

# *Discernment*

## **DISCERNMENT OF THE VOCATION**

The candidate should prepare an autobiography to present to her spiritual director/formation director and to the bishop. She should include an explanation of why she seeks the Consecration of a Virgin for a Woman Living in the World according to Canon 604.

The autobiography is a useful starting point in order to determine maturity, points of discussion, and motivation for candidacy.

## **SPIRITUAL DIRECTION**

### Definition

The term “co-journeying” to “spiritual direction,” is preferred primarily because it is God who gives us direction in our spiritual lives--a director can only assist this process.

Spiritual direction is not simply spiritual advice, or small homilies, and certainly not a counseling relationship (although some people as a result of counseling may move into the area of spiritual direction.)

The principle relationship in spiritual direction is between the directee and God. The relationship between the director and the directee is not primary as it may be in counseling. It is important that transference (in particular, Spiritual Parent/Child transference) and dependency is not fostered between the directee and the director as this will probably block the directee's relationship with God.

The content of a direction session is any intra or inter-personal conflict which prevents the fostering of the relationship with God (i.e., our prayer). Therefore, the director has the role of challenging intra and inter-personal conflicts (e.g., if a person says I trust no one but God, or I am intimate with Jesus but no one else. These have to be challenged.) Through our inter and intra-personal relationships we come to knowledge and love of God. This is about the spiritual experiences we have had, and how these are integrated into our whole lives. (E.g., a person who has visions in church and then is selfish or abrasive in the community needs to be challenged.)

### Choice of Director

You cannot set yourself up as a spiritual director. A spiritual director is someone who is recognized for his personal spirituality, holiness, and knowledge of God (through the Church's tradition and the Scriptures). This is the first criterion to look for in a spiritual director. However, once someone has been identified by a few people as a good director, there is much that the director can do to educate and train himself in the ways of direction, and maybe this is worthwhile to use as a criterion, too.

Be aware that not all spiritual directors will be good for all spiritual directees. You need someone who is going to concentrate on your relationship with God. You may need to shop around. One criterion for selecting a director is how he is able to challenge you. A director who constantly makes you feel good while there are tensions and inconsistencies in your life is not good for you.

An important part of spiritual direction is the director's ability to listen to what is happening in the relationship between you and God. I would suggest that a personal meeting is the best way to facilitate this, as what is being said may be non-verbal as well as verbal. You should be able to pray with your director.

Although a friend may be the most accessible director, you have to watch the conflict between your relationship with the friend and the purpose of direction which is your relationship with God.

Some form of formal contract covering issues of confidentiality, meeting times, and a regular review of how the direction is going is appropriate. An informal, open-ended, irregular, and never-ending relationship is potentially open to abuse and dependency.

## MATURITY AND CONSECRATED VIRGIN

If all Christians are supposed to follow Jesus Christ, the consecrated virgin has a special obligation to keep very close to Him as His beloved spouse should do. The way which He takes us to walk on is the Way of the Cross. This demands total self-giving, self-forgetting, courage, and heroism. To prepare for this, the consecrated virgin must grow beyond childhood and adolescence. She has to be mature emotionally, intellectually, and above all spiritually.

Grace is built on nature. This is the normal path or the law which we have to follow. If our nature is not ready, grace will not work, unless we expect God to work a miracle at every turn of our life. This is wishful and unrealistic thinking. Consequently, the consecrated virgin must try to use every means available to grow into maturity on every level: emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Her driving force can no longer be self-interest, self-fulfillment, self-realization but self-sacrifice, self-giving, and self-immolation. She must live and work for the good of others, for the good of the Christian community, for what is good for the cause of Christ. She must be ready to give up everything: her dreams, her pleasure, her interest and, yes, even her life in martyrdom for her Spouse and His cause. This demand is not for the childish, the immature, the non-saints.

She may not be able to reach that height at this moment, but she must have the desire, the courage, the determination to attain it someday with the grace of God. She must work towards the stage of total self-giving, and self-emptying (kenosis) like her divine Spouse Jesus Christ. It is clear that only mature individuals can do such a thing and reach such a height. It is towards such a goal, such an ideal, that the consecrated virgin must strive and aim. It is towards this stage of maturity that a consecrated virgin must work at every moment of her life.

As to how to reach such a goal, such a sublime stage of maturity, what St. Paul regards as the full stature of Christ, is not just a psychological question or an academic question; for the consecrated virgin, it is a challenge she cannot evade without betraying her real vocation as a bride of Christ. It is a question of holiness for her. It is an existential question which she cannot evade or ignore. She must face it in her life, the sooner the better.

However, she knows that without a psychological maturity, maturity as a human person, she will be working in a vacuum. Therefore, she must strive first to reach that emotional, psychological, and spiritual maturity of a self-actualized adult Christian and then divine grace will step in to finish the work of sanctification in her. Then, she will walk closely with her divine Spouse and Savior on the way to Calvary.

### **Maturity Notes**

Three factors that must be in place in order to be mature and stable: relationship with God, social relationships with other people in some way, work that has a meaning for the person doing it.

The work can be either voluntary or paid, but it must be seen to have a transcendental meaning. It must be of benefit to others in some way. One can see this is a "mission" one has received from God. The work, therefore, can be directly beneficial to others on this earth, or it can be spiritually beneficial to others, as suffering endured for love of God and offered for the salvation

of others. The work must be done for God, not for human appreciation or self-seeking

## **CONSECRATED VIRGINITY REQUIRES THE INTEGRATED PERSON**

from *Coleccion Pastoral Juvenil, Num. 1,*

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The integrated personality requires the development of the whole person, i.e., body, intellect, will, social relationships, and the life of grace. No person is pre-determined, nor pre-programmable, but rather she enjoys a unique and individualized freedom. Although certain factors influence the growth of any human being and they seem to determine her personality, they can be changed if and when the person wants and asks for help. Human maturity is an on-going process, to be worked at consciously each day; it is never without areas of improvement no matter what the chronological age.

A number of components are necessary for human maturity. One must be able to give and receive when on different levels of human affective development. A person needs to recognize and act realistically within the time and space in which she finds herself. If her physical, economic, intellectual (education and culture), free will (capacity to make free decisions and the capacity to surrender herself in love), social (general society), communitarian (family, friends, school), and spiritual needs are successfully filled, then we can expect that a person will continue to grow in maturity.

In observing various levels of maturity, psychologists have recognized certain traits belonging to the stages of human development. Briefly, they are:

**Child:** body, thinking, social relations, affections, and the spiritual are all in the service of the child. She needs familial and social security. She has nothing to decide for herself.

**Adolescent:** advances toward giving. She goes through various stages. Although she receives a great deal, she is called to give of herself and open herself to others. She would like to jump into adulthood, but she can never do it without discovering first her personality by trying out its possibilities through her own care of her body, long discussions, friendship, teamwork, a movement to the margins of the familial circle, and the exploration of ideals.

**Adult:** gives and receives--both are necessary. She is in full possession of herself and is called to give to others in order to be happy. She continues to receive, but it is to the benefit of others. She continues to grow each day in physical maturity, intellect, affections, and spirituality. It is understood that this stage of human development is not a pre-determined one, but made by one's own decisions.

It is clear from the brief descriptions above that each stage of human development means that a person cannot reach her full identity without changing her relations with the people who played a role in each period of her life from childhood through the various stages of adolescence. Closely related to this principle, also, is the fact that in the social sphere, no matter what group(s) one may belong to, a person will never find herself fully satisfied in her social needs. This is because

each group has its own proper interest, be it economic, professional, political, medical, cultural, or whatever. They are bound by that interest and, therefore, by their very nature will provide only a part of the social interaction that an integrated, mature person needs. Each social grouping provides for a give-and-take, but only in one aspect of an integrated human personality.

The above being said about the characteristics of the integrated human personality and maturity, it is time to look at the question of vocation. "Grace is built on nature," and the spiritual director/formation director should be aware that an aspirant to consecrated virginity lived in the world should be a mature person for her chronological age. In addition, just as there is a "readiness" in certain stages of human growth and development, for example, the "readiness" to learn to read when one is a child, so the spiritual director/formation director should be aware that there is a point of "readiness" when a candidate is prepared to receive the Consecration of a Virgin.

Let us look first, however, at the general concept of vocation, the unique call from God that He makes to the individual person.

The integrated person knows that vocation is a necessary component of human growth and maturity. She must come to know that she is called by God to live in a way planned by Him. The call is from God to man, not from man to man. She is to participate in the ministry of Christ and be configured to Christ personally and existentially. God calls, and man responds to the mission that God proposes to her. This mission is PROPOSED, NOT IMPOSED; man is free to accept or to reject it.

This call of God necessarily means that there is some mission, some temporal work to do, on this earth. (Even contemplative life, or a life of physical suffering and immobility, have a "work" in that they build up the Body of Christ through prayer and penance.) This temporal mission is a person's work in the time and place in which she finds herself. It is her unique part of developing and perfecting the world around her. It is a necessary part that leads to her eternal mission. The mission, the "work," that the person is called to do spans, then, both time and eternity; it is her eternal identity and mission in salvation history.

Vocation is not unilateral. To be human means to be called by God to integrate oneself into salvation history. By entering into it consciously, one progressively discovers her own manner of personally responding until she has made God the center of her life. The three moments of vocation are:

1. The call from God as the fruit of His love
2. Man's response: free, conscious, and grateful
3. The mission that God proposes (not imposes) to man and her free execution of it

The internal and external signs of a certain vocation are:

1. External circumstances are agreeable to that perceived call and the person's capacity shows that she can carry out that specific mission to its conclusion
2. Objective and subjective gifts are evident in the person to show that she can complete that mission to which she feels called. If God calls one to a specific mission, then He will give the specific gifts needed to fulfil that mission. Peace

is a result of the union with God's will.

When a person perceives a certain vocation, it is a dynamic process. God has her recognize little by little that He is calling her through the circumstances in daily life. She responds as an integrated person because to be human means an evolutionary process of growth--somatically, socially, psychologically, spiritually--until she reaches her own identity.

Jesus indicates and confirms His will through normal channels in His Church.

In summary, then, the spiritual director/formation director of the aspirant for consecrated virginity lived in the world should be able to recognize that the proper components of the candidate are in place. She should be mature in personality--within herself and in relation to others. Basic human necessities should be satisfied. The intellect should be developed to the adult stage and the person should continue to want to grow and learn each day. She should be able to make decisions and carry them out. Lastly, she should be able to articulate that she has perceived a call from God, not that she is trying to emulate or copy someone else's call, nor that she is looking for an "escape" from some situation, nor should she manifest that she is aggressively looking to "get her own way." The person called to a specific vocation should be willing to learn about it, go through a formation period to prepare herself for it, and desire to continue to grow in that vocation even after she has entered it. Consecrated virginity for women living in the world usually manifests itself as a vocation that has taken awhile in a woman's life to develop; it is not a vocation for those "just shopping around." When this vocation is confirmed by the bishop who gives his approval for the woman to receive the Consecration of a Virgin, she is humbled and displays an attitude of "innocent freshness," not one of "Well, I finally made it!"

## How Do I Discern the Call to Consecrated Virginity?

The Consecration of a Virgin for a lay woman living in the world (Canon 604) is a call from God. It is a definitive vocation in the Church. No one can presume to take it on herself, nor should she ever deem herself "worthy" of it. Most importantly, it is a call of love, and love alone should be the motivation. Love of Jesus makes everything have sense, meaning. It is the love of Jesus that calls a lay virgin to become a bride of Christ, a bride of the Lord Jesus, an living image of the Church.

Called to be bride of Christ, the consecrated virgin concentrates her life on who she is, rather than on what she does. In this vocation, she is not called to a particular service or ministry in the Church, although most consecrated virgins use their talents and gifts in volunteer service to the Church. The life of being the bride of Christ is essential; her service in the Church and in humanity flows out from who she is. She can volunteer her time in catechetics, health care, administrative service, or civic responsibilities, but primarily she is a consecrated virgin. The key to her identity is love--as her whole love, attention, life, and desire are all surrendered to Jesus alone. Love in absolute surrender is the key to being a bride of Christ.

Sometimes lay women discerning this vocation would like to know what questions to ask themselves so that they can better perceive if they have this call, or not. Often points of comparison can throw contrasts and one can see more clearly the objective in view. With this in mind, let us look at some questions and subsequent discussions of these questions.

If I had been called to a vocation other than consecrated virginity lived in the world, could I have followed it in my life and been successful? For example, if I had been called to marriage, could I have married and made a success of the marriage? If I had been called to Religious Life, could I have entered a congregation and been successful in community interaction? If a woman can answer Yes to these questions, then she can be fairly sure that she is not seeking the Consecration of Virgins as a "last resort," but rather that she is seeking an intimate bond with Jesus as a consecrated virgin.

The Consecration of Virgins for lay women living in the world is not a "catch-all," a vocation to aspire to "when all else fails." It is a demanding life, perhaps one might even say a "tough life." Further questions can distill the true vocation from surrounding residues.

What am I seeking? Am I looking for a status, a certain identity, in the Church? Do I want the respect (and attention) of others in the Christian assembly? Do I want to be known as "Sister"? Do I seek a job, a position, as an aftermath of the Consecration? The answer to these questions is No--No, in that the Consecration does not give one the habit so that she can be easily identified as a consecrated person in the Christian assembly. No, she is not to assume the title of "Sister" because that title is reserved for those in canonical Religious Institutes. No, a job or position in the parish or diocese is not a necessary by-product of the Consecration. If she is seeking any of these "sideline residues," then she ought to look deeper, and more honestly, into what her motivation is. Perhaps the motivation is really self, not Jesus.

How can a lay woman, then, try to discern the purity of her intention in desiring the Consecration of Virgins? An easy way is to go through the Beatitudes in the Gospel (Matt. 5:1-12). She can try to apply each of the Beatitudes to the life of a consecrated virgin who should be living a life of humility. For example, am I willing to be a meek person of the earth?

Am I

satisfied with no title of honor, no authority or power, no recognition in the congregation gathered together for Mass, no particular job or position in parish or diocese? Am I willing to be "lost in the crowd" of Sunday worshipers, praying sincerely for my bishop and clergy, praying for all the laity around me gathered in the pews? Am I willing to mourn over those who have lost their way, not condemning, judging, or feeling self-righteous? Am I willing to pray and do what I can to help them return to the fulness of the faith, to the fulness of their vocation, to the health that they have disregarded? Do I feel their tragedy in my silent compassion? Do I trust that God will comfort all who mourn over the tragedies of our life today in the Church and in society?

Am I willing to endure persecution--the persecution that inevitably comes from being a "sign of contradiction" to the world? Virginity in today's world especially is ridiculed in the media, in social life, in one's workplace. Am I willing to be misunderstood because of my vocation of consecrated virginity? Am I willing to accept that I cannot live and recreate like others in my profession because of evangelical poverty? Am I willing to turn down some activities, legitimate for others, but ones that would cut into my time for prayer, time that I need to spend with Jesus? This is the virgin/martyrdom of our century, and we must be willing to live through it as our witness (and "martyr" means "witness") for Jesus.

Do I really trust all to Jesus? Have I made, and do I make each day, that total act of faith that He will keep His words, "Seek first the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness, and all will be given to you besides"? Am I willing to wait until eternity to see the results of my life, my witnessing, my prayer, and the entire meaning of my life?

If one can go through each of the Beatitudes like this in light of discerning the vocation of consecrated virgin, then perhaps she can get a clearer insight into whether she is called to pursue further preparation for the Consecration. And, it should be understood that no amount of preparation will ever be enough, but in the succeeding chapters we will just give a skeleton of an outline that one can flesh out as one prays and studies the Consecration. The Consecration of Virgins is ever-fresh, ever-new, and ever-growing because it is a life of love; after she receives the Consecration, the consecrated virgin lives it out sincerely, vigorously, and joyfully each day, aware that all the graces she needs will always be there and Jesus is, and always will be, faithful.

## What Attitude Should I Have?

In the last chapter we spoke of trusting Jesus' words, "Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all the rest will be given to you as well." This takes an act of faith in more than one way. Perhaps one will think only of trusting in Divine Providence to take care of all material and emotional needs throughout life. That is perfectly true. However, another "hidden," so to speak, trust is necessary in a "hidden" region of our heart. Perhaps it is so close to us, so hidden deep down, that we are hardly perceptive of it. It is our dignity as human beings, our wanting to be respected for what we are. Certainly, nothing is wrong with wanting to be properly respected as a human being, but the question is the means.

In the Beatitudes referred to in the last Chapter, we see what seems to be almost an about-face in attaining the respect that we so universally desire. Jesus does not say to seek human respect for itself, but to be meek and gentle, expecting persecution for who and what we are. Is this respect from the world?

In another text, Jesus says, "Learn from Me for I am gentle and lowly of heart." Again, does this foster human respect? Is Jesus asking us to do something contrary to our human nature? No, He came to fulfil human nature. So, how do we square these paradoxes in our minds? Only faith, the revealed faith of Christianity, can make sense of these seeming contradictions.

We must not forget that human nature is fallen, that we are affected by the sin of Adam. Therefore, Jesus invites us to look above fallen human nature and to be willing to see as God sees, or at least accept that His ways are not our ways and His thoughts above our thoughts (cf. Isaiah). Jesus invites us to be meek and humble of heart--this is His way. Why?

Only a humble heart can receive God and His gifts. Only an empty glass can be filled with water. Only a heart filled with God can be happy, or "blessed," as stated in the Beatitudes. So, "Wonderful," you say, "but that is more easily said than done. How do you do it?"

That "how do you do it" part is the subject of this chapter on Attitude. What kind of attitude should we have when we prepare for the Consecration of Virgins and what kind of attitude should we maintain throughout all our lives as consecrated virgins. You have probably guessed by now the attitude is humility, the kind of humility lived by the Blessed Virgin and the saints.

The key to the humility that God wants is most evident in the Blessed Virgin. And the means she used is so simple--she always concentrated her attention on Jesus. If we could just shift the focus from ourselves to Jesus, just as we shift the lens of a camera from a chaotic scene to the person we want to capture forever in our photograph, then we will walk in the right direction. If we could just keep looking at Jesus, trying to get His portrait clearer and clearer in our heart's lens, then we will concentrate on Him, not on ourselves. This will be a shift away from the capital sin of pride and a movement toward Jesus. This simple shift is the way to walk the road of humility. And, only in humility will we be able to appreciate all of God's gifts to us--talents, health, life itself, reasoning power, possessions, and on and on. We will begin to comprehend

the greatness and goodness of God, and we will want to thank Him. We will concentrate more on prayers of adoration and thanksgiving for His goodness to us.

Let us look now at a bit of Scripture, taken from the Gospel read for the feast of St. James the Apostle, July 25. When James and John's mother approached Jesus to ask that her sons be seated one on His right hand and the other on His left in His kingdom, what kind of focus did she (and they) have? Was it not self? Was it not human pride? Then, what did Jesus answer? He reminded them that they (note He speaks to them directly now, not to their mother) did not know what they were asking. He then went on to ask them "Can you drink of the cup I am to drink of?" "We can," they said. Can't you just hear the tone of voice with which they answered "We can"? He then promised them that they WOULD drink from that cup, but that where to sit in His Father's kingdom was the Father's selection. In other words, Yes, they would suffer in this life, but selection of places in the kingdom was the Father's prerogative.

Jesus then goes on to teach us even further--anyone who feels himself called to greatness must be the servant of all, and Jesus Himself sets the example. He is the Son of Man who has come not to be served, but to serve and to give His own life as a ransom for others.

Now, what is Jesus telling us here as consecrated virgins listening to His words? What is our attitude? Is it to be looked up to? Is it to get respect for being called to this position in the kingdom of God? If that is our attitude, our expectation, then we are in the wrong kingdom. We are in the self-serving kingdom, the kingdom of pride. On the contrary, what does Jesus ask? He tells us to serve others, to be their servant, and even to follow Him to give our lives in union with Him as a ransom for the many (drink His cup--His cup of sufferings for the salvation of mankind).

Jesus does not leave us there, though. Remember, He added when He spoke to James and John that His Father would assign places in His kingdom. So, is our faith great enough to trust that the Father will take care of our places too? Are we willing to put our identity in His hands, knowing throughout our life that we have the greatest dignity of all--that of being called a child of God through our Baptism into Christ? We have been recognized and loved by the Father; what more do we need? Let us concentrate our energies, our activities, and our FOCUS on Jesus Himself and serve Him by serving others ("Whenever you have done it for the least of My brethren, you have done it for Me.") That is the secret of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the secret of the saints. They did not need titles, plaques, places of honor, publicity, positions, or even sensitivity workshops to know that they were respected and loved. They just concentrated their attention on Jesus, did all for Jesus and the glory of the Father, and saw themselves throughout life as unprofitable servants. They put their faith in God, and in their humility God "did great things for [them] and holy is His Name."

## Does My Life Have Any Fruitfulness?

In the last two chapters we spoke of the foundations not only of Consecrated Virginity but also of basic Christianity. That is, the Beatitudes are the blueprint for the Christian life, and humility of heart in faith is the operating mode. Upon these foundations we can build our structure of activity--the service of others for the sake of Christ. Jesus promised, "Whenever you have done anything for the least of My brethren, you have done it for Me." He even promises that a glass of cold water given to a thirsty man will not be forgotten by the Father. As human beings, we are not mere static beings; our growth requires actions and reflection upon our actions.

As Christians, then, we will see our activities in the light of faith and endure persecution for our way of life and even sometimes for our good works. In the Scripture readings chosen for the feasts of the Apostles, we can get a clue on what we can expect. Let us look again at the Scripture assigned to the feast of St. James the Apostle, this time the Epistle from the Second Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians. "We possess a treasure in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way possible, but we are not crushed; full of doubts, we never despair. We are persecuted but never abandoned; we are struck down but never destroyed." St. Paul describes what we can expect in our life not only as Christians, but especially as consecrated virgins. Our life is a contradiction to the ways of the world, and our Christian service, our actions, should flower from our being a consecrated virgin for Christ.

First, we DO "possess a treasure in earthen vessels." We embody that consecrated virginity totally dedicated in love to Christ. Like the Church itself, we are His bride. Our physical virginity is an external representation of our total INTERIOR virginity, which demands undivided love for the Lord Jesus. Yes, our treasure of virginal love for Jesus is in this earthen vessel of our human nature. As part of the same sentence, St. Paul immediately explains that this surpassing power, the on-going strength to remain totally faithful to Jesus in virginity, is from God, not from us. No honest person would deny that. So, God is always sustaining us in our being virgins for the sake of Christ. However, St. Paul goes on to detail further what we can expect, especially as we live the Beatitudes and act accordingly. We can expect sufferings, persecutions, afflictions, and even doubts; but we are never abandoned by God nor should we ever despair because God is with us and strengthens us. Even if we are struck down, we will never be destroyed. With that assurance from the Word of God, what more do we need to carry on each day? No matter what our work, our responsibilities, our daily difficulties, God will never abandon us. He will always provide the strength, the help, and even the way out that we need. Our role is to recognize His strength, help, and avenue of recourse and seize them.

How do we recognize his help and the next course of action that we should take, especially when we are faced with difficulty or even supposed failure? We can look at Scripture again and learn from the miraculous catch of fish. Do you remember that the Apostles were fishing one time all night long, and they caught nothing. How many times have we tried to do our best in some good work, but seemingly have "caught" nothing? Had we prayed for guidance before we started the work? Have we left the result, even if visibly nothing, in God's hands? Have we realized that "Unless the Lord build the house, the builders labor for nothing"? Let us turn again to the same

Scripture which describes the Apostles' fishing failure of that night. Jesus told them to put the nets off to the right side of the boat and there they would catch fish. They OBEYED IN FAITH, and what was the result? Too many for even one boat's nets--153 fish! The key here is OBEDIENCE IN FAITH, nothing more. They had let those nets out several times the same night before--their human activity alone--and caught nothing. With the OBEDIENCE IN FAITH, they did the same activity of letting down the nets and caught so much that they had an overabundance of fish.

The obedience of faith always brings results. God has promised that He will not send out His Word and it will return to Him empty--no, it will always come back with the fruitfulness that He has deigned it to have. However, the key is God's glory. All our activities should be directed for His glory, so that He has the recognition for the fruitfulness, so that He gets the credit for the harvest. At the end of the passage chosen for the Epistle on the feast of St. James, we see St. Paul say that very thing: "Indeed, everything is ordered to your benefit, so that the grace bestowed in abundance may bring greater glory to God . . . ."

Should we expect always to see, with these human eyes, the results of our good works? No, we may not see anything as a spiritual result. One cannot forget Charles de Foucauld who for years in the Sahara Desert prayed that others would join him in his style of life dedicated to God. Did he see any result when the time came for him to die? No, to the human eye at the time, it looked as if his life was a failure. His way of following Christ seemed to be obliterated with his death. But today--look! All over the world there are Little Brothers and Sisters of Charles de Foucauld, witnessing the meekness of Christ by their lives of faith, silence, humility, and poverty. What sustained Charles, the ascetic of the Sahara Desert? It was surely faith in Christ, the kind that St. Paul speaks of. God's grace never failed him, nor will it fail us, even if all we see now in spiritual fruitfulness is a spiritual desert.

## What Are the Essential Insignia of the Consecration?

In preceding chapters, we studied the foundation of the consecrated life of virginity. In fact, all Christians should have that same attitude of humility of heart and obedience in faith in their lives. What makes consecrated virginity, then, distinct as a vocation in the Church? The Rite of Consecration for women living in the world will give us clues.

The first clues we will look at are the essential insignia found in the ceremony itself. These are the ring and the Book of Hours. These significant symbols in the Rite direct our attention to the meaning of the life of a consecrated virgin and her means of living out the call she has been given.

Let us set a foundation first, however, before we look directly at these insignia. The consecrated virgin has been called to be a bride of Christ. The very term "bride of Christ" implies love. The love of Christ has been offered to her first, she has recognized it personally in her own life, and she has responded by her total giving of herself in a promise of virginity. All these steps have taken place even before she starts to prepare for the crowning ceremony of her life, the Consecration of a Virgin.

When one says that one is attracted by the love of Christ, we can glance for a few moments at an analogy in our human life. When a man proposes to a woman to be his bride, does he hand her a mop and dustpan, a ledger or a pencil? No, he usually professes his love for her and she responds. He does not give her "tools" for her housework, or tools for her occupation. Their union is to be one of love, of commitment forever in love, not a work contract between business partners. The same is true for the virgin who responds to Christ's invitation to love him entirely and forever. The bride of Christ does not respond to Christ because of a certain work or service to be done in the Church, but because she knows His love and wants to belong to Him directly forever.

In the same vein, when this engaged human couple marry, they exchange rings, or at least the bride receives a ring as a pledge of their lifelong union and commitment to love. In the Consecration of a Virgin, as she is set aside now in order to love Him forever--and that means here on earth and throughout eternity--the bride of Christ receives a ring. She receives the ring from the bishop, the representative of Christ himself in the diocese, with these words: "Receive the ring that marks you as a bride of Christ. Keep unstained your fidelity to your Bridegroom, that you may one day be admitted to the wedding feast of everlasting joy." It is clear with these words of the bishop that the ring is the symbol the consecrated virgin is to wear to "mark" her as a bride of Christ. She is admonished to "keep unstained [her] fidelity to [her] Bridegroom"; she must love Christ alone now and forever in complete purity of heart. The thought of anything else but fidelity to Christ must not even taint her soul. The remainder of the bishop's admonition is ". . . that you may one day be admitted to the wedding feast of everlasting joy." Again, these words denote that this fidelity to love of Christ will lead her into the eternal wedding feast with the Lamb.

The second essential insignia during the ceremony is the presentation of the Book of Hours. This

is the prayer of the universal Church. The newly consecrated virgin receives this book with the words of the bishop: "Receive the book of the liturgy of the hours, the prayer of the Church; may the praise of our heavenly Father be always on your lips; pray without ceasing for the salvation of the whole world." After giving the newly consecrated virgin the Book of the Hours, the bishop exhorts the consecrated virgin to have the praise of the heavenly Father always on her lips. The Divine Office (the Book of the Hours) is to praise God. Of course we beg Him for our needs, the needs of all people everywhere. But nowhere do we see the praise of God so manifest as in the Divine Office, hour by hour. The greatest work of the Church is to praise God; that is what we will do throughout eternity. Now the consecrated virgin is asked to participate in that praise even while on earth to a greater degree than most people are called upon to do. She is to be in the heart of the Church, praising God in love.

The second part of the bishop's exhortation to the consecrated virgin upon giving her the Book of Hours is to request that she pray without ceasing for the salvation of the whole world. The Divine Office is her "tool." Does that seem strange--to call the Divine Office a "tool"? Yes, it is a tool of faith, it implies faith. Prayer implies faith. And, the consecrated virgin is called upon to have such faith that she will beg God for the salvation of the whole world. Her fruitfulness in prayer will be in proportion to her faith. No matter what she is called to do as a service in the Church, according to her talents, health, education, and opportunities, she is not to forget that primarily she is to pray for the salvation of the whole world. Just as in a marriage between a man and a woman, they will be married and communicate love to one another no matter what their state of health or illness, talents, and work, so it is the same with the consecrated virgin. She will not be less a bride of Christ if she is ill, cannot participate in the teaching, nursing, or any other service of the Church. Because her identity is based on what she is and not on what she does, she will always be a bride of Christ. She can and will always praise God in love, as St. Paul says in "Christ will be glorified in my body, whether by my life or by my death." (Phil. 1:20) She will always be a bride of Christ, no matter what kind of ministry she performs in the Church. A wife would be no less a wife to her husband if she contracted some debilitating illness; her identity does not depend on her household chores completed, but on their mutual love commitment. So it is with the consecrated virgin. She will always be a bride of Christ, and she is admonished to be faithful to that love commitment by fidelity (symbol of her ring) and praise (symbol of the Book of Hours).

Often candidates for the Consecration choose to have other insignia presented to them during the Rite of Consecration because these insignia signify something about their life. Probably the veil is chosen most often as one of the optional insignia. Traditionally, the veil symbolizes the mystery of the relationship between Christ and Mary, that mystery of love between Christ and the Church. The consecrated virgin is to guard that precious mystery of love that reigns in her, and Christ will cast a veil over her as a sign of His watchful and protective love.

The veil has the same symbolism as the veil in the Rite of Marriage, as we learn from the history of the Consecration. And, it is important to note that although the veil may be used as a symbol within the liturgical rite of Consecration, it is not intended to be worn outside of the liturgical rite. Other optional insignia sometimes chosen are the crucifix and the pearl. The crucifix needs no explanation here because we know how it symbolizes our Redemption and our union with Christ on the Cross. The pearl is seen by those who choose it as a reference to "the pearl of great

price"; the Consecration to the Lord Jesus Christ is the pearl for which she has paid a great price in her life.

It is significant to note here that the two insignia of the ring and the Book of Hours are the ONLY two essential insignia in the ceremony. Both denote the supernatural--love and faith. The bride of Christ is to live in love and her "tool" for spiritual fruitfulness in this union with Christ is prayer made in great faith. Nowhere in the Rite is she given any other insignia that is essential to

her identity in the Church. This makes us, then, look to the supernatural meaning of her life. It is a witness in the Church and in the world of the reality and power of the spiritual. All around us we see the pragmatic, the visible, the measurable by earthly standards. In this Rite we see a directive for us to look to the spiritual, but no less real. We must be aware of the power of God, His grace, and His reality in the life of the Church through the life of the bride of Christ, an image of the Church.

## What Is Meant by "Sacred Person"?

"Consecration" means a setting apart of a person or object to be totally given over to the service of the All-Holy God. The word "consecration" has been used in various ways and contexts in our modern world, but for our usage here we will maintain the above definition. To ponder this definition of the Consecration of a Virgin, then, is rich food for thought just in itself: a virgin set aside totally for God Himself.

Who is the active agent in this holy action? Is it the virgin herself? No, she has already done her part by previously offering to God her promise of perpetual virginity. It is presumed before the actual Rite of Consecration of a Virgin that she has been living this commitment for some time. She has already proven herself for some years and her bishop has recognized that. The Consecration is, then, not something that she does, but something that she receives. She receives this profound blessing, one of the most ancient sacramentals, through the Church at the hands of her bishop, one of the successors of the Apostles.

Note, then, that before the bishop performs the Rite of Consecration, he invites the virgin to renew her resolution, her promise, of perpetual virginity for Christ. He asks her point blank, so to speak, "Are you resolved to persevere to the end of your days in the holy state of virginity and in the service of God and his Church?" Only after he receives her renewal of her promise of perpetual virginity does he begin the Prayer of Consecration. He invites the people present at the ceremony to pray, and then he invites all to join in the Litany of the Saints to ask all of Church Triumphant to join in interceding for these candidates who ask to be consecrated.

The actual Prayer of Consecration first addresses God the Father and recalls the purity of Creation. It reminds us that after sin came into this world, God in His mercy gave mankind a new covenant so that all nations under heaven could be born not of human birth, nor of man's desire, but of the Holy Spirit. Among the gifts of this new life in the Spirit, virginity is given to some to make the sacrifice of marriage, good in itself, for a greater good--"to . . . give themselves wholly to Christ, the Son of the ever-virgin Mary, and the heavenly Bridegroom. . . ." They "renounce the joys of human marriage, but cherish all that it foreshadows." That is, they live in and cherish the love that will be made manifest to all in heaven--the nuptial love between Christ and His Church.

The bishop then prays for the protection and help the virgins will need as they go through this life. He asks for their protection from the cunning and deceit of the enemy. Lastly, he prays for more detailed gifts, gifts which we can recognize are true gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom with kindness, right judgment and modesty, fortitude with gentleness, humility of heart, purity, fear of the Lord, and total love of God. We can also see that these gifts of the Holy Spirit make it possible for the Christian, and especially the consecrated virgin, to live out the Beatitudes in her life.

As a virgin set aside totally for God and living in His close embrace, the bishop continues on to pray for special gifts that she will need over the years: he asks that God alone will be her glory, her joy, her whole desire. He asks that God Himself will comfort her in sorrow, guide her in

perplexity, protect her in the midst of injustice, help her to have patience in adversity, keep her in evangelical poverty, and be her strength in penance. His final intercession, summing up all, reminds us of St. Matthew's Gospel: "Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness and all will be given to you as well." The bishop concludes the intercessions with the words: "They have chosen you above all things; may they find all things in possessing you." And the Prayer of Consecration concludes with the invocation "through our Lord Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever."

At the end of the Mass during which the Consecration of a Virgin has taken place, the bishop has a special Solemn Blessing to give. He humbly begs the Father again who has initially poured into the heart of a virgin the desire and grace to live a life of holy virginity. Then he appeals to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, our Lord Jesus Christ, God-made-man, to fill the heart of the consecrated virgin with the love from his divine heart. Lastly, he invokes the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, to fill the consecrated virgin with the burning desire to serve God and His Church. How appropriate that He should be invoked now to continue to pour out His graces on the consecrated virgin so that she will do her part to praise God and serve her neighbor with good works! Finally, the bishop blesses the whole congregation present with the usual blessing invoking the Blessed Trinity.

The Consecration is the Rule of Life for the consecrated virgin. The Consecration is never "over." It is always present. God's grace through this sacramental is always available to help her to live this most sacred life of being set apart for the God's glory and the service of the Church. Never are its graces exhausted, never will the prayers in the Rite of Consecration go unanswered at any moment of the consecrated virgin's life. May all glory and thanksgiving be given to God for such a great gift to the Church!

## What Intention Should the Consecrated Virgin Have?

In another chapter we speak of those days, months, years of persevering love, prayer, and good works. These provide the means to live the consecrated virgin's spiritual motherhood, the building up of the Body of Christ. In this chapter we will plunge a little deeper into that spiritual motherhood.

Like Christ, our Spouse, we live the Cross. We reach out horizontally, one might say, to others in their need of nursing care, teaching, cleaning up, visiting the lonely, and the like. The vertical aspect of our lives is often referred to as prayer, that raising of our minds and hearts to God. But what about the vertical aspect that plunges deep into our hearts, that sadness and suffering that come to us from physical pain, frustration, misunderstanding, and the like. These also are part of the Cross--they plant the Cross deep down into our hearts here on earth.

In the actual Prayer of Consecration during the ceremony, several avenues of penance are mentioned, and we will take up these in a later chapter. However, for the moment, let us concentrate on some general categories and the intention we should have in our prayer and penance.

Penance, first of all, is doing our daily duties well. If we must make our bed, then we should make it well. Not much creativity or delight is found in making beds, but this is a chore of our daily duty. Do we have to cook for ourselves, wash dishes, mop floors? Let us do them well as part of our daily duties. St. Therese of Lisieux had the right idea when she did little things with great love and after her death was given the commission as Patroness of the Missions. It was her intention that counted--her love for Jesus and doing all for Him was the key.

Penance also is the suffering that comes to us; we don't look for it. In fact, we don't necessarily want it. Frustration in work, pain in illness, misunderstanding in human relations, fatigue, monotony with daily tasks--all these are ingredients for penance in our lives. Perhaps one of the deepest sufferings is to observe those who have left the Church, their vocations, their morality to follow now some trinket or obsession. We cannot talk about them to others out of charity, or even speak to them because we know they would not "hear" us. We can only groan within us, as Abraham or Lot were distraught over the sins and condition of their fellow citizens. We can only beg God for His grace and mercy for their conversion to Him and His ways.

Penance can also be little things we do extra. Does your job require eight hours of work per day? What if you added an extra ten minutes for tidying up after work and offered those extra minutes as a bit of penance? Are you a teacher? What if you were to spot a certain student having some difficulty and helped him for a few extra minutes? A nurse? Can you give an extra smile to a troublesome patient? Can we all go beyond the call of duty, just a little bit each day, for our part of penance in the Mystical Body?

All of these areas of penance mentioned above, however, will mean nothing without the proper intention. St. Paul reminds us, "Even if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it is nothing." So, we must do all for love of Jesus, uniting ourselves with Him on the Cross. He also

reminds us, "Whenever you do the least little bit for the least of My brethren, you have done it for Me." When we give that extra smile, therefore, or that extra few minutes to someone, we are actually giving it to Jesus.

Perhaps the most poignant passage of Scripture, however, to lead us to the mystery of Jesus are His words: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his brethren." Yes, Jesus did it for us, even when we were still sinners; can we not do the same for Him through His brethren?

As consecrated virgins, for whom are we specially called to lay down our lives? In the suggested homily written about in another chapter, we had a few categories of people listed. It is appropriate here, however, to zero in on a special responsibility that the consecrated virgin living in the world has. She has a special bond with her diocese and a spiritual bond with the bishop who represents Christ to her in the diocese, as he does to all in his diocese. Her designated role and duty is to intercede for her bishop, the diocesan priests, and all the needs of her respective diocese. If she could pray and do penance with the same fervor of intention of St. Therese of Lisieux, what could her diocese become? It would surely be transformed! And, what if every diocese had even one St. John Vianney? How the laity would be transformed! This is the MOST SPECIAL intention that the consecrated virgin should have in all her prayer and penance--her diocesan bishop, priests, and laity.

The exciting view of the consecrated virgins living in the world, throughout the various continents, is that they are indigenous to their own diocese. They did not have to get to their diocese from abroad. They live there now. The Holy Spirit, restoring their vocation in the Church and raising them up on various continents, cultures, and countries, is giving the Church in our day a spiritual powerhouse. He is truly "renewing the face of the earth" by calling these virgins to prayer and penance for their local church. Let us praise and thank Him for revitalizing this movement of consecrated virginity in the Church at this critical juncture of history and not fall down on the job that we are called to do in faith.

## How Can I Make It to the Finish Line?

*Be wise: make ready your lamps.  
Behold, the Bridegroom comes;  
go out to meet him.*

These opening words of the Consecration of a Virgin during Mass are timeless. The word "wise" is a key. What does it mean to be "wise" in the Christian sense? How should a consecrated virgin be "wise"?

It is obvious that this antiphon quoted above refers to the Gospel story of the wise virgins who were ready with their lamps when the bridegroom arrived. They, as well as the foolish virgins, waited for some time, not knowing when the bridegroom would arrive. In contrast to the foolish virgins, however, they were ready with their lamps alight for the bridegroom's arrival and entrance into the wedding hall.

How were they wise? They provided oil for their lamps. What is this oil in the spiritual sense of the parable? It is what makes the lamp continue to burn, to give light. Is it not interesting that in another parable Our Lord instructs us to be "lights of the world"? How interesting--both passages of the Gospel exhort us to give light, to keep those lamps burning! "But how?" one may ask.

First of all, to keep lamps burning takes diligence and work. In the everyday life that we live, what does that mean? Our "light" must be our faith; we must keep that faith aflame in order to "shine before all men." And, in order to keep that faith alive, we must be faithful to prayer, holy reading, and the good works which follow prayer.

In this chapter, we will deal with those times when the flame flickers, when it is hard to keep going, when month after month we have to keep working in the same good works, but seeing no results. Perhaps prayer is an effort. No emotional "highs" lift us above the mundane. How does one persevere during these days, which are probably the majority of the days of our lives?

These days are probably the most important ones of our life. Emotions, highlights, and celebrations carry us through those days without much effort. But, during days of humdrum, faith must take over. Acts of faith during these seemingly sterile days show that God's grace is really working in us. We could never participate in the life of God through faith without His grace. So, these days prove His action in our lives, as long as we cooperate with Him in acts of faith and persevere in our hope and love of Him.

The Rite of Consecration of Virgins will help us out here. Let us look ahead from that opening antiphon to the suggested homily and get our meaning for the ordinary days of our life. After the bishop reminds the congregation that consecrated virgins are very much a part of the human family and members of God's holy people, the Church, he reminds the listeners that God has called the consecrated virgin to be more closely united to Himself and dedicated to the service of

the Church and mankind. They have received a call to a greater fervor in spreading the kingdom of God and in giving to the world the spirit of Christ. Their "lamps" must burn brightly for all to see. The bishop then reminds the people that the consecrated virgins will accomplish great good for the Church and all human society by their prayers and good works.

The bishop then goes on to address the candidates for Consecration directly. He reminds them that their Consecration was initiated at the Incarnation, when the Word was made flesh and thereby united the two natures of divinity and humanity. The bishop reminds the candidates that it was by the labors, preaching, and especially the Passion of Christ that Our Savior brought His Church into being. The Church is virgin, bride, and mother--as are consecrated virgins. Consecrated virgins are a sign on this earth of the world to come where the marriage covenant between Christ and His Church will be perfectly fulfilled.

The bishop then instructs the candidates on what their life should be like while they wait for the Bridegroom. How are they to keep their lamps trim and burning? He asks them to imitate the mother of God; they should desire to be called and to be in reality handmaids of the Lord. They must preserve the faith, hope, and love given to them at Baptism and strengthened in Confirmation. They should be prudent, watchful of encroaching pride. They nourish their love for God by the sacrament of the Eucharist; they are strengthened by self-denial; and they build up their life of faith by the study of Scripture, untiring prayer, and works of mercy.

We could stop right here and have the answer to our question of how to keep the lamps of faith burning so that we can be that "light to the world." When we feel the light flicker, the room grow stale, the monotony of work without apparent result, then we can turn to this homily and find out how to keep going. How shall we wait, as the wise virgins in the parable, for the coming of the Bridegroom? Are we supposed to sleep? No, we are to keep awake by the study of Scripture, prayer, the reception of the sacraments, and works of mercy.

The suggested homily of the bishop in the Rite does not stop there, however. It goes on to refer to the words of St. Paul: "Let your life be hidden with Christ in God,.." while offering prayer for the crucial intentions of the spread of the Christian faith and the unity of all Christians. This is spiritual motherhood--to beget new Christian life and nurture that life in the family of the Church. Then the homily asks the virgin to pray for the welfare of the married--those who beget physical human life and rear their children in the Christian faith. Lastly, he admonishes the virgin, as a spiritual mother, to pray for those who have strayed from the family of the Church, just as a mother in a human family prays and always tries to unite her family in love.

The next paragraph of the suggested homily details more ways of service to the whole of the human family. The bishop reminds the consecrated virgin that she is an apostle in the Church and in the world to bring all to Christ so that His Father may be glorified in heaven. She should love everyone, especially those in need. Who might those needy be? The poor, the weak, the ignorant, the young, the elderly, those without family to care for them, those in some kind of distress, and those who have lost their faith and fallen away from God's love.

Lastly, the bishop ends by reminding the candidate for Consecration that her motherhood is of the spirit and her children will be those born, or reborn, to a life of grace. Her Bridegroom is the

Son of God and Son of the Virgin. She waits for Him now by doing His good work on earth. The promise is that she will be called into His presence and into His kingdom, in His wedding hall, where she will sing a new song and follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

With this work to do and this spiritual motivation, who cannot but "stay awake" and keep those lamps trimmed by prayer and good work for her Bridegroom. What are a few hours of monotonous tasks when He is due to arrive before the night is over? Perseverance is possible by God's grace only, as it is a sign of God's never-failing grace. Only by faith that His grace will always be there is the virgin able to make her first promise of perpetual virginity in the first place. However, the "tools" of perseverance are prayer, Scripture, and good works. Let us get busy, then, because there is plenty to do before He comes! The consecrated virgins are called upon especially today to keep alive the virtue of HOPE, as symbolized by the burning lamp. They must keep alive the invocation of the primitive Christians and the virgin-martyrs of the first centuries: "Come, Lord Jesus, Come!"