

CONSECRATED VIRGINS FOR TODAY'S CHURCH

IN ALL PROBABILITY, CONSECRATED VIRGINS REPRESENT THE OLDEST FORM of dedication in a total following of Jesus Christ. The early virgins, out of love for Him, and sometimes at the cost of their lives, chose not to marry in order to dedicate themselves totally to prayer and to service of others in the Christian community. Their male counterparts, the ascetics, were less numerous and less well known (1). Like the widows who dedicated themselves to prayer and service, the virgins were considered a distinct group in the early Church, referred to as an *ordo* or order.

Decline and Revival of the Rite for Virgins Living in the World

Over the centuries, the use of the rite of consecration was quite completely reversed, becoming common in monasteries of nuns with solemn vows and gradually disappearing from use among women remaining in their secular condition. By the time of Lateran Council II (1139), during the Pontificate of Innocent II, the practice of consecrating women living in the world had ended.

It was after the First World War that requests were again received for permission to use the consecration of virgins for individual women remaining in their secular condition of life. The question of whether this was expedient was taken up in the February 25, 1927 Plenary Meeting of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and received a negative response (2). Thus, when Pope Pius XII stated in *Sponsa Christi* that the rite was reserved to nuns, he was simply stating a fact (3).

Authors gave various explanations for the 1927 decision, although these are not expressed in the response itself. Some judged that the practice was obsolete and noted the silence of the 1917 Code. Some believed that Church authority did not favor innovations and that the consecration of virgins living in the world would be an affront to religious. Others spoke of the danger which would be faced by such consecrated women living in their own homes, while still others pointed out that only religious institutes and societies permitted such a public or quasi-public juridic state. The author collecting these opinions notes that what the 1983 Code now provides for, simply was not mature when those authors were considering the matter (4).

A simple statement from Vatican Council II threw the matter wide open again. In its first document, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963) we read: "The rite of the Consecration of Virgins contained in the Roman Pontifical is to be revised" (no. 80).

The subsequent instructions on the implementation of that Constitution did not address the point further. However, in 1970, the revised Rite was published under the authority of Pope Paul VI. The Decree from the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship (May 31, 1970), permitted the new Rite to go into use, where possible, on January 6, 1971. Vernacular versions and adaptations were to be prepared by episcopal conferences and sent to the Sacred Congregation for confirmation.

The Rite of Consecration

It is noted in the Decree that this Rite of Consecration is viewed as a precious treasure in the Roman liturgy because Christ bequeathed sacred virginity as a legacy to His Spouse. Indeed, from apostolic times, virgins dedicated their chastity to God, thus adorning the Mystical Body and enriching it with fecundity. Touching the central elements of the Rite, the Decree notes that from ancient times the Church “has been wont to strengthen the pious and arduous resolve of virgins by a solemn prayer of consecration.” Over the centuries, the ceremony was embellished to ever more clearly demonstrate the significance of sacred virgins “as the image of the Church espoused to Christ” (5).

This image of the Church, perhaps less frequently cited today than others, such as the “People of God,” is nevertheless also found in the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964). In the terminology of the Apocalypse, the Church is the spotless spouse of the spotless lamb. In the terminology of Ephesians, Christ loves the Church and has delivered Himself up for her sanctification; He unites the Church to Himself in an unbreakable alliance. Christ nourishes and cherishes the Church. He fills the Church with heavenly gifts for all eternity, “in order that we may know the love of God and of Christ for us, a love which surpasses all understanding” (cf. Eph. 3:19) (LG 6).

The consecrated virgin is to image just this Church, the spouse of Christ. In the homily which the Rite offers to the bishop, the same imagery is contained: the Church is the Bride of Christ, and the Fathers and Doctors of the Church give this title to those who live a life of virginity as a sign of the world to come.

Likewise, in the bishop’s examination of the candidate for consecration, this central spirit and image is present. Three questions are posed:

1. Are you resolved to persevere to the end of your days in the holy state of virginity and in the service of God and his Church?
2. Are you resolved to follow Christ in the spirit of the Gospel that your whole life may be a faithful witness to God’s love and a convincing sign of the Kingdom of Heaven?
3. Are you resolved to accept solemn consecration as a bride of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

A short time later in the Rite, the candidate renews her resolution (the *propositum*) in a more synthetic form: “Father, receive my resolution to follow Christ in a life of perfect chastity which, with God’s help, I here profess before you and God’s people.”

Then follows the solemn prayer of consecration sung or recited over the candidates by the bishop with extended hands. It recognizes before God their “resolve to live in chastity.” The grace of virginity is recognized as a gift of the Spirit and while praising it, the prayer proclaims that “the honor of marriage is in no way lessened.” The virgins renounce the joys of human marriage, cherishing what it foreshadows.

The gift of the Spirit is invoked to provide the virgins “modesty with right judgment, kindness with true wisdom, gentleness with strength of character, freedom with the grace of chastity.”

The bishop prays that the Lord may be all for them: “their glory, their joy, their whole desire...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 sickness.” Since they have chosen Christ above all things, the bishop prays that they will find all things in possessing Him.

The *propositum* of the candidate and the prayer of consecration by the bishop are the central elements of the Rite. These are placed within the context of the Eucharistic celebration, for which there is a special ritual Mass. Other elements of the prayers and symbols, some of which are optional, enhance the central symbolism of bride of Christ, imaging the Church espoused to Christ. These symbols include the veil, the ring and the book of the Liturgy of the Hours.

Criteria

In the strength of this imagery reflecting the theological nature of the vocation of the consecrated virgin, one can understand the criteria for being admitted. For women living in the world, the introductory norms state the following:

- 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.

The first point is the same for nuns receiving the consecration. For them, the other requirements are perpetual profession and that their religious family has permission to use the Rite.

Consecrated Virgins in the Code

The 1983 Code of Canon Law for the Latin Church, reiterates some of the key elements of the Rite in canon 604.

§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 resolution more faithfully and to perform by mutual assistance service to the Church which is in harmony with their proper state, virgins can be associated together.

This canon, unlike that for hermits, did not appear in the 1977 draft of the canons. It appears in the discussion of the *coetus* in their fifth session, held May 28 to June 1, 1979.

Discussion of whether to use the word *ordo* or status seemed to hinge on whether or not one viewed this as a state of life. For some, the *propositum* of the virgins was inadequate juridically. The absence of the vows of poverty and obedience raised doubts for some as to whether this was a public state of consecrated life in the Church. Others, speaking of the *propositum* of chastity as a vow, made in a solemn ceremony according to the Rite of the Church, insisted that it surely constituted a public vow and a public state in the Church, although one entered into as an individual. The suggestions included the addition of reference to a closer following of Christ.

In the end, the decisions regarding the first article of the canon were: (1) the term *ordo* rather than *status*; (2) the insertion of the words *iuxta probatum ritum liturgicum*; (3) the phrase *ab Episcopo diocesano* rather than *ab Episcopo eiusve delegate* and (4) a revised order of the wording to include the insertion of *Christum pressius sequendi*.

Discussion of the canon's second article ranged from the recommendation to omit it entirely, to providing for public associations erected by competent authority. If associations were public, it was observed, they would need statutes. One consultor deemed the word "freely" important, lest bishops seek to prohibit their formation.

The Secretary of the Code Commission saw, in addition to the canons on associations of the faithful, an eventual possibility of a specific form of consecrated life developing, insofar as provision was made for poverty and obedience in statutes approved by authority.

At the point of decision making, the *coetus* was also asked to vote on suppressing the second article. The vote was 5 *placet* and 6 *non placet*. The subsequent vote, on a text essentially that of the actual canon, received 7 votes of *placet* (6).

The canon as we have it today stresses two fundamental elements of this vocation: consecration and service. There is a clear echo of the spirituality developed in the Rite. The virgins are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to a rite approved by the Church; they are betrothed mystically to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church.

Contemporary Questions

Despite the antiquity of the vocation, the publication of the Rite and the subsequent inclusion of its use in the Code of Canon Law, both gave rise to practical, theological and juridic questions.

Those Who May Receive the Consecration

Although, as seen above, the criteria for reception of the consecration are quite clear, there were subsequent questions. The introduction to the Rite makes clear that neither in the case of nuns, nor in that of women living in the world, may the consecration be conferred upon widows. In the early Church, there was also the order of widows and today certain efforts are being made to restore some comparable rite for them. Likewise, whether in the monastery or in the world, those who have lived in public or open violation of chastity may not be admitted to the consecration. The historical roots of this practice, reflected anew in the virginal images from Scripture, help clarify the distinctive nature of this vocation and its requirements which are different from those of religious institutes.

In a 1971 response from the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, it was affirmed that women in secular institutes might use the Rite. The reply does not discuss the potential incongruity between the public nature of the consecration of virgins and the leaven imagery typical of secular institutes. There is the similarity of consecrated persons living in the midst of the world and there is diversity of practice among secular institutes regarding the practice of discretion. Nevertheless, this appears to be a question which merits further reflection.

The same 1971 response also clarified that the Rite was not intended for use by men. Nevertheless the Dicastery expressed openness to the possible development of a parallel rite should interest be expressed (7).

Another question touching on the use the Rite has arisen in the case of women requesting indulgences of departure from religious institutes. Occasionally there is the question of whether this may be handled as a transfer between one state of consecrated life and another. In brief, it must be stated that there cannot be a transfer, in the ordinary sense of canon 684, because there is no institute or society on the part of the virgin. Nevertheless, a sort of analogy may be used.

Transfers between two institutes of the same kind are handled by the supreme moderators (can. 684 §1). When there are two types of institutes, such as religious and secular or societies of apostolic life, the Holy See or the diocesan bishop becomes involved (can. 684 §5). In moving between incorporation in an institute or society and the consecration of virgins, a further step is involved.

In practice, if a religious wishes to leave her institute and become a consecrated virgin, she must receive an indulgence of departure from her religious institute. Often such a person has been out on excommunication for a time, has investigated this vocation and has made contact with a bishop about it. If that is the case, and if the bishop is disposed to receive the woman for the consecration of virgins, the indulgence can be granted to take effect at the time of the consecration. Actually, however, bishops are usually encouraged to proceed carefully, even with women who have considerable spiritual formation. This is a distinct vocation in the Church. A person in transition who wishes to maintain her personal consecration to God, in service to the Church, but outside an institute to which she has belonged, would often do better to receive an indulgence of departure, make a private vow of chastity, and then take time for discerning her next step. A bishop may well wish to insist on such a time of preparation and discernment before accepting the individual who is leaving a corporate form of public consecration in the Church, for this individual one.

It may also occur that one who has lived as a consecrated virgin for some time, seeks entry into a religious institute. Once again, a simple transfer process (which of itself requires three years of probation, cf. can. 684 §2) is not sufficient. While the consecrated virgin would not need to be dispensed from her consecrated state of life, it would be expected that she would discuss the matter with her bishop; later, if seeking admission to the religious institute, she would present a letter from him. Such a person needs to enter the congregation in the normal way, making a novice (8).

While it is true that the consecrated virgin has spiritual experience and perpetual commitment in consecrated chastity, she is not accustomed to community life lived in common, and she has not been living the vows of religious poverty or religious obedience. She needs to learn the history, spirituality and mission of the institute and discern her vocation to live it, according to the institute's constitutions. Likewise, the institute has the same right and obligation to discern with her.

The Propositum

Another question which arose immediately after the Rite's publication, and which continues to raise questions, is the nature and effect of the *propositum*, and the prayer of consecration.

Some of the questions placed before the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship sought to draw comparisons between religious with simple vows and consecrated virgins. One query asked whether or not there might be gradations of consecration and if so, which was the highest. In response the Dicastery asserted that there are not gradations of consecration, determined by different rites (9). This was followed by the question of whether a vow was necessary to consecration

or if some other form of commitment, such as a promise, would be sufficient if accepted by the Church. The response clarified that strictly speaking, a vow in the technical sense used today is not necessary. It is, however, the response continues, indispensable that the person have the intention of offering him/herself to God in a total and perpetual way, and that this be accepted by the Church (10). In the context of the Rite for the Consecration of Virgins, this response reflects the two-fold movement of the renewal of the *propositum* by the virgin, and the prayer of consecration by the bishop.

De Urquiri, however, finds a lacuna in the revised Rite regarding the actual nature of the commitment. He argues that the *propositum* and a vow are not wholly synonymous. There cannot be a vow without the intent, but the converse, he insists, is not necessarily true. In this context, however, he notes that since the time of St. Jerome in the fifth century, the general understanding has been that the *sacrum virginitatis propositum* was understood as a general vow of religion—not an explicit vow, but an implicit one. He also calls attention to the fact that the canons do not include this consecration with the perpetual public vow of chastity in religious institutes which constitutes an impediment to valid marriage (cf. can. 1088) (11).

Also writing at the time of the revised Code, Hout warned against trying to put the ancient practice (the *propositum*) into today's categories of vows. The consecrated virgin, he states, enters a public state of virginity; a public state of consecration (12).

As has been seen above, those drafting the canon on this subject also had doubts. Nevertheless, the combined expression of the *propositum* in the words of the Rite and the bishop's response in the prayer of consecration, seem to reflect the understanding noted from the time of St. Jerome, and to clearly indicate a public state of consecrated life in the Church.

The very nature of the vocation and the Rite itself make clear that the fundamental way of life is that of consecrated virginity. It should also be clear that the Rite is not a religious profession and does not call for vows of poverty or obedience, or living "according to the constitutions of X." It is a life of consecrated virginity...of charity...of prayer and service of the Church. Consecrated virgins do not make vows of poverty and obedience, but united to Christ and the Church in a special way through their virginity, they must be exemplary in that evangelical detachment from material things, and that obedience to God and the Church which is required of all of the baptized (cf. VC 30).

The Minister of the Rite

Despite the emphasis on the role of the bishop and the Rite's expressed preference for the ceremony being celebrated in the Cathedral, doubts have been raised about the minister. The Rite states that the minister is the bishop who is the ordinary of the place. Canon 604 states the same, using the revised language of the Code, the diocesan bishop. Although some, including de Urquiri, express the opinion that this could be delegated to a priest as extraordinary minister(13), taking into consideration the entire symbolism of the bond with the local Church, represented by the diocesan bishop, it becomes clear that much would be lost by delegation. The Rite states clearly that the diocesan bishop is the minister. As noted above, one of the decisions in drafting the canon was to remove reference to another being delegated by him for this celebration. Hout states that it is the use of the Pontificals imposed by the liturgical rite which requires the bishop as minister, more than the necessity of orders or the power of government. As chief pastor of the

local Church, it belongs to the diocesan bishop to choose and consecrate for the service of the diocese (14).

It could be concluded then that the delegation of a priest would not invalidate the consecration, but would be inadequate in its symbolism. On a practical note, since this is a relatively infrequent ceremony for which considerable time of preparation is needed and which does not have to take place according to a specific time sequence, under normal circumstances it would not seem necessary to delegate the role of minister. If this should be necessary, delegation to another bishop would be more appropriate.

Relationship to the Diocese

As has been seen, among the qualifications listed in the introduction to the Rite for a woman living in the world who wishes to receive the consecration of virgins, is that her age, prudence and universally approved character give assurance of her perseverance in the life of chastity “dedicated to the service of the Church” and of her neighbor. Earlier in the same Introduction, when speaking of the principal duties of such women, it is noted that their consecration of their chastity in this vocation is for the sake of a more fervent love of Christ and “of greater freedom in the service of their brothers and sisters.” To this end they spend their lives in works of penance and mercy, in apostolic activity and in prayer “according to their state of life and spiritual gifts.” The one specific note added here is a strong exhortation to celebrate the liturgy of the hours daily, especially morning and evening prayer.

In the primitive Church, surely some of the early consecrated virgins were women of Christian households which provided their support. While today, some may have personal funds at their disposal both for their own support and for works of charity among the poor, the normal situation is that a consecrated virgin must earn her living, secure provision for her medical care in ways available to other individuals, and provide, at least modestly, for her own future. If an individual is in the service of the local Church in a full time work, she would need to receive the salary or stipend another person would receive. If she earns her living through a secular job, she will probably volunteer her free time in the service of the diocese or parish according to her gifts and the needs of the Church.

Practical questions regarding the finances of a consecrated virgin and the diocese’s responsibility for her in that area, find a response in the fact that this is an individual vocation to consecration, and, as distinct from religious, is a secular one. There is no religious community of goods into which they put all that they receive and from which they receive what is needed. In a way more similar to members of a secular institute, the consecrated virgins earn their living and spend themselves in the service of the local Church. One is reminded of St. Paul who wished to earn his own way while bringing the Good News.

Through consecration there is a particular bond with the bishop and with the particular Church. It is, however, less juridically specified than the bond referred to as the incardination of a diocesan priest. The latter has an obligation of obedience to his bishop in being assigned to priestly duties, and in turn, he has a right to be supported in his material, as well as spiritual, needs, through the local Church. This is not the situation of the consecrated virgin.

How each consecrated virgin will exercise her responsibility of service in works of mercy, prayer, sacrifice and apostolic activity, and how she will earn her living, are elements of the conversation which must take place prior to being admitted to consecration. Consecrated virgins

may be working as university professors, parish secretaries, nurses or pastoral ministers; they may be working in purely secular jobs during the day and volunteering their services in a variety of charitable works on behalf of the sick, elderly, handicapped or homeless in their time off. Wherever they are, they will be present as one consecrated, bearing witness to the love of God for all, made visible and mirrored in Christ's love for the Church.

All of this does not suggest, however, that after admitting a candidate and presiding at the Rite of Consecration the bishop has no further responsibility toward the consecrated virgin. As pastor of the local Church he is concerned for the promotion of vocations of all kinds, for the spiritual well-being of all members of his flock. For those who have been received by him for consecration at the service of the Church, he must express special pastoral and spiritual concern. Many encourage that the bishop have a regular, perhaps annual, conversation with each consecrated virgin, regarding her life of consecration and her areas of service in the Church.

A bishop will most probably call upon the more mature to participate in the formation and preparation of other consecrated virgins. He may discover areas of service in the diocese for which they are particularly apt, and call upon them for their assistance. While it is presumed that a consecrated virgin will have another spiritual director, not all regular contact with the diocesan bishop should be delegated to others, such as a vicar for consecrated life. A well prepared colloquium can be of benefit to both the bishop and the individual consecrated virgin.

Several years of experience have given rise to further practical questions about this relationship with the local Church. A woman is admitted and consecrated by the bishop of the place, but it can happen that she must move to another place. The law does not provide details, but since this is a public state of consecration in the Church, it would seem right to request of the consecrating bishop a letter introducing her to the new bishop. In some dioceses, it is the practice to give a certificate or letter testifying to the fact, on the occasion of her consecration. This would include the date, diocese and consecrating bishop. Providing this at the time of the Rite would avoid future problems if that bishop is no longer there when the need of a document arises. Likewise, notification of the Church of Baptism would be appropriate.

In recent years, consecrated virgins have also encountered the problem of the bishop of a new residence not being familiar with or favorable to this vocation. Likewise it may happen that a new bishop in the original diocese has less interest or experience with the Rite. First of all, it must be stated that the fact of the woman's public state of consecration in the Church is in no way changed, nor are her fundamental obligations of prayer and service. Because this vocation is less familiar than that of priesthood and religious life, there can be an awkward situation. Nevertheless, the Church's formal recognition of and provision for the vocation is clear, and patient efforts must continue to make it better known and observed. In some places, materials are being placed at the disposition of bishops and vicars for consecrated life in order to assist with the process of discernment, formation and consecration (15).

Discernment and Formation

It is worthwhile noting that the Code does not require a "rule of life" for consecrated virgins as it does for hermits who wish to be recognized as living a consecrated life (can. 603). Nevertheless, a bishop who must discern whether or not to admit a woman to consecration will want to know about her way of life, her spirituality, her prayer and her proposed way of serving the local Church. As an individually lived vocation, there is no need for uniformity of practice,

beyond the urging found in the Introduction to the Rite to pray the morning and evening prayer of the Church.

The discernment of this vocation presents a significant challenge. One must study the Introduction to the Rite and the Rite itself. There are, as we have seen, norms which exclude certain persons from receiving it. A woman seeking some form of individual consecration may not know the whole spirituality expressed in the Rite, but she, and the one guiding her in discernment, must experience an openness to this expression of spirituality. It is truly scriptural and has a very long tradition in the Church. Spousal imagery is not as common today as it once was. It is not suited to every woman who leaves a monastery of nuns or an institute dedicated to apostolic works, but wishes to continue a consecrated life. It is not the answer for everyone who wants to dedicate herself to God and the service of the Church.

In a word, this is a distinct vocation. Women throughout the world experience and respond to this specific call with its various elements: a witness to the Church as spouse of Christ, a life of consecrated virginity, a life of prayer and service in the Church, lived with neither the support and the obligations of a religious community, nor the regular contacts which flow from belonging to a secular institute. These must be strong and dedicated women, mature in their singleness of purpose.

Without specifics, the Rite speaks of age, prudence and a universally approved character as necessary traits of candidates. It does not state an age, as does the Code for religious and for secular institutes, but these requirements suggest a certain maturity. The fact that the Rite of Consecration is at once a definitive act, suggests that there be a fairly lengthy time of formation and preparation. Some bishops require a number of years living the life of a consecrated virgin, but obliged under a private vow of chastity, before admitting a woman to the public rite.

If certain analogies are sought from the canons on consecrated life, the most logical choice would probably be those for secular institutes. Because of the similarity of life, as an individual in a secular setting, longer periods of formation and temporary commitment are required than is the case for religious.

Surely as a part of formation, before and after consecration, there will need to be spiritual direction for growth in prayer and all aspects of the spiritual life. A deepened study of the Rite, supplemented by related doctrine will assist the candidate in interiorization of the meaning of Christian virginity, and of the Church, particularly under this image as spouse of Christ. Likewise, assistance in how to pray the psalms will enrich the morning and evening prayer of the consecrated virgin, and formation in the liturgy of the Church will make sacramental practice more fruitful. Because love of Jesus is central to all, all that fosters growth in this love and its expression in prayer and service of others will enable joy and perseverance in this very particular vocation.

Associations

As has been seen, during the meetings of the *coetus* which formulated the new canon, there was difference of opinion regarding the provision for associations. The text itself clearly leaves associations optional. The right of the consecrated virgins reflects that enjoyed by all of the Christian faithful to form and govern associations for some appropriate purpose (cf. can. 215).

The broad purposes for which such an association would be formed and to which individuals might choose to belong, are expressed in canon 604: to observe their resolution more faith-

fully and to perform by mutual assistance service to the Church. The statutes of any such association would have to express more clearly how this would be done, in particular with reference to their service to the Church, since these are not normally envisioned as institutes of consecrated life with a common mission (16).

The canon speaks of service to the Church “in harmony with their proper state.” As has been seen, their state is that of publicly consecrated persons in the Church and as persons who have received that consecration as individuals, remaining in their secular condition. Associations of consecrated virgins would seem more analogous to clerical associations than to institutes of consecrated life. The original concept of *ordo* as a category of persons such as the order of virgins, of widows, and of penitents, maintained the identity of the individual within that category while recognizing the group as having its particular place in the Church.

To more closely imitate that original practice, when associations of consecrated virgins are formed, their statutes should be prepared primarily on the basis of the canons regulating associations of the Christian faithful (cans. 298-329) and should avoid the temptation to borrow from the structures of religious institutes. The statutes will reflect the purposes given in the canon and further specify in what ways the association will seek to fulfill those purposes. These may include various forms of communications, the publication of materials useful for formation before and after consecration, the sharing of news and information, and the planning of gatherings such as retreats and conferences.

Depending on circumstances, associations may actually be formed on a diocesan, regional or national basis (cf. can. 312). However, once erected, actual membership in the association remains voluntary for each individual. While already being a consecrated virgin would be a requirement for membership, not all who receive the consecration are obliged to belong to an association. Some, in view of the distinct and individual nature of their consecrated vocation do not wish to risk being confused with religious or secular institute members. Others benefit from the mutual support and encouragement provided by an association.

The statutes of an association as envisioned by the canon, should in no way change the nature of the vocation as presented in the Rite. The moderator of an association should not be presented in such a way as to have authority over individual members, as in an institute of consecrated life. The statutes should neither add to the obedience already due to God and the Church, nor to poverty, guided by the Gospel norm for one following Christ, but not involving a religious community of goods.

It is not surprising that there continues to be discussion regarding the advisability of forming associations. During the Code revision process, some wished to omit all reference to associations for fear of their being developed into a new form of consecrated life. On the other hand, some questioned if the consecration of virgins is truly a form of consecrated life at all, because it does not include vows of poverty and obedience (17).

In his extensive study of the consecration of virgins, A. Jimenez includes a skeletal outline for statutes of an association in the sense of canon 604 §2. In a note he observes that his intention was to do a comparative study of existing statutes, but he received none in response to his requests. Thus he offers his reflections without presenting the results as a model to be followed. He begins from the principle that this vocation is an individual form of consecrated life and that each member of an association retains her autonomy and individuality(18).

Because the experience of the renewed Rite is relatively limited, and experience with associations is even more so, it would seem advisable that statutes—especially if being prepared at the national level—be approved provisionally for a specified period of years. This builds in a useful evaluation on the part of both the members and the episcopal conference. The same could certainly be useful at the diocesan level, although in that case there is more possibility of concrete collaboration between the persons interested and the bishop in the preparation of the statutes.

Neither the members of an association, nor the bishop should pressure an individual to join the association. Likewise, the association cannot in any way replace or impede that fundamental relationship of each consecrated virgin with the diocesan bishop and the diocese. These are her primary relationships; the association is to foster and support them.

Conclusion

In May, 1995, a pilgrimage and international congress was held in Rome to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of the revised Rite for the consecration of virgins. Participants visited the major basilicas, participated in special liturgies, heard conferences and shared in discussions. Pope John Paul II received the group in a special audience.

The women present were of various ages and cultures. Most did not wear any visible identifying sign of their state or use a religious title. Some were former religious, but it was noted that there are now increasing numbers of “first vocations” to this form of consecration. Many expressed the experience of bishops moving gradually toward the full use of the Rite in the cathedral, as is recommended in the Rite, since the vocation often is not well known in the local Church. Some spoke of spiritual direction from their bishop, some of annual meetings, and some of being delegated to the care of others. Most live within the same diocese in ways diverse one from the other, while at least one bishop had set up norms which almost seem like a rule of life.

Due to the very nature of the vocation as an individual one, there had been difficulty in communicating with consecrated virgins throughout the world, to provide them with information regarding the event in Rome. They had to depend on informal networks of communication, in addition to the hope that bishops would pass the information on to the consecrated virgins in their dioceses.

In the booklet recording the Acts of the Congress, there are national reports from twenty of the countries represented. These came from Eastern and Western Europe, North and South America, from two countries of Africa and from the Middle East.

France stood out, claiming about 300 consecrated virgins. There they have benefited greatly from the services of a member of the Episcopal Conference’s Commission for Religious, named as liaison for them.

Argentina’s report claimed about 200 consecrated virgins. They have benefited from the assistance of a priest of the diocese of Buenos Aires who has been given particular responsibility for them. The report from Buenos Aires expressed the belief that they were the first diocese in the world to use this form of consecration, beginning in May 1973. It was reported that Argentine dioceses give a document officially witnessing to the fact of the consecration and that it is also registered in the books of the archdiocese as public proof of the individual’s state.

In his audience with the consecrated virgins on June 2, 1995, Pope John Paul II focused his remarks on love. Love Christ, the reason for your life, he exhorted. Return Christ's infinite love with your own total and exclusive love. Love the Church. Here the Pope's words echo the ancient tradition of the vocation: "It is also the task of virgins to be the hard-working hands of the local Church's generosity, the voice of her prayer, the expression of her mercy, the relief of her poor, the comfort of her suffering sons and daughters, and the support of her orphans and widows." The consecrated virgins are to have a merciful heart, sharing the sufferings of others, and committing themselves to the defense of life, the advancement of women and respect for their freedom and dignity.

Finally, the consecrated virgins are urged to love Mary of Nazareth, perfect icon of the Church as mystery of communion and love(19).

In 1996, the consecrated virgins also found their place in the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*. Their vocation is recognized as "a special eschatological image of the Heavenly Bride and of the life to come..." The Holy Father adds: "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" (VC 7).

Consecrated virgins are a renewed gift of the Spirit for today's Church as it enters a new millennium.

– Sr. Sharon Holland, I.H.M.

Notes

- (1) See M. Dortel-Claudot, "Ascètes et Vierges des Premiers Siècles." *Vie Consacrée*, 48 (1976) 142-50.
- (2) "Negative et nihil innovetur." *AAS*, 19 (1927) 138-139.
- (3) Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution, *Sponsa Christi* and General Statutes. Nov. 21, 1950. *AAS*, 43 (1951) 5-24; *CLD*, 3:221-248. Statutes, Art. I11, §3 states: "The ancient solemn formulae for the consecration of Virgins, which are in the Roman Pontifical, are reserved to Nuns." See D.M. Hout, "La Consecration des Vierges," *Informations SCRIS*, 9 (1983) 159; Eng. Ed., *Consecrated Life*, p. 294.
- (4) T. de Urquiri, "Circa Ordinem Consecrationis Virginum Questiones Tres." *CpR* 64 (1983) 142-169. On this point see pp. 146-153.
- (5) *CLD* 7. 42 1-425. See also *AAS*, 62 (1970) 659; *CpR* 51 (1970) 373-375; *Notitiae* 6 (1970) 3 14-3 16. Except in the case of *AAS*, which published only the Decree, the "Norms" or Introduction to the Rite also appear in the other places cited.
- (6) *Comm.* 11 (1979)331-334.
- (7) *Notitiae* 7 (1971) 108-109.
- (8) In such a case, the superior general may wish to make use of the exception provided for individual novices in can. 647, §2.
- (9) *Notitiae* 7 (1971)108.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- (11) De Urquiri, pp. 156-157.
- (12) Hout, p. 164-165; CL p. 299.
- (13) De Urquiri, pp. 158-159
- (14) Hout, p. 168; CL, pp. 302-303.
- (15) The [United States Association of Consecrated Virgins](#) has prepared a "Formation Packet" which includes a copy of the Rite, conferences and articles, recommendations regarding discernment, excerpts from the writings of the Fathers of the Church and from more recent Church documents, personal testimonies and bibliography.

- (16) The 1998 *Annuario Pontificio* lists one association of consecrated virgins in the category “Other Institutes of Consecrated Life.” That Argentine association, known as “Servidoras,” was conceived as an association of consecrated virgins with a particular apostolic direction, well before the canon was written.
- (17) *Comm.* 11 (1979)332.
- (18) See A. Jimenez Echave: *El Order de Las Virgenes Consagradas. Comentario al Canon 604*. Rome: Istituto della Vita Consacrata “Claretianum,” 1997.
- (19) *L’Osservatore Romano*, 3 giugno 1995, p. 5; Eng. Ed. June 14, 1995.