

CHRISTIAN VIRGINS AND ASCETICS

IN THE EARLIEST DAYS OF THE CHURCH the supreme witness to Christ was martyrdom, although even in those times there were ascetics and also men and women who vowed to live a celibate life. When the persecutions ended, the ascetics and the celibates were placed in a difficult situation; in a world that was tolerant of Christians it was almost inevitable that relaxation should set in and that some Christians should become worldly.[3] As long as they were considered enemies of the State, it was relatively easy to avoid contact with pagan society and to practice their religion within the confines of the small Christian communities; and if they were arrested, they could hope for the coveted crown of martyrdom. But once Christians obtained their freedom and Christianity became the official religion, “it is no longer the pagan world that fights and eliminates the martyr; it is the hermit that takes up the attack and eliminates the world from his being.”[4]

From the beginning of the second century there are references to ascetics who lived a life of continence and it seems that the state of virginity was approved by the Church and held in reverence by the faithful. Both St. Clement of Rome, and St. Ignatius of Antioch speak of Christian men and women who had embraced a celibate life, and for both of these authors the primary purpose of the celibate life is to imitate Christ in that respect.[5] There are numerous texts from the third century that describe the role of virgins and other celibates in the life of the Church; the treatises by Tertullian and St. Cyprian are especially noteworthy.[6] Finally, in the fourth century the authors who praised virginity were even more numerous: St. Athanasius, St. Basil, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine and Cassian.[7]

At the start, the ascetics, virgins and other celibates remained in their own homes, living with their families and sharing in the common life of the local church. Sometimes they organized themselves into groups, similar to confraternities or chapters of a Third Order. Eventually a rule of life was composed and promulgated by various authors such as St. Ambrose, St. Jerome and St. Caesarius of Arles. Moreover, in order to be approved by ecclesiastical authority, men and women desirous of consecrating themselves to God in celibacy could make a vow to this effect into the hands of the bishop. Thus as early as 306 the Council of Elvira in Spain imposed sanctions on virgins who had been unfaithful to their consecration to God and their vow of virginity. At the same time the Council of Ancyra (314) declared that consecrated virgins who marry were guilty of bigamy, since they were espoused to Christ. In 364 the civil law, under Valens, declared that anyone who married a consecrated virgin was subject to the death penalty.

According to the canonical legislation, virgins were required to wear a black tunic and a black veil, which was to be blessed and bestowed on them by the bishop at the time of their consecration. They could live in their own homes but they were not to leave the house without real necessity. The prescribed prayers were to be recited, alone or in a group, at the traditional hours of nine o'clock in the morning, at twelve noon, and at three o'clock in the afternoon. In addition to

this, they were to rise during the night to chant psalms. At Jerusalem both men and women celibates usually joined the clergy for prayer at the prescribed hours. In the fourth century at Rome Marcella and Asela welcomed the virgins and widows into their home for prayer and spiritual reading.

The regulation on fasting was severe and it lasted throughout the entire year, exceptions being made for reasons of health. One meal a day was permitted, and only after three o'clock in the afternoon. It consisted of bread and vegetables and was preceded and followed by appropriate prayers. As regards works of mercy, the virgins were encouraged to share their simple fare with the poor, to visit the sick and to perform any works of mercy befitting their state of life.

Both in the East and in the West the practice of cohabitation was introduced for a time. Clerics or celibate men shared the homes of the virgins to protect them and to provide for their spiritual needs. Inevitably this situation led to abuses that were sharply criticized by bishops and preachers, such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Jerome, and the pseudo-Clement (author of the treatise *Ad Virgines*, composed in the middle of the third century). Ultimately ecclesiastical legislation was drawn up for the protection of the virtue of consecrated virgins and to guarantee that they would be faithful to their commitment. These regulations contributed in no small measure to the development of truly monastic communities of consecrated virgins and the recognition by the Church of the religious life as a distinct state of life.

It should be noted, however, that the vocation to married life among the early Christians was not only the normal calling but that Christian matrimony and family life were a forceful witness to the teachings of Christ. St. Paul not only offered advice to husbands and wives and their children (cf. I Cor. 7:1-40; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 5:21-33; 6:1-4; Col. 3:18-24), but he used the union of husband and wife as a symbol of Christ's union with the Church (cf. Eph. 5:25-30). In fact, the ceremony of the consecration of virgins was itself based on the marriage rite. The veiling of the virgin, taken from the Roman wedding custom, was a symbol of her marriage with Christ, and in the Middle Ages it was customary to give the consecrated virgin a ring and a crown, which were also marriage symbols. The celibate life and separation from the world did not connote a disdain for marriage or a Manichaean condemnation of created things.

ENDNOTES

³ Cf. St. Jerome, *Vita S. Malchi monachi*, PL 23, 53.

⁴ P. Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God*, Paulist Press, Glen Rock, N.J., 1966, p. 64.

⁵ Cf. I Clement 33:1-2; St. Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp*, 5:2.

⁶ Cf. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis; De cultu feminarum*; St. Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*.

⁷ Cf. J.M. Perrin, *Virginity*, tr. K. Gordon, Newman Press, Westminster, Md., 1956; P.T. Camelot, "Virginity," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, McGraw-Hill, New York, N.Y., 1967. Vol. 14, pp. 701-704.