

Excerpts from “Consecration of Virgins”

By Fr. Paschal Botz, OSB, 11 November 1954

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THE Consecration of Virgins is a sign of spiritual renewal. Always in times when the doctrine of the Mystical Body was appreciated, it seems there was a return to this rite. It surely takes the right kind of total faith. A return to “this most lovely of the records of ancient liturgy” should correspond with a spiritual renewal, an inward clarification and intensification of the means to perfection.

In our preparation, there should be a two-fold consideration.

1. We should consider and clarify the problems, the history of the rite, and its legal elements. This kind of study, however, is likely to predominate to the neglect of the spiritual. Theologians and canonists both must study the whole subject further.
2. We must consider and meditate on the mystical elements, the contemplative character and power of the rite, the meaning of the prayers and symbols for our spiritual life (ascetic and mystical). Truly, it serves a retreat purpose, inward renewal in Christ, with all the new awakening, new attachment to Christ.

Look out for your spiritual welfare! Much of our time and energy goes to making a success of teaching, of our apostolate, our credits, our nursing, etc. That is all good, but it presupposes that our interior life is rich. How much time [does a consecrated virgin spend] for developing her interior life, for making real progress? Does she bear fruits of sanctity in the enclosed garden of [the spiritual life]? Or is it a wild garden of brambles and weeds? Does she adorn herself daily for loving communion with her Spouse? Does she adorn the Church for all the world to admire in faith? Does she grow in the power of prayer and recollection, in the use of personal sacramentals, in the contemplative ideal?

Did you ever realize that the Apostolate of Virginity is one way of restoring all things in Christ? It gives the world the highest picture of woman’s vocation on earth, the virginal state? . . . We must be in love with the ideals of Christ. Today married life tends to displace the ideal of virginity in the eyes of many, but our true Christian emphasis ought to be on dignity, beauty, charm of spirit.

1. The Apostolate of Virginity, through the rite of Consecration.

The consecration, performed in church, publicly, where the faithful and especially the young see it, is a way of exerting your true calling in the Church. You show forth your special position in the Mystical Body. You show forth the excellence of spiritual marriage and virginity, its pre-eminence over family life in the sacrament of marriage.

Therefore, you are serving the best interests of the Church in receiving the Consecration and living it out.

2. You do not lessen your works performed for the Church, but give them a great source of inspiration and contemplation and merit. You serve the needs of the Church better, praying the Divine Office for the Church's universal, redemptive, mission intentions. You exercise an influence for good on other Orders in the Church. You help to bring the Christ-ideal to other[s] . . . , in all humility.

3. There would be an opportunity to give to Christians and non-Catholics and pagans alike a perfect and hitherto concealed glory of your state, by speaking about the consecration, by writing it out, and spreading the good news far and wide. Let the world know that this rite is not "obsolete," as some thought, but alive and effective to regenerate souls. You could make it clear what the Church has done for womankind, how the Church has raised the status of women in society against all paganism and secularism. The consecration must have been a powerful weapon to spiritualize men's concept of woman, to give her the exercise of her rights, given by God.

Spiritual nuptials are a mystery of faith

Only faith can see the hidden "*sacramentum*," the hidden mystery. This is the heart of the rite, the "visible sign," the grace described. All the glory of the King's daughter is within (Ps. 44). The world cannot see the reality, but only the rich drama, colorful rites and prayers.

Pius XII, in *Sacra Virginitas* (1954) says, quoting St. Augustine, that "Virginitas is not honored because it is bodily integrity, but because it is something dedicated to God . . . nor do we extol virgins because they are virgins, but because they are virgins dedicated to God in loving continence.

Pius XII, in the same encyclical, gives the official interpretation of perfect chastity. In speaking of spiritual marriage, he says, "Moreover, the Fathers of the Church considered this obligation of perfect chastity as a kind of spiritual marriage, in which the soul is wedded to Christ so that some go so far as to compare breaking the vow with adultery (St. Cyprian, PL 4,459). Thus St. Athanasius writes that the Catholic Church has been accustomed to call those who have the virtue of virginity the spouses of Christ. And St. Ambrose, writing succinctly of the consecrated virgin says, "She is a virgin who is married to God." In fact, as is clear from the writings of this same doctor of Milan, as early as the fourth century the rite of consecration of a virgin was very like the rite the Church uses in our own day in the marriage blessing.

"For the same reason, the Fathers exhort virgins to love their Divine Spouse more ardently than they would love a husband had they married, and always in their thoughts and actions to fulfil His will.

“It is nothing else but love of Him that sweetly constrains the virgin to consecrate her body and soul entirely to her divine Redeemer. Thus, St. Methodius, bishop of Olympus, places these beautiful words on her lips: ‘You, yourself, O Christ, art my all. For you I keep myself chaste, and holding aloft my shining lamp, I run to meet you, my Spouse.’”

THE GRACE OF MYSTICAL MARRIAGE

Spiritual espousals with your divine Bridegroom is a high grace. It is, in fact, the highest, specific grace of this sacramental. There are many other graces given, which are described in the rite. What the words and ceremonies of the bishop describe, that is the grace which the Church intends for you, prays for. Many actual graces are given, but there is also an increase of sanctifying grace. By the invocation of the Holy Spirit, a special communication of that Spirit comes to you. The rite is ratified in heaven; nothing is done in vain. You become a strong, living center where the Holy Spirit wants to unfold His gifts. Hence there is also an increase of Gifts. Your state of grace and cooperation in faith and charity are needed so that the tremendous graces are realized. It is no empty ceremony!

How real is this to you? The grace of spiritual (mystical) marriage with the Divine Bridegroom sounds remote and unreal to the world of unbelief. But to faith it is most real, the most lasting reality. Virginity of body and soul, approved by the Church, undertaken for love of Christ, puts you into a state of spiritual union. That union with Christ in grace is more real than human marriage. In fact, human espousals are only a faint echo, a passing and disappointing image of the spiritual reality that is yours. Pray for light.

Compare it with the coronation of a queen (of England). That was a long spectacle that drew the attention of millions. Great and long preparation was required. For what? For a legal ceremony, once a Catholic ritual. There were 26 steps in that coronation ceremony. Was grace given? Was it ratified in heaven? Your espousals the angels are watching as a distinct joy in heaven. “Into these things the angels desire to look.” (1 Peter 1:12)

Your espousals are a crowning act of divine love. God comes down, singles you out, prepares you, takes you up into a union so sublime that all the high romance of man is empty and cheap by comparison. . . . [God] claims you as His own in a unique sense. This cannot be said of human beings in the same way. God loves you with a jealous love as a man loves his bride, according to St. Paul. Your will to virginity becomes fixed in the Church, and God raises you up to a sublime supernatural dignity.

In facie Ecclesiae. . . . The Church is virginal (and mother, as Mary is also the Virgin-Mother), and the Church needs other virgins to picture to the world her sublime union with Christ. That must become visible in persons like you. You have the high honor and calling to be visible symbols of that exclusive, flaming love of Christ, waiting for Him till He comes. You are not private individuals. . . , but shining lights in the kingdom of

Christ. You must let your light shine, and God will do the rest. The rite must allow you to sink in contemplation to the heart of this mystery, the greatest in your life.

Application of all this to you. It is a long way from original sin to Baptism. . . and now into a new realm of the Church's mystic life. You should rise to the heights of prayer through humility and obedience. The Saviour looks on you with love and invites you to the intimacy of His special gifts. "Rise, thou that sleepest and arise from the dead, and Christ shall enlighten you." (Eph. 5:14) You pass from glory to glory. As Esther, you go from door to door of the King's palace until you enter into His Throne Room Presence. You sing the "new canticle" which only the 144,000 signed know (Apoc.) I would like to think that you received new desires, mounting ever higher in the sight of God. . . .

Analogy

The American Astronomical Society met in 1951 at Haverford College. There Dr. Shapley of Harvard estimated that there are 200,000,000,000 galaxies (like our Milky Way system). . . . New worlds remain discoverable within our universe. How small all that is in comparison to grace, to the supernatural world, its possibilities, its discoveries, its adventures. At consecration, our faith opens up new worlds in the rite, unexpected heavenly constellations of grace. . . .

St. Paul says, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him." The closer we approach the Divine Majesty, the less we need words, the more is our soul detached, the more recollected in the simple gaze and act of love of the Godhead. . . . "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." There you spend your energies in prayer and sacrificial love and obedience and abandonment. Your activity becomes the outward fruit of that inward union. All is the overflow of love of the Triune Godhead who has deigned to make you hear His voice, to take you into a closer union.

Also, there is a new and supernatural fecundity. . . . The grace of the consecration will work out new offspring in the Church, unless one renders that grace sterile by lack of love, or by selfishness. . . .

The mystical life can well have its fountainhead in this new consecration. Who should be more disposed for the higher interior life than the spouse of the Heart of Christ? Who should sense His every thought, sentiment and desire more than the beloved of His heart? Who should be the recipient of His favors more than she? By your very state of intimacy and unity you should tend to more perfect prayer and be better disposed for the more perfect gifts.

Should you cultivate the higher mystical gifts? They are and remain free gifts which the Holy Spirit distributes as He wills. You can dispose yourselves, but you cannot force them. That is the advice of St. Teresa, to cultivate the best dispositions, but not to force yourselves into such a way as the transforming union (*Interior Castle*, Mansion VII) You may desire these gifts, and pray for them, all in accordance with God's Will.

Mystical Theology speaks of the “Spiritual Marriage,” which is the highest kind of infused contemplation. It is also called “Transforming Union.” After many purifications, works and penances, the soul is lifted into a state of calm union, the final goal in this life that the soul can reach, the immediate preparation for the Beatific Vision. As one looks at its characteristics, there are many similarities with the liturgical consecration you receive, namely:

1. Intimacy (hence the name “spiritual marriage”)

There are no secrets, but sharing, a common destiny, blended lives. All is in common, joys and sorrows. One’s whole life is spent in mutual care and guarding.

2. Serenity (that is beyond raptures and ecstasies)

This reminds one of the Benedictine *pax, summa quies*. Being sure of one’s love for each other, there is a peaceful possession and undivided pursuit of a common aim.

3. Indissolubility

This is no passing caprice. This follows from the marriage bond.

All this we can cultivate with trust, humility and love, by

- Thinking only of God, of our Divine Spouse. Please Him in all things. Forget self (Ps. 44). Be indifferent to everything that is not of Christ or God.
- Abandoning one’s self to God in life and death. By being intent on His will, nothing else, having no other desire.
- Having an ardent zeal for the sanctification of souls. Knowing Christ as you do, you act, work, suffer in all with Him. Have an ardent zeal for humility, especially, for humility is St. Benedict’s way to the highest love.

In all this, you must depend not only on your own will, but look to God, Christ’s arm, to the sacramental graces. You must often, always revert to this grace, and make it operative by prayer and love. Let it become a springboard of highest personal states of prayer. Your mystical life of union with God has a visible start and guarantee in this incomparable consecration. Therefore, we set no limits to God’s grace and working in our spiritual lives. The transforming principle and power is our sacramental in the Church. Constantly repeat: “Of myself, I can do nothing. In and with You, I can do all things.”

SHARING IN THE EASTER MYSTERIES

The heavenly Lamb (Apoc. 5:6)

The Bride of the Lamb is the Church, the heavenly Jerusalem, come down into the world of men. (Apoc. 21:1 ff., Apoc. 22, Hebrews 12:18, 22 ff.)

Jesus took His bridal intentions to the Cross. What are these intentions?

1. That He Himself is the Bridegroom. He dealt with virginity, not in a detached and impersonal way, but in intimate relation with His own divine Person. (Matt. 9:15; Matt. 25:1-10; John 3:28 ff.)
2. That the soul in virginal chastity is especially His Bride. The parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins shows that the wise virgins are welcomed into the marriage banquet. Virginity is a higher law in His kingdom than marriage. Marriage, too, received special graces, and was restored to the idea of monogamy, to the status of a sacrament. But the higher is the ideal and state of virginity. Virginal souls are souls of His special predilection.

Virginity is a special gift. "Not you have chosen me, but I have chosen you." (John 15:16) "His disciples said to Him: 'If the case of a man with his wife is so, it is not expedient to marry.' And He said: 'Not all can accept this teaching, but those to whom it has been given. . . . Let him accept it who can.'" (Matt. 19:10-12)

3. That He would remain a virgin. The Son of the ever-Virgin Himself remained a virgin. That is His teaching by example. It is meant to attract souls to the same mode of life. Along with His words, it gives us the divine thought and will, ideal and practice.
4. That He would die for His virginal bride, the Church. He gave His life in redemption for all the truths He taught, for all the example He had given. His love went even unto death, not just unto speaking words that are ideal. This thought is found in St. Paul to the Ephesians. He died to cleanse and purify His spouse.

Fulfillment of the Old Testament. God taught in the Old Testament. He chose His spouse out of Egypt, led her through the desert of penance and purgation, into the Promised Land. His People are His faithful spouse. The prophets stressed this theme of the spouse of Israel. All this is fulfilled in Christ and the Church.

Think of that when you are invited. . . . Go out to meet your Bridegroom! All is fulfilled in the bishop at the altar, when you go up with lighted candles. Think of what you are; think of Jesus Christ!

The ripe, rich, rare fruit of the Cross.

All graces, personal and social, derive from the death of Jesus on Calvary. Every single grace distributed in the world to pagan or Christian is merited by His Passion and Death, was paid for by His Precious Blood. Think of the sacraments. . . or vocations, miracles, gifts, charisms. . . . Think of the conversion of sinners, fallen-away Catholics, death-bed conversions. . . . Think of the missions, the spread of the Church. . . . of the priesthood, preaching, authority. . . of the graces of the hierarchy . . . of Religious founders, other saints, martyrs. . . of family graces, corporal and spiritual works of mercy . . . of the innocence of children . . . of the prayer life of mystics . . . all the ritual and liturgy where Christ is present. . . .

And now think of your Consecration, your mystic espousals to the God-man Jesus Christ as exquisite Passion-flower fruit. He died to purchase your soul, to lead you to perfection in this state. He bought the grace of your consecration by His Agony and Silence and Patience and Weariness and Words and Deeds, His Passion and His Death. The graces that flow so abundantly and gloriously in the sacred ceremonies of the Church, originally flowed in the bitterness of His suffering and dying. (Note Eph. 5:25-32)

You have come a long way from original sin! Like the Chosen People in the Old Testament [from Abraham, to Egypt, to the miraculous passage through the Red Sea, He led them.]

The came the Promised Land of milk and honey. It meant homeland, altar, temple, stability, peace, God's permanent presence, victory, truth of God, His Law, rewards, future hopes, His Presence!

The "oil of preparation" . . . [like] virgins with lighted lamps [who] await Him with the oil of preparation, and are not frightened by His sudden coming. Spouses are prepared for His final coming in glory. How to prepare? There are two points to be considered:

- the bride considers her Spouse
 - the bride considers herself
1. The bride considers her divine Spouse: His nature, character, virtues, desires. How attract Him? What sacrifices can she bring for Him? This includes prayer, meditation, reading the Gospels, study. Where can she find Him? Where does He want to find her? She must grasp clearly His sacrificial nature and intentions.
 2. The bride considers herself: She must conform to the ideal of the Bridegroom. The basis of love is in the image of the ideal. What is her nature? What qualities has she? What imperfections? What blemishes? She must adorn herself for Christ and for Him only. And she must adorn her soul, not her body. That means virtues-the seal will be in grace.

She must be without spot or wrinkle. This means purification from sin, from faults, all kinds of stains and remains of sin. This requires confession and penance and renouncements. It implies a new rejection of the world and its attractions, of the flesh,

and its sensuality. Of all the passions, of selfishness, of the devil. . . and a mortification of desires for present pleasure, comforts, power, honors.

Chastity, especially, according to the Rite. This means more than not sinning. It means putting the powers of emotions and senses into the service of grace. It means solitude of heart. Control your affections and bestow them on God's children and sinners. . . . Chastity demands maturity of personality. Eliminate what is offensive to your Divine Spouse in the use of the eyes, the smile, praise.

Greater love than this no one has. . . . You must exercise yourself in all discipline, . . . virtues, [and] especially in divine and fraternal charity. Humility is the rock-bottom of charity . . . be not exalted by pride with the "better-than-thou-spirit."

Love the Person and Nature of Christ ardently, intimately. Let there be more fervent love. Love His will by doing it. Let there be a greater measure of charity. More perfect love by giving out of supernatural faith. Exercise the theological virtue of charity. Let there be readiness to give all in sacrifice for Him, just so you know He wants it. Learn to run on the way, rather than amble along leisurely. See that there is more perfect cooperation. . . . BE A GREAT LOVER. Victim love is the final test. Pius XII (Encyclical "On Virginity") quotes St. Paul (1 Cor. 7:33) "The heart of married persons will always remain more or less divided." Your heart is undivided. Abandonment into the arms of your Bridegroom should be your ideal. Your love must be spiritual. Be always a true and spiritual spouse.

Community of life with Jesus Christ. St. Paul says: (1 Cor. 7:34) "And the virgin thinks about the things of the Lord that she may be holy in body and in spirit." In marriage there must be one common standard of living for success. Common thinking, common goods, common striving. Different economic standards destroy happiness and success of holy wedlock. There must be the same poverty. If you are His loved one, then you will suffer for His intentions. Then you will welcome persecution. Then you will be victims with Him. If He died for you, then you must die for love of Him. You must not look for happiness outside the mystic marriage circle. Your giving will be different: joyful, inspired, without measure, without considering yourselves. You will want to go to die with Him, for Him. There will be one will, one desire, totally His.

Great love and zeal for the Mass: There on the altar you bring your all. There are you united to Him with your whole being. That is the beginning and the end of your existence this side of heaven. You learn all, get all strength; you tend to the altar, pine for the altar, regard it as your greatest symbol in life. The living, sacrificial Christ comes to you in death, to purchase you daily. His spouse came forth from the opened Side of the Saviour. . . there you see your origin, your all.

Zeal for the [Divine Office], the canonical Prayer. As a Spouse of Christ, the virgin must perfect herself in prayer. Now you pray more officially in the name of the Church, in the voice of the Church, that is, united with Christ your Head and Bridegroom. There is a greater intimacy, more tenderness, more community of life. You will study what you

can do for Him, always striving for, tending to higher prayer. Feasts and seasons, hours and days will be your total joy if lived with your praying Spouse. You identify yourself with the *Ecclesia Orans*, the praying Bride of Christ. Every thought and emotion of His Sacred Heart registers in your life. Nothing is too much: nothing is too small to be done out of total and perfect love. (Read Gertrude von le Fort, *The Hymns to the Church*).

Increase in faith. Develop more perfect faith. After all questions and doubts have been settled, throw yourselves into this great heavenly union. To you is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom. You will pray for clearer faith and freedom, more single and deeper penetration of your mind into the mystery of His love. You will want to know better what you can do, and perfect your motives. You will pray for light very intensely. *Domine ut videam!* O Lord, that I may see! You will not want to be a blind bride. You will not want to be a mechanical bride, but the bride of His heart. You want to be free with inner freedom to give more and more, to contemplate and lose yourself. You will want discernment of spirit and values, to live a truly spiritual life. You will want more loyalty, and the distinctive mark of a bride, fidelity.

The late Fr. Paschal Botz, O.S.B., was a Benedictine monk of St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA. Consecrated virgins owe very much to him for his encouragement and effort to see this sacramental restored in the Church, especially in the United States in the 20th century. Before he died, he gave his written permission for us to reprint his writing.