

*Definition
of
Consecrated Virginity
according to Canon 604*

What is the Consecration of a Virgin?

The Consecration of a Virgin is one of the oldest sacramentals in the Church, and one of the fruits of Vatican II was the restoration of this profound blessing on virgins living in the world. The promulgation of this restored Rite for laywomen was on 31 May 1970.

Through this sacramental, the virgin, after renewing her resolve of perpetual virginity to God, is set aside as a sacred person who belongs only to Christ. The acting agent in the Consecration is God Himself who accepts the virgin's promise and spiritually fructifies it through the action of the Holy Spirit.

This sacramental is reserved to the bishop of the diocese. The consecrated virgin shares intimately in the nature and mission of the Church--she is a living image of the Church's love for her Spouse while sharing in His redemptive mission.

The consecrated virgin living in the world embodies a definitive vocation in itself. She is not a quasi-Religious, nor is she in a vocation that is in the process of becoming a Religious institute or congregation. Nevertheless, she is a consecrated person, with her bishop as her guide. By virtue of the Consecration, she is responsible to pray for her diocese and clergy. At no time is her diocese responsible for her financial support.

The consecrated virgin living in the world, as expressed in Canon 604, is irrevocably "consecrated to God, mystically espoused to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church, when the diocesan bishop consecrates [her] according to the approved liturgical rite." The consecrated virgin attends Mass daily (if possible), prays the Divine Office, and spends much time in private prayer. She can choose the Church-approved spirituality she prefers to follow.

Supporting herself by earning her own living, the consecrated virgin is not obliged to take on any particular work or apostolate. Usually, consecrated virgins in the United States volunteer their time to their local parish, diocese, or Church-sponsored association. Some volunteer their time also in civic responsibilities.

Who can be consecrated?

A woman living in the world who has never married or lived in open violation of chastity, and who by age, prudence, and good character is deemed suitable for dedicating herself to a life of chastity in the service of the Church and of her neighbor may petition her bishop to receive the Consecration. She must be admitted to this Consecration by her local Bishop; it is he who determines the conditions under which the candidate is to undertake a life of perpetual virginity lived in the world. Usually, a woman who aspires to the Consecration works with a spiritual director and has lived a private resolve of perpetual virginity for some years before seeking the Consecration of a Virgin. It is understood that this consecrated state of life cannot be dispensed.

In addition, the Church has never stated an upper age limit for a virgin to receive the Consecration.

It is understood that a woman aspiring to the Consecration of a Virgin is able to support herself by work or pension or independent means and has provided financially for her medical care.

A woman aspiring to the Consecration should be practicing her faith. She accepts the teaching of the Church and Sacred Scripture, with a readiness and capacity for personal growth. She should be able to give herself totally to God and the Church.

Approved by Most Rev. Raymond L. Burke, Archbishop of St. Louis and
Episcopal Moderator of the Consecrated Virgins in the United States

WHAT IS THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS?

[reprinted with permission From the Archives of St. Benedict's Convent,
St. Joseph, Minnesota -- no author given]

The word "consecrate" in the English *language* has many meanings, but its most proper meaning is the technical *and* theological one employed by the Catholic Church to designate a person, place, or thing dedicated to God forever by special rites and ceremonies performed by a person who has the power and jurisdiction to consecrate. The power to consecrate (outside the Consecration at Mass) is proper only to bishops, who have the fullness of the priestly office and who enjoy ecclesiastical jurisdiction. For some consecrations minor prelates and priests may be delegated, but the jurisdiction belongs to the Holy Father and the bishops. . . . When Tertullian, St. Ambrose, and others wrote of virgins consecrated to God, they meant those who had formally been consecrated by the bishop and there was no ambiguity in what they wrote, for the Rite itself was often described in detail.

Effect of Consecration

It is a Rite which, of itself gives the consecrated virgin the character of a sacred person. The ceremony of Consecration is one of the Church's greatest and most beautiful and at the same time most significant sacramental rites, comparable to the consecration of a sovereign or the blessing of an abbot or an abbess. Because of its great solemnity, because of the great care with which the administration of this great sacramental has been surrounded, there have even been those who mistakenly thought it was a sacrament. It imprints no new character upon the soul; but we may be pardoned, I am sure, for saying that it comes nearer to doing so than any of the other sacramentals, and the ceremony itself is proof of the fact that, while it is not a sacrament, it comes nearest of all the sacramentals, with no exception, to partaking of the nature of a sacrament, for in it is exemplified the mystical marriage of the virgin with Christ who is her Spouse.

The state of consecrated virginity is the highest state which a Christian woman can attain. She cooperates with God in the supernatural order. She has answered the call of the heavenly Bridegroom to be His spouse in preference to becoming the spouse of an earthly husband to whom she would be bound in many things. The consecrated virgins have attained the freedom of being bound by no earthly ties. Her bonds are those of supernatural charity which bind her to God alone. Yet her charity is great enough to embrace all men and strong enough to bring with her to God many souls of whom she becomes the spiritual mother.

THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT SHOULD DO

[Excerpts from a talk given 22 July 1954 in Minnesota--reprinted with permission of the author]

— by Fr. Paschal Botz, OSB

What is the Consecration of Virgins?

The Rite itself is not a short, simple blessing, but a very elaborate liturgical drama whereby the greatest possible blessing comes to an unmarried woman. . . It is a sacramental given to virgins in the Church and by the Church. It is a reserved blessing, that is, a special kind that is reserved to the bishops. I think at one time, in the early centuries of the Church, it was reserved to the Pope. And so it takes special jurisdiction to confer this Consecration. We speak of this as a constitutive Sacramental; therefore, as a permanent Sacramental. It is one that inheres and does not diminish as the years go by. . .

The Consecration of Virgins is not an act of making vows; [a resolution of perpetual virginity is] presupposed. However, at the beginning of the Rite there is a renewal of the promise of virginity, but that is not a necessary part of it; it is only a presupposition, an introduction.

Then comes the Litany of the Saints, which is also used in Ordination, and at the end of it the bishop rises and gives the blessing. . . . And there it is that the real grace of this Sacramental is indicated, for which the Litany of All Saints was prayed. The Litany of All the Saints is always a sign of a very solemn act, like the calling down of the Holy Spirit.

The Consecratory Prayer is the heart of the Consecration. It is a great hymn of praise of the sacred nuptials. I think it would be a good topic to meditate on because it is the heart of the Consecration, and it is patterned after the Rite of Ordination. So, it is very closely modeled after the Sacrament of Holy Orders. After that comes the conferring of the ring and the presentation of the Book of the Hours.

There are antiphons, hymns, and other sung parts and prayers; it is altogether a very rich liturgical rite produced in the golden era of the liturgical origins. Some go back to the third century for sure. . . There is another prayer that seems to go back to the time of St. Matthew, the blessing of St. Matthew. The prayer cannot be traced back beyond the tenth century--it is from that time on we have these full pontifical books with the prayers in them--but in this prayer there is a very ancient part which begins with "Sit quae in eis casta Virginitas." which some authors claim goes back many, many centuries, perhaps even to the time of the Apostle St. Matthew who is recorded as having consecrated . . . a virgin to God. While the actual prayer may be lost, the tradition remains. [editor's note: This Latin prayer that Fr. Paschal mentions here was in the older form of the Consecration of Virgins used before its revision in the 1970s.]

What the Consecration of Virgins Does.

First of all, it brings a renewal of the will to dedicate one's self to God. . . . But this is not the specific contribution or the spiritual achievement of this Rite that it brings a renewal of your will. I think it is essentially a crowning of your will by Divine Grace, by Divine Grace in the Church of course. And so it makes a difference. . . . there is a spiritual difference. It would be strange if

such a beautiful and elaborate Rite would achieve nothing. It is not an empty ritual; there is no empty ritual in the Catholic Church. It is not the same, then, as vows. In the early centuries there were consecrated persons who were not in religious vows. But the difference that it makes is the giving expression to the nuptials in the Church. The Church is by her very nature in spiritual nuptials with Christ, and if that is part of the Church's nature, then it must be expressed because the Church always wants to express her nature. We can see it makes a great difference in terms of new graces, exceeding new graces, that we could never have without this Consecration; a new great power of meriting. I would say an instrument, a principle, a meriting, a kind of spiritual equipment by which your love is incorporated anew into Christ and gives you a new power or efficiency, and that means in the end a new glory. You can well belong to the "one hundred and forty-four thousand Virgins who follow the Lamb," that constitute a special heavenly group. It is all of a new sanctity, a new grace, a new power, new Godliness conferred. Therefore it does do something to you.

There are two kinds of espousals in the Church--two pictures of the espousals of Christ with His Church. First of all, there is that of the more natural order which is between married spouses; and secondly, the nuptials in the Church of this CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS in the supernatural order which is a much better picture, a closer reproduction of the original which is Christ with His Church..

What Should It Do.

It should make you Church conscious. I think it is essential for a grasp of this Rite and its doings to know that it makes one more Church conscious. A spouse who gets married steps into a new social circle, so to say. And we, too, step into a new position in the Mystical Body. Guardini says that our age is a time when the Church is going to live in the hearts of men. And so your soul grows from individualism into Church consciousness--you become greater women of the Church, like St. Gertrude. And this fits you for the work of the Church. All prayer and work that you do receives a higher efficiency in the Church. So you have not only a position of honor, but a power of function even though you remain hidden. . . . Our Holy Father says in his encyclical *Mediator Dei* that Christ is present in every liturgical rite, every liturgical function and this is a liturgical function. Therefore, Christ becomes present to you mystically. You await the Bridegroom and the Church presents you to Christ visibly. The virgin concerns herself with the things of the Lord. There is a new function in the Mystical Body.

Another thing that it does, or another fact, is that it gives you spiritual fruitfulness. Christ in the world is there for redemption and that goes beyond personal sanctification. He becomes the spouse of the perpetual virgin in order to become the son of the perpetual virgin just as it was in the life of the blessed Mother. He became her spouse in Faith first of all, and in grace, and then He became the son by perpetual virginity. And so it must be in that apostolate in the world. We do not subscribe to a narrow concept of virtue, for instance virginity, but all this must be taken up into charity, a great flaming and fruitful charity where by you become public servants for the Church, become new mediators of the Church. All prayer and work is now more official in the Church. And so, I say, designedly there is a higher position in the Mystical Body. All efficiency comes to us not through natural means, not through flesh and blood, but through the Holy Spirit

Who distributes the gifts, and therefore, wherever He distributes such an abundance of gifts, as in the Consecration of Virgins, there must also be a new efficiency, a new apostolate in the world for the redemption of souls. And St. Augustine says in commenting on Christ's words in the Gospel, "He is My mother, brother, and sister who does the will of My Father," he says "She is my mother who gives birth to Me daily in the hearts of men." I think that is a magnificent text to express this apostolic aspect of this Consecration of Virgins, that one who gives birth to Christ daily in the hearts of men is truly a mother and brother and sister of Christ.

Why We Should Want the Consecration of Virgins.

As I studied a little bit of the history of this Rite of Consecration, I found that the Rite seemed to thrive in different periods of history and then relapsed again; but the times when it thrived were always times of great revival, of great new life in the Church, and especially of an appreciation of the great realities like the Mystical Body. We should want the Consecration because it isn't an empty ritual, it isn't like supplying ceremonies--as, for instance, in Baptism: after an emergency Baptism, the ceremonies have to be supplied, and that isn't considered superfluous. Even that confers grace. It is not what we call a mere Sacramental. Somebody who would call it "just a mere Sacramental," it seems to me, would need a little brushing up on the theology of the Sacramentals. Sacramentals are very great. I would hesitate to say to my abbot, "You are abbot by a mere Sacramental." . . . The sacramental of the Consecration of Virgins works, as we see, through the efficacy of the Church. It requires our faith united with our obligations, devotion, and love; and then comes God's crowning act, in the work of the Church, with those special graces and gifts, and that is more than my own subjective willing. As I said before, you become constituted in a new state in the Mystical Body.

I recall that famous event of several years ago when the present queen of England was crowned, that there were twenty-six steps in the ceremonies. There are many fewer in the Consecration of Virgins. I think the crowning of the queen of England is very empty in comparison to yours. (I hope no one will mention that to Her Majesty that it was an empty ceremony.)

An important obligation of the Consecrated Virgin is to love God more. I don't think that it should be given unless there were thorough preparation, I mean spiritual preparation. . . . Otherwise, there will not be the corresponding love which it should produce.

I think that if the privilege of the Consecration of Virgins is available, it should be accepted as a privilege under all conditions of the privilege, because it is a great spiritual thing. I would imagine that [a virgin who had been faithful to her duties for many years] would find this a tremendous boost spiritually. And it would even give the basis for a very intense interior and mystical life. I am convinced that in the ancient Church that was the basis for mysticism. When anyone talks about the mystic state, the mystic marriage, which is the highest of all mystical experiences, it always seems to match this Consecration of Virgins. Now, don't think that it is just a Rite which is performed and then one packs his grip and goes again. It is something that is lived out. And certainly the graces there would mean a great deal for one's life of love. And I think we all need that. We can never say that we have reached the heights of that charity. So, would say that even if we are busy and active and have a lot of assignments, that this would be a

wonderful way of uniting prayer with action. Or, to put it the old way, by letting our action be the overflow of our contemplation. . .

That's the doctrine of St. Thomas, i.e., that there are many crowns for the spiritual life. We don't go to heaven with just one crown. . . . You have already given yourself to God as completely as you knew how, and this is not a new giving, in that sense, but God is giving anew. God is crowning that offering of yourself in a way that has not been done before. You see, there are always new blessings of God, new approaches to God, new sacramentals by which God can guarantee perseverance of that will which He sustains And so, when we first offered ourselves to God, His was the greater part; ours was a token gift. . . . I think we should also bring the people, the world, back to this concept of virginity, of Consecration, as incorporating something--an objective incorporation into Christ in the Church. So, we have a special position then in the Mystical Body, that is, visible only to the eyes of faith because many times we have to retire, we have to drop out of the picture, we have to do our work in a hidden way. So it isn't a kind of pedestal in the Church, but it is a spiritual concept, a gift of the Holy Spirit. . . . And virgins are called the glory of the Church; and the Church has always wanted to deck them with graces. The Church has always wanted to show her appreciation of virgins in the Church. And so the solemnity is not a luxury but a necessity, like heaven itself. Heaven is ALL solemnity.

This Consecration expresses the very essence of Christianity. From the Old Testament on, this was prefigured as the spiritual nuptials of God with His people, Christ with His Church, and here comes the most perfect picture of it. The most perfect thing the Church has worked out in two thousand years is that Consecration of Virgins. And, as I say, it makes you a mother of the redeemed. It isn't just an honor whereby you enjoy your position; but it is a vital function in the Church. It makes you the mother of the redeemed; you become the mother of God on earth, and a mother of divine grace, so you are that much closer to the blessed Virgin too; and certainly it is a sign of great flaming love, and that love is incorporated, is glorified.

There is no rite, as far as I know, that so brings out the dignity of womankind. I think we should not merely have these things for ourselves, but also make them known to the world so that people learn what was the great factor of raising the status of woman in the world [Fr. Paschal then explains historically that to let women assert their own right to determine their own vocation was the great factor in bringing out the dignity of a woman as a person. The Consecration of a Virgin is the crowning of this great dignity of womankind.--Editor's note]

CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS, excerpts
by Fr. Paschal Botz, O.S.B., November 11, 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 was there 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] 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 out it, 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.

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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 a rich drama, colorful rites and prayers.

Pius XII, in Sacra Virginitas, (1954) says, quoting St. Augustine, that "Virginity 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 of 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 fulfill 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.' "

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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. Virginité 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 virginité 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

1. 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.
2. Abandoning oneself to God in life and death. By being intent on His will, nothing else, having no other desire.
3. 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 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."

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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

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.” (Jn. 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 Israel. All this is fulfilled in Christ and the Church.

This 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 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.]

Then 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:

- a) the bride considers her Spouse
 - b) the bride considers herself
- a) 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
- b) 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 renuncements. 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 power 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 (Encycl. 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 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 videani!* 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 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 monk of St. John’s Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota.

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.]

SOME ELEMENTS OF CONSECRATED VIRGINITY

{Excerpted and adapted from a conference on Consecrated Virginity, 28 October 1954,
by Father Harold, OSB. Used with permission. }

The woman, who gives herself entirely to God and eventually receives the Consecration of a Virgin, is welcoming the invitation to the wedding feast and goes there to be one with the Master of the wedding; she is answering an invitation to permanent and undivided love. Like a bride in marriage, the consecrated virgin's love must be total and undivided; all other things are to be considered in the light of her Spouse. Note what St. Paul says--that a virgin can give herself to God without hindrance. The spouse of God is able to give all her attention to God.

Does that exclude the love of fellow man? No one ever said that consecrated virginity interfered with fraternal charity. It is a law of God that we must love our neighbor as ourselves, but we must love them in the proper way.

God is not to be loved just for Himself in heaven, but He shows Himself concretely in our fellow man. We must love our fellow man, but are we taking anything of the "first-placeness" of God away when we love our fellow man? Not if we love in that other person. That love of God in our fellow creatures, in our fellow man, actually emphasizes the "first-placeness" of God. We must not stop just at the creature's own beauty or charm, but see beyond those characteristics to God Himself in that creature.

Those who live consecrated virginity often show that love for God in others by their help of the sick, the poor, the uneducated. Actually, consecrated virginity, then, fosters love for our fellow man and the whole world we live in.

The second element in consecrated virginity is its permanency. Just as marriage is intended to be permanent because it is an image of Christ and the Church, so the virgin espoused to Christ in the Consecration of a Virgin is in a permanent bond of love and fidelity.

It is true that a person in perpetual vows has taken upon herself a permanency, but the Church has allowed Religious to be dispensed from even perpetual vows. However, history has shown us that it has always been the practice of the Church from the earliest centuries, from the beginning of this Consecration to Virginity, that the Church has not dispensed a virgin from the obligation of virginity. The Consecration is not the same as a vow, not even the same as a solemn vow. The Consecration of a Virgin is a distinct sacramental of the Church meant to make of the person a blessed, sacred individual, and through this sacramental the virgin receives the graces to live forever in this state in life. By making a vow, the person herself is the active agent; but in the Consecration of a Virgin, the Church does the consecrating of the person.

If there is any obligation that the consecrated virgin takes upon herself, it is to grow distinctly in love. What would be the sense of the Church in establishing a great sacramental to set aside a person distinctly for the service of God unless it were that she grow in the love of God very distinctly? When the virgin petitions for the Consecration, she is asking for a sacramental which is given her by the Church with the graces necessary to be a bride. She is therefore certainly to

grow in love. It means, too, that the consecrated virgin is certainly to decrease in the commission of sin and defects. That again needs grace. So, one who wishes to be a consecrated virgin, set aside as a sacred person for God alone, needs special help. The Church makes ready the graces necessary for her to live as a person wholly dedicated to the service of God through this sacramental.

It only follows, then, that anyone who foresees or who feels that her vocation to a life of virginity is unstable and that she may likely at some time be desirous of marrying should never ask for the Consecration of Virgins. The Church asks for maturity of character; most often one who petitions for the Consecration of Virgins should have been living some form of committed virginity for some time.

CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS

[Excerpts]

by Fr. Bernard Sause, OSB, 1 May 1954

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The Consecration of Virgins has been restored in our age with the intent that it will increase the spiritual life of the Church in its modern circumstances. . . . An analogy may help to clarify:

On the battlefield a soldier, in heroic action, far beyond the line of duty, performs an act of outstanding bravery. That is something he did for his country, and, we hope out of love for God. Now he is called to Washington, and at the President's hands receives the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest military honor his country can bestow.

Does this recognition—change his status? Of course it does! He goes back into the ranks, prompted to greater zeal because of the recognition and pride of his country; his presence stimulates the confidence of his fellow soldiers; he champions the cause of defense of his fatherland as few other persons can possibly do; he is the symbol of courage and assurance to a whole nation.

MARY IN OUR LIVES AS CONSECRATED VIRGINS

[As we study the Rite of the Consecration of Virgins, we can reflect on Mary as the Virgin of all virgins.] –

Mary is a mystery. Initiation into this mystery can come only through Christ and His Church. Mary is a unique revelation of the wisdom of God. With no other creature did God share the depths of His wisdom as with Mary. As the Immaculately Conceived, as Mother of God yet ever Virgin, as the one assumed into heaven, and as powerful intercessor, she constitutes a unique praise of the splendor of Christ. No creature was so irradiated by, so steeped into, and was so transformed by Christ's glory as was Mary. The configurative powers of the Incarnation, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of the Son of God and His outpouring of the Holy Spirit were prodigally realized in Mary. She is Bride and ever Virgin and Mother because of the inexhaustible riches of Christ, which fill her and overflow from her. She is more of Him than He is of her. In Mary is made clear to what a high degree a creature can become as a vessel of God through the power of Jesus Christ. How the grace of God brings forth a new creation is revealed by the way Mary was privileged to conceive of the Holy Spirit, becoming the Mother of the Word, and with this, the Father's pleasure remaining as a heavenly light over her.

Mary is a creature like to Christ and united to Him in a unique way. As such she was not without struggle and suffering during her earthly life. Although nearest to the mysteries of God, she lived in the obscurest darkness of faith. All her meetings and experiences with God veiled Him from her. In humble, docile listening to God she became the knowing one but remained the unknowing one in the silence of her Son. She was called into the broad noonday light of Christ as no other creature, yet she suffered in the constant darkness of sacrifice.

Christ possessed her utterly. With the sword in heart she remained erect in faith and love. In her one sees not only what absolute tranquility can and may be, but also how praise becomes prophesy and surrender. Her most profound knowledge of Christ she poured out in song--in her "Magnificat." The splendor of the cross of Christ operating in her from the beginning gave birth to this exultant lyric. Mary was completely dedicated to the cross of her Son, therefore, she had performed both to keep her silence and sing her song.

Mary is mother and virgin. In this she is a picture of the Church. Motherhood in perpetual virginity can be understood only through the Church, who is the Bride of Christ, chosen and loved by Him. He gives Himself to her. Through Him and in Him she is also a mother, bringing Him to birth in mankind and in the entire creation through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church brings Christ to the ends of the earth, being in travail until the end of time. Then, when His Mystical Body has reached its fullness, she will rejoice like a mother who gave birth while remaining a spouse dedicated to Christ in virginal love, made one with Him forever. This happiness can never be lost or dimmed.

Virgins should ever remain inviolate under the protection of holy Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. What this means, a text From the Office of the Assumption of our Lady into

heaven will clarify: “Who is she that comes forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army in battle array?” In Mary, rises the morning of the new creation. She is beautiful as the moon. Like that of the moon her light is reflected. Out of her burst forth the rays of Christ, the divine Sun. In her the Light of Life and Love begins His victorious course, extending to the ends of the earth. Mary is clothed in the enveloping Light of the Christ-Sun.

She is the bearer of salvation. But--what is the meaning of “Terrible as an army in battle array”? In Mary there never was opposition to grace. In her grace is most mighty life, a recapitulation of all power of good. Sanctity can bring its power to complete fruition in Mary’s soul, for she said: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.” Mary received the love of God unconditionally, and she herself loved unreservedly in His love. Because of this, the powers of darkness find her terrible and unassailable. In Mary, Christ has revealed His power of salvation through the Redemption. He leaves this power in her and in this world as a sign of His judgment of the world.

Virgins, in fact the entire Mystical Body, are under the protection of Mary and form with her the “terrible army set in battle array.” We may picture this army under the form of the cross. All the powers of the evil spirits cannot withstand it.

[Excerpted from a manuscript in the Archives of St. Benedict’s Convent, St. Joseph, Minnesota. No author given. Reprinted with permission.]

BRIDAL SPIRITUALITY OF THE CONSECRATED VIRGIN

St Bruno writes:

. . . The living exclusively of the one thing necessary — that is, the “better part” of sitting at the Lord’s feet entirely absorbed in Him alone. In this we discover the spirit of Spiritual Virginité which is the deliberate entrance into the mystery of the Eternal repose and Sabbath rest that is in God Himself. . . In this lies the secret apostolic fecundity of . . . contemplative prayer and sacrifice in the Church, cooperating in her redemptive mission through the sanctity of [her] life “hidden with Christ in God”. Clearly, this is the function of Virginité in the heart of the Church, the Virginal Body and Bride of Christ, which is her most essential characteristic in her relationship with her Lord and Divine Spouse. In this she is disengaged from every created concern and temporal care so as to attend in loving receptivity to His glorious, deifying, transcendent, immanence ever present in her heart, where He, in perfect love of her, brings her to birth by enabling her to love Him with the very Divine Love with which He infinitely and eternally loves Himself. Thus are His nuptials with her consummated as she joins Him in His Eternal Living Sacrifice of Love in the Holy Spirit for the Father. (taken from *The Life of St Bruno*, condensed from Vol. 1 of *Aux Sources des la Vie Cartusienne* by Dom Maurice la Porte, pp. 80-81)

Fr. Romano Guardini writes:

The consecration of virgins from the *Roman Pontifical* is a liturgical action of very great solemnity; it has a high rank. . .

A great fullness stands beneath the words and actions of the ceremony of the consecration of virgins. Calm, objective examinations take place. Decisions are pronounced; binding actions are completed; truths are taught.

The spoken or sung texts are surrounded by exact rubrical directives: they are the constant — reminders which decide what is to happen. The careful manner of the ceremonial bespeaks a sacred action. Following the objective questions and their respective answers are the formulas in which the binding action takes place; then follow the prayers with clearly developed thoughts; then hymns of praise in the style of the preface in which thoughts and prayers become one; then the psalm-like soarings in which the religious experience bursts forth. . .

Calm moderation reigns in the liturgy. The liturgy is in no haste; it does not want to “edify” in the ordinary sense of the word; it does not take pains to train and to teach; it asks not whether the men of haste are bored; it is not there for men at all, but for God; and thus it is there for man, but in a deeper sense; and ready souls are strongly edified by it rather than by a pedagogical over-zeal. The liturgy builds up (“edifies”) something which is much more powerful: viz. The mystery of the holy world about which St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and the Colossians speak. In deep moderation the holy action is accomplished.

Everything is clear and perfect. The action slowly falls into a pattern: the series of events that form it keep coming back and ascending rhythmically and thus develop the basic theme in all its

extent. We carry the restlessness of our times in our nerves; it is not easy for us to enter into this solemn rhythm, but we have no right to judge the possibilities and the calm of such an event according to our restlessness. Buddha's speeches are read with patience and found dignified. Should not we approach our own heritage with similar respect and receptivity? The soul must quiet down and step out of the chase, place itself calmly into the present, gather itself in alertness and attention. Here sacred action is going on. It has a different measure of time, a different sense and a different structure than anything else.

Neither should we forget that those who enter into this action have been enlightened through long preparation. The personal questions have been solved—should have been at least. The inner decisions have been made. Here a life which has been clearly understood inwardly finds its determined expression. Maybe it is distasteful for us to hear such intimacies of the soul displayed with such calm minuteness. However, if we examine it carefully, we note that word and action are so transformed and purified that whatever is intimate remains untouched and that nothing is surrendered.

What happens in the consecration of virgins? There human beings enter on a special way—the way of virginity. One is not led to virginity by a rule, but by a call; it is an extraordinary way which is chosen only with an extraordinary call and responded to with an extraordinary religious power; a breath of the *charismata* is working here.

From the earliest times on, this way was holy for Christians; the one who chose it stood very high. The virgin was, for the Christian communities, something especially holy and precious; respectful love surrounded the virgin.

The consecration sanctifies those who are ready for such a way in a deep, intimate sense of being set-apart for God. This sense of belonging to God enfolds in a special way their whole being and is the foundation of their state. This is why they yearn for this final form of consecration. The human being gives to God [her] word, offers [herself] to Him and is consecrated by the Church which has the power to bind and to loose. [She] is filled with the power which is necessary for such a life of dedication, of sacrifice and of magnanimity.

At the same time, the Church knows that all energy tending towards the extraordinary, that all mentality moving in an extraordinary sphere, can be either creative or destructive. The whole of history shows this. So the Church binds such human beings, gives them a state in her organization. It is a state because of its essence; the Church binds this state according to its inward essence into an expression, a form and a law; the Church transforms this state into a sacred and lawful one, so that one might remain in fruitful discipline while one is carried along by an extraordinary impulse, which though ever so weak carries in itself something of the charismatic.

What does virginity mean? It is not rooted in a utilitarian aim, so that through it a task might be better fulfilled and so that energies might be freed for a richer activity and a more selfless work. Virginity, in the real sense of the word, knows no utilitarian aim; it is essentially a state of life; it is a personal life in its whole fullness and intimacy turned in a special way to God.

Virginity in the Christian sense is also more than austerity of extraordinary [women]: in whom austerity frees and elevates them above everything and makes it possible for them to rest in themselves. That is a precious disposition, but only a psychological one. Christian virginity is more: it is a life coming from God, flowering out of Christ, given and founded by Him. Virginity is being centered in God with a total decision and a total exclusion, in a love and sacrifice capable and willing of receiving the mystery coming from Him; of keeping it and carrying it to maturity.

In this way living humanity comes to fulfillment, not through others, not through given and receiving from other human beings or from the other sex, but in a wide, special virginal freedom and intimacy. This is a human fulfillment, but one only of the redeemed Christian personality tending towards God which first of all is a tending of God towards [her.] This is a life essentially free from any utilitarian aim: a state; a plane on which one stands, a starting point from which one thinks, judges, and acts.

In her being the virgin is free from any aim; that is why she is free for every task which is offered to her by circumstances and by her call. Virginity really lived and centered only on God is capable of consecrating in its selfless dedication a great power to any task: it is capable also of accomplishing this task with special freedom and selflessness. This state is dissolved and its essential power is maimed as soon as such a task were to become primary, so that effectively it becomes the essence and the aim of the virgin state both in the consciousness of the individual and of the society, in such a way that it takes first place in the order of life and in the distribution of time and energy. Such virginity is no longer a Christian state of life but is utilitarian in its effects in the inward living mentality of the person.

In its depth the basis of virginity can only be contemplative, which however does not mean inactivity. It would be a manifestation of activism if one were to see activity only in outward action. The contemplative state is more genuine life and one of purer act: it is a purification, a gathering, an awakening, an illumination, a trans-flowing of the being in the movement toward God. However, it is an act directed differently from that of the active life.” It is directly turned towards God in loneliness and in silence; this compartment—in the midst of all outward activities—must be the basis of the virginal life; otherwise, activity will be supreme and will choke everything.

A pure call must lead one toward it. It is not yet a call to virginity when a human being, in the shyness of her untouched youth, shuns marriage or a call for virginity when a refined soul is repulsed by the running wild of sex in our age. It is not yet a call to virginity when in the vague and fluctuating feelings of puberty there is a longing for dedication, fulfillment and inward fertility that fuses with a religious feeling and longing; nor when a longing after purer atmosphere makes the world repulsive. It is not yet a call to virginity when one feels oneself drawn to the service of one's neighbor in social work, nursing, and teaching; nor when one thinks that that could be done best within an Order. One is led to virginity only by a completely calm and long experience, in which one recognizes, from experiences in different situations in life, that this way in itself is really one's choice. Neither is it a sign of a call to virginity if one is without passions and if one knows nothing about struggle. The virginal vocation originates not from the fact that one cannot find one's place in life nor from a weak vitality, but from a personal

decision. It does not originate from a psychological experience; nor from some sort of suggestion, not even from a religious suggestion; nor from an inrooted idea that one may not live but must be sacrificed. Rather it is a decision which originates from an inward calm and deliberation.

It is a readiness for being bound. The Church knows what is within a human being; she mistrusts enthusiasm. Would she not mistrust it, she would have been destroyed by idealists a long time ago. Therefore, she binds the will of the virgin into discipline.

The consecration of a virgin points to a way of vocation, a special meaningful state of life, not a utilitarian arrangement, but a state which in the last analysis comes from God and whose essence consists in an immediate relation between the inner personality of the virgin and God. This relation is of such exclusiveness, depth, and supernatural fertility that the only symbol for it seems to be the ring of espousals. Thus consecration of a virgin becomes the expression of a special dedication to God, of an offering, of a taking into possession, and of a holy seal of inward action made permanent through the [resolution] of the individual and the action of the Church.

If such is the case, then consecration is also an expression of a binding and of a discipline. We live in a time of rising religious enthusiasm. A friend wrote to me saying: "An unhealthy atmosphere is growing around us. To sick people, ordinary food is tasteless. A ridiculous stilted ethical rigorism wants to become the fashion." Not only is an ethical rigorism becoming fashionable, but also a religious one. The gift which was wished for by St. Paul for his followers is ore necessary now than ever: namely, discernment of spirits. Virginité is free and daring. Man puts himself outside the natural order in respect to the most sensitive point of his being. In the state of the counsels he puts himself in a different priority of values. Somehow he takes the charisma into himself. When this determination of the will is genuine, he receives within simultaneously a readiness for being bound. The form this binding might take may vary. The tenor of the time and the variety of individual dispositions influence it. But whatever the form, it always involves being bound to the Church.

Virginité and the Church belong together in their utmost depth, like marriage and the Church do. Virginité in its essence of religious freedom and immediate divine intimacy is in its essence directed towards the Church in a very special manner. It is directed towards the Church not so much in that aspect which is expressed in her law and order but rather towards the Church as a mystery. It is directed to the Church as a living continuation of the great Christian manifestation: of the entering of God into this mystery . . . from the Father, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. It is directed to the Church as a mystery in which the womb of grace lies and always newly gives birth to the kingdom of God, and which is a spring of life and an order of life at the same time: a gushing forth of a life and a discipline. It is not by chance that historically considered the breaking with the Church and with virginité took place at the same time. This reality of the Church stands out strongly in the consecration.

The manner in which the virginal life is related to the Church has changed in the course of time. . . It does not mean, however, a change in the essence of virginité. Rather a new understanding of the nature of the virginal [commitment] seems to be expressed by them in the Church, which is more austere, simple and more hidden in the depth of the person. Maybe—some signs seem

to point in that direction—a form of virginal life which has absolutely no outward signs is winning a greater importance: the virgin who stands amidst the world in a worldly garment in the life style of her profession and of her society is bound only through an inward decision and comportment. However, she too has a special relation to the Church. She too has that peculiar discipline of the virginal state in which a higher freedom is counterbalanced by a more complete binding and the giving up of the earthly creates space for a more direct union with the supernatural life of the kingdom of God.

We cannot say much more about that, for these are things which emerge from the heart of the age and are caused by God.

Probably it has seemed that this reality which we have discussed, together with the questions awakened by it, concern only women. This impression could be caused by the fact that the name virginity is taken from the feminine sphere; other things could emphasize this opinion too.

In the whole structure of her life, a woman seems to be more unified than a man. This is not only a gradual unification, but there is constructive unity in her acts, and between her acts and her being. This seems to be the starting point for her special manner of being. On the other hand, a man is so constituted that he stands in separated spheres (his being, his activity, his life, his achievement, etc.) and his behavior is determined through this division of spheres-and orders; he can and often does lead different lives along the side of one another; and thus whatever he does in one-sphere does not psychologically determine that he does the same in the other spheres. At the heart of the feminine character belong a unity and unification of being and of life, and of the different spheres of life subordinated to one another; whatever the woman is and does is more revealing of herself than is the case with man. Man's activity and the direction of his intellectual life tend towards things and work; whereas that of woman, on the contrary, is directed to life itself and to living beings. Granting the questionableness of such generalizations, it does seem that such a transformation of life style as is in virginity is more deeply expressed in the character and being of a woman than in that of man. Since a woman puts more in it than a man, it is understandable that the state should be named after the woman as its representative. One could go much more deeply into this question. . . (from a translation made for private use from *Ehe und Jungfräulichkeit* by Romano Guardini, translated by Sr. Antonio Foder, S.Ch.K., and Sr. Mary Anthony, O.S.B. Reprinted by permission from the Archives of St. Benedict's Convent, St. Joseph, Minnesota.

A COMPARISON OF THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS LIVING IN THE WORLD WITH RELIGIOUS PROFESSION

[Courtesy of Archives, St. Benedict's Convent, St. Joseph, Minnesota]

THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS

1. The virgin is consecrated (dedicated by the bishop to God); passive; is open to and surrenders to God's action.
2. The bishop receives the virgin in the name of Christ for the Church.
3. Presupposes the promise (resolve) of virginity.
4. The virgin lives in the world in a lifestyle that does not endanger or hinder her fulfillment of her role and position in the Church.
5. As the Church is Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:23-33), the consecrated virgin is the visible sign of this brideship and becomes in a special way an open channel of blessings for the whole Church.
6. She is morally obliged to live in accord with the graces received at Consecration. She is to live in the state of one espoused to Christ; i.e., to make action in union with Christ the substance of her daily living.

RELIGIOUS PROFESSION

1. The virgin consecrates (dedicates) herself to God; active; a binding of oneself to certain actions, a legal contract.
2. Vows are received by the superior or bishop in the name of the Church.
3. The vow of chastity is made.
4. By vows of obedience and poverty the religious binds herself to live in community.
5. The religious becomes a special servant of the Church according to the purpose of her Order or Congregation.
6. She is morally obliged to fulfill the promises of her vows according to their interpretation by her Order or Congregation.

INFORMATIONAL RETREAT, CONSECRATED VIRGINITY LIVED IN THE WORLD

Holy Cross Diocesan Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin, U.S.A.

Saturday, 14 June 1997

1. It is my purpose to reflect upon some of the fundamental questions regarding the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world.

Consecrated virginity lived in the world has been inspired by the Holy Spirit in the Church from its very beginnings. It is a most esteemed and delicate gift which is to be fostered and safeguarded in its integrity. Only by understanding clearly the foundations of the vocation can we truly respect fully and foster the vocation of consecrated virginity.

2. As you know, the Church distinguishes three states of life: laypersons, consecrated persons, and the clergy. Within the states of life, there are the various vocations. The laity are called to the married life or to the dedicated single life. Consecrated persons are called to the monastic life, the eremitic life, consecrated virginity, apostolic religious life, contemplative religious life, or consecrated secularity. Within the consecrated life, there is taking place the development of new forms which are yet to be tested and more clearly defined. The clergy are called to the diaconate, the priesthood, or the episcopate.

The state in life defines the form of the individual Christian disciple's life. In that sense, each state in life is founded upon a consecration, the gift of the Holy Spirit who configures the Christian life to Christ. In his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, our Holy Father Pope John Paul II gives the following summary of the distinct form of each state of life in the Church:

For the mission of the *lay faithful*, whose proper task is to "seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God," the consecration of Baptism and Confirmation common to all members of the People of God is a sufficient foundation. In addition to this basic consecration, *ordained ministers* receive the consecration of ordination in order to carry out the apostolic ministry in time. *Consecrated persons*, who embrace the evangelical counsels, receive a new and special consecration which, without being sacramental, commits them to making their own--in chastity, poverty, and obedience--the way of life practised personally by Jesus and proposed by him to his disciples. Although these different categories are a manifestation of the one mystery of Christ, the lay faithful have as their specific but not exclusive characteristic, activity in the world; the clergy, ministry; consecrated men and women, special conformity to Christ, chaste, poor, and obedient. (No. 31d)

The form of life of the consecrated virgin living in the world is a deeper adherence to the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the most intimate union with Him which is reflected in the ancient title given to the consecrated virgin: "bride of Christ." We hear it echoed in the beautiful refrain from the Rite of Consecration:

I am espoused to him whom the angels serve;
sun and moon stand in wonder at his glory. (No. 29)

In our time, the vocation to consecrated virginity has experienced a new vitality as more and more women have come forward to their diocesan Bishop for assistance in understanding and embracing their vocation in life. It is a phenomenon which brings new vitality, renewed faith, hope, and charity to the whole Church. Regarding the new appreciation of consecrated virginity, the Holy Father wrote the following in *Vita consecrata*:

It is a source of joy and hope to witness in our time a new flowering of the *ancient Order of Virgins*, known in Christian communities ever since apostolic times. 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. Either alone or in association with others, they constitute a *special eschatological image of the Heavenly Bride and of the life to come*, when the Church will at last fully live her love for Christ the Bridegroom. (No. 7a)

3. As in the first centuries of the Church's life, when the order of virgins had its beginnings, so also today the life of consecrated virginity is lived principally in the world.

While consecrated religious may also receive the consecration to the life of virginity, their consecration is intimately connected with their religious profession and is lived within the primary call for them which is to the religious life. (cf. *Consecration To a Life of Virginity*, no. 7) Consecrated virginity constitutes also a distinct and proper vocation which is lived as the primary vocation for the consecrated virgin living in the world.

The consecrated virgin living in the world loves God and neighbor with the undivided heart of one who anticipates the life which is to come: Universal Church law tells us:

Through their pledge to follow Christ more closely, virgins are consecrated to God, mystically espoused to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church, when the diocesan Bishop consecrates them according to the approved liturgical rite. (Can. 604.1)

For the consecrated virgin, the closer adherence to our Lord Jesus Christ is expressed in her day-to-day activities.

The proper insignia of the consecration point to the esteem in which the Church holds the consecration of a virgin living in the world. While both the veil and the ring may be given, the ring must be given. Both veil and ring signify the espousal of the consecrated virgin to Christ, but it is the ring which most clearly signifies the union of one heart of the consecrated virgin with the Most Sacred Heart of the Savior.

The veil which may be imposed during the liturgy is not part of a habit proper to those consecrated persons who are religious or hermits and, therefore, separated from the world. Rather, it is like the veil of the bride in the Rite of Marriage, symbolizing the unity and fidelity of the love of the bride of Christ for her Spouse.

At times, there has been confusion between the life of the consecrated virgin living in the world and the consecrated hermit who separates himself or herself from the world. Because the

consecrated virgin lives in the world, the habit is not proper to her vocation, neither is the religious title, Sister. The hermit, on the other hand, wears a simple habit defined in his or her plan of life, and takes the title of Sister or Brother.

With regard to the use of a title or initials for a title after one's name, often hermits will identify themselves by the title of their hermitage or, if a group of hermits have chosen to live nearby one another in a type of anchoritic life, by the title of their community. For the consecrated virgin, however, the use of the title or initials is improper, since her consecration is lived fully in the world.

This is not to say that the consecration of the virgin living in the world is hidden, like the consecration of members of secular institutes. The consecration of the virgin living in the world is clearly public. The consecrated virgin is identified as such by the celebration of the Rite of Consecration and by the ring given her during the Rite of Consecration, much as are the married.

The presentation of the Liturgy of the Hours during the Rite of Consecration signifies the profound significance of the life of the consecrated virgin for the whole Church. The consecrated virgin makes her own the Church's daily prayer for the salvation of the world. Because of her intimate union with the Savior, the consecrated virgin is naturally led to serve His Body which is the Church, first and foremost by her prayer, but also by special service given to the diocesan Bishop who received her consecration or in whose diocese she lives. The praying of the Liturgy of the Hours and the special service given to the Church in no way take the consecrated virgin out of the world but rather unite her more and more to the world in her desire for its salvation, according to God's plan.

The special service to the Church is offered from within the world. While it certainly can take on the form of a paid service, it is usually given in the form of some particular service to the diocesan Bishop or Diocese which is given freely by the consecrated virgin as an expression of her total union with Christ whose Body is the Church.

In this regard, it is good to reflect upon the temporal condition of the consecrated virgin. Because consecrated virginity as a vocation is lived in the world, the consecrated virgin must, with the possible assistance of an advisor, provide for her own livelihood and social benefits. Before the consecration, the diocesan Bishop should be certain that the candidate has a plan for her temporal needs. While the consecrated virgin certainly strives to imitate the poverty of Christ because of her closer identification with the Savior, she does not take the vow of poverty within a religious institute which assumes responsibility for her livelihood and social benefits. Neither does she cede the administration of her temporal goods, as does the consecrated hermit. It is important that the diocesan Bishop and the spiritual director insist with the consecrated virgin on the prudent use of her temporal means.

With regard to her service to the whole Church, the consecrated virgin has a particular relationship with both the married and priests. Regarding the relationship of consecrated virginity to marriage, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us:

Esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable, and they reinforce each other. . . . (No. 2349)

In the life of the consecrated virgin, the married find strength and support for living chastely within their own vocation, observing the unity and fidelity characteristic of married love. They

also see in the life of the consecrated virgin the finality of the love lived according to their married vocation, the salvation of the spouse, full communion with God in the eternal life in Heaven.

Because of her spiritual bond with the diocesan Bishop, the consecrated virgin has a special rapport also with the priests who are the diocesan Bishop's co-workers. The consecrated virgin will see in the priest the sacramental figure of Christ the Good Shepherd, Head of His Body the Church. Her union of heart with the Savior will, therefore, express itself in a union of heart with the vocation of the ordained priest. The ordained priest for his part will see in the consecrated virgin the figure of the Church for which he gives his life and the finality of his ministry, the salvation of souls.

4. Since the consecration to a life of virginity is a true vocation in the Church, belonging to the state of life of consecrated persons, it is definitive, the purpose and plan of a life of perfect continence offered to God for His glory and for the salvation of the world. The suggested homily for the Rite of Consecration states:

Their consecration is a call to greater fervor in spreading the kingdom of God and in giving to the world the spirit of Christ.

The preparation for the consecration must, therefore, be analogous to the preparation for the assumption of any state of life in the Church.

The candidate for the consecration should be under the care of a spiritual director for a significant period of time, so that, with the assistance of the spiritual director, the truth of the call to the life of virginity may be tested. Likewise, too, the consecrated virgin will need the continued help of a spiritual director lest the beautiful treasure which she has received be corrupted by pride.

What are the elements of the spiritual formation of the consecrated virgin? The suggested homily for the Rite of Consecration indicates them:

Nourish your love of God by feeding on the body of Christ; strengthen it by self-denial; build it up by the study of the Scriptures, by untiring prayer, by works of mercy.

The suggested homily goes on to recommend prayer for the spread of the Gospel and for the unity of all Christians, for the welfare of the married, and for the abandoned.

The consecration to a life of virginity includes within it the notion of perpetuity, of faithful love of God and of the Church. Therefore, the instruction before the Rite states regarding the requirements of the candidate for consecration:

In the case of women living in the world it is required: . . . 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. (no. 5)

Before consecration, the candidate should have lived tranquilly several years of the celibate life. Chastity or perfect continence can only be embraced by a candidate who has matured over some years.

One of the particular areas which needs attention is education regarding the formation prior to and subsequent to the consecration to a life of virginity lived in the world. Only through

proper formation prior to the consecration will the candidate come to understand and embrace the vocation to which God is calling her. Likewise, ongoing formation, similar to what you are doing as a group today, keeps the consecration renewed and strong in the individual virgin's life.

5. The consecration to the life of virginity lived in the world does not require the plan of life proper to religious institutes or hermits who are separated from the world through their consecration. Sometimes in canonical commentaries on consecrated virginity, the vocation to consecrated virginity is treated together with the vocation to the eremitical life. Then, unthinkingly, the requirement of the plan of life which is essential to the hermit is attributed also to the consecrated virgin. Because consecrated virginity is lived in the circumstances of everyday life in the world, a plan of life as such is not appropriate.

The virgin must follow a schedule which respects her secular duties connected with her work and with her home. Her day, in that respect, resembles much more that of a married person or dedicated single person. Her consecration, however, leads her to sanctify each moment of the day by a following of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Poor, the Chaste, and the Obedient.

The virgin must be attentive to the nurture of her consecration through daily prayer, especially the Liturgy of the Hours, and, if possible, daily time spent in prayer before the Most Blessed Sacrament. The praying of the Rosary is likewise an important element of the daily schedule of the consecrated virgin. Living in the world, the consecrated virgin may need to change the exact times for these spiritual exercises from day to day, but she will give them prominence in her life, for they are the source of inspiration and strength for the living out of the obligations of her consecrated state in life and her particular vocation as a virgin living in the world.

6. The petition of the virgin for consecration is received by the diocesan Bishop. The diocesan Bishop celebrates the solemn Rite of Consecration. The required participation of the diocesan Bishop indicates the particular esteem in which consecrated virginity is held in the Church and the special relationship of service of the consecrated virgin to the diocesan Church.

The special relationship of the consecrated virgin to the diocesan Church is seen also in the presentation of the candidate for consecration to the diocesan Bishop before the day of the consecration. The Introduction to the Consecration To a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World states:

On a day scheduled close to the day of the rite of consecration, or at least on the day before the consecration, the candidate is presented to the bishop, so that the father of the diocese may begin a pastoral dialogue with his spiritual daughter.

After the consecration, the consecrated virgin should strive to meet with her diocesan Bishop on a regular basis, perhaps every six months or at least once a year, so that the diocesan Bishop may foster and nourish the sacred plan and purpose of the consecrated virgin.

The spiritual conversation between the consecrated virgin and the diocesan Bishop should touch upon the essential elements of the consecration, and the fostering and safeguarding of the grace of the consecration. A good point of reference will be the Rite of Consecration itself; it will provide the point of departure for the important spiritual conversation of

consecrated virgin with her Bishop.

It will be important that the diocesan Bishop understand well the spiritual relationship which the Rite of Consecration establishes between the consecrated virgin and himself. From the earliest days of the Church, the Order of Virgins has always had a particular relationship with the diocesan Bishop. Saint John Chrysostom writes at some length about the relationship of the diocesan Bishop with the virgin in his *Six Books on the Priesthood*.

When questions arise, it would be good to refer them to the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins so that Loretta Matulich or I may assist your diocesan Bishop and you.

7. Most diocesan Bishops have a vicar or delegate for religious. The purpose of the office of vicar or delegate is to assist the diocesan Bishop in his mutual relationships with members of institutes of the consecrated life. In the past, the vicar or delegate dealt almost exclusively with men and women religious. In some dioceses, like my own, there is a director of the office for the consecrated life who assists me in my relationship with all members of the various institutes of the consecrated life. It is, I believe, a better approach, given the recognition which is now given to the various forms of consecrated life with their distinctive elements.

The question arises regarding whether the relationship of the consecrated virgin to her diocesan Bishop should take place through the vicar or delegate for religious. If the vicar or delegate has knowledge only of the apostolic and contemplative religious life, he or she will be unable to give proper counsel to the consecrated virgin who is not a religious. If, however, the vicar or delegate has knowledge of the variety of forms of the consecrated life, then it will be appropriate to address questions and concerns about consecrated virginity to him or her.

In any case, the spiritual conversation with the Bishop every six months should be personal and direct, that is, not mediated through a third party. It is the diocesan Bishop's obligation to know the person and situation of those whom God has consecrated for the life of perpetual continence in love of Christ and of His Church. The knowledge will only come through regular meetings with the diocesan Bishop. It will be good for the consecrated virgin to suggest an agenda of matters to be discussed. Certainly, it will include the essential elements of the vocation to the consecrated life, particularly to consecrated virginity lived in the world.

In this regard, it is important, should a consecrated virgin change her diocese of residence, that she inform her diocesan Bishop and also the Bishop of the Diocese in which she will be resident. It is a courtesy to present a copy of the important documents pertaining to your consecration to the Bishop of your new diocese.

8. The association of the order of virgins, which is referred to in the Code of Canon Law (cf. Can. 604.2), does not refer to the life in community, although there is nothing to forbid that two or more consecrated virgins live together. However, because the life is lived in the world, the monastic common life is not suited to the life of the individual consecrated virgin.

The association of virgins refers to the forming of an association in the sense in which you who are the consecrated virgins living in the world in the United States have formed your association. The purpose of the association is stated in the Code of Canon Law:

to fulfill their pledge more faithfully, and to assist each other to serve the Church in a way that befits their state. (Can. 604.2)

The kind of activities and services which the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins has organized and provided are aimed precisely at helping consecrated virgins living in the world to understand more fully the integrity of their vocation in life and to serve the Church, in accord with the integrity of their vocation. It is my hope that your association will continue to grow and so provide the important service of information and support.

In your local areas, the consecrated virgins living in the world may wish to gather from time to time for communal prayer and mutual support. It will be good for any local group to keep in contact with the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins so that better communication may be promoted and greater unity among us may be fostered.

Work is in progress to have the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins living in the world listed in the Official Catholic Directory. Such a listing will give the civil status which your association certainly merits.

9. Since consecrated virginity lived in the world is a public state in the life in the Church, the Rite of Consecration should be duly documented by an official pronouncement of the Diocesan Bishop, with a proper certificate for the consecrated virgin. It will be important, too, that the Diocesan Bishop retain the original petition of consecration. Notification would fittingly be forwarded to the church of Baptism, in recognition of the distinct state in life of the consecrated virgin living in the world.

10. As I mentioned earlier, consecrated virginity lived in the world is a public witness in the Church. Especially in today's world, in which there are so many confused ideas about human sexuality and the human body, it is important for consecrated virgins to share with others, as they are able, the beauty of their state of life and vocation. There is a great hunger among young people for such a witness, for many of them see the emptiness of the world's approach to human sexuality and the human body.

Likewise, too, I believe that consecrated virgins can be particularly effective agents of a deeper understanding and unity among men and women in the Church and in the world. As you know, today's society is marked by a certain stridency, if not division, between man and woman. It shows itself in various ways and has even entered into the liturgy which is the font of our unity and communion in the Church. By the prayer and example of the consecrated virgin living in the world, witness will be given to the deepest meaning and reality of the vocation and mission of woman in the Church.

11. Our Blessed Mother is the Virgin of Virgins. In her virginal maternity the consecrated virgin finds the meaning of her vocation in life and the model for living the demands of her vocation in life. Through the intercession of the ever-virgin Mary, the consecrated virgin finds both inspiration and strength to embrace each day her vocation of undivided love of God and of neighbor.

CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS

By Fr. Bernard Hwang, STD

INTRODUCTION: Before we enter into a discussion on the Consecration of Virgins, it is both useful and necessary to know the various ways the word "consecration" has been used in the English language. It can be used in a broad or loose sense, meaning to give one's life to a noble cause, or to a mission or charitable work, or one's life to God through Religious profession. In all these ways of consecration, the human person is the principal agent in the act of consecration.

However, the same word "consecration" can be used in the strict sense that implies a radical and substantial change in the object or person being consecrated. The most striking example is the consecration at Mass. The bread and wine consecrated become the Body and Blood of Christ. Only God can do such a thing. In the consecration of virgins, the word "consecration" is also used in the strict sense. The virgin consecrated is removed by God Himself from the secular domain and transferred to the realm of the divine. After consecration, the virgin no longer belongs to this world; she belongs solely to God. The principal agent in the consecration at Mass and the consecration of virgins is God Himself.

What is Consecration of Virgins?

Consecration of Virgins refers to the ceremonies or the series of rites through which the Catholic Church dedicates and sets apart those virgins who have already vowed themselves totally, eternally, exclusively, and irrevocably to God. It is an action of God mediated through the ministry of the Church. By this action the virgins consecrated are removed permanently and absolutely from any secular or human usage. It is to be noted that one can only be consecrated to God because He alone has the right to our total dedication and service.

The Consecration of Virgins is one of the Church's Sacramentals composed of a series of liturgical acts. It is undoubtedly the most ancient, beautiful, elaborate Sacramental which one can find in the treasury of the Church. One has to experience it before he knows what has just been said. It is patterned after the ordination ceremony. It is one of the few Sacramentals that is reserved to the bishop and not found in the Ritual or Book of Blessings used by the priests. This Sacramental of the Consecration of Virgins is one of the channels of grace that connects to God's infinite treasury. It is always enshrined within the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

It is difficult to conceive the virgin's self-oblation and God's blessing on her offering enacted outside the supreme sacrifice of Christ's oblation. In the Catholic tradition, consecrated virginity, assumed for the reason of love, is equivalent to martyrdom because both witness to a supreme love of God and to the faith in the resurrection of the body. The difference between the two kinds of heroism is merely accidental and external. While martyrdom involves the shedding of blood and death and is caused by an external agent, consecrated virginity involves much sacrifice and a death to the world and to self with no external shedding of blood and no outsider involved in her death. When a consecrated virgin truly and generously lives her holy vocation for love of Christ and His Church, she gives up the joys and pleasures of the married life and is willing to die daily the slow death of the martyrdom of love through the generous

giving of herself to the service of the Church. This martyrdom of love can cause as much pain and sacrifice as the martyrdom of blood. Both forms of martyrdom are faithful reproductions of Jesus' own death of love. For the death of Christ saves the world not merely by the pain and suffering which He endured, but by His loving obedience to His Father. The same is true of the holy martyrs and the consecrated virgins. Their life of self-giving unto death is meritorious, not by reason of the pain and suffering endured, but by reason of their immense love of God and their obedience of faith. For the slow daily dying through monotonous service and unpretentious labor of love for the Church and the needy can be a real martyrdom of both body and soul. Both the martyrs and the consecrated virgins can do what they do and can endure what they endure because they are both supported by the powerful grace of the Risen Lord who is interceding for them before the throne of God. Both of them are aware of their own weakness in doing what they do and in accomplishing what they accomplish; but they are both reinforced by the inexhaustible strength of God which can help them to do the humanly impossible, one by dying a violent death, the other by a slow immolation of herself until death for love.

It is useful to note that the Consecration of Virgins is not an upward movement of the virgins offering themselves to God, but rather a downward movement of God offering to the virgins His love and predilection, His blessings, His graces through the ministry of the bishop, God's special envoy. There has been much confusion in the minds of many. Some look at the Consecration of Virgins as a substitute or an equivalent of Religious profession. Even some in authority do not seem to be aware of the essential difference between the Rite of Religious Profession and the Rite of Consecration of Virgins. The two are not the same.

Despite the twenty-five years that have gone by since the restoration of this ancient Sacramental, not every diocese in the U.S.A. has the privilege of having consecrated virgins in its midst. Even among devout and learned Catholics, few are aware of the existence of consecrated virgins, and even fewer know about their significance and contributions to the life of the Church. God must have His reasons for allowing the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the hierarchy in regards to encouraging and supporting the movement of consecrated virgins in the Church in America. The correct Christian response to this phenomenon is not criticism, throwing blame, or looking for scapegoats but to pray and do penance for the removing of obstacles put there by the forces that are opposed to God and to truth. At the same time we must try to learn more about the real essence and true beauty of this ancient rite and try to do our best to make it known to all people of good will with all the modern means of communication available to us. Let us be God's instruments to spread the truth and beauty of this venerable rite throughout the Church. Let us be confident that in God's own time the movement of consecrated virgins will spread not only all over the United States of America but all over the inhabited world (oikoumene).

The Annunciation and Consecration of Virgins:

It is not difficult to see a similarity between the Consecration of Virgins and what happened at the Annunciation. The virgins, like their Queen and Model, have already vowed their lives to God at a time previous to their consecration. Like the Blessed Virgin Mary, the consecrated virgins become spouses of God and their virginity is made fruitful by the descending action of the Holy Spirit. At the Annunciation, Mary offered herself totally and permanently to God with her "Fiat"; the consecrated virgins do the same at their consecration with their own "Fiat" and

self-surrender. As at the Annunciation where God accepted the positive response of Mary expressed through her "Fiat", the consecrating bishop accepts the "Fiat" of the virgins in the name of God during the rite, and prays also that they may accept God's gifts with faith and gratitude. From then on, their life belongs totally to God and devoted to Christ and His salvific mission and it is to be lived for God alone. The Annunciation should be the constant and life-long subject of meditation of the consecrated virgins. It is so natural for the consecrated virgins to turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary for inspiration. She is not only the First Consecrated Virgin but also the Mother and Exemplar of all consecrated virgins. For it is in her that the mystery of virginal consecration to God is fully revealed to us.

It is good for all to know that it was Father Paschal Botz, O.S.B., who did the ground work for the Consecration of Virgins in the U.S.A. He has given us so much insight into the theological and mystical dimensions of the Consecration of Virgins. I agree with him that the spiritual nuptials of virginity are most perfectly expressed and celebrated in the Rite of Consecration of Virgins. It behooves all consecrated virgins to read and meditate on his conferences and writings. For many years he was the editor of the review Sponsa Regis where the subject of consecrated virgins was discussed.

Consecration of Virgins and Sacrament of Matrimony:

From what has been said, it is clear that the Consecration of Virgins is very different from the profession of the vow of chastity. It presupposes the vow of virginity and can be conferred on virgins alone. The vow of chastity can be dispensed by the authority of the Church while there is no dispensation possible for the Consecration of Virgins, as far as I know. I do not believe that the Pope himself pretends that he has that power. If it is true that what God has joined together let no man put asunder in regard to marriage between a man and a woman, how much more true it must be regarding a spiritual nuptial between God and the virgin! What human would dare annul such a sacred union or declare such a nuptial null and void? In my humble opinion the nuptial relationship between Christ and the consecrated virgin is a more striking image or reflection of the spousal relationship between Christ and His Church than the union of a married couple.

For those who are gifted with the true Catholic Faith and who have witnessed and experienced the Rite of Consecration of Virgins, it is much more touching and moving than the liturgy of the Sacrament of Matrimony. Not only is the former much longer and impressive, but the Bridegroom celebrated in this union is truly present, though not visible to human eyes; and He is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the King of the universe, the King of Love, the Savior of the world, and the Bridegroom of the Song of Songs. For those who have no faith, the Consecration of Virgins is idiotic, crazy, insane, and meaningless: to see a young, intelligent, dynamic woman surrendering herself and her whole life with great enthusiasm and dedication to an invisible bridegroom is to them absolutely absurd, ridiculous, and laughable. But for the consecrated virgins, it is the most meaningful, beautiful, and fantastic event that can happen to them in their life, something which transcends all human description, experience, and comprehension.

The Impact the Rite of Consecration has on the virgins:

It is very true that the Consecration of Virgins is not a Sacrament like marriage, but a Sacramental of the Church. However, it does confer the grace of God on the recipients in great abundance. If the virgins are well-disposed and prepared, there is an infusion of grace on the virgins to enable them to live according to their new identity as spouses of Christ. Indeed, they become through this ancient and venerable Sacramental the icons of the Church, as some spiritual writers like to call them. They receive the privilege to follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

This ancient Rite of Consecration of Virgins is not just an empty ritual, impressive no doubt, but ineffectual. On the contrary, it can, by the prayers and merits of the Church, produce in the souls of the virgins special effects that match its solemnity and beauty. It confers on the virgins a godliness and holiness that will last throughout their entire life and will stay with them even in heaven. According to Fr. Paschal, the consecrated virgins are given the new status of a sacred person who belongs only to God, as a wife belongs only to her husband by reason of the Sacrament of Matrimony. Furthermore, through the Rite of Consecration, the virgin is elevated to a new position in the Church. As a consequence, she shares intimately in the nature and mission of the Church, at the same time she becomes a striking witness to the holiness and pure love of the Church for Christ. Let us pray and hope that she now mirrors Christ the King, the Victor, her divine Bridegroom ever more perfectly and strikingly. It is not too difficult to see that the divine Bridegroom shares everything He has with His beloved bride as it is so clearly described in the Song of Songs: His perfume, His nard, His own spiritual endowments, above all, His knowledge and His love. This is not human imagination. God Himself tells us this in that most beautiful book in the Old Testament.

Let us not forget the new fruitfulness the consecrated virgin receives through the Rite. As at the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit made the virginity of Mary fruitful; so at the Consecration, God also makes the virgin fruitful. Virginity without fruitfulness is empty and ugly. However, it is not a natural fruitfulness like giving birth to babies, but a supernatural fruitfulness of giving birth to new children to God. The consecrated virgin participates intimately with the work of the Church in bringing new births into the spiritual family of God. Here, we are touching mystery, profound mystery which we can only hope to understand more clearly when we are in the beatific vision. After the Consecration, the virgin lives more intimately the mystery of the Church in her union with Christ, the divine Bridegroom, and in her begetting of new members. And finally, she participates more zealously in the Church's longing, loving, and adoring of the Triune God in her liturgy.

It is sad that such a source of grace is not better known by more people, especially by the dedicated women in the Church today. It must be painful to those who have done so much and worked so hard for the Consecration of Virgins to see such a treasure of the Church being ignored and put aside during the last thirty years. There must be a reason for this phenomenon which is known to God alone. Since God is good and omnipotent, He can bring much good out of this unfortunate happening which is beyond human comprehension. It is an occasion for those who have faith to adore God's way of doing things.

Side by side with their graces and privileges, the consecrated virgins also assume new duties,

new responsibilities, and new charges. Like the wise virgins in the Gospel, they must now await the glorious return of the Lord in the name of the Church for the Christians and the entire human race. To keep the eschatological aspect of the Church in the conscience of the Christian people is a very important duty which the consecrated virgins must assume and fulfil. At the same time they must also assume the charge of cooperating with their Spouse in the work of redemption through prayer and sacrifice, and especially through the mission of vicarious atonement. In this charge, one can see that the Rite of the Consecration of Virgins is not for the immature and the fainthearted. Another duty they also have assumed is to join in the liturgy of praise of the Church. Like the Blessed Virgin Mary, their place must be in the midst of the apostles, the bishops, the priests as a source of unity and of inspiration for the laity. Another very important duty they must fulfil with zeal and enthusiasm is to reproduce in themselves the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary for the glory of the Blessed Trinity. They have the duty now to show to the world what the Church should look like and what the Church should be: holy, sinless, totally dedicated to the cause of Christ, enthusiastic, joyous, and ready to do anything that is asked of them, even to the giving of their life.

By reason of their Consecration, the virgins assume also a fundamental ministry in the Church, a ministry parallel to and supportive of the priestly ministry. In my humble opinion, the consecrated virgin also embraces through the Consecration the vocation of love in the heart of the Church, the vocation which St. Theresa describes so eloquently and glowingly in the Canticum of Love which she wrote her sister Marie shortly before her death. By reason of her loving sacrifices, the missionaries could preach the Gospel with enthusiasm and the martyrs could die with heroism. Like the virgin martyrs of old, especially St. Cecilia, the consecrated virgins of today are the apostles of Christ. Through their life of purity, heroism, and generous love, they lead those who know and admire them to Christ.

At this very critical moment when the Church is confronting the serious problem of low morale and defection among the ministers of the Gospel, the consecrated virgins can share with their brothers in the priesthood the mystical meaning of their Consecration and the joy and enthusiasm which their Consecration has brought into their lives. For, after all, the Sacrament of Orders is also a consecration to Christ the High Priest and to the people of God. What a wonderful vocation it is to confirm, encourage, and support their brother priests in their holy vocation! This function of encouragement and support given by the consecrated virgins to their brothers in Christ is vividly shown in the life of Scholastica, Clare, Catherine, Teresa, and many others. Let us not forget the great contributions which the consecrated virgins of the first centuries gave to the popes, bishops, and priests, and the whole Church of Christ by their heroic dedication and service in time of persecution. Even a casual reading of the acts of martyrs will acquaint us with the inspiration and help which Sts. Agnes, Cecilia, Agatha, Lucy, and many others have given to the Church as a whole. If the consecrated virgins of our times can offer similar contributions to the Church which is facing a crisis no less threatening than the Roman persecution of the first three centuries, the future of the Church is absolutely assured. One can see why the enemy of the Church desires to destroy the movement of the consecrated virgins before it can flower and bud. Let us have confidence in God. For if this movement is from God, no power, neither human or diabolical, can destroy it. Like the kingdom of God which is small and insignificant at its beginning, the movement of consecrated virgins in the Church will grow and grow under the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit into a big tree that will give shade and comfort to many

dedicated women throughout the world.

Personal Reflections:

From the list of the consecrated virgins in the U.S.A., it is clear that God once again has chosen the weak to confound the strong and the lowly to shame the learned. If God chose a group of uneducated fishermen to be carriers of the Good News of salvation, He can surely use now a group of non-sophisticated women to start a new model of consecrated life in the Church. God does not need the intellectual elite of our times to bring His work of salvation to success. God prefers to use the humble, the poor, the lowly, the disabled, those who will listen to Him and obey Him, people like the Virgin of the unknown village of Nazareth, to carry out and complete the magnificent Plan of restoring all things in Christ. I feel it a great privilege in being called by God to render a humble service to this great movement which I firmly believe to be originated from God, directed by God, and much blessed by God. I want to carry on what Fr. Paschal Botz, my mentor and teacher in Christ, has begun and is continuing to inspire from his quasi-hermitage in Minnesota. I thank God for the good health, education, the material blessings, and precious time that He has given me to do His work. May He be praised and glorified in all things.

The revival of the Consecration of Virgins in the Church throughout the world at this juncture of history has a great significance for those who believe that we are living at a very important turning point in the history of mankind. In the history of the Church we have noticed that the revival of the Consecration of Virgins often ushered in a period of great fervor in the Mystical Body of Christ. Our Holy Father Pope John Paul II himself believes that the Church is entering into a new springtime at the end of the Second Millennium and the beginning of the Third. In his letter "Tertio Millennio Aveniente" he invites all Christians, yes, the whole human race, to prepare themselves to welcome this great Jubilee of the Year 2000. For those who live in hope, the revival of the Consecration of Virgins is one of the signs of the new birth of faith and of new vitality in the Church. It is a true and striking sign that God is pouring great graces on the Church because these pure and wise virgins are the most striking signs of beauty and fidelity in the Church and the most vivid symbols of the new spiritual springtime in the Church when the virtues of purity and charity blossom once more after the winter of stagnancy and death. The history of the Church has taught us that the revival of the Consecration of Virgins invariably marks the coming of a new age of faith and fervor in the Church.

We are right now in 1995 witnessing only the beginning of a new springtime in the Church. The age of rebellion and dissent in the Church seems to be coming to its closing days. We are witnessing the return of right reason and sincere dialogue. It is quite possible that the Consecration of Virgins, restored in this juncture of history, is intended by God to assist and support the authentic renewal of the Church in the coming Millennium. Through the fervent prayers of these virgins, their sacrifices, prayers, good example, and enthusiasm, the Church will move confidently into all parts of the world with new hope, vigor, and apostolic zeal, raising the victorious standard of the Cross in every continent of the planet. For those who love Jesus Christ, this is an exciting time to be alive. The consecrated virgins are indeed the radiant sign of

life, the morning star heralding a new dawn of salvation, a symbol of peace which Jesus Christ brought into the world for the first time 2000 years ago.

Spirituality of the Consecrated Virgins:

We come now to the most important subject to be explored regarding the Consecrated Virgins. All our explorations and discussions are not very helpful to them unless these can help them to live their consecration in a way that is most pleasing to God and beneficial to them. The consecrated virgins, like other committed Christians, need to live a deep and intense spiritual life guided by a sound and authentic spirituality.

The spirituality of the consecrated virgins is essentially the same as all truly committed Christians. It is the living of the Mystery of Christ and of the imitation of the Lord Jesus. Like their Lord and Master, they have only one goal in life and that is to return to the Father, to the right hand of the Father where Jesus is. It is a spirituality that facilitates the living out of the Baptismal commitments with the help of the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, and with the assistance of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. They keep the Bible as their indispensable travel guide and the breviary and missal as their constant companions.

Specifically, however, they should be immersed in the mystery that was enacted at the Annunciation where they can best discover the mystery of their own consecration. It is to the Blessed Virgin Mary that they must turn in order to learn about the mystery of their unique and holy vocation. Like their holy Mother Mary, they must learn to listen, to ponder, and to treasure the word of God so as to find in it the enlightenment regarding their identity, and their special call and ministry in the divine Plan of Salvation. It is in the word of God that they must learn about their new being, their unique vocation in the Mystical Body of Christ. No secular writings can help them in this matter. They must understand the word of God in the light of the living Tradition of the Church as handed down through the centuries in the teachings of the Church's Magisterium and in the life and writings of the Fathers of the Church and the saints.

The Song of Songs:

There is one book in the Bible that the consecrated virgin must be very familiar with, and that is the Song of Songs. It is hard to imagine how the consecrated virgin can be ignorant of this unique book which was written specifically for her. It is her book given her by God Himself. The experiences of the Bride, so touchingly described in that book, are really her experiences. The story of the Bride's growth and maturation is the very story to be relived in her own life.

Once the consecrated virgin realizes who she is with the grace of God, she will immediately understand that the Song of Songs was written specifically for her and will treasure it as her own. She will have no difficulty in seeing herself as the Bride in that book. She will immediately recognize also that it is God's love-letter addressed to her personally. With the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is the Bride par excellence of the Song of Songs, she can see herself, her life's history, her spiritual journey vividly depicted in this most beautiful book of the Bible which describes in the form of a drama the infinite, patient, and incredible love of God for His poor

spouse.

Like the Bride of the Song of Songs, the consecrated virgin is also from the People of the Land, not from the nobility and wealthy class who lived in palaces and mansions in a walled city. She has to work and earn her own living by working in the fields. She is not one of those who appears in the cover of Vogue or the New Yorker. Or is she numbered among the CEOs who run big corporations giving orders to others or making decisions. She knows that she belongs in the company of the anawim, the poor of Yahweh, and the Song of Songs was written with her in mind.

Like the Bride in the Song of Songs, she is in the process of growing and she makes many mistakes and blunders. She is far from being self-confident or able to make all decisions for herself. She is still growing, learning, and maturing. She finds that the Song of Songs is just right for her, and she finds great comfort in it. Deep down in her heart, she knows that she has won the heart of the King. However, she does not know why He loves her so much. She presumes that the King must be blinded by love to have chosen her out of all others who are surely better and more qualified and appealing than she. The Song of Songs reveals to her unsophisticated mind the mystery of divine love which has been hidden from the proud intellectuals of her days. She realizes that this unique Book is just the book for her. In it she learns how to grow and advance in the Science of Love. It also gives her the insatiable desire to know more. It urges her to ask her beloved bridegroom to teach her more when she is alone with Him. The pleading of the Bride to the divine Bridegroom, "Teach me!" comes so natural to her lips because she knows well that it is impossible to learn enough of the divine secret of love. Yes, who can teach her the secret of love better than her Beloved who is for her the best of all lovers and who is at the same time her first Love and the only Lover she has ever known and wanted?

In this unique book, she can hear the most beautiful love songs which easily wrap her into ecstasy. How can any consecrated soul be indifferent to such a love call: "Come then, my love, my lovely one, come. For see, winter is past, the rains are over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth. The season of glad songs has come, the cooing of the lovebird is heard in our land. Come then, my love, my lovely one, come. Let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is beautiful?"

In this same book, the consecrated virgin encounters the most beautiful compliments from her Beloved: "How beautiful you are, my love; how beautiful you are!" "What spells lie in your love, how delicious is your love, more delicious than wine!" She hears Him calling her by the most exquisite names: "My dove, my sister, my promised bride, my beloved, my most beautiful one!" Finally, she learns from her beloved Bridegroom the absolutely overwhelming power of love which is stronger than sheol, yes even than death itself. Does she need to look for any other book to guide her in her love journey other than the Song of Songs which her Master and King has given her? The answer to this question is definitely No.

If the Song of Songs was meaningful and inspiring to the virgin before her Consecration, it becomes even more meaningful and exciting after her Consecration. Because now with the help of this book, her identification with the divine Bridegroom becomes more real and intimate. Her

union with Him is no more a mere dream, a wish, a desire; it is now a reality, an ecstatic experience. She is now not only in the house of the Bridegroom, her King, but in the inner chamber, the wine cellar itself, experiencing not only His myrrh, His sweet scent, and His perfume but His loving embrace, yes, even the kiss of His mouth.

In the midst of such wonderful experiences she becomes more aware of her sinfulness, immaturity, selfishness, weakness, misery, and unworthiness. Instead of being discouraged, the grace of Consecration gives her a greater trust in God's unconditional love, and also a greater courage to plunge herself into the divine furnace of infinite mercy. Her failures and mistakes embolden her under the influence of grace, instead of frightening her. The awareness of her human limitations only encourages her to seek God's help with greater earnestness and challenges her to try harder. The process of growth and maturation is long and hard in view of her human condition, but that only encourages her to move forward instead of retreating. For how can the divine and understanding Bridegroom remain indifferent to the poor efforts of His loving Bride? The Song of Songs shows her that He cannot and will not; it also reminds her over and over that He has no memory of her past and her failings. He simply does not remember. He has already thrown them into the bottom of the ocean. Moreover, He is so fascinated by the beauty and goodness that He has endowed her with on the day of her Consecration, in both the natural and supernatural orders, that He prefers to look at the many positive elements in her instead of the negative ones. He is so happy just to see her and be with her that He forgets all her faults, mistakes, and blunders. He knows also that, at the end, He will win. His powerful graces will transform her into the image of His holy Mother, the model of all consecrated virgins for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity. As far as the divine Bridegroom is concerned, the battle is already won, though individually the virgin is still on the way to victory.

The Book of Isaiah: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

The next book which the consecrated virgin should know well is the Book of Isaiah, especially the four mysterious hymns of the Servant of Yahweh, which describe so vividly the mission of Christ's vicarious atonement. As true bride of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, she absolutely cannot avoid participating in this vocation of the Messiah if she wants to be faithful to her divine Spouse. How can any faithful bride be indifferent to her Bridegroom's mission of suffering to redeem the human race? There is no doubt that the readiness of sharing into this vicarious atonement of her divine Bridegroom is the most difficult challenge which a consecrated virgin has to face. There is no escape from it. In the Song of Songs, we find that towards the end of that book, the Bride begged her Bridegroom with these touching words: "And You would teach me!" No doubt, the Bride has learned many things during her numerous encounters with her Bridegroom, her King, and her Beloved, but there is still the most important lesson that she needs to learn absolutely well in order to graduate in the school of divine love. And this last lesson is vicarious atonement. How can the Bridegroom refuse the request of His own loving Bride?

The process of growth in love from the human level to the divine level is a long process which starts in this life and continues on in the next. Since the consecrated virgin has the desire and willingness to grow in love for her beloved Bridegroom and King, the Spirit of God is ready to lead her towards the sublime state of perfect union of love. But this union can never be reached

without the grace of God and the purifying fire of suffering which vicarious atonement always requires.

Teaching is indeed one of the messianic roles of the Bridegroom. Man, by reason of his fall, has lost his sharp vision; his intellect has been dulled and blinded. The Messiah is sent to open the eyes of sinful man and to show him the way of truth. Sinful man, touched by the grace of the Messiah, always wants to learn the truth which he has lost by sin. The Bride, who has experienced her inadequacy and poverty in her close relation with her Beloved, really feels the need to learn more about His way of love and His science of love. She pleads to Him to teach her that science so that she can truly be His love, His sister, His disciple, and His bride. If there be any one whom He wants to teach this science of love, it is to His most precious bride. The last and the most important lesson in the science of divine love is on suffering and the mystery of atonement for the sins of others. It is the mystery of kenosis, self-emptying, of vicarious atonement. Jesus taught this very lesson to His mother from the Cross. For three long hours Mary opened her eyes, her ears, her mind, and her heart to the preaching of her divine Son, not given in words but in deed, in the very act of dying for love of us. The Sorrowful Mother learned this lesson not just for herself, but for her newly adopted children. She learned how to become the Mother of Sorrows and the Queen of Martyrs without going through physical death. She learned how to die without actually experiencing the separation of body and soul. She died mystically with her Son for the glorification of God and the redemption of the human race. John and Mary Magdalene must have also learned the lesson of the Cross on Calvary. We too have to learn this lesson of suffering from our Master Jesus Christ, the sooner the better. As bride of the crucified Lord, it is unthinkable that she would want to skip this last and most important lesson. Surely the divine Bridegroom wants to teach her this most important lesson she needs to know in order to be truly His bride. For how could she let her Beloved suffer alone or be indifferent to and ignorant of the most painful page of His life? To know Jesus Crucified was for St. Paul the most important and most crucial knowledge a Christian should know and identify with. It is true to say that unless one knows and identifies with Jesus Crucified, one cannot say that she is the bride of Christ. Without doubt, the Bride of the Song of Songs wants to learn this last lesson of Jesus Crucified and of vicarious atonement when she pleads to her Bridegroom: "And You would teach me!" Teach indeed He will, as He has taught this last lesson to His mother and to John and Mary Magdalene. For sure, this ultimate lesson regarding the Cross as a passage to glory must be taught to the Bride. Its meaning and value is an important part of her total formation as the Bride of the Crucified Lord. The consecrated virgin knows well that her life on earth is a novitiate where she learns to live in love as a preparation for the life of love with her divine Bridegroom in heaven. The Song of Songs and the Book of Isaiah are the most useful manuals of love which God has given her during her earthly journey towards Him. Blessed is the consecrated virgin if she knows these two books well and use them profitably. May she, with the powerful grace of God and her humble cooperation, learn these books well before her final encounter with her Lord and Beloved!

The Psalter:

The third book in the Bible which is very precious and useful to the consecrated virgin is the Psalter. These beautiful songs and prayers are God's gift to the Church. Our loving Father knows well our human poverty, and He provides for us a book of songs and prayers unsurpassed

in beauty and warmth. He puts so much depth and meaning into them and endows them with His own timelessness that they can be sung now with as much freshness as when they were first used by David and the Israelites in the Temple thousands of years ago. The psalms uttered from the heart of the sacred psalmist and on the lips of the Israelites are not mere words. They are the living expressions of the religious sentiments and hopes of the Chosen People of God. When we Christians recite them now, we assume not only their sentiments but we also live and fulfil the deep sense that was put there by God and which was first realized in Christ and is now fulfilled in us.

The psalms, besides being songs given us by God to express our homage, praise, and inner feelings to Him, have been used by God to teach the Chosen People the great truths of revelation, to keep alive in the Old Testament time the fire of hope for the coming of the Messiah and Redeemer, and to show forth in prophecies the eternal glory and existence of Christ (Ps. 2), His kingly dignity and priestly power (Ps. 109), and even the humiliation and sufferings He was to undergo for our redemption (Pss. 21, 68). The psalms also summarize for the Chosen People the Law and the Prophets and express them in songs. The psalms are the compendium of the whole Old Testament in poetic form.

These beautiful songs and holy prayers are specially destined to be used by the consecrated virgin in her life of prayer. When they are uttered from the heart of a pure and loving person, they are not mere words but become the living expressions of faith which are very pleasing to God. From her beloved Bridegroom, she learns the usefulness and beauty of these sacred songs. She also learns from Him the love of the psalms which speak of Him and find their full meaning in Him. During His life on earth, He often recited and sang the psalms. He used them in the synagogues and Temple. He recited the gradual psalms in His pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the various feasts of the Jews. He sang them with His disciples after the Last Supper. And finally, He died with the psalms on His parched lips (Mt. 27:46; Lk. 23:46). He alone could sing the psalms with the truth they contain. The full sense of the psalms as intended by God came right out when they were used by Christ. Without doubt, the consecrated virgin can also learn how to love and use the psalms from the Blessed Virgin Mary who must have taught them to the Christ-child and recited them with Him during the thirty years of His hidden life at Nazareth. And finally, she must have united with Him to recite the psalms at the foot of the Cross that all the prophecies concerning Him spoken by the holy kings and prophets of the Old Testament might be fulfilled.

Like her beloved Bridegroom and her heavenly Mother and Model, the consecrated virgin loves the psalms. She uses them not only to praise and celebrate God's perfection but to express her sentiment of joy and sorrow, her needs, and her problems to God. The psalms weep for her in her pain and grief. They also rejoice for her in her moment of joy and exaltation. They express her thanksgiving to God in time of gratitude and her sorrow in time of repentance. They long for God's face on her behalf in moment of dryness and desolation. There is no sentiment or aspiration of her soul that the psalms cannot express for her.

When the consecrated virgin prays the psalms, especially in the setting of the liturgy, she prays with the Church and for the Church. She does not pray only the literal sense of the psalms. With the help of the Holy Spirit, she penetrates into the spiritual sense as put there by God for her

usage and enjoyment. This is possible by reason of her union and identification with Christ. But before she gets into the spiritual sense of the psalms, she must first understand and pray them in the literal sense, that is, the sense that was intended by the sacred psalmist. This can be achieved by entering into the mind of the sacred psalmist and trying to share in his religious experiences when placed face to face with God's perfection and before His divine presence. Thus her soul can vibrate with the same sentiment of joy, hope, sorrow, fear, or love which the inspired authors wished to express with the psalms. If she succeeds in joining her heart to this flow of the genuine religious sentiments of the psalmists, she is already praying the inspired songs magnificently.

However, in the wisdom of God, the psalms are also to be the prayer and religious expression of His Incarnate Son our Lord Jesus Christ and that of His Mystical Body. In His divine mind, the psalms have a deeper and fuller meaning than what is signified on the surface of the words. When they are placed in the light of the mysteries of Christ and His Church, the psalms assume a new dimension and significance. For example, Israel, Jerusalem, Exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea--these figures and events, in the light of the redemptive mysteries of Christ, are not mere historical facts, but facts foreshadowing and pointing to a higher reality, pregnant with truths of a different order. In other words, they possess a deeper and hidden meaning, put there by God, commonly known as the spiritual sense. It is into this deeper and fuller sense that the consecrated virgin must try to enter with God's help, while she looks forward to beholding the meaning of the psalms in its full splendor in the beatific vision. In the meantime, being the Bride of Christ, she is given the liberty to pass from the literal to the spiritual sense, from the sentiments of the inspired psalmist to those of Christ, from figure to reality, and from prophecy to fulfillment. She transcends the description of the temporal blessings mentioned in the psalms and raises her eyes to the wonderful gifts in the order of grace which Christ has won for her.

It may be beneficial for the consecrated virgin to be aware of the different voices that some ancient authors recognized in the psalms: 1. the voice of Christ addressing His Father; 2. the voice of Christ addressing the Church, His Bride; 3. the voice of the Father speaking to Christ or concerning Him; 4. the voice of the prophets speaking of Christ as the Messiah; 5. the voice of the Church addressing her Bridegroom Christ; 6. the voice of the Church addressing God the Father. Once she can recognize what voice the psalm represents, she joins herself into that voice and prays accordingly. It is quite sure that she can easily recognize that voice 2 and voice 5, as a dialogue of love between herself and her beloved Bridegroom.

It is hoped that these few remarks may be of help to the consecrated virgins to live their vocation more fully and more meaningfully. What is left to be discussed is how to use the three precious gifts which Christ has given to them: the Holy Eucharist, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Holy Spirit, and how to practice the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, poverty, humility, and purity so that they can live their noble vocation to the full for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity and for the advancement of the Church.