

Consecrated Women Faithfully Serve Christ

By their profession of the evangelical counsel of chastity,
consecrated women reflect the union of the Church with her divine Bridegroom

by Pope John Paul II

March 15, 2003

On Wednesday, 15 March, the Holy Father continued his discussion of consecrated life, speaking this week about women religious and consecrated virgins. After mentioning all the feminine qualities which are so valuable and indispensable to their work, the Pope emphasized the importance of prayer and contemplation. Here is a translation of the Holy Father's catechesis, which was the 119th in the series on the mystery of the Church and was given in Italian.

1. The life of consecrated women has a very important place in the Church. It is enough to think of the deep influence of the contemplative life and prayer of women religious, of their work in education and health care, of their collaboration in many places in parish life, of the important services that they provide at diocesan or interdiocesan levels and of the specialized tasks which they are increasingly assuming even in the Holy See.

Let us also remember that in some countries the proclamation of the Gospel, catechetical activities and even the conferring of Baptism are largely entrusted to women religious who have direct contact with the people in schools and families. Neither should we forget the other women who, in various forms of individual consecration and ecclesial communion, give of themselves to Christ in service to his kingdom in the Church, as happens today in the order of virgins, which one enters through special consecration to God in the hands of the diocesan Bishop (cf. *CIC*, can. 604).

2. Blessed be this multiform host of "handmaids of the Lord" who down the centuries extend and renew the very beautiful experience of the women who followed Jesus and served him and his disciples (cf. Lk 8:1-3).

They, no less than the Apostles, experienced the overwhelming power of the divine Master's word and love, and began to help and serve him to the best of their ability on his missionary journeys. Jesus' pleasure is apparent in the Gospel. He could not fail to appreciate these expressions of generosity and kindness typical of feminine psychology, but inspired by a faith in his person beyond mere human explanation. A significant example of this is Mary Magdalen, faithful disciple and minister of Christ in his life and later a witness to and, one could almost say, the first messenger of his Resurrection (cf. Jn 20: 17-18).

Jesus' sacrifice is example to be imitated

3. It cannot be ruled out that in her gesture of sincere and faithful adherence there is a sublime reflection of the sense of total dedication that leads a woman to betrothal, and

more so, at the level of supernatural love, to virginal consecration to Christ, as I pointed out in *Mulieris dignitatem* (cf. n. 20).

In this following of Christ expressed as “service”, we can also discover the other feminine quality of *self-giving*, so vividly expressed by the Virgin Mary in her final words to the angel: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). It is an expression of faith and love, which is made concrete in obedience to the divine call, at the service of God and of our brothers and sisters: thus it was with Mary, thus it was with the women who followed Jesus, thus it was with all those who, in their footsteps, were to follow him down the centuries.

Today spousal mysticism appears less pronounced in young aspirants to the religious life, this outlook is not fostered by the common mentality, by school or by reading. Besides, there are well-known saintly figures who found and followed other paths in their relationship of consecration to God: such as service to the coming of his kingdom, the gift of themselves to him in order to serve him in their poor brothers and sisters, and a keen sense of his sovereignty (“My Lord and my God!”, cf. Jn 20:28), identification with the Eucharistic sacrifice, being a daughter of the Church, the vocation to works of mercy, the desire to be the least or the last in the Christian community or to be the heart of the Church or to offer in their own souls a little temple to the Blessed Trinity. These are some of the *leitmotifs* of a life – like that of St Paul and especially that of Mary – grasped by Christ Jesus (cf. Phil 3: 12).

In addition, it could be useful to underscore for all women religious the value of participating in the condition of the “Servant of the Lord” (cf. Is 41:9, 42:1, 49:3 Phil 2:7, etc.), proper to Christ the Priest and Victim. The “service” that Jesus came to fulfil by giving his life “as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28) becomes an example to be imitated and a redeeming participation as it were to be lived in fraternal “service” (cf. Mt 20:25-27). This does not exclude – on the contrary, it includes – special fulfilment of the Church’s spousal dimension in union with Christ and in the constant application to the world of the fruits of the Redemption wrought by the priesthood of the Cross.

4. According to the Council, the mystery of the Church’s spousal union with Christ is represented in every consecrated life (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 44), especially through the profession of the evangelical counsel of chastity (cf. *Perfectæ caritatis*, n. 12). It is understandable however that this representation is particularly realized in the consecrated woman, to whom the title “sponsa Christi” is frequently attributed, including in the liturgical texts. It is true that Tertullian applied the image of nuptials with God to men and women without distinction when he wrote: “How many men and women in the ranks of the Church have appealed to continence and preferred to be wedded to God...” (*De exhort. cast.* 13; PL 2:930A, *Corp. Christ.*, 2, 1035 35-39), but it cannot be denied that the feminine soul has a particular capacity to live in a mystical spousal relationship with Christ and thus to reproduce in herself the face and heart of his Bride, the Church. This is why, in the rite for the profession of women religious and consecrated virgins in the world, the singing or recitation of the antiphon “Veni sponsa Christi...” fills their hearts

with intense emotion, enveloping those concerned and the whole assembly in an aura of mysticism.

5. In the logic of the union with Christ as Priest and Spouse, the sense of spiritual motherhood is also developed in women. Virginité – or *evangelical chastity* – implies renunciation of physical motherhood, but so as to be expressed, according to God's plan, in a superior kind of motherhood on which the light of the Virgin Mary's motherhood shines. Every consecrated virgin is destined to receive from the Lord a gift which in a certain way reproduces the features of universality and spiritual fruitfulness of Mary's motherhood.

This is shown in the work accomplished by many women religious in educating young people in faith. It is well known that many female congregations were founded and have established numerous schools precisely to impart this education for which, especially when it is a question of little ones, womanly qualities are valuable and indispensable. This is also the case with many works of charity and assistance to the poor, the sick, the handicapped, the abandoned, especially children and little girls, once described as waifs. These are all cases where dedication and compassion, the treasures of the feminine heart, are involved. It is finally found in the various forms of co-operation in the services provided by parishes and Catholic institutions, where a woman's capacities for collaboration in the pastoral ministry are being ever more clearly revealed.

6. However, among all the values in female religious life, prayer should always be recognized as having priority. This is the main form of achieving and expressing intimacy with the divine Bridegroom. All women religious are called to be women of prayer, women of piety, women of interior life, of a "life of prayer". If it is true that the witness to this vocation is more obvious in institutes of contemplative life, certainly it also appears in institutes of the active apostolate that carefully safeguard the times of prayer and contemplation which correspond to the needs and demands of consecrated persons and to the advice given in the Gospel. Jesus who recommended prayer to all his disciples, wished to shed light on the value of a life of prayer and contemplation with the example of a woman, Mary of Bethany, whom he praised for choosing "the better part" (Lk 10:42): listening to the divine word, assimilating it, making it a secret of life. Was not this a light for the whole future contribution of women to the Church's life of prayer?

Secret of perseverance found in prayer

In assiduous prayer, moreover, lies the secret of perseverance in that commitment of fidelity to Christ which must serve as an example for everyone in the Church.

This unblemished witness to persevering love can be a great help to other women in critical situations which in this regard also afflict our society. We hope and pray that many religious women, possessing the heart of a Bride of Christ and showing it in their lives, may also help reveal to all the Church's fidelity in her union with Christ her Spouse and enable them to understand it better: fidelity in truth, in charity, and in yearning for universal salvation. 🌹