

VIRGINITY

In the most general sense of the word, virginity is the state of one who has not had sexual relations and has not experienced voluntary carnal pleasures involving grave sin. It may therefore be attributed to men as well as to women. However, apart from considerations of religion and virtue, it has generally been more highly honored in women than in men. Its existence in women is a verifiable fact, so far as physical integrity is concerned; also, the purity of blood lines and the authenticity of family relationships depend more upon the virtue of the woman than of the man. The optimum of chastity, which is virginity, is therefore given more attention in the case of a woman than of a man, and the term is, in fact, rarely used in reference to a man.

In Non-Christian Religions. The virginity of a young woman is considered with esteem and respect, for it appears in her as a symbol of freshness and purity, and a sort of youthful integrity of the forces of life. Primitive and ancient religions sometimes attach to virginity a religious significance; thus a certain sexual purity was required for particular ritual and magical rites, perhaps because of an intuition that the integrity of natural forces permitted magical or mystical union with cosmic forces. Similarly, in Greco-Roman antiquity the cult of the virgin goddesses (Artemis, Athena) attributed to the virginity of a goddess a magic power of strength and blessedness. It also demanded continence or even virginity, at least temporarily, in priests and priestesses of certain cults. Such was the case with the vestals in Rome: the immaterial purity of sacred fire had to be attended only by virgin priestesses (Ovid, *Fasti*, 6, 291-294), and a miraculous power was attributed to the prayer of the vestals (Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 28, 2). The practice of castration for certain priests was not unrelated to this same regard for the religious value of continence (γαλλοι). Dualist philosophical speculation, for example that of the Pythagoreans, Platonists, and Neoplatonists, tended to encourage abstention from carnal pleasures, but this was advocated more to encourage contemplation and the pursuit of wisdom than because any properly religious value was attributed to continence or virginity.

In the Bible. In the Old Testament, virginity as a permanent state in life for religious motives was quite unknown. Marriage was regarded as the normal state for all adult men and women in Israel, but premarital virginity was expected in women. According to the older law in Ex 22.16-17 a man who seduced a virgin who was not yet betrothed had, at the decision of her father, either to pay her marriage price and marry her, or to pay “the customary marriage price for virgins” without marrying her. According to a later law in Dt 22.28-29, such a man must pay the girl’s father 50 silver shekels and take her as his wife without the right of ever divorcing her. This later law (Dt 22.23-24) also decreed the death penalty by stoning for a betrothed maiden who consented to intercourse with a man other than her future husband; the crime was considered adultery. The Law of Holiness ordained that “a priest may not marry a woman who has been a prostitute, or has lost her honor, or has been divorced by her husband” (Lv 21.7). Ezechiel (Ez 44.22) forbade a priest to marry a widow unless she was the widow of another priest. Ordinarily, therefore, the bride of a priest would be a virgin. The Law of Holiness also decrees that “a priest’s daughter who loses her honor by committing fornication...shall be burned to death” (Lv 21.9). These laws were based on the taboos that surrounded the sacredness of the Old Testament priesthood.

Although the evidence is not conclusive, it seems that most of the Essenes and the members of the Qumran community were celibates, primarily because of their apocalyptic, eschatological preoccupations. In the New Testament, virginity, not in itself, but as practiced for supernatural motives, is placed on a higher level than marriage. Jesus praises those who remain voluntary “eunuchs,” i.e., celibates, “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19.10-12), so that, freed

from the burdens of married life, they may more easily be His intimate followers in seeking the kingdom of God. St. Paul, while making it clear that all Christians may marry (1 Cor 7.25), recommends that the unmarried remain as they are because of the nearness of the *parousia* (1 Cor 7.25-31) and because of the greater freedom they have to serve the Lord (1 Cor 7.32-35). At the time he wrote these words, the Apostle himself was not married (1 Cor 7.7). He may have been a widower, since, as an ardent Pharisee in early life, he would hardly have violated the almost universal Jewish custom of marrying. St. Peter certainly was married (Mt 8.14; 1 Cor 9.5), and probably the other Apostles were also, though St. John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” has been traditionally regarded as a virgin. A married clergy was taken for granted in the early Church, but the prescription that a bishop, priest, or deacon must be *μίας γυναίκοσ ἀνδρα*, literally “one woman’s husband” (1 Tim 3.2.12; Ti 1.6), does not mean that he must necessarily marry; it merely means that, if his wife died, he could not marry a second time.

First Centuries-Patristic Era. From the end of the 1st century and the beginning of the 2nd, one finds allusions to ascetics who lived continently “in honor of the flesh of Christ” (Ignatius, *Pol.* 5.2; cf. *1 Clem.* 38, 2). From these words we may conclude that the imitation of the virginity of Christ had become by that time a motive for continence. Perfect continence, along with voluntary poverty and austerity of life, was a constitutive element of the ascetical life that began to develop in the 2nd century, and of which Origen, in the following century, was to be: an illustrious example (Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 6, 3, 9-10; 8, 1-3).

The state of men practicing continence and asceticism soon evolved into monasticism, and ultimately into ecclesiastical celibacy, and the word “virgins” came in time to be reserved especially for women who gave themselves to perfect chastity.

In effect, it would seem that from the beginning of the 2nd century, a state or a profession of virginity was recognized in the Church, which granted those who practiced it a place apart, comparable to that of a widow (Ignatius, *Magn.* 13.1, thus speaks of virgins “called widows.” After the 3rd century there are abundant texts that attest to the place; increasingly important, that “the holy virgins,” *virgines sanctæ*, assume in the life of the Church. From Africa comes the important testimony of Tertullian (*De virginibus velandis*), and of Cyprian (*De habitu virginum*): virgins are “the most illustrious portion of the flock of Christ” (Cyprian, *op. cit.*, 3); they are the spouses of Christ” (Tertullian, *De virg. vel.* 16; *De resurr. carn.* 61; cf. *De orat.*, 22), and the violation of their purpose of virginity is considered adultery (Cyprian, *Ep.* 4, 2; *De habitu virg.* 20).

Tertullian and St. Cyprian use words in this connection that seem to suggest a kind of vow (Tertullian, *De orat.* 22; Cyprian, *De habitu virg.* 4) but it is more than a private vow, a *continentia propositum* (Cyprian, *Ep.* 55, 21). One does not find evidence that this purpose of chastity was consecrated and solemnized by a liturgical rite, or sanctioned by ecclesiastical legislation. The council of Elvira in Spain (c. 306) was the first to impose canonical sanctions against virgins “who have consecrated themselves to God” and who. been unfaithful to their “pact of virginity”: they are excommunicated, and even if they repent, they are allowed to receive communion only at the end of their lives (c.13): moreover, the text clearly distinguishes between consecrated virgins, and women guilty of misconduct before marriage (c.14). At about the time the council of Ancyra (314) condemns virgins who have married as guilty of bigamy (c.19): a virgin is the spouse of Christ and thus must not contract marriages. A little later, civil legislation sanctioned these decrees, and went to the extent of punishing by death anyone who married a consecrated virgin (Valens, 364, in Cod. Theod. 9, 25, 2).

In the 4th century, the writings of the Fathers who exalted virginity were numerous; they emphatically recommended it and elaborated upon its spiritual value. In the East, Methodius of

Olympus, even in the 3rd century, wrote of virginity in a lyrical dialogue inspired by Plato's Banquet. In the same manner, SS. Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa especially, and John Chrysostom wrote of virginity with enthusiasm.

In the West, St. Ambrose has no less than four treatises dedicated to virginity: *De virginibus*, *De virginitate*, *De institutione virginis*, and *Exhortatio virginitatis*; he also wrote a treatise addressed to widows: *De viduis*. He insisted especially on the example of the Virgin Mary; he is the great Marian Doctor as well as the preacher of virginity. St. Jerome wrote to the virgins of whom he had become spiritual director (*Ep.* 22 to Eustochium, 130 to Demetrias) and engaged in vigorous polemic against the adversaries of asceticism and virginity: *Adversus Helvidium de Mariae perpetua*, *Adversus Jovinianum*, and *Contra Vigilantium*. St. Augustine also wrote an eloquent treatise, *On Holy Virginity*.

These exhortations to virgins were composed with a view to the condition of virgins living in the world, in their own familial menage, where they sometimes made up little communities that were still characterized by considerable personal freedom. Such were the holy women, widows and virgins, who were disciples of St. Jerome. Little by little these groups organized themselves and settled according to a monastic or cenobitic way of life; they used Rules established by virgins living in true monastic communities, for example; *Regula ad virgines* of St. Caesarius of Arles (534).

We must note here a strange practice that existed in antiquity, in the West as well as in the East—the cohabitation of clerics and monks with virgins (*syneisaktoi*, *virgines subintroductæ*, *agapetae*). Under the text of assisting and protecting them, clerics or monks shared the houses and the lives of the virgins. This questionable sort of cohabitation and the abuses to which it could lead set off a sharp reaction on the part of bishops and preachers (St. John Chrysostom), and led to disciplinary measures on the part of the councils. In this way ecclesiastical legislation was developed and established to preserve the virtue of virgins still living the world, and to guarantee their fidelity to commitments they had assumed. These prescriptions parallel those which govern female monasticism, which began to be developed and organized at the same time. The history of consecrated virginity mingles with that of religious life for women, and even at the present one finds numerous women who choose to lead lives of consecrated virginity in the world.

Rite of Consecration. There is no indication before the 4th century of a liturgical ceremony of consecration. It does not seem that the celebrated fresco in the catacomb of Priscilla (3rd century) represents the taking of the veil by a virgin: it appears rather to represent the *velatio conjugalis* in the Christian marriage ceremony. In Rome, in the middle of the 4th century, the solemn rite of the consecration of virgins consisted essentially in taking the veil. Marcellina, the sister of St. Ambrose, made her profession between 352 and 354 before Pope Liberius, who gave her a veil of somber color (*De Virg.* 1; cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 24, 3). The imposition of the veil on virgins is found first in Africa, then in Milan, where was accompanied by the blessing of the bishop (Ambrose, *Ep.* 19, 7). At the end of the 4th century, this rite had passed to Rome and Gaul. One can thus distinguish between virgins who have promised to live in their proposed virginity, but who have not received the sacred veil, and those who have made public profession of chastity and have received the veil from the bishop, with a long prayer of blessing (Siricius, *Ep.* 10, 3.4, to the bishops of Gaul; Innocent I, *Ep.* 2, 15, to Victricius of Rouen). This veiling, borrowed from the Roman marriage ceremonies, symbolized the mystical marriage of the virgin with Christ. The veiling was accompanied a long preface of consecration that, with the exception of some clauses added in the Gelasian Sacramentary and reproduced in later versions, goes back to Leonine Sacramentary. The rite of imposition of the veil upon virgins is not found in the East in antiquity. Other ceremonies

also symbolized the mystical marriage between Christ and the newly consecrated virgin. In the Middle Ages it became customary to give the a ring and a crown that, like the veil, were traditional symbols of marriage.

Theology and Spirituality. Moral theology distinguishes a triple element in virginity: physical integrity; absence of all voluntary and complete venereal pleasure in the past; and, as regards the future, a determination to abstain perpetually from such pleasure. This determination, so to speak, is the formal element of virginity; inexperience of voluntary carnal pleasure is the material element; integrity of the flesh is no more an accidental element. Such is the teaching of St. Aquinas (ST 2a2ae, 152.1), who adheres closely to the doctrine of St. Augustine (*De sancta virginitate*, cf. *De Civ. Dei* 1.18). St. Bonaventure makes the distinction, though less formally; he speaks of virginity of the flesh, virginity of the spirit, and virginity of the flesh and of spirit. For this reason the accidental and involuntary loss of physical integrity (e.g., by accident, operation, rape) leaves virginity, which is most essentially in the will, intact.

Theologians also show the eminent value of virginity, which abstains not only from all disordered and culpable carnal pleasure, but absolutely from all carnal delectation, no matter what it is, and applies itself to divine things, and particularly to the contemplation of divine truth (ST 2a2ae, 152.2-3). Moreover, although it is not the highest of the virtues (*ibid.* a.5), it is more excellent than marriage, since it has as its object a superior good. Marriage is ordered to the multiplication of the human race, but virginity is ordered to a divine good, and enjoys a completely spiritual fecundity (*ibid.* a.4; cf. St. Augustine, *loc. cit.*).

The Council of Trent defined against Luther, who had repudiated the religious vows, that “the conjugal state is not to be preferred to the state of virginity, and it is better and more felicitous to remain in virginity or celibacy than to be bound by marriage” (Denz 1810). In the 20th century Pope Pius XII, in reaction against a tendency to exalt beyond measure the dignity and greatness of marriage at the expense of consecrated virginity, reminded us of the excellence of the latter; he reminded us equally that celibacy and virginity are not an obstacle to the development and flowering of the person [“*Sacra Virginitas*,” March 25, 1954; *AAS* 46 (1954) 161-191. Cf. “*Allocutions to the International Congress of Superiors General of Orders and Congregations of Women*,” Sept. 15, 1952; 44 (1952) 824].

Here the true value of virginity becomes apparent: it is not only simple abstention, even virtuous, from carnal relations; still less is it a timorous refusal of sexual experience. Rather it is a voluntary and perpetual choice, “for the kingdom of Heaven” (Mt 19.12; cf. Lk 18.29). It is a sign of a greater love, and of a will determined to seek God alone and to belong to Him exclusively (I Cor 7.34). Thus, as a special virtue, it implies the consecration of a vow, which expresses and confirms the determination to follow Christ irrevocably (ST 2a2ae, 186.6 ad 1).

As a matter of fact, certain Fathers of the Church, in order to exalt and commend virginity, show a tendency to depreciate sexual activity and to exaggerate the inconveniences of marriage (so with certain of the Greek Fathers, St. Gregory of Nyssa, or Basil of Ancyra; or among the Latins, St. Jerome). In this tendency they are victims of a Platonic mentality that disdains the “flesh,” or the sense order, to exalt the “spirit,” or the “intelligible”; or they indulge in rhetorical exaggeration. But this is not the true sense of Christian virginity, the intention and orientation of which are properly religious, and the motive inspired exclusively by charity. In the teaching of the Fathers and of masters of the spiritual life, one should remember several important features that enable us to grasp the spirituality of virginity:

Virginity is inspired above all by charity. The virgin vows to Christ an exclusive love that admits of no sharing, and because of this she may call herself spouse, according to a theme already

used in the *Canticle of Canticles* and by the Prophets, and which is adopted and developed in the whole of monastic and spiritual tradition. In this there is no element of unhealthy compensation for a grudgingly accepted chastity or for repressed sexuality. All must be raised to the level of the spirit and of charity. Without an increasingly limpid and pure charity, virginity would in fact involve a risk of repression, or dessication of the heart. With charity, which it requires and develops, it is an occasion of growth, and brings about a remarkable equilibrium of the affections.

Moreover, inspired by charity, virginity disposes toward a mystical union, which is the supreme fruit of charity. Because of this we are enabled to understand better the superiority of virginity to marriage. If Christian marriage is the sacred sign (*sacramentum*) of the union of Christ and the Church, consecrated virgins attain to something beyond the sign and are in immediate contact with the holy reality, of which marriage is the sign. In them is realized the nuptial union of Christ and the Church. This doctrine is expressed with exactness in the preface of the consecration of virgins in the Roman Pontifical, which employs the terms of the Leonine Sacramentary alluded to above.

Thus the ecclesial significance of consecrated virginity is clear. We would demean it if we were to consider it only under its utilitarian aspect, and see the virgin as renouncing marriage simply to devote herself more efficaciously to charitable or apostolic works. Virginity is best seen in the mystery of the Church, which is at the same time virgin and spouse (cf. 2 Cor 11.2; Eph 5.25-27). In the Church, the virgin spouse of Christ is the visible sign of this mystery. This is the most profound meaning of consecrated virginity in the Church, and through it, the virgin participates in maternal fecundity of the Church (St. Augustine).

Virginity has also an eschatological significance: it is, in a sense, a present experience of future life in the kingdom of heaven, where “they will neither marry nor be given in marriage” (Mt 22.30) it is the living now of the life of angels in heaven (*ibid.* cf. St. Augustine *De Sancta Virg.* 12); and in this sense virginity, like monastic life, may be qualified as an “angelic” life. The integrity of the flesh, conserved in virginity, assumes a particular significance: it represents in some way the state of the creature in the Garden, as it came intact from the hands of the Creator; and it is the state of the creature in heaven, restored to his primitive integrity. This also is the eschatological significance of monastic life. It represents a return to Paradise and an anticipation of heaven. This helps us to understand also the profound meaning of the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mother, who in her absolute integrity is the first of creatures.

Furthermore, we should note that virginity is oriented toward contemplation. It realizes in a special way the beatitude concerning the “pure of heart,” who “will see God.” The essential element is purity of heart, i.e., purity in the profound center of intention and desire. Even the legitimate and holy use of the pleasures of marriage involves the risk of keeping the soul captive to the “flesh,” causing it to lose something of its spiritual purity and its readiness to open itself to the mystery of God. Perfect chastity, on the contrary, allows a total freedom of spirit, which nothing will hinder in its inclination toward the contemplation of the light of God (Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virg.* 2; Basil of Ancyra, *De Virg.* 66).

The practice and the guarding of virginity require a careful asceticism. Mortification of the flesh is necessary, and spiritual authors insist very particularly upon fasting as well as upon modesty; restraint; and prudence in bearing, dress, diversions, and relations with the world - especially where men are concerned. Custody of the eyes is the necessary condition for protecting the heart. In modern times these precautions continue to be necessary. Humility is a point insisted upon by St. Augustine, who made much of its necessity to virginity.

Humble spouses “follow the Lamb” more easily than pious virgins (*De Sancta Virg.* 52). In fact, whatever strengthens and nourishes Christian life, and particularly the life of faith, is especially necessary for virgins: reading of holy books, prayers, etc.

Finally, it can be stated that a sane and balanced psychology is required for virginity to be chosen and accepted in its full light, not as timidity or repression but as the opening up of a generous love and of wholly rectified and transformed by agape.

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