

“May Christ Be Your Total and Exclusive Love”

*International Conference of Consecrated Virgins, Rome
In audience with Pope John Paul II, 2 June 1995*

My dear Sisters,

1. This audience fills me with joy, for it offers me the opportunity to meet with you on the occasion of the international convention which has been promoted in order to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the promulgation, which occurred on May 31, 1970, of the up-dated Ritual of the Consecration of Virgins. I greet the organizers of the convention and all of you who have gathered here today.

Vatican Council II determined the revision of the rite of the Consecration of Virgins, present in the Roman Pontifical (cf. Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 80). This was to entail not only a diligent revision of the liturgical formulas and ritual gestures, but also a restoration of a rite that, with respect to women who do not belong to institutes of consecrated life, had fallen into disuse for many centuries. Along with this rite, the “*Ordo virginum*” was also reinstated, which was to find its own juridical configuration, distinct from that of institutes, in Can. 599 of the new Code of Canon Law. This renewed rite, and reinstated “*Ordo*” are a two-fold gift of the Lord to His Church. You exult at such a gift, thanking the Lord for it. On this occasion, you seek to draw from it a motive and inspiration for renewing your fervor and commitment.

2. On my part, I would like to speak to you with the same affectionate warmth with which bishops of old used to speak to the virgins of their churches: for example, the warmth of Methodius of Olympia, the first cantor of Christian virginity; that of Athanasius of Alexandria and of Cyprian of Carthage, who considered consecrated virgins an elect portion of Christ’s flock; that of John Chrysostom, whose writings are rich in ideas to nourish the spiritual life of virgins. Ambrose of Milan, whose works bear witness to an extraordinary pastoral care for consecrated virgins; Augustine of Hippo, that keen, profound theologian of virginity embraced for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Mt 19:12); the great, holy Pontiff Leo I, with all probability the author of the admirable prayer of consecration *Deus castorum corporum*; and Leander of Seville who wrote a beautiful letter to his sister Fiorentina on the occasion of her virginal consecration. This is an episcopal tradition to which I willingly join myself.
3. On this meaningful occasion, I am happy to stress some fundamental directives that can guide your special vocation in the Church and in the world.

Love Christ, the meaning of your life.

For the consecrated virgin, as St. Leander of Seville affirms, Christ is everything: “spouse, brother, friend, inheritance, reward, God and Lord” (*Regula sancti Leandri*, Introd.).

The mystery of the Incarnation was seen by the Holy Fathers in a spousal light, following the interpretation given by the Apostle Paul on the Lord’s death: “Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). The event of the resurrection was also seen as a nuptial encounter between the Risen Lord and the new messianic community, for which reason the Easter Vigil was celebrated as the “nuptial night of the Church” (St. Asterio Amaseno, *Homilia XIX, in Psalmum V oratio V*).

The entire life of Christ was therefore placed under the sign of the mystery of His nuptials with the Church (cf. Eph 5:32). You, too, dear Sisters, belong to that mystery through the gift of the Holy Spirit and in virtue of a “new spiritual anointing” (cf. *Pontificale Romanum, Ordo consecrationis virginum*, n. 16).

Answer Christ’s infinity love with your total and exclusive love.

Love Him as He desires to be love in your concrete life: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (Jn 14:15; cf. 14:21). Love Him as is fitting to your spousal condition: assuming His same sentiments (cf. Phil 2:5); sharing His way of life consisting in humility and meekness, love and mercy, service and joyful availability, untiring zeal for the glory of the Father and the salvation of the human race.

The state of consecrated virginity makes the praise of Christ more spontaneous, listening to His word quicker, service to Him more joyful, and the occasion of offering Him the homage of your love more frequent. Yet *consecrated virginity is not a privilege, but rather a gift of God*, which implies a strong commitment in following Him and being His disciple.

The following of the Lamb in Heaven (cf. Rev 14:6) begins on earth, walking down the narrow path (cf. Mt 7:14). Your *sequela Christi* will be more radical, the greater your love is for Christ and the more lucid your awareness of the meaning of virginal consecration. In the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, dealing with the “Gospel ideal of virginity,” I recalled that “in (consecrated) virginity is expressed . . . the radical nature of the Gospel, which consists in leaving everything and following Christ” (n. 20).

Your being *disciples of Christ* will be more intense, the more you are convinced that Jesus is the one Teacher (cf. Mt 23:8), whose words are “spirit and life.” Dear Sisters, remember that your place is, like that of Mary of Bethany (cf. Lk 10:39), at the feet of Jesus, listening to the words of grace that come forth from His mouth (cf. Lk 4:22).

Love the Church, your Mother.

Through the solemn rite presided over by the diocesan bishop (*Ordo consecrationis virginum, Praenotanda*, n. 6, page 8), you have received from the Church the gift of consecration. You are dedicated to its service. You ought to feel ever bound to the Church by a strict tie.

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. Virgins are also a reminder of the orientation of the Church towards the future goods and a warning to keep this eschatological tension alive.

It is also the task of virgins to become an active hand of the generosity of the local church, the voice of its prayer, an expression of its mercy, a help for its poor, a consolation for its afflicted sons and daughters, and a support for its orphans and widows. We could say that at the time of the Father the *pietas* and *caritas* of the Church were expressed to a great part through the heart and hands of consecrated virgins.

These are lines of commitment that still remain valid today. I myself underlined the anthropological value of the virginal choice carried out in the Church. It is a way in which the consecrated virgin “realizes her personality as woman.” “In freely chosen virginity the woman confirms herself as a person, as a being that the Creator desired for Himself right from the beginning, and she realizes at the same time the personal value of her own womanliness” (*Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 20).

Not less than the woman who follows the path of matrimony, the consecrated virgin is capable of living and expressing spousal love. “In a similar love” she becomes in the Church a gift for God, for Christ the Redeemer, and for every brother and sister.

Love the children of God.

Your total and exclusive love for Christ does not exempt you from love towards all men and women, your brothers and sisters, for the horizons of your charity—precisely because you belong to the Lord—are the same as the horizons of Christ.

According to the Apostle, the virgin “gives her mind to the Lord’s affairs and to being holy in body and spirit” (I Cor 7:34). She seeks “the things that are above, which Christ is, sitting at God’s right hand” (Col 3:1). And yet this does not estrange you from the great values of creation and from the longings of humanity, nor from the suffering of the earthly city, from its conflicts and from the sorrows caused by war, famine, disease, and the wide-spread “culture of death.” Have a merciful heart and share in the sufferings of the brethren. Commit yourselves to the defense of life, the promotion of women and respect for their liberty and dignity.

You are well aware: “You who are virgins for Christ” become “mothers in the spirit” (*Ordo consecrationum virginum*, n. 16), cooperating with love in the evangelization of man and his promotion.

Love Mary of Nazareth, the first fruits of Christian virginity. Humble and poor, “the promised spouse of Joseph” (Mt 1:18), a just man “of the house of David” (Lk 1:27), Mary became by a singular privilege and by her fidelity to the Lord’s call, the Virgin Mother of the Son of God.

Mary is thus the perfect icon of the Church as a mystery of communion and love, an icon of its being *Virgin, Spouse and Mother*.

As St. Leander of Seville observes, Mary is also “the culminating point and prototype of virginity.” In body and soul she was fully what you desire to be with all your strength: virgins in body and soul, spouses through total and exclusive adherence to the love of Christ, mothers through the gift of the Spirit.

My dear Sisters, Mary is your Mother, Sister and Teacher. Learn from her to fulfill God’s will and to accept His salvific plan, to keep His word and to bring all events of life to it, to sing His praises for His “great works” in favor of humanity, to share in the mystery of suffering, to bring Christ to all men and to intercede for those in need.

Be with Mary in the nuptial room where there is rejoicing and where Christ manifests Himself to His disciples as the messianic Spouse. Be with Mary at the foot of the Cross, where Christ offers His life for the Church. Remain with her in the Cenacle, the house of the Spirit, who is poured out as divine Love in the Church, His Spouse.

Persevere faithfully in your vocation with the help of the most holy Virgin. May the examples of the holy Virgins who enriched the life of the Church in every century inspire you.

May the assurance of my constant prayer together with a special blessing accompany you.