹ Angelo Cardinal Scola discusses this new generation of life as “a fecundity for the kingdom, which becomes the eschatological sign of the marriage between Christ and the Church; it is a virginal fecundity or nuptiality which is not at all asexual.”³⁰ The Eternal Father has given the gift of virginity to humanity as a particular way to prepare humanity to enter into the intimate and generative love of the Most Holy Trinity.

Christian understanding of virginal chastity

“Be wise: make ready your lamps. Behold, the Bridegroom comes; go out to meet him.”³¹ The Bridegroom comes! The antiphon sung at the calling of candidates during the Rite of Consecration attests to the wedding about to take place, when, in the words of canon law, the virgin is to be “mystically espoused to Christ.”³² Pope Pius XII in *Sacra Virginitas* considers the words of the Fathers about this spiritual marriage: Saint Ambrose simply calls the virgin “married

²⁸ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

²⁹ John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), 38.

³⁰ Angelo Cardinal Scola. *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 98, as quoted in Angelo Cardinal Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle K. Borrás [Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005], 14.

³¹ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 13.

³² *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 604 § 1.

to God” and St. Athanasius refers to them as “spouses of Christ.”³³ It is the state of virginal chastity that characterizes the virgin-bride of Christ, a state that emulates Christ, her Spouse, and was lived by our Blessed Virgin Mother. In response to concerns raised by the disciples about the difficulties of marriage, Jesus offered a precept that, he said, could be received only by those to whom it had been given: “there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.”³⁴ What is it that defines a state of virginal chastity that is able to be consecrated for the sake of the Kingdom of God? Fathers, Saints, Doctors, and Popes of the Church have taught an understanding of virginal chastity involving the physical as well as the spiritual, and emphasizing that in order to truly be Christian, virginity must be freely chosen, for Christ, and for one’s entire life.

While it is true that a spiritual dimension cannot be lacking in authentic Christian virginity, it cannot be ignored that without the bodily dimension, one is no longer speaking of virginity. Saint Thomas Aquinas thus refers to the bodily, physical dimension of virginal chastity as the “formal and complete element in virginity.”³⁵ The Fathers also speak to what is meant by this physical dimension of virginal chastity. “Virginal chastity is purity free from stain,” according to Saint Ambrose, who judged virginity’s author to be “the immaculate Son of God, whose flesh saw no corruption, whose Godhead experienced no infection.”³⁶ Pius XII in *Sacra Virginitas* refers to perfect chastity as a “complete abstinence from marriage and sexual pleasures,”³⁷ Athanasius speaks of the “untainted body” as “the dowry that the bridegroom requires,”³⁸ and Gregory of Nyssa calls the purity of virginity “uncontaminated,” observing that it is by means of this virtue that

³³ Pius XII, Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas* (1954), 16.

³⁴ Mt. 19: 12.

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q 152, A 3 Ad 3.

³⁶ Ambrose, “Concerning Virgins, To Marcellina, His Sister,” in *The Early Church Fathers and Other Works*, trans. H. de Romestin, with assistance of E. deRomestin, and H.T.F. Duckworth, originally published by Wm . B. Eerdmans, Scotland, 1867. Ed. Eternal Word Television Network <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PATRISTC/ambrvirg.HTM> [accessed February 13, 2006], Book I, § 21.

³⁷ Pius XII, Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas* (1954), 6.

³⁸ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Pseudo-Athanasius On Virginity*, trans. David Brakke, ed. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Editum Consilio Universitatis Catholicae Americae [Louvain: In Aedibus Peeters, 2002], 10.

virgins are brought into relationship with “the Holy and Blameless One.”³⁹ In a letter to his sister, the virgin Florentina, Bishop Saint Leandro of Sevilla proffered that while the Apostle Paul spoke of the incorruptibility of the body after the resurrection of the flesh, “You, however, have lived some of the greatness of incorruptibility, you enjoy in this life part of the glory. You have received here on earth the gift of incorruptibility, a grace for which many yearn.”⁴⁰

St. Thomas provides precise scholastic definitions of matters related to virginal chastity in questions 151 to 154 of the *Summa Theologica*. “Chastity,” he explains, properly refers to “a special virtue having a special matter, namely the concupiscences relating to venereal pleasures,”⁴¹ and takes its name “from the fact that reason ‘chastises’ concupiscence.”⁴² St. Thomas holds that “chastity does indeed reside in the soul as its subject, though its matter is in the body,” and he therefore concurs with Augustine in determining that the woman who has been raped, “so long as her mind holds to its purpose, whereby she has merited to be holy even in body, not even the violence of another’s lust can deprive her body of its holiness, which is safeguarded by her persevering continency.”⁴³ In Question 152, Aquinas turns his discussion specifically to virginal chastity. “Virginitas,” takes its name, Aquinas surmises,

from ‘viror’ (freshness), and just as a thing is described as fresh and retaining its freshness, so long as it is not parched by excessive heat, so too, virginitas denotes that the person possessed thereof is unseared by the heat of concupiscence which is experienced in achieving the greatest bodily pleasure which is that of sexual intercourse. Hence, Ambrose says that ‘virginal chastity is integrity free of pollution.’⁴⁴

Aquinas considers three aspects of venereal pleasures: 1) accidental to the moral act: the violation of the body’s seal of virginitas; 2) the matter of the moral act: the integrity of the flesh and freedom from venereal experience; and 3) the form and complement of the moral act: the purpose of

³⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginitas*, 1.

⁴⁰ Leandro of Sevilla, quoted by Francisco de B. Vizmanos, *Las vírgenes cristianas de la Iglesia primitiva* [Madrid, Spain: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2009], 927.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q 151, A2.

⁴² Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q 151, A1.

⁴³ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q 151, A1, Ad 2.

⁴⁴ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q 152, A1.

attaining the pleasure.⁴⁵ Aquinas concludes that while the material element in virginal chastity is “integrity of the flesh free of all experience of venereal pleasure,” that material element is rendered virtuous only if the purpose of perpetually abstaining is “in order to have leisure for Divine things.”⁴⁶

A corollary may be drawn from Aquinas’ teaching on the matter of the moral act of virginal chastity – a corollary that is sometimes consternating to a modern Christian: St. Thomas concurs with St. Jerome’s assessment that “other things God can do, but He cannot restore the virgin after her downfall.”⁴⁷ Aquinas explains that while penance can recover virtue as regards what is formal, it cannot change what is material. Thus, “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.”⁴⁸ St. Augustine similarly warns the virgins, “See how that Lamb walks on the path of virginity! How will those who have lost this follow him, when it cannot be regained? Follow him by holding steadfast to your ardent vow. See to it, while you can, that you do not lose the gift of virginity; you can do nothing to recover it afterward.”⁴⁹

The purpose for a life of virginal chastity, summarized by Jesus as “for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven,” is elucidated by St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians as he commends the virgin as being free from anxiety about worldly affairs in order to give undivided attention to the Lord.⁵⁰ The Introduction to the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity explains: “Those who consecrate their chastity under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit do so for the sake of more fervent love of Christ and of greater freedom in the service of their brothers and sisters.”⁵¹ As well, centuries of teaching by the Fathers and apologists for Christian virginity expound upon the

⁴⁵ Cf. Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q 152, A1.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q 152, A3, Ad 3.

⁴⁷ Jerome, *Letter #22 to Eustochium*, 5.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q 152, A3, Ad 3.

⁴⁹ Augustine, “Holy Virginity,” in *The Works of St. Augustine – a Translation for the 21st Century, Volume 9, Marriage and Virginity*, trans. Ray Kearney, ed. John E. Rotelle (New York: New City Press, 1999), 29.

⁵⁰ Cf. 1 Cor. 7: 34-35.

⁵¹ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 2.

purpose of living virginity on earth. St. Ambrose paints the picture in his letter to his sister, the virgin Marcellina: “Virginity has brought from heaven that which it may imitate on earth. And not unfittingly has she sought her manner of life from heaven, who has found for herself a Spouse in heaven. She, passing beyond the clouds, air, angels, and stars, has found the Word of God in the very bosom of the Father, and has drawn Him into herself with her whole heart.”⁵²

Pius XII in *Sacra Virginitas* sets forth the primary purpose of a virginal life: “to aim only at the divine, to turn thereto the whole mind and soul; to want to please God in everything, to think of Him continually, to consecrate body and soul completely to him.”⁵³ As well, the admonitions of Saint Jerome in letters to the virgins Eustochium and Demetrias are informative as to the manner of life expected of Christian virgins – they are to watch carefully the company they keep, be attentive to prayer and fasting, live, eat, and drink frugally, be careful, and keep occupied with good works.⁵⁴ In his biblical study of virginity, Lucien Legrand articulates the purpose of Christian virginity directly in terms of the virgin’s mystical betrothal to Christ, showing that the virgin’s duties to Christ are analogous to the duties of a wife to her husband. The virgin’s desire to please the Lord, in the words of Legrand, “does not mean simply to comfort and console the Heart of Jesus. The virgin belongs to Christ as the wife belongs to her husband. To please the Lord, the virgin must be totally dedicated to him and adopt his viewpoint in everything.”⁵⁵

Thus, while the matter of virginal chastity is found in its bodily, physical aspect, the Fathers teach that the virtue of virginal chastity is only found if both soul and body are holy. Saint Athanasius asks rhetorically, “For of what use is it that the body be kept in purity but the soul be full of the marks of iniquity and the thoughts of a heart far removed from God?”⁵⁶ Likewise, in order to be virtuous, the Fathers teach that virginal chastity must be deliberately and freely chosen

⁵² Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins, To Marcellina, His Sister*, Book I, § 11.

⁵³ Pius XII, Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas* (1954), 15.

⁵⁴ Cf. Jerome, *Letter #22 to Eustochium*, 17,24. *Letter #133 to Demetrias*, 4,6,7,10 to 18.

⁵⁵ Lucien Legrand, *The Biblical Doctrine of Virginity* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 102.

⁵⁶ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Pseudo-Athanasius On Virginity*, 14.

and committed to, for one's entire life. The words of St. Augustine ring clear, "What we extol in virgins is not that they are virgins, but that they are virgins consecrated in holy chastity to God."⁵⁷ Pius XII further explains that when Jesus likens the renunciation of sexual pleasure to those who are forced to do so by nature or the violence of men, his own words reveal virginal chastity as a freely chosen, lifelong resolution.⁵⁸ If a woman simply happens to remain single or never considers the possibility of marriage, or if she chooses continence because she disdains marriage, or even if she decides on the state of celibacy for a noble reason other than God, she is not living virginal chastity as a Christian virtue.⁵⁹ It is the firm decision to permanently refrain from sexual union and enjoyment for the sake of belonging solely to God that gives virtue to virginity.⁶⁰

In this brief survey of the understanding of virginal chastity in the economy of salvation, as conveyed by the teaching of the Church and her Fathers, it is important to return to a consideration of that which is the ultimate good of a life of consecrated virginity, and the reason for the formation of the solemn rite of consecration. The Praenotanda to the Rite opens by explaining that the virgin is consecrated "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." Virgins who keep their lamps lit for the Bridegroom welcome him and guide others to his heavenly banquet...but there are also the foolish virgins. St. Cyprian warned of the grave scandal caused by immodest and unfaithful virgins who injure "the honor and modesty of continency,"⁶¹ and St. Jerome complained of the "plague of the agapetae"⁶² – the practice of consecrated virgins closely associated with laymen. The Council of Ancyra, in 314, in fact, needed to move to forbid the

⁵⁷ Augustine, *Holy Virginity*, 8.

⁵⁸ Pius XII, Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas* (1954), 10–11.

⁵⁹ Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *In Defence of Purity: An Analysis of the Catholic Ideals of Purity and Virginity*, trans. Reinheit Und Jungfräulichkeit (London: Sheed & Ward, 1945), 128-132.

⁶⁰ Cf. Josef Pieper, "Virginity," in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, trans. Daniel F. Coogan (USA: University of Notre Dame, 1966), 176-177.

⁶¹ Cyprian of Carthage, "On the Dress of Virgins." trans. Ernest Wallis, in *The Early Church Fathers and Other Works* originally published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. and in English in Edinburgh, Scotland beginning in 1867. Digital version from The Electronic Bible Society, Dallas, Texas. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PATRISTC/ANF5-10.TXT> [accessed May 13, 2014], 20.

⁶² Jerome, *Letter #22 to Eustochium*, 14.

practice of consecrated virgins living with men as sisters.⁶³ It is the faithful virginal life of the wise virgin that stands as an eschatological image of the world to come, a life lived without fear of death, because death brings the fullness of union with the Spouse.⁶⁴ With St. John Chrysostom, the wise virgin can say to her brothers and sisters in faith, “Let me give you a glimpse of the Bridegroom’s exceeding wealth and of the ineffable kindness which He shows to His bride.”⁶⁵

⁶³ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Agapetae.” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/0102a.htm> [accessed May 15,2014].

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 3.

⁶⁵ John Chrysostom, “The First Instruction,” in *Ancient Christian Writers: Baptismal Instructions* [USA: Paulist Press, 1963], 23-24.

Christian Virginity as a Way of Life

Virgins of the early Church

Those who choose chastity have looked upon the face of Christ,
its origin and inspiration.

They give themselves wholly to Christ,

The Son of the ever-Virgin Mary,

And the heavenly Bridegroom of those

Who in his honor dedicate themselves to lasting virginity. – Prayer of Consecration to a Life of Virginity⁶⁶

The Hebrew people of the Old Testament, though they had a moral code enshrined in the law and were the people of the covenant, did not understand the good of a virginal life, or view virginity as virtuous. The story of Jephthah's daughter is a poignant example – she accepted the fate of death allotted to her by her father's oath, but she requested two months to go with her companions to the mountains "to bewail her virginity."⁶⁷ It was a shame for her to die a virgin, and this shame was understood culturally, for it became a yearly custom that the daughters of Israel would go to lament the daughter of Jephthah.⁶⁸ Fr. Francisco de B. Vizmanos, in his study on the history of the virgins of the early Church, comments that it was not until the revelation of Jesus that a life of virginal chastity, lived for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven, came to be seen as virtuous. As Vizmanos documents, the life of virginal chastity dedicated to Christ caught on quickly, evidenced even in apostolic times. For example, in Caesaria of Palestine, the deacon Philip had four virgin daughters whose decision to live in virginity made a lasting impression on Bishop Papias of Hierapolis.⁶⁹

Among the virgins of the apostolic Church, a most notable example was Thecla, acclaimed among Christians and a subject of the popular *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. St. Ambrose wrote a beautiful passage about her virginity, saying that after being condemned to death for avoiding nuptial intercourse, she "changed even the disposition of wild beasts by their reverence for

⁶⁶ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

⁶⁷ Judges 11:38.

⁶⁸ Judges 11:40.

⁶⁹ Cf. Acts 21:9 and Francisco de B. Vizmanos, *Las vírgenes cristianas de la Iglesia primitiva* Vizmanos, 47.

virginity. For being made ready for the wild beasts, when avoiding the gaze of men, she offered her vital parts to a fierce lion, caused those who had turned away their immodest looks to turn them back modestly.”⁷⁰

Ambrose addressed his treatise on virginity to his older sister Marcelina, who had been consecrated twenty-five years earlier, in the year 352 AD, by Pope Liberius in the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome. Besides Thecla, Ambrose also commends to Marcelina the example of a virgin in Antioch who was sent to a brothel as her punishment; his words convey a fatherly, pastoral concern for the virgins who may be reading his words: “Close your ears, ye virgins! The virgin of God is taken to a house of shame. But uncloset your ears, ye virgins. The virgin of Christ can be exposed to shame, but cannot be contaminated.”⁷¹ Ambrose wrote at a time when the martyrdoms and persecutions of Christians were fresh in mind, and his examples of virgins began with acclamations of that most famous virgin-martyr, Saint Agnes, on whose birthday he was writing the treatise. Even today, the Breviary recalls his words concerning Agnes on her January 21 Feast Day: “She would not as a bride so hasten to the couch, as being a virgin she joyfully went to the place of punishment with hurrying step, her head not adorned with plaited hair, but with Christ.”⁷² The second to fourth centuries witnessed a flourishing of consecrated virgins throughout the Christian Church, virgins who lived in the world, remained with their families, and lived ordinary, albeit heroic lives characterized by joy, austerity, prayer, and acts of charity in the midst of a pagan community.⁷³

The lives of the virgin martyrs have inspired generations of Catholics - besides Agnes, the names of Agatha, Lucy, and Cecilia are recalled in the Canon of the Mass. In his recent work on the virgin martyrs, Father Michael Fuller notes that there are three major aspects considered in the

⁷⁰ Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins, To Marcellina, His Sister*, Book II, § 19.

⁷¹ Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins, To Marcellina, His Sister*, Book II, § 26.

⁷² Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins, To Marcellina, His Sister*, Book I, § 8.

⁷³ Francisco de B. Vizmanos, *Las vírgenes cristianas de la Iglesia primitiva*, 55.

theology of virginity: “first, virginity implied the achievement of the virtue of purity; second, virgins were understood as being the brides of Christ; and third, virginity was seen as the new martyrdom.”⁷⁴ The three aspects are decidedly intertwined, for those who choose the life of virginity for Christ have chosen to give the most intimate gift of themselves to Christ alone, rather than to a human spouse. In defending their virginity from would be suitors, each of the virgin martyrs can be found to cry out words likened to those of Saint Agnes, “I am already pledged to another!”⁷⁵ Their cries are not made in order to defend virginity for its own sake, and certainly not to disparage human marriage, but to raise attention to the Bridegroom who always solicits the faithfulness of his virgin Bride, the Church. It is this that the virgins and virgin martyrs teach the people of God about living as the Bride of so great a Bridegroom: “Those who choose chastity have looked upon the face of Christ, its origin and inspiration.”⁷⁶

Development of a rite of consecration to a life of virginity

Above all, St. Ambrose commends the virgin reader of his treatise to imitate the pattern of life of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, in her most perfect example of virginal modesty, faith, and devotion, in anticipation of the day when this Blessed Virgin will lead choirs of virgins to the Lord. “Oh!” St. Ambrose exclaims, “How many virgins shall she meet, how many shall she embrace and bring to the Lord, and say: ‘She has been faithful to her espousal, to my Son; she has kept her bridal couch with spotless modesty.’”⁷⁷ In order to seal the spousal bond between the virgin and Christ, the Son of the ever-Virgin Mary, a solemn rite of consecration developed in the Church. The praenotanda to the current Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity opens with a summary of that which led to the establishment of this sacred ritual:

The custom of consecrating women to a life of virginity flourished even in the early Church. It led to the formation of a solemn rite constituting the candidate a sacred person, a surpassing sign of the Church’s love for Christ, and an

⁷⁴ Michael J.K. Fuller, *The Virgin Martyrs: A Hagiographical and Mystagogical Interpretation* (USA: Hillenbrand Books, 2011), 36.

⁷⁵ Michael J.K. Fuller, *The Virgin Martyrs: A Hagiographical and Mystagogical Interpretation*, 62.

⁷⁶ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

⁷⁷ Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins, To Marcellina, His Sister*, Book II, § 16.

eschatological image of the world to come and the glory of the heavenly Bride of Christ. In the rite of consecration the Church reveals its love of virginity, begs God's grace on those who are consecrated, and prays with fervor for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁸

It appears that since apostolic times there has been some sort of a vow marking the commitment of a woman to live in lifelong virginity for the Kingdom of Heaven. The writing of Tertullian indicates the existence of a recognized vow of virginity, which, although not solemnly received by the Church, did have a public character.⁷⁹ Tertullian referred to virgins espoused to Christ who were highly respected by the priests, bishops, and faithful, for their daily lives of modesty and purity. Also in the third century, St. Cyprian instructed the virgins who had vowed and dedicated their virginity to Christ "in the flesh as in the spirit,"⁸⁰ even warning them that a virgin's unfaithfulness is adulterous not to any husband, but to Christ.⁸¹ Writing in the fourth century, St. Ambrose commented that virgins from Placentia, Bononia, and Maruitania had come to him in Milan in order "to receive the veil," a reference to the public rite of consecration, during which the veil was conferred as a traditional sign of espousal to Christ.⁸²

Book III of the treatise of St. Ambrose on virginity is significant for its detailed reference to the words of Pope Liberius to Marcellina on the day of her consecration, Christmas Day, 352 A.D. Pius XII in *Sacra Virginitas* later wrote that it is clear from the words of the Doctor of Milan that the rite of consecration in the fourth century was very similar to that which is used today.⁸³ Expressing the spousal nature of the consecration of virginity, Pope Liberius said to Marcellina:

You, my daughter, have desired a good espousal. You see how great a crowd has come together for the birthday of your Spouse, and none has gone away without food. This is He, Who, when invited to the marriage feast, changed water into wine. He, too, will confer the pure sacrament of virginity on you

⁷⁸ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 1.

⁷⁹ Francisco de B. Vizmanos, *Las vírgenes cristianas de la Iglesia primitiva*, 88.

⁸⁰ Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Dress of Virgins*, 4.

⁸¹ Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Dress of Virgins*, 20.

⁸² Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins, To Marcellina, His Sister*, Book I, § 57.

⁸³ Pius XII, Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas* (1954), 17

who before were subject to the vile elements of material nature...And now He has called many to your espousal, but it is not now barley bread, but the Body from heaven which is supplied.⁸⁴

No ancient ritual of consecration, or rite of veiling, is extant, but the prayers used during the Rite of Consecration of Virgins do exist in ancient texts, the earliest known edition of which is the Leonian Sacramentary, generally attributed to Pope Leo the Great, 440-461.⁸⁵ The solemn prayer of consecration of virgins found in the Leonian Sacramentary is often referred to by its first words, “Loving Father, chaste bodies are your temple; you delight in sinless hearts” (*Deus, castorum corporum benignus habitator, et incorruptarum, deus amator animarum*). The prayer of consecration found in the eighth century Gelasian Sacramentary is the same as that in the Leonian, except that it omits a brief and touching final segment alluding to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. The prayer of consecration of virgins revised in 1970 for the Roman Pontifical is nearly identical to that found in the Gelasian (and Leonian) Sacramentaries. It is a long prayer, and in fact is longer than the prayers of ordination for bishops, priests, and deacons.

The prayer of consecration of virgins mirrors the vocation of consecrated virginity. It begins by setting the foundation for a life of chastity: the restoration of human nature in Christ that “made it possible for mortal people to reflect the life of Angels.”⁸⁶ Next is the petition asking that the Lord look with favor upon his handmaids, as “they place in your hands their resolve to live in chastity. You prompt them in this, their intention; now they give you their hearts.” A few lines later, the prayer refers to the grace of virginity as being among the gifts that are given to some. The prayer is clear that this vocation of consecrated virginity is based upon a grace that has been given to the virgin, has been received by her, and has prompted her to now give back to the Lord her heart. It is significant that the candidate does not make a vow of chastity during the rite.

⁸⁴ Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins, To Marcellina, His Sister*, Book III, § 1.

⁸⁵ Charles Lett Feltoe, ed. *Sacramentarium Leonianum with introduction, notes, and three photographs* (Cambridge: University Press, 1896, paperback edition 2013). Reverend Feltoe documents the history of the *Sacramentarium Leonianum*, concluding that the text is most likely a collection of texts compiled in the seventh century, although “a large quantity of the matter introduced is of an earlier date,” xv.

⁸⁶ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

Rather, she offers her *propositum*, that is, her resolution, to continue to live in this grace of virginity that she has received as a gift from God. In return, she gives her heart, the very gift of herself, to her Spouse.

The ancient prayer of consecration to a life of virginity presents the spousal nature of a vocation to virginity as it explicitly honors marriage. The prayer asserts that while God's first blessing still remains upon the holy union of marriage, his "loving wisdom chooses those who make sacrifice of marriage for the sake of the love of which it is the sign."⁸⁷ She who lives virginal chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven is engaged in a spousal union of love with Christ. Bishop Fernandez notes that while Christ gives himself as Spouse through another person in the sacrament of matrimony, he gives himself directly as Spouse to the consecrated virgin. There is no sacrament of virginity; a sacrament is not necessary because the union is not mediated through any earthly sign.⁸⁸ In the words of Bishop Fernandez, "Jesus Christ the Spouse wants to unite Himself directly, immediately, explicitly, and totally when someone is called to virginity; and for that there is no sacrament, because the union is direct."⁸⁹ It is this union that demonstrates the love of which human marriage is the sign.

The prayer of consecration continues with a series of invocations addressed to God, seeking his help that nothing may "tarnish the glory of perfect virginity, or the vocation of purity which is shared by those who are married."⁹⁰ The invocations call for all that the virgin would most need and desire from her Divine Spouse as she makes her way through her earthly life: "Be their comfort in sorrow, their wisdom in perplexity, their protection in the midst of injustice, their patience in adversity, their riches in poverty, their food in fasting, their remedy in time of

⁸⁷ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

⁸⁸ Cf. Lucien Legrand, *The Biblical Doctrine of Virginity*, 106.

⁸⁹ Demetrio Fernandez-Gonzalez, "The Christian Foundation of Virginity," address of the Spanish Bishop-Advisor to the Order of Virgins, Rome International Congress-Pilgrimage of Consecrated Virgins, May, 2008.

⁹⁰ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

sickness.”⁹¹ This prayer is as meaningful to the virgins of the early Church as it is to the virgins of today’s Church.

Renewal of the rite of consecration to a life of virginity for women living in the world

Communal life for women developed as a result of the fervor of the Christian virgins in the early Church, and the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity became associated more and more with those living a communal way of life. By about the tenth century, the practice of consecrating women who would remain living in the world fell into disuse, so that after the eleventh century, it was rare to find a Christian virgin living in the world.⁹² In 1868 there was a revival of use of the rite for the consecration of virgins, but only within monasteries. Not until the early twentieth century did laywomen, including Anne Leflaive, begin again to be discreetly consecrated using the ancient rite, but in 1927 Pope Pius XI confirmed a decision of the Congregation for Religious denying use of the rite of consecration of virgins to women living in the world.⁹³ A sentence in the 1963 document *Sacrosanctum concilium* of the Second Vatican Council called simply for a revision of the rite of consecration of virgins in the Roman Pontifical.⁹⁴ When the revised Rite of Consecration was promulgated on May 31, 1970, it unexpectedly, and happily, included the option for celebration of the rite either for nuns or for women living in the world, ushering in a revival of the ancient Order of Virgins – those living the vocation of consecrated virginity in the world. Since that time thousands of women, from all parts of the world, have been consecrated according to the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity for a Woman Living in the World, receiving the solemn consecration at the hands of their diocesan bishops.

For centuries, in fact for more than a millennium, very few women who dedicated their chastity to Christ for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven had lived as brides of Christ *in the world*,

⁹¹ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

⁹² Metz, René Metz, *La Consécration des Vierges Hier, aujourd’hui, demain* [Paris, France: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2001], 121.

⁹³ Marcel Metzger, “Historical Aspects of the Consecration of Virgins and Its Rebirth in the Twentieth Century,” address at the Rome 2008 International Congress-Pilgrimage of Consecrated Virgins, Rome, Italy, May, 2008.

⁹⁴ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 80.

following the example of the early consecrated virgins and virgin martyrs. The Church had grown familiar with the ways of monastic life, contemplative institutes, and a variety of apostolic institutes for women religious, but this form of consecrated virginity would prove to be quite different: the Church opening her doors once again to a form of consecrated life lived individually, in the world, under the direction of the diocesan Bishop. Unlike the established forms of consecrated life, with time-honored rules of life, foundresses and corporate apostolates, this new – and yet most ancient – form of life would recall in a somewhat dramatic way the essence of consecrated life. Even its title, “consecrated virginity,” would be striking to modern ears, as would the rite of consecration, with its blatant and beautiful bridal imagery including the official insignia of ring and veil, and the candles, white dress, and attendants, as well as its ritual elements not unlike those found in an ordination – the calling, *propositum*, litany of the saints, prostration, and prayer of consecration at the hand of the Bishop. The expression *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing) pertains most aptly to the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in today’s Church: one comes to understand the meaning of the life through the rite of consecration itself, a rite as relevant and applicable to twenty-first century virgins as to the virgins of the early Church, for whom the Church first composed the words and ritual.

A most excellent gift – the meaning of consecrated virginity in today’s Church

The 1970 Decree promulgating the revised Rite of Consecration refers to consecrated virginity as being “among the most excellent gifts bequeathed by Our Lord to his Bride, the Church.” The words reflect not only those of the Fathers of the Church but also of *Lumen Gentium* which described as “towering among the counsels of the Lord” that “precious gift of divine grace given to some by the Father to devote themselves to God alone more easily with an

undivided heart in virginity or celibacy.”⁹⁵ Similarly, the 1986 Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Saint John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, echoes the words of the *Praenotanda* to the Rite of Consecration in saying that consecrated virginity is “a surpassing sign of the Church’s love for Christ and an 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.”⁹⁶

But why is this so? Why, after so much time had passed, did Pope Paul VI decide to re-open the rite of consecration to virgins living in the world, at this moment in time of implementation of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council? In asking the question, is the answer perhaps apparent? Many of the faithful, including many priests, do not recognize the close connection between this newly restored virginal vocation, lived in the world, and the Second Vatican Council, called by Pope Saint John XXIII to respond precisely to the question of “bringing the perennial life-giving energies of the Gospel to the modern world.”⁹⁷ Pope Saint John Paul II confirmed the place of this vocation of virginal chastity in the heart and structure of the Church by specific inclusion in the 1983 Code of Canon Law,⁹⁸ in the 1988 document *Pastor Bonus*⁹⁹ and in the 2004 directory *Apostolorum Successores*.¹⁰⁰ The popes of the Second Vatican Council saw a clear connection, as if perhaps this virginal vocation lived in the world might play a most significant role in carrying out the Council’s mission to bring the Gospel message anew into the world. It makes sense – for the same reason that the Council Fathers, by a nearly unanimous vote in 1964, chose to incorporate the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary into the core of the Dogmatic

⁹⁵ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

⁹⁶ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, trans. Vatican [USA:Daughters of St. Paul,1996], 7.

⁹⁷ John XXIII, Convoking of Second Vatican Council *Humanae salutis*, 1959 <http://conciliaria.com/2011/12/john-xxiii-convokes-council> [accessed July 5, 2014].

⁹⁸ *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 604 states: “§ 1. Similar to these forms of consecrated life is the order of virgins who, expressing the holy resolution of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God by the Diocesan Bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, are mystically betrothed to Christ, the Son of God, and are dedicated to the service of the Church. § 2. In order to observe their own resolution more faithfully and to perform by mutual assistance service to the Church in harmony with their proper state, virgins can be associated together.”

⁹⁹ John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, Art. 110: “The Congregation [for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life] has competence also regarding eremitical life, the order of virgins and their associations as well as other forms of consecrated life.”

¹⁰⁰ Congregation for Bishops, *Apostolorum Successores*, 2004 “Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops,” 104: “The Bishop should show particular concern for the order of virgins, who are dedicated to the service of the Church, entrusted to the Bishop’s pastoral care and consecrated to God at his hands.”

Constitution on the Church, rather than issuing a separate document on our Mother.¹⁰¹ In the words of *Lumen Gentium* introducing the role of our Virgin Mother in the modern Church:

Wishing in his supreme goodness and wisdom to effect the redemption of the world, ‘when the fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman ... that we might receive the adoption of sons.’ ‘He for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnated by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary.’ This divine mystery of salvation is revealed to us and continued in the Church, which the Lord established as his body.¹⁰²

The vocation of consecrated virginity belongs to the fullness of time that is present in this generation as it makes present most distinctly the gift of virginity first given to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary.

There is something remarkable here – the gift of virginity belongs to the fullness of time that came with the Incarnation! The virginal gift is not static; it is part of the plenitude, the fullness, of time that is continued in the Church and offered as a solution to each generation. Since the beginning the devil has been active in diverting the plan of God, particularly in the area of sexuality, and yet Christ loves the Virgin Church as his bride and “he fills the Church, which is his body and his fullness, with his divine gifts.”¹⁰³ The fullness of Christ, born of the virgin Mary, is a virginal fullness, and the gift of virginity is an essential part of the restoration of man in each generation. How much more is the witness and gift of virginity needed in the current age, when the devil has so deceived man that even fundamental laws of nature are questioned. Thus it was that into the midst of today’s sexually aberrant world, in 1970, the Holy Spirit led the Church to restore a vocation of virginity lived in the midst of the world, that it might more fully communicate the Gospel message in the heart of that world. “Loving Father,” begins the Prayer of Consecration, “chaste bodies are your temple; you delight in sinless hearts. Our nature was corrupted when the devil deceived our first parents, but you have restored it in Christ. He is your Word, through

¹⁰¹ Pontifical Universidad de Salamanca, *Constitucion Dogmatica Sobre La Iglesia, Introduccion Historica* in the “Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos” 4th ed. [Madrid: La Editorial Catolica, S.A., 1966], 30.

¹⁰² Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 53.

¹⁰³ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 7.

whom all things were made. He has made our nature whole again, and made it possible for mortal people to reflect the lives of Angels.”

Gaudium et Spes begins by acknowledging that the Second Vatican Council desires to address not only the Church, but also to offer to the whole of humanity clarifications of the problems facing the world, in light of the Gospel.¹⁰⁴ It is not a mere coincidence that the restoration of a virginal vocation lived in the world corresponded in time with this offer to address the serious challenges of the modern world. In fact, the vocation of consecrated virginity offers a lively witness to the solutions offered by the Church as she interpreted the signs of the times, as related in *Gaudium et Spes*: To a world in need of the understanding that man by nature was created in the image of God,¹⁰⁵ the virgin’s very choice of a life of virginity confirms her personhood as a being “whom the Creator from the beginning has willed for their own sake.”¹⁰⁶ To a world in need of wisdom to reach realities that cannot be observed by the senses,¹⁰⁷ the virgin witnesses to faith in an unseen Bridegroom. To a world in which blind choice often prevails over a correctly formed conscience,¹⁰⁸ the virgin’s life seeks to be one of holiness of action and purity of heart.¹⁰⁹ To a world that will find true freedom only as it learns to seek to freely choose the good,¹¹⁰ the virgin witnesses to the freedom of a choice motivated purely by love for Christ. To a world tormented by a dread of death, the virgin’s life fosters faith in a life beyond that of this earthly world.¹¹¹ To an atheistic world that “does not at all perceive, or else explicitly reject[s], [an] intimate and vital bond of God,”¹¹² the virgin’s unique witness – a witness only she can give – is to the love of God as Husband.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 2-3.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 12.

¹⁰⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 20.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 15.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 16.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 17.

¹¹¹ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 18.

¹¹² Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

Lest this eschatological witness still appear disconnected from the ordinary life of members of the Church militant, one is reminded again that this consecration to a life of virginity is bestowed precisely upon a woman living in the world. In 1954 Pope Pius XII anticipated the “new flowering”¹¹³ of virginity as a precious gift in the Church, when he wrote that “virgins make tangible, as it were, the perfect virginity of their mother, the Church, and the sanctity of her intimate union with Christ...It is a profound joy that virgins should be the marvelous sign of its sanctity and fecundity.”¹¹⁴ Living in the world as bride of Christ, it is thus the role of the consecrated virgin to actualize the fruitfulness of the nuptial bond between the Church and Christ. In his 1995 address to consecrated virgins gathered in Rome, Pope Saint John Paul II put flesh on the meaning of virginal motherhood:

According to the teaching of the Fathers in receiving from the Lord ‘the consecration of virginity,’ virgins become a visible sign of the virginity of the Church, the instrument of its fruitfulness and witness of its fidelity to Christ. ... It is also the task of virgins to become an active hand of the generosity of the local church, the voice of its prayer and expression of its mercy, and a help for its poor, a consolation for its afflicted sons and daughters, and a support for orphans and widows. We could say that at the time of the Fathers, the *pietas* and *caritas* of the Church were expressed to a great part through the heart and hands of consecrated virgins.¹¹⁵

In a similar way, Pope Benedict XVI in his address to consecrated virgins in 2008 related the giving of the Liturgy of the Hours during the Rite of Consecration to spiritual motherhood: “May you open yourself in your dialogue with God to a dialogue with all creatures, for whom you will find you are mothers, mothers of the children of God.”

How significant it is that the vocation of virginity lived in the world has been restored at a moment in history when society is entrenched in sexual deviation, with little value placed on the merits of marriage or virginity. The consecrated virgin bride of Christ images the Bride whose

¹¹³ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 7.

¹¹⁴ Pius XII, Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas* (1954), 30.

¹¹⁵ John Paul II, “May Christ Be Your Total and Exclusive Love,” address of Pope John Paul II to consecrated virgins, June 2, 1995, in the English Weekly Edition of *L’Osservatore Romano*, n. 24, June 14, 1995.

role is expressed keenly in *Gaudium et Spes*: “The Church, at once ‘a visible organization and a spiritual community,’ travels the same journey as all mankind and shares the same earthly lot with the world: it is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God.”¹¹⁶ This vocation of consecrated virginity is clearly a part of the solution offered by *Gaudium et Spes* to a mankind whose nature was restored to incorruptibility in the fullness of time, through the fiat of the Virgin, and yet who continues to travail in a world deviated by the devil from the plan of God. As the suggested homily in the Rite of Consecration recalls, it was when the fullness of time had come that “the almighty Father showed, in the mystery of the Incarnation, his love for this great virtue [virginity]. In the chaste womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word was made flesh, in a marriage covenant uniting two natures, human and divine.”¹¹⁷ The vocation of consecrated virginity belongs to the fullness of time of generations of the Second Vatican Council.

¹¹⁶ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 40 quoting *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

¹¹⁷ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 16.

Virginal Chastity as the Essential Prerequisite for the Consecration of a Virgin

Prerequisites stated in the *Praenotanda* to the Rite of Consecration

The *Praenotanda* to the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity state the requirements for those who may be consecrated. In the case of women living in the world:

- a) that they have never married or lived in public or open violation of chastity;
- b) that by their age, prudence, and universally approved character they give assurance of perseverance in a life of chastity dedicated to the service of the Church and of their neighbor;
- c) that they be admitted to this consecration by the Bishop who is the Ordinary of the place.¹¹⁸

The first requirement, that the woman has “never married or lived in public or open violation of chastity,” is the same for women living in the world and for those seeking consecration as professed nuns. The requirement of “never married” is not frequently questioned, although occasionally it is asked if a woman whose marriage has been annulled or never consummated might be eligible for the consecration of virgins.¹¹⁹ The requirement of never having “lived in public or open violation of chastity” (*neque publice seu manifeste in statu castitatis contrario vixerunt*) is the requirement more frequently called into question among those seeking consecration. A woman may raise the question of so-called “second virginity” or may ask what violations of chastity constitute impediments to consecration, or may wonder the meaning of a “public or open” violation of chastity.

As he discerns whether or not to consecrate a particular woman, a bishop considers the testimony offered by a woman’s life in light of the Church’s reason for reinstating the vocation of virginity lived in the world: the Church loves virginity and desires that consecrated virgins witness in the world to the Church’s love for her Bridegroom, a witness of virginity that flows forth as crystal clear waters from the font of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary. The Apostle John records

¹¹⁸ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 3.

¹¹⁹ It is the understanding of the author that the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life has consistently responded in the negative to these questions.

Jesus crying out, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”¹²⁰ Jesus and his Bride the Church are thus the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, “they shall not hunger or thirst, by springs of water he shall guide them,”¹²¹ and “Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters!”¹²² Ezekial described torrents of healing water flowing forth from the temple on all sides, and all that the water touched became fresh, never withering or failing, “because the water for them flows from the sanctuary.”¹²³ The Virgin Mother is the font from which has sprung forth the virgin Son of God, Jesus Christ, from whose heart has flowed the torrents of living water as he espoused His virgin Church on the Cross. From the pure and holy font of the Blessed Virgin Mary flows now the spring of virginity lived in the heart of the Church and the world today.

In his day, Saint Augustine commented on what may then have been perceived as the obvious: “Bodily virginity is not for everyone. In fact, those who have already lost their virginity do not have the option of being virgins.”¹²⁴ But in today’s culture of relativism, with its emphasis on the subjective, even the words ‘have never lived in public or open violation of chastity’¹²⁵ have sometimes been interpreted to mean other than perpetual virginity. In a private letter written in 2007, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments concurred that “women who have lost the gift of virginity by knowingly and deliberately engaging in sexual relations should not be received as consecrated virgins.”¹²⁶ It is only the female virgin who can, in her person, represent the spousal virginity of the Church, the Bride of Christ – as only a male can represent the priesthood of Christ in his role as Bridegroom of the Church. The woman presenting

¹²⁰ Jn. 7:37-38.

¹²¹ Is. 49:10.

¹²² Is. 55:1.

¹²³ Cf Ez. 47; 47:12.

¹²⁴ Augustine, *Holy Virginity*, 27.

¹²⁵ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 3.

¹²⁶ Albert Malcolm Ranjith, Archbishop Secretary of the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to Burke, letter, April 4, 2007, “Response to inquiry from His Excellency, The Most Reverend Raymond Burke, Archbishop of St. Louis,” Prot. N. 231/06/L.

herself for consecration as a virgin must have the gift of virginity to offer to Christ, a gift that she has never offered to another.

There is a **profound** freedom in the discernment of a vocation of consecrated virginity, for what is key is if a woman has received a gift of virginity. The sexual impulse for union with a man is a strong and most natural human impulse, directed to procreation and the building of that fundamental unit of society, the family; God has so ordered human society that his first blessing still remains upon this union of man and woman in matrimony.¹²⁷ To desire and to be able to give one's virginity in union with the unseen virgin Christ as Bridegroom is surely a gift from him, a gift which Jesus himself said is meant only for those who are able to receive it.¹²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa in his treatise *On Virginity* comments that those are happy who still have the power to choose the way of "glorious virginity" and have not yielded to a secular life that puts out of their power the enjoyment of virginity's delights.¹²⁹ There is truth in what he says, but only if one has actually been given that gift of virginity in the first, for it must always be remembered that the one called to the state of holy matrimony will be most blessed in following Christ by following the path of conjugal, not virginal, chastity. But the one given the gift of virginity will be granted the grace to preserve that gift of virginal chastity as she prepares for the moment of her virginal consecration to Christ. Thus is the freedom in discernment – for a woman's gift of virginity is confirmed by her having been preserved in virginal chastity throughout her life.

The woman given the gift of virginal chastity is characterized by a certain modesty concerning the discussion of sexual matters, and is understandably reserved when asked about whether certain past sexual behaviors, not uncommon in today's society, are acceptable in one who has repented and now seeks consecration as a virgin. Beyond the matter of genital intercourse, questions arise concerning past participation in oral sex, masturbation, lesbian encounters, and

¹²⁷ Cf. *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

¹²⁸ Cf. Mt. 19:12.

¹²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 3.

intimate expressions of affection that belong rightly to married love. The prerequisite that a woman has “never lived in public or open violation of chastity” most surely refers to a state of virginal chastity, making physical virginity – not having knowingly and willingly engaged in genital intercourse – the minimum requirement for a vocation of consecrated virginity. More is involved in living virginal chastity than merely abstaining from genital intercourse. She who seeks to offer the gift of virginity to Christ prepares to offer herself to a Divine Spouse, and may turn for guidance to the Catechism of the Catholic Church concerning activities expected in one preparing for human marriage:

Those who are engaged to marry are called to live chastity in continence. They should see in this time of testing a discovery of mutual respect, an apprenticeship in fidelity, and the hope of receiving one another in God. They should reserve for marriage the expressions of affection that belong to married love. They will help each other grow in chastity. –CCC 2350.

A woman who has not lived in such a state of virginal chastity has violated the meaning of her own integral virginity, and while the sin may be pardoned through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the consequence of actions may still remain an impediment to consecration. When asked, for example, if a woman who has engaged in oral sex with a young man over a prolonged period of time might be eligible for consecration as a virgin, those already consecrated resoundingly answered in the negative. The response of Gloria Irene Alvaro Sanz, a Spanish consecrated virgin and author of the book *Amar y Servir*, “To Love and to Serve, the Order of Virgins according to Canon 604,” was emblematic: “Oral or anal sex,” she wrote, “breaks virginity for two reasons: a) there is an entrance into the body breaking its cloister, and b) it constitutes a trap against the divine plan that has assigned a function to each bodily organ. ... Do not lose sight that we are in the great battle between the Virgin Mary and Satan. The devil tries to completely deceive the woman because he cannot do anything directly against the Blessed Virgin Mary.”¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Cátedra Gloria Irene Alvaro Sanz, written response to inquiry from author, February 28, 2013.

Her response, and those of other virgins, concurred with Thomas Aquinas in his assessment that sins against chastity are worsened when they are matters of “unnatural vice,” in which classification he included masturbation, bestiality, sodomy, and not observing the natural means of copulation.¹³¹ And as Pope Saint John Paul II stated in *Veritatis Splendor*, “there are kinds of behaviors which can never in any way or situation be a proper response which is in conformity with the dignity of a person.”¹³²

Virginal chastity: an essential prerequisite for consecration

Vita Consecrata stresses the direct connection of the virgin to the Church: “consecrated by the diocesan bishop, these women acquire a particular link with the Church, which they are committed to serve while remaining in the world.”¹³³ The diocesan bishop himself celebrates the Rite of Consecration to a life of virginity, and as such it is he who is tasked with deciding “on the conditions under which women living in the world are to undertake a life of perpetual virginity.”¹³⁴ The charge to the bishop is most serious, for an act of consecration on the part of the Church is not revocable, unlike a vow to chastity, which, for grave reasons, may be dispensed by the Church. In his discernment about whether or not to consecrate a particular woman, the diocesan bishop will keep in mind that he will be admitting the woman to a public state of life in the Church, for the rite of consecration constitutes “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.”¹³⁵ The bishop will be most attentive to assuring that the prerequisites of consecration have been met in the candidate, for otherwise scandal could arise, and an apparent contradiction of the meaning of a virginal life witnessing to the Church’s love for Christ, her Bridegroom.

The distinctive element of the vocation of consecrated virginity is the matter of virginity offered for consecration, offered in order that the virgin might become this surpassing sign of the

¹³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *ST II-II*, Q 154, A 11.

¹³² John Paul II, Encyclical. *Veritatis Splendor*, *The Splendor of Truth* (1993), 52.

¹³³ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 7.

¹³⁴ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 5.

¹³⁵ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 1.

Church's love for her Bridegroom. Such is the service that the consecrated virgin commits to the Church: to faithfully and fruitfully live her consecration – her exclusive devotion to Christ – in the midst of the world about her. In a beautiful passage in *Sacramentum caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI affirms this virginal witness, “precisely in relation to the mystery of the Eucharist . . . inasmuch as [consecrated virginity] is an expression of the Church’s exclusive devotion to Christ, whom she accepts as her Bridegroom with a radical and fruitful fidelity.”¹³⁶ This witness of fidelity to the Bridegroom of the Church is a witness of faith testifying to the life to come, when those who have kept lamps lit will be admitted to the heavenly banquet feast of the Lamb, to the resurrection where “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.”¹³⁷ The bishop will seek to assure himself that a candidate for consecration, will be able to provide an authentic testimony to the life to come and to grow throughout her life that she might, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “radiate the dignity of being a bride of Christ,” and thus be as “stars to guide the world on its journey”¹³⁸ through the fleetingness of earthly life.

The matter of integral virginal chastity, physical and spiritual, guards the integrity of the consecration to a life of virginity. In the situation of today, it is not infrequent that a woman seeks the consecration of virgins because she desires to commit herself, from this time forward, to a chaste and celibate life inspired by her love for Christ, dedicated fully to the service of the Church and to prayer, while she remains living in the world. Such reasons are consonant with the stated duties of consecrated virgins, who are consecrated “for the sake of more fervent love of Christ and of greater freedom in the service of their brothers and sisters,” and are “to spend their time in works of penance and of mercy, in apostolic activity and in prayer, according to their state of life

¹³⁶ Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis The Sacrament of Charity* (2007), 81.

¹³⁷ Mt. 22:30.

¹³⁸ Benedict XVI, “To the Order of Virgins,” address of Pope Benedict XVI to consecrated virgins, May 15, 2008. In the English Weekly Edition of *L’Osservatore Romano*, n. 22, May 28, 2008.

and spiritual gifts.”¹³⁹ And yet, it is not apostolic activity and prayer that identify the nature and good of consecrated virginity as a distinct vocation in the Church.

What identifies consecrated virginity as a distinct vocation in the Church is that the virgin is consecrated as 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.”¹⁴⁰ The virgin’s duties to engage in apostolic activity and prayer flow from this essential nature of the vocation. In fact, if her essential identity as a surpassing sign of the Church’s love for Christ is not established as the premise from which apostolic activity flows, the vocation of consecrated virginity risks being identified as primarily a vocation of apostolic service within the diocesan Church. This is a serious misconception of the vocation of consecrated virginity that lends itself to disregard the fact that integral virginal chastity – in body and spirit – is an obligatory prerequisite for those aspiring to be consecrated as virgins in the Church.

This distinction also sheds light on a question often posed to a consecrated virgin by one trying to understand her life. Virgins are asked, “What is it that you do?” The answer lies in understanding this essential sign-nature of the vocation: consecrated virginity is immeasurably more about “being,” rather than “doing.” The virgin is not part of a religious family with a particular charism expressed in apostolic works. Rather, the virgin has received the gift of virginity that flows from the font of Mary’s virginity. As the Virgin Mary gave herself entirely to the will of God with her fiat, becoming virgin Mother of the Son of God, so the virgin is consecrated that she might live the mystical meaning of espousal to Christ. The essential meaning of the virgin’s life is to not to do, but to be. She lives her life as “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

¹³⁹ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 2.

¹⁴⁰ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 1.

bride of Christ.”¹⁴¹ Without doubt, having received the gift of virginal chastity is the essential prerequisite for consecration as a virgin in the Catholic Church just as the gift of virginity given to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Nazareth was the essential prerequisite for her fiat.

The gift of virginity

Jesus spoke gently about living in virginity, not mandating its practice but commending it with the words, “Let him who can receive this, receive it.”¹⁴² The Fathers of the Church amicably vied with one another in measuring the merits of a virginal life – perhaps virginity is the gold relative to the silver of marriage, or the hundred-fold relative to the sixty-fold of widows and thirty-fold of the married,¹⁴³ or perhaps virgin-martyrs are the hundred-fold, with martyrs at sixty-fold,¹⁴⁴ and non-martyr virgins something less. One might detect that the ongoing rivalry in the ranking of a life of virginal chastity with that of conjugal chastity is not unlike the request of Jesus by James and John to be seated one at his right and the other at his left in glory.¹⁴⁵ What is important, of course, is that the life of virginity has been chosen in response to the particular gift that has been received. St. Augustine spoke often of this gift of virginity, especially as he warned of temptations to pride, “The only one who can protect the gift of virginity is God himself, he who gave it.”¹⁴⁶ “You walk laden with gold,” St. Jerome warned the virgin Eustochium, “you must keep out of the robber’s way.”¹⁴⁷

In guidelines issued in 1995 on the truth and meaning of sexuality, the Pontifical Council for the Family reiterated the timeless teaching of the Church. “As the image of God, man is created for love,” the guidelines noted, for Holy Scripture has taught: “‘God is love’ and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image ...

¹⁴¹ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 1.

¹⁴² Mt. 19:12.

¹⁴³ Cf. Jerome, “Against Jovinianus,” trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W. G. Martley in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series, Vol. 6 [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893], Revised and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/30091.htm> [accessed June 16, 2013], 2-3.

¹⁴⁴ Augustine, *Holy Virginity*, 45.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Mk. 10:35-41.

¹⁴⁶ Augustine, *Holy Virginity*, 52.

¹⁴⁷ Jerome, *Letter #22 to Eustochium*, 3.

love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.”¹⁴⁸ If love imaging the love of the Most Holy Trinity is the fundamental vocation of the human being, then it is clear that the human expression of love is capable of being “of a higher kind of love than concupiscence”¹⁴⁹ – placing humanity high on the phylogenetic scale in their ability to live in chastity. But it is the supernatural *gift* of virginity that allows a woman, as a sexual being created in the image and likeness of God, to live out a vocation to love in virginal, rather than conjugal chastity, in imitation of the virginal love of the Most Holy Trinity.

The woman who has not received the gift of virginity must also stay out of the robber’s way, lest she allow her particular gift to be stolen from her. While she is not called to a life of consecrated virginity, it is nonetheless true that from the moment of her Baptism, the Eternal Father has been unfolding a special plan for her to follow Christ in a life of holiness. She may be called to marriage, to a dedicated single life, to another form of consecrated life – monastic, contemplative, apostolic religious, member of a secular institute, or eremitic – or she may be called to live a private vow of chastity. Pope Saint John Paul II emphasizes in *Vita Consecrata* that all the faithful, by virtue of their Baptism, are called to build up the Body of Christ in accord with the vocation each has received. The Holy Spirit uses this diversity as he “establishes the Church as an organic communion in the diversity of vocations, charisms and ministries.”¹⁵⁰ It is only in faithfully living the gift each has received that the Body of Christ can effectively serve as the visible organization through which Christ can communicate truth and grace to all.¹⁵¹

In his homily at the consecration of a virgin, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger referred to consecrated virginity as a Marian state in the Church that is “not less necessary for the fecundity of the Church than the ministerial state of the Priesthood in the succession of the Apostles. The

¹⁴⁸ Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family* (1995), 8.

¹⁴⁹ Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family* (1995), 9.

¹⁵⁰ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 31.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

Church must always be Marian and Petrine,” he explained, “in order to correspond to her original vocation.” In the beginning, the triune God, the virginal God, created man in his own image as male and female. And the Son of God, born of a Virgin Mother, died on a cross in order to restore man to the state of incorruptibility. Those who have been given the gift to live in the state of virginal chastity, the Marian state, witness to the fruitful love of Christ as Bridegroom as they follow the Lamb wherever He goes.¹⁵²

“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.”¹⁵³

¹⁵² Cf. Rev. 4:4.

¹⁵³ *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity*, 24.

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