

“What Must We Do? – the USACV Exists to Serve”

Summary of address by Judith Stegman

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Holiness

John Paul II opens Chapter III of “Novo Millennio Ineunte” (The Beginning of the New Millennium) with the words of Jesus, “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt. 28:20), and he reminds us that this assurance has accompanied the Church for 2000 years. He identifies the persistent question of Christians throughout the centuries as that which was presented to Peter in Jerusalem immediately after his Pentecost speech, “What must we do?”

The Holy Father notes that all pastoral initiatives for the 21st century must be set in relation to holiness. And this makes sense – the whole course of our lives is fundamentally set by our first decision – the decision to follow Jesus and to live fully as baptized Christians.

From there, the ways of holiness are many, and the paths to holiness are personal. Those of us given the gift of consecrated virginity live our entire lives, make our choices, and respond daily to “What must we do?” in the context of our lives as Consecrated Virgins Living in the World.

The USACV: an association of consecrated virgins

In addition to discovering and fully living our personal vocations, I find myself, as your new president, looking at our Association, the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins, and asking again, “What must we do?” The question and answer is distinct to this body, to who we are and to who we are not, and our answer to “What must we do?” is shaped by these understandings.

First – who we are not: We are not a religious order, nor do we want to be; membership in our Association is entirely optional for consecrated virgins. The Association and the Episcopal Moderator of the Association do not have authority over individual members, as in a religious institute.

And then – who we are: We are an association of consecrated virgins formed in accord with Canon 604 par. 2, which says, “Virgins can be associated together to fulfill their pledge more faithfully, and to assist each other to serve the Church in a way that befits their state.”

Sr. Sharon Holland at the Congregation for Consecrated Life and Institutes of Apostolic Life, in her article, “Consecrated Virgins for Today’s Church”, comments about associations of Consecrated Virgins. She emphasizes that they are optional, and discusses the unique status of such associations, because they are associations of publicly consecrated persons who have received the consecration as individuals, remaining in their secular condition. They’re not analogous to institutes of consecrated life.

She notes that the organizational statutes of associations of consecrated virgins should reflect the purposes of the canon and specify in what ways the members would seek to fulfill those purposes and “assist one another to fulfill our pledge more faithfully and serve the Church in a way that befits our state”. She suggests that such purposes might include “various forms of communications, the publication of materials useful for formation before and after consecration, the sharing of news and information, and the planning of gatherings such as retreats and conferences.” She emphasizes that membership must remain voluntary among consecrated virgins, and that it is important always to not risk confusing the distinct and individual nature of our consecrated vocation with that of members of religious or secular institutes.

What must we do?

The people gathered here today come with unique histories and gifts. As I look back on our own sacred history here in the United States, I see that this history reflects some of the concerns that Sr. Sharon Holland notes. We are quite aware that each one of us lives her own personal vocation, and that the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world is authentically lived by consecrated persons who have received the consecration as individuals, remaining in our secular state. We are responsible for our own livelihood. Basically, we live our lives fully “in the world”, in the situations in which God has planted each one of us. We have been concerned over the years to assure that our association reflects this reality and that it does not overstep its role into our personal lives. Likewise, we have been concerned that individual members not lean too heavily on the Association, expecting it to fulfill a role that it isn’t meant to play.

How can we start afresh with Christ at this time? How can we be a means of assistance in growth of holiness as consecrated virgins, and how can we assist one another in service to the Church? By remaining close to the purposes for which we were founded, which are summed up by the thought that “The USACV exists to serve.”

As we start afresh in our walk, we build on our past experiences and consider where to go from here. Let us reflect for a moment again on the words of the Holy Father in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*.

Pastoral Initiatives

In the Holy Father’s address, paragraph 29, he asks local communities to consider pastoral initiatives adapted to their own circumstances, initiatives set in relation to training people in holiness. He cautions the people of God to not invent new programs, because the program for all ages is the Gospel, but he earnestly exhorts the people to confidently plan the stages of the journey ahead.

He identifies such training in holiness as including first the art of prayer, which is the secret of truly vital Christianity; he calls for cultivation of the experience of contemplation among those called to the consecrated life, he calls for rediscovery of the Sacraments, to a reliance on grace, to a renewed listening to the Word of God, and he devotes significant time to calling for a renewed priority on Evangelization in the Church.

I’d like to begin to look, together, at setting forth a pastoral plan for USACV – to look at ways to carry out the already-established purposes of our Association in light of

producing the fruit of a growth in holiness, and intimacy of prayer among consecrated virgins and in the broader Church, as well as do our part in Evangelization. All would be from the perspective of our unique role as an Association of virgins living their own individual lives, and recognizing both the challenges and blessings of having members engaged fully in their secular occupations. Challenges – time and money. Blessings – time and money. Any plan must reflect the resources in time and money that are available to us from within and without the Association.

Towards a Pastoral Plan: The USACV Exists to Serve

The United States Association of Consecrated Virgins exists for the service of the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world. Not just for members do we exist, or for friends, but in order to serve this vocation. Those who drafted the original organizational statutes of the USACV found three ecclesial objectives to be reflective of our purposes in 1996, and I think a fourth has developed naturally among us. These objectives have been confirmed in many ways, not the least being that they reflect exactly what consecrated virgins and others have asked of us over the years. Here are the four objectives:

1) COMMUNION AMONG US: Many of our members over the years have participated in the Association because it *provides a vehicle of communication, a means of facilitating relationships and fostering communion among us* in the United States. This is the first stated purpose of our Association, and very important.

Equally important are the other two stated purposes:

2) EDUCATION: *to promote an accurate understanding of the vocation of consecrated virginity through programs of education, printed materials and other media, and*

3) STUDY: *to encourage ongoing in depth growth of understanding of consecrated virginity, along with other consecrated virgins throughout the world.* Archbishop Burke has been so singularly helpful in deepening our understanding of the vocation, through talks such as the one he gave earlier today.

4) EVANGELIZATION: The fourth purpose I'll add is that we must do our part in the new evangelization, letting the message of the love of our Spouse speak to the culture about us through our particular charism of virginity.

For some of us, it might be a small adjustment of our vision to consider that we exist for all of these purposes. An implication of existing to serve the vocation, and not just our members, is that we don't have as a focus or emphasis the gaining of new members. Certainly it is important to have new members and we want consecrated virgins to be part of the Association – but gaining new members is not a primary focus for us. Another way we serve the vocation as a whole is by holding our annual United States convocation for all consecrated virgins, not only those who are eligible or choose to be members of the Association.

Existing for all of these purposes also means that no one aspect of the Association is the “ALL”. It’s natural that a person may be interested in just one particular area, such as assisting with educational conferences or attending the annual convocation.

What people ask of us

What is it that others ask of the Association? It was interesting to me when I sat down and actually listed the various “constituents” of the USACV and what they have asked of us. Here’s a sampling:

- ❖ Members
 - How can we spread news of the vocation in our dioceses
 - Practical suggestions for relating to our Bishops and dioceses – for living as a public person in the Church
 - Blessed Sacrament in our homes – how can we ask permission
 - Desire to share through newsletter, email and telephone prayer chain
 - Formational and study materials for growth in the vocation
 - Educational tools about the vocation to assist with presentations
 - Assistance with forming of new candidates

- ❖ U.S. Bishops
 - Assistance with discernment and formation of candidates
 - Assistance with educational materials and forums
 - Documentation on having Blessed Sacrament in homes
 - Theological background and understanding for the vocation (from Archbishop Burke)

- ❖ Vicars for Consecrated Life
 - Assistance with discernment of vocation vis a vis other vocations
 - Questions about formation and where to go for it.
 - Questions they’ve asked me to speak to next year: becoming and being a consecrated virgin, including the spiritual, psychological and canonical aspects of the vocation, what the concerns are for today re formation, relationship with the Bishop, relationship with the vicar for religious, finding adequate spiritual direction.
 - Can we come to the diocese and present an Information Day?
 - More concise Information Packet

- ❖ Inquirers
 - Variety of questions to website: eligibility for vocation if prior marriage, dress, discernment questions. . .
 - Assistance with discernment and where to turn next if choosing among different forms of consecrated life.
 - Inquirers Conference
 - What’s the next step if I’m interested in the vocation?

- ❖ Candidates
 - Assistance with the process and diocesan processes or unfamiliarity
 - Questions on formation materials

- Formation materials
- Assistance with Consecration planning
- Personal support and mentoring

- ❖ Spiritual Directors/Pastors/Priests/Vocation Directors
 - An understanding of the authentic nature of this vocation, so they can help a person recognize it
 - “witness” aspect of consecrated virginity – the public nature of it. What does this mean?

- ❖ Society / Newspapers
 - Why? What draws a person?
 - Who is in our area?
 - References

- ❖ Non-member Consecrated Virgins in the United States
 - Receive the newsletter and be in touch

- ❖ Consecrated virgins in other Countries
 - Questions about our structure as an Association
 - Questions on how we live our life: habits/veils/titles/occupations
 - Desire to be in communication

These are real questions that have been posed to us, pointing to the need for our existence as a vehicle of service to the vocation.

“Witnesses to Love” – showing the Face of Christ our Spouse

Chapter Four of “Novo Millennio Ineunte,” entitled “Witnesses to Love” begins with these words of Pope John Paul II: “By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” [Jn 13:35]. If we have truly contemplated the face of Christ, dear brothers and sisters, our pastoral planning will necessarily be inspired by the ‘new commandment’ which he gave us: ‘Love one another, as I have loved you.’ (Jn 13:34)”

In April, after previous discussions with Archbishop Burke and Loretta Matulich, our founding president, I presented to the USACV Council an organizational structure for the USACV that I believe would help us to better meet our distinct objectives and be ready to serve generations of virgins to come. This plan would involve organizing our Association along four distinct divisional lines to carry out the four stated objectives, and naming each division independently as an “Institute” or “Center.”

A pastoral plan would be developed for each center which would include raising the necessary funds to support that unit – whether by material sales, contributions, donations, or grant monies from individuals and foundations desirous of funding a countercultural and yet orthodox group of Catholic women with an important cultural message to present concerning sexuality and Jesus’ love. . .

The four USACV divisions or centers I envision:

- 1) Member Services: “Fostering Communion Among Consecrated Virgins”
- 2) Center for Education and Formation in the Vocation of Consecrated Virginity
- 3) Institute for the Study of Consecrated Virginity Lived in the World
- 4) “Speaking Out” – Our Role in the New Evangelization

Each of these areas deserves significant attention and the attached outlines might be used as guides to begin discussion on each area.

Getting there...

- First, the fundamentals: These first years of the Association have been dedicated to establishing necessary fundamentals - governing statutes, relationship with the Bishops through an Episcopal Moderator, the Information Packet, an extensive website, membership lists and database, a newsletter and prayer chains, educational materials including our new video, publishing the Preparation Process document, establishing our annual national Information Conference and convocation / retreat for consecrated virgins, establishing relationships with the USCCB, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the National Conference of Vicars of Religious, and others in the Church.
- Remaining fundamentals are well underway: gaining our tax-exempt status with the IRS and increasing our funding base.
- Personnel – we expect the Holy Spirit will bring a person or two to coordinate the activities of each arm, working in conjunction with the Council (whose role would be to oversee and assure that the vision is carried out with integrity, according to the mind of the Church and our own objectives.)
- We can begin now to move out in a plan to organize the work of the Association along these four lines. As we move out, attentive to the lead of the Holy Spirit, we can begin to develop more detailed pastoral plans, including funding plans. We’ll take the long view, building slowly and deliberately.

Wednesday morning we’ll have opportunity to break out into groups focused on each of the four topics in order to begin discussion among us. Each person is welcome to attend one, two, or none of the discussion groups – whatever interests you. The groups are meant to begin the discussions among us, to put forth some ideas and see what seizes attention.

Let us pray and commit the building of the house to our Lord, even as we labor to serve Him.

See attached discussion group outlines.