

# *The Consecration of Virgins*

(excerpts)

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## VIRGINITY

### The Blessed Virgin Mary

In the genealogy of Our Lord, according to St. Matthew, we see verse 16 suddenly bringing a change: “Mathan begot Jacob; and Jacob begot Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called the Christ.” There is no mention of a father who begot. The chain of generations seems to be suspended. And that there may remain no doubt, that the complete change may be made quite clear, the story is told in all its details in verses 18 to 25; the reputed father having had no part in this birth — in fact, a pure spirit, an angel, had to enlighten him regarding the things which had happened to his spouse; and the mother, a virgin, found with child conceived by the Holy Spirit.

There was a profound difference between Our Lord’s birth and all the births of the preceding three times fourteen generations. Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit. There was announced from on high a new age, a new creation. The past is blotted out. There is no longer a chain of procreating fathers, no longer the flesh but the Spirit. This was the introduction of the New Covenant. The essence of the message was that there is to be a fatherhood apart from the flesh. From now on, he who desires to be fruitful in the sense of the New Covenant, in the Spirit, will be called in his dreams by an angel to virginal life. Under the New Covenant, motherhood does not come of the flesh but of the Holy Spirit. The new order of salvation reverses the old order of creation. It is the time of turning the life of the flesh into the life of the Spirit, of the *pneuma*.

Salvation began exactly there where all evil had begun: with the humility and obedience of a young woman and her will to virginity, her *propositum*. The source of human history and the root of human procreation is the family. In the people redeemed, or still to be redeemed, even the family is being given a virginal aspect: in the virginal Holy Family of Nazareth. From the beginning of redemption we are faced with the tremendous difference between natural man and Christian man. Marriage is to be sanctified, is to be a sacrament. It is to be rooted not only in flesh and blood — as it must be — but in chastity. Without the virginal birth of the child of that first holy family, Christian marriage could never have become a sacrament.

There hardly could have been a mystery in the person of Christ if he had had a human father. Christ has two natures, a human and a divine. But he is only one Person. It would be difficult to accept that one and the same person should have two fathers, a human and a divine. For Christ, it was absolutely necessary and indispensable to be born of a virgin if the glory of the one and true Son of God was to be preserved. The earthly birth of the Messiah had to be virginal for the same reason that his messianic birth had to be through a resurrection from the dead. To create anew, the Spirit had to work on an annihilated flesh. The life-giving breath of God had to blow on inert matter.

Only through his birth of a virgin can his generation from God be made manifest. In other words, redemption depended on virginity.

But this world of the flesh owes to virginity more than redemption, more than the consecration into a new holiness. When the angel announced to Mary, she kept silent, except for one question. She debated within herself. She meditated as if suspecting that more was still to come. And then was revealed to her not only the whole plan of salvation but the unheard-of mystery of the Godhead as well: “He shall be the Son of the Most High — of God the Father — and the Holy Spirit shall come upon you.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In a few words the angel unveiled the past, present and future of the greatest mysteries of the New Covenant, of the kingdom of heaven to come: the virgin birth of Christ and the Holy Trinity, as if absolutely nothing should remain hidden from this virgin. The new faith and its profoundest mysteries were revealed first to a virgin soul. And ever since Christian virginity has its place among the Christian mysteries of grace. Ever since has it been part of Christian belief that the faithful depend for the intercession between God and men on the prayers of the virgin handmaids of the Lord. . . . Mary kept silent. She kept all these things and words carefully in her heart. And so began the long chain of meditation which is one of the main characteristics of the consecrated life.

There is another power which grants understanding when the decisive hour has come: faith. Mary believed. She believed at a time when no one else believed. If anything can describe Mary’s greatness, then it is the cry of her cousin Elizabeth: “And blessed is she who has believed.” Mary followed in bare faith every step the Lord took towards his destiny. Understanding, comprehension came only with Pentecost.

In Mary, human fecundity had reached total renouncement. In return, the Spirit created a new order of fecundity which transcends nature’s achievements and limitations. In the virgin, human fecundity acknowledges its weakness and withdraws; the fecundity of the Spirit takes its place. It is more than a miracle; it is a new stage in the economy of salvation. The old order of the flesh gives place to the new order of the life in the Spirit. A new world begins, and life in the Spirit invades the flesh. This life is a divine life. It is beyond flesh and blood. No human generation can communicate it. For man is born to it “from above.” It was to bring that new life to the flesh that the Spirit came upon Mary, and her glory consisted in her entire surrender to that new life.

The union of the Word and the flesh can be accepted only on faith.

Mary was silent and receptive, but she did ask one question: “How shall this be done since I do not know man?” When in a comparable situation Zachary asked a like question, he was punished because his only thought was of the physical unlikeliness, or even impossibility, by reason of his great age. Zachary, the priest of the Old Covenant, became dumb and lost his speech. This meant the end of the Old Covenant which was no longer valid and fell silent. Mary was not doubting the angel. She did not ask “How shall I know this?”, as Zachary did in disbelief. She declared her firm belief by asking how this should happen. She was not questioning the fact but the manner, the “how.” She asked how this should happen because she “did not know man.” She asked in wonder because she was already a dedicated virgin, vowed to virginity. Where Zachary should not have asked, Mary had to ask. She had to give her free consent. And this she did when she was told that her virginity was not only no obstacle, but was in fact the very

condition on which the will of God depended. She had to pronounce her own *Fiat*. Her virginity was not to be sacrificed, not even for God. Her virginity, vowed of her own free will, was part of God's design. It is from this moment in Mary's life, this moment of the beginning of Christian salvation, that virginity derives its splendor in the eyes of God. Virginity given to God in love will force God and his graces down upon the virgin as in Mary it forced the Holy Spirit down upon her.

But the story of Mary did not stop at that word of passivity, or receptivity. Her first reaction after the revelation was quite different. She did not remain in solitude, meditating and praying, as could well have been expected. She went in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth upon whom a similar miracle had been wrought: Elizabeth was to bear, not the Son of God, but the greatest born of woman. Mary did not stay within the self-imposed cloister of her vow. She went into the world on an errand of charity to serve her kinswoman as the handmaid not only of the Lord but of humankind. She responded to her call, to her vocation, not only by accepting the will of God but by fulfilling it, by carrying out the human obligation to which she felt called in conscience and in charity.

### Church and Virgin

Dedicated, consecrated virginity has its origin in Mary. Pope Pius XII, with this origin in mind, wrote in his Encyclical Letter, *Sacra Virginitas* of March 25, 1954: "This then is the primary purpose, the central idea of Christian virginity: to aim wholly and solely for the things of God and to direct mind and heart to them; to desire to please God in all things; to consecrate body and soul completely to him."

Because Mary, though a mother, remained a virgin, she could in a very deep sense also be a bride of the Son of God. Without Mary, it would be impossible for the Church to be the bride of Christ, "having neither spot nor wrinkle but holy and without blemish." At times it almost seems as if the Lord would again want to make himself dependent on his bride. It is of deep significance that it was Mary who should again assume the lead when he began his public ministry. It was at a wedding. A human wedding is the reflection, the visible embodiment of the mystery of Christ's union with his bride, the Church. The chain of his miracles began at the bidding of a virgin interceding between God and men. She spoke only brief words. First, "They have no wine." Mary was quite human in observing the minor mishap at the feast. But this rather secondary detail, through her intercession, laid the scene for the first miracle of her Son. And she continues speaking to God of our human needs, and God will keep on listening to her. And then she said: "Do whatever he tells you." She was now talking not to God but to men, that we may listen to her commands and do as Christ did.

Both Mary and the Church are virgin mothers. St. Augustine has said: "Mary bore the head of his Body in the flesh" — he means Christ, the head of the Church, his Mystical Body — "and the Church bears the members of that head in spirit" — he means, gives birth to the members in baptism — "and in neither one does virginity impede fecundity; in neither does fecundity destroy virginity."

The Church sees in virginity the most perfect fulfillment of her own mystery: to be the bride of Christ. Virginity fulfills what marriage only symbolizes or, at best, vaguely intimates. Through your consecrated virginity you share directly what marriage expresses symbolically.

In relation to Christ's Passion, the difference between a married person and a virgin is like the difference between an ordinary baptized Christian and a martyr. The ordinary baptized Christian is joined to the Passion sacramentally. The martyr shares the Passion in his very life-process. The consecrated virgin has part in Christ's bridal union with the Church not only sacramentally but in her very life itself. And in sharing the martyrdom of Christ's Passion, which brought forth the Church, the consecrated virgin will be fruitful. No married woman has more children than the Church, the mysterious mother of many.

The Church stands in the world as the sign of the virgin who begets. A symbol represents. Therefore, the symbol is the thing which it represents. Consecrated virginity is a symbol of the Church: in consecrated virgins the Church is perpetually offering herself to God. As a living sign of the Church, virgins make visible the whole Church under its aspect of holiness. Of consecration to God, of union with Christ and of its partaking in his own sanctity.

Consecrated virginity is truly a sacred mystery: that is, the life of the virgin is a symbolic ritual giving outward expression to what the Church herself is. The sacrificial life of the virgin is a kind of liturgical expression of the Church in her action of living up to her consecration to God, immolating herself as a victim of love. Like the virgins, Christ on the Cross is not just a substitute sacrificed instead of mankind, but in him all mankind is sacrificed. Virgins offer themselves, like Christ, as a pledge on behalf of all mankind. Their whole being is a sacrament in the sense of sacred mystery or symbolic rite.

Virgins are the symbol of the interior sacrifice of the whole Church. They must accomplish more perfectly and more intensely than the average person the inner spiritual sacrifice which is outwardly expressed in their whole being as consecrated persons. They are identifying themselves with the entire Church in charity so that in their love they are one mystical person with the Church. In offering themselves to God, they will truly offer the whole Church to him. They will be a living sign to inspire others to give themselves to God, each one according to the demands of his way of life. The harvest of souls is the responsibility of virgins. They are dead to the world, and their very existence is a symbol that all Christians are citizens of heaven and not of earth. The first-fruits of their fidelity can bring the full harvest, of which they themselves are the pledge.

Like the virgin, the Church is apparently sterile. She cannot and will not claim worldly efficiency. She will not compete with the powers of the world for might and prestige. She does not try to expand man's universe and make it yield more power. The result of her work is the coming of Christ and, in Christ, of that re-created world which the prophets announced. The aim of the Church is not the organization and propagation of the pre-

sent life but its renovation. The life she brings is the divine life, the gift of the Spirit. Of this life, every Christian is begotten. And every Christian, in turn, must become instrumental in making the whole world share in that new birth. And this spiritual fecundity of Mary, of the Church, of all Christians, is most fully contained and realized in virginal life. If virginity were merely virtuous, if it would remain on the level of moral virtue, it would not be truly Christian. Christian virginity must aim at total identification with the crucified Lord. It must mean total dispossession of self by total faith and total love.

Mary, body and soul, is already assumed into the glory of her Son. But the Church remains the fulness of grace functioning in history. She is the mystery of that union into which God, through Christ, draws all creation. She is the mother constantly bearing and re-bearing heavenly life. Virginity in the Christian sense does not take away motherhood but spiritualizes it. The spiritual union of Christ and the Church is represented by distinct and different signs in its human fruitfulness and its spiritual purity. The spiritual marriage of Christ and the Church is represented in its fruitfulness by human marriage in the flesh; and in its unviolated integrity by the consecration of virgins.

Woman was made by God to nurture life. Unless she does, she will be unhappy. That does not mean that every woman must be a physical mother. She can become co-creator of faith, hope, and charity. These, too, are wellsprings of life; in fact, of a much higher spiritual life. It is woman's special task to preserve the sacredness of the wellsprings of life. She can go beyond the natural level of the body. Her vocation, like that of the prophetess Deborah, will be for the suffering people of God. She will be another Judith of whom the elders of her town said: "Pray for us, for you are a holy woman and one fearing God." Maternal instincts are needed in the spiritual sphere. Consecrated virgins must guard the sacred spiritual fountains of life. Consecrated women are disposed by nature to compassion, sympathy, and understanding.

Of her very nature, woman is made for sacrifice. Hers is the more self-effacing lot in life. She wants to give, and she is not happy until she can give her whole self. Giving is, above all, a spiritual act which enriches the giver. True wealth cannot be found in possessiveness nor in firmly held possessions. True wealth can be found only in sharing. To this respect, it is akin to divinity. God does not lose by sharing his life with men. Material goods diminish through distribution. The more men there are to receive them, the less each one actually has. But spiritual goods are all the richer and fuller for being shared by many.

In the life of the Christian virgin, the mystery of Mary's motherhood is reproduced spiritually and in a hidden manner. Just as Mary was the "door" by which Christ entered the world even though the door was not "opened," so too the virgin is filled with a love rich in material gifts, which generously gives itself everywhere in outward works of mercy, yet at the same time never yields its interior secret, which remains totally consecrated to God. The Christian virgin is, like Mary, a closed door. In bodily things she gives, but does not receive, human love and consolation. In spiritual things, she receives from God, but does not reveal the secret communicated to her by the King. Thus her life is integrated in perfectly ordered love. God is loved for his own sake, and the neighbor purely

and disinterestedly for the love of God. In consecrated virginity, acts of self-renunciation may be small acts. By their very smallness they may seem unheroic. They will assume immense proportions for the regeneration of Christian society. They will work from within, like nuclear energy.

The death of the flesh is quite contrary to human nature and hard to achieve. Unselfishness not be inspired by it, will not be inspired by the death of the flesh — but rather by the death of the spirit of evil which is so much part of human nature. What virginity really is cannot be learned from knowledge of man on the natural level. It can be learned only from revelation, from Christ himself. And he said that it is possible for the human being to concentrate honestly and purely all his powers of love on God so that God can become everything, beginning and end, of existence. This is, however, not some kind of “ersatz,” as a substitute for something one grudgingly renounces. God is the sovereign lover who loves absolutely, unreservedly. And he is the only one who can be loved without reserve. A human lover and a human beloved essentially remain always distant. The two can never blend perfectly. For these very reason one called to consecrated virginity begins to sense the possibility of another love, impossible on the mere earthly plane, to which she not only can but must surrender her innermost being: the divine love revealed by revelation, the divine call to virginity. This teaching and this call is not meant for all; the Lord said so himself (Mt. 19:12). It is meant only for those whose heart is large enough. And one must not forget — that with God nothing is impossible. Only in Christ can virginity become a possibility.

It is quite obvious that Mary is the perfect model of consecrated virginity in spite of the fact that she was very different from ordinary human beings. God gave to Mary a unique place and mission. She was immaculately conceived and knew no sin. She remained a virgin in spite of childbirth. She was assumed into heaven, body and soul. Even though we do not have these privileges, she is still the model.

God gave Mary one faculty which he never took away from her, and he gave us the same faculty and never took it away either: our free will. That is where we and Mary meet. We cannot expect to receive her fulness of graces, but we are expected to use our free will as she did: in response to the call of God. We are perfectly free — and perfectly able — to refuse his call. Mary always said Yes to God. Do we always say Yes to God? Much good has come into the world by the Yes of many a woman. We all owe our life to the Yes of our mother to the marriage proposal of our father. There would be no virginity without Christian homes to give it birth. What a good thing it is for us that our mothers did not vow virginity but said Yes to God’s call to the married state of life.

Mary’s motherhood did not come from man. It was a spiritual motherhood. It came from the Holy Spirit. We are not supposed to become the mother of God, but we are still supposed to be open to the Holy Spirit and to become mothers of sanctity, in ourselves and in others. Unfortunately, it is quite easy to close oneself to the Holy Spirit, to refuse to receive him, to refuse to conceive of him.

The problem is not to preserve virginity, one would hope. If efforts were concentrated only on preserving virginity, they would be directed in a negative sense: not doing certain things. Virginity is not a virtue to be defended. It is a virtue to expand, to grow, to be fruitful not in the flesh but in the spirit. Only then will it mean anything and be productive. Mary's was a spiritual motherhood. Human marriage passes easily to its fulfillment. Consecration does not so easily pass into spiritual union. The total giving of the soul is quite a different matter from giving one's body.

Consecration is a marriage ceremony. But it takes place on the spiritual level. As bride of Christ we have to fulfill the obligations of the bride if we want to enjoy the privileges. There must be service of love, absolute and final. Look at the model, the Blessed Virgin Mary. In spite of all her excellence, she remained the humble servant, the handmaid. We cannot take upon ourselves the title of bride of Christ, even though it be conferred. We have to earn it. It can be earned only by utmost generosity. It will involve a total gift. A total gift of self on the spiritual level is not easy. If we want to exercise spiritual motherhood — as we should — there will be, as in natural motherhood, pain, anguish, and labor. There will be no room for egoism and self-love.

Mary's virginity is not a title of glory, is not a privilege which separates her from God's other creatures, and certainly not from consecrated virgins. Her virginity was the necessary condition for a total and final gift of self to God, a pledge of service. Mary never belonged to herself. She was detached from her own ego — "I am the handmaid of the Lord." She never thought of herself without thinking of God. Only because she was empty of everything but God could she become full of grace.

The great mystery in the life of Mary was, of course, that when she gave herself completely to God when she even bore his Son, she still remained a virgin. The eternal glory of Mary's virginity consists in this — that the Child passed from his mother's womb into her arms as a ray of sunlight passes through a pane of glass without breaking or staining it. Human marriage will demand the sacrifice of virginity. Spiritual marriage will preserve virginity. When the angel announced to Mary, she understood that her vocation to virginity was not to be violated by her motherhood. There was no break. No change of direction and purpose.

We are not called upon to bear the Son of God in the flesh. But we are still called upon to bear the Son of God in ourselves and to carry him to men, to other creatures. Mary's motherhood was not only physical. It was, above all, spiritual, and so is ours. That is where the parallel between Mary and us comes in. Her motherhood owed nothing to any human being. Nor does our spiritual motherhood. She conceived of the Word of God as a result of her total consecration to God. Her body became the instrument of the divine will. And we are meant to be instruments of the divine will.

Before the Incarnation could become real in the flesh, it required a spiritual readiness. Nobody will deny that Christ's birth from the womb of Mary was an unsurpassed miracle of grace. But it is rather remarkable that the Lord himself did not place this miracle above all other miracles. When the woman in the crowd cried out: "Blessed is the womb

that bore You,” which referred to Christ’s virgin birth, he replied: “Rather blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it.” The Lord himself put the spiritual element, the motive for doing God’s will, before even the divine motherhood itself. There lies a great lesson for all consecrated virgins. It seems that in the eyes of Christ the spiritual motherhood of the consecrated life ranked higher than even the motherhood of Mary.

Through the whole Gospel runs the idea that Christ and his call must be received, like a living seed, like a grain, and then develop to full stature, to maturity. Receive him and bring him forth. That is our motherhood. Conceive of his word. For more than thirty years, Mary gave her heart and soul to Christ. In him and in his love she was entirely content. Here is the real inspiration for our spiritual motherhood. We must grow in the knowledge of Christ, love him, serve him — completely and exclusively as Mary did.

Spiritual motherhood is not the same as the active apostolate which is also part of our lives. Spiritual motherhood is by its nature personal and interior. We have to use all our abilities that those with whom we have personal bonds and who are our spiritual charges may be born again to the life of grace or grow in it. Like St. Paul, we have to labor that Christ is born again in them. This will mean the full acceptance of the Incarnation on a day-by-day basis.

As in the case of Mary, motherhood is not only a matter of transmitting life but of doing so by a complete offering of one’s own life. Mary’s motherhood was realized in the flesh. But she knew that there was also a motherhood of a purely spiritual kind. After all, woman creates only the body of the child. The soul is created by God. Spiritual motherhood is no less painful than natural motherhood. Only at the Cross was Mary’s motherhood finally accomplished: when she united herself to the sacrifice of her Son. She offered no less than he did: she offered him. This was the price, the pains of her spiritual motherhood.

If natural motherhood can reach its fulfilment only in a painful way, it is no different with spiritual motherhood. Spiritual motherhood will require suffering. But no longer one’s own suffering — rather the suffering of Christ which we have to share with him. The purpose is, apart from our own salvation, the zeal for the salvation of the whole world. It was only at the Cross that Mary’s motherhood was raised to supernatural motherhood of all mankind. For us, too, it will be a cross, or at least a hard road. The forces and inclinations of nature are strong. We will have to develop personality as consecrated virgins to the same pitch as Mary did, or as closely to it as humanly possible. And what cannot be done humanly, grace will do.

It will not be easy to reproduce Mary in our lives of consecrated virginity. The joys are easy to take, and they are most legitimately ours. But there will be also self-denial and abnegation. We should not shrink from them. Rather we should walk with Christ. We know that Scripture never mentions Mary apart from her Son, only both together. As she did, we must walk with him. Otherwise, we will be lost. And as Mary walked with him, she knew her place very well. In the Gospel, Mary always seems to point away from herself and to point to her Son. She is like the vessels of the altar. They are precious things

in themselves. But they contain and show us something which is far more precious than they are.

Permit the Holy Spirit to get a hold of us, as he got hold of Mary. She knew that the Holy Spirit can work wonders, can work miracles. See no one but Jesus. So did Mary. The world is waiting for the fruit of consecrated virginity, our betrothal, our spiritual motherhood. The world is very much in need of these fruits.

## THE CEREMONY OF CONSECRATION

### As a sacramental

Consecration of persons or things means to take that person or thing out of profane use and to reserve it for the exclusive service of God, to make it holy and sacred. By the efficacy of the sacramental of consecration it constitutes the virgin in a permanent state as a bride of Christ and, by the power of the Church, implores God for her objective sanctification.

The consecration as a sacramental means that it is a rite analogous in its structure to that of the sacraments, instituted by the Church and used by her for obtaining by her impetration spiritual effects. There are two aspects to every sacramental. It is primarily a prayer, a petition address to God by the Church. It is also, thanks to the prayer of the Church *ex opere operantis ecclesiae*, i.e., a means which God uses to sanctify persons or things.

The sacramental has twofold significance both as a prayer and as a means of sanctification. As a prayer it manifests the interior supplication and impetration of the Church, but also the prayer of the glorified Christ which the Church continues. However, it is not only a prayer. It also obligates the person who allows this prayer to be said on her behalf; it recalls Christ's earthly prayer and Passion; it announces the prayer of the heavenly Jerusalem where the petition, then perfectly satisfied, will become pure thanksgiving and praise.

Secondly, as a means of sanctification the sacramental is a sign of the habitual graces granted to the Christian to dispose herself for the reception or the increase of sanctifying grace. But beyond that, every sacramental must manifest in the recipient a certain disposition of soul, just as the sacraments require the proper disposition for their fruitful reception. That means that the reception of the sacramental obligates the recipient for the future, for the performance of future acts which have to be in accord with her disposition and her intentions at the moment of reception. This involvement of the future, of future dispositions and intentions, is particularly true of such sacramentals as the Consecration of Virgins. By the reception of the sacramental of consecration one does indeed assume a moral obligation regarding her future conduct as a consecrated virgin; it is a moral obligation of which one's conscience will be the sole judge.

### References to history

The idea of consecrated life as a martyrdom became part of religious thinking over the centuries. Actual martyrdom was, to be sure, nothing pleasant. But it was forced upon the individual by extrinsic circumstances unless he was ready to foreswear his faith. It was afflicted from the outside rather than sought of his own choice. It was suffered once and endured for more or less a brief moment. The martyr's glory was openly admired. He was venerated as a saint and officially celebrated by the Church. The spiritual martyrdom of consecrated life, on the other hand, was undergone spontaneously. It was an

act of free will. It meant a life-long and daily-renewed renunciation, perseverance in a self-imposed self-discipline. It carried with it little glory in the eyes of the world. It remained obscure and hidden, known only to God. And if there was glory attached to it, that glory came only after a long life of persistent cooperation with grace. The martyrs were filled with, and carried through by, a temporary emotional stress; consecrated life is a tiring and taxing routine.

All Christian perfection is the following of Christ. But the person of Christ is so rich that it permits of an infinite number of various ways of following. All will produce the essential qualities of Christ's example, but each one according to its particular accent. If the perfection of the martyr consists in his following Christ to total participation in his redemptive death, then the consecrated person is rightly called a martyr. Consecrated life wants to follow Christ in his redemptive death and in his fight against Satan. This means to unite oneself to the mystery of life in the death of the Cross and by it save the world from sin. Under this aspect, the vocation to consecrated life is a charismatic gift and reserved to the few, freely chosen by God by the mystery of predestination.

Virginité will sanctify. The privation which it involves is not the sign of a destruction but of an ascension. The life of the virgin is sanctified through the holocaust of her virginity. She is imbued with the radiance of the divine presence, burned by the fire of divine charity. She sees her deepest urge and power turn into an act of love for God, as the victim was turned into smoke to ascend into the divine glory. Vital energy is sacrificed, but that does not mean it is cut off — it is consecrated and transfigured. Close relation to Christ will not follow all at once upon the consecration. It will be reached only after a life of faithfulness and generous service. This spiritual marriage is based on faith and charity. It will grow with these virtues. In the truest sense of the word, only the sky is the limit — heaven.

The purity of the virgin is closely connected with the purity of faith itself (St. Jerome to Eustochium). The virgin really is what a redeemed human person ought to be.

Christians saw in the ring a sign of fidelity. It was worn on the left hand for the practical reason of there being better preserved from everyday contacts. And on the third finger because of the argument that this finger was connected with the heart by a nerve, according to Roman customs and beliefs.

From the earliest times, only the bishop could perform the consecration. It was to take place only a major feast days: Epiphany, Christmas, Easter, and on the feasts of apostles because the virgin was expected to continue the apostolate of the Twelve. From earliest times also, consecration was a spiritual marriage, and like marriage it implied union, fidelity, indissolubility — it could not be dissolved.

Consecration was then in the early years of the Church, the last and crowning act of dedication to God. It is a matter of record that many virgins took only a private *propositum* which was accepted by the Church, but not in a solemn ceremony. These virgins, at the time of their *propositum*, were not consecrated. Consecration was delayed for a varying

number of years, sometimes to a rather late age. A certain delay was mandatory because the consecration by a bishop was considered the final crown and the official sanction of the original *propositum*. The virgin was to give her first resolution time to mature, was to learn what consecrated life and virginity really do imply. Consecration followed only after a time of probation and perseverance.

In the early centuries, when dedicated virgins were still sharing the life of their families and when religious life and enclosure in the later sense were rare, the dedicated virgin remained exposed to the influence of the world, as today consecrated virgins living in the world are subject to. Their solemn consecration bestowed upon them supernatural grace and supernatural help. It provided the necessary protection for their life of dedicated virginity.

Through the *propositum*, the virgin has given all she can give — she has dedicated herself completely, her all, body and soul to God. But God can still give more, the additional graces of the sacramental of consecration. By means of this sacramental he further transforms her human offering and bestows new supernatural powers to intensify the sacredness of her consecrated life. And the sacramental of consecration, like all sacraments and sacramentals, depends in its efficacy on the faith and interior disposition of the recipient. Every reception of grace will imply obligations regarding future conduct. The consecrated virgin is obliged to cooperate with all her power so that the graces of the consecration can become fruitful. On the way to God, the essential element is faith. Without it, consecration is void of meaning. Its effects depend on interior disposition. Consecrated life also necessarily entails self-denial and penance on the part of the recipient.

The glory of Christian virginity shines forth clearly in its comparison with sacramental marriage. The consecration ceremony has a close affinity to the sacrament of matrimony. One of the most important parts of the marriage ceremony is the bridal blessing of the nuptial Mass. It invokes many more blessings upon the bride than upon the groom. The condition that a candidate for consecration never have been married shows that the nuptial blessing and consecration exclude each other. They are the respective counterparts in the sanctification of woman in human marriage and supernatural wedlock.

St. Matthew —

According sacred belief and writing from past centuries, St. Matthew went to Ethiopia, preached the Gospel and confirmed his preaching by many miracles. Among these miracles was the calling back to life of the daughter of King Aeglippus, or Egeppus. This miracle converted her father, the king, his wife and the whole country. After the death of the king, his daughter, Iphigenia, was asked in marriage by the successor to the throne, King Hirtacus. But Iphigenia, at the suggestion of St. Matthew, had vowed virginity and wanted to remain faithful to her holy promise: *in sancto proposito*. St. Matthew gave her and many of her companions the consecration of virgins and on this occasion pronounced the blessing *Deus plasmatior*. In revenge, Hirtacus ordered him to be slain while celebrating the mysteries of the altar. If the legend is true, it would mean

that St. Matthew died a martyr's death on account of the first known administration of the consecration of virgins.

This history shows how closely the consecration of virgins is connected with the most ancient heritage and tradition of the Church, reaching back to the actual life-time of the apostles, and that would mean, of Christ himself.

It may not be a mere coincidence that the martyrdom of St. Matthew occurred in direct connection with the first recorded consecration of virgins. A careful study of his gospel shows that St. Matthew was much concerned about virgins and virginity. It seems that his gospel pays special attention to a life dedicated to Christ, to what is now being called consecrated life.

*Propositum* —

The Latin word *propositum* is a very ancient ecclesiastical term. It means that which you propose to yourselves, although it may well be in response to what had been proposed to you. The word itself can be traced at least as far back in ecclesiastical writing to the third century. Compared with the words *professio* and *votum*, profession and vow, the word *propositum* is much more ancient. "Profession" and "vow" became current much later.

When speaking of Mary's *propositum*, her will to virginity, the Latin word signifies the original meaning of the word itself: a purpose, a plan, an ideal. In her case it was the ideal of a life dedicated to the service of God, a life of purpose and zeal. This ideal is inspired by God, of course, in the first place. And, of course, only by the inspiration of the *pneuma* of the Holy Spirit and our cooperation with God's grace can our consecration as virgins become a living and lived reality. If we live up to the spirit of the consecration, live up to God's call and our calling, then the Father, bending over us, will see only — his Son.

## CHURCH AND VIRGIN: SPOUSES OF CHRIST

To be a bride, be it virgin or Church, means to be permitted to love. The bride of Christ did not love first, but Christ loved her first. And then, in the power and glory, in the beauty and chastity of his love, she herself is the lover. Christ reveals to her what he is in his very being. He initiates her into the mystery of love. Christ opens the eyes of his bride to the love with which he yearns for her. As a lover the bride of Christ must give thanks. She is all glorification to the Father through and in Christ. When a virgin is consecrated bride of Christ, when God shows his generous love again, the whole Church must pour forth her gratitude in memory of all the great and wonderful works of divine omnipotence. When a virgin becomes a bride of Christ, the whole Church rejoices, for she herself receives new life and pure love from Christ. She grows and expands whenever Christ reveals himself as the spouse of a virgin. And that is the reason for giving thanks, always and everywhere.

By its re-creation human nature is also given a foretaste of the eternal treasures which are prepared in the new era. This "new era" conjures up before the eyes of faith the cosmic Christ-image. When Christ assumed human nature, he consecrated the whole cosmos and sanctified the human race. His baptism in the Jordan sanctified all water. The bread he broke became a sacrament. The places he visited became sacred. The wedding of Cana was elevated to the divinely instituted sacrament of matrimony. Creation was snatched away from the power of death. Christ is the father of the new eon. His second coming will reveal openly what takes place secretly in our day. Both Old and New Testaments speak of the new heaven and the new earth, the full ripe fruit of the sacred mysteries celebrated here on earth. They will be an unending glorification of the all-holy Trinity in the celebration of the heavenly liturgy.

Christian existence is of an eschatological character, oriented towards its end. The last things are already present. He who lives in Christ, lives in the final era, in the beginning of the new world. He already enjoys a foretaste of the eternal treasures, for in Christ we wait for Christ.

The consecrated virgin reveals in a special way this eschatological glory. The virgin espoused by Christ belongs to him exclusively. Though still subject to death, she is nevertheless already changed to the likeness of the angels. Virginité is a living anticipation of the parousia. By their uninterrupted contemplation the angels reveal the ultimate destiny of creation: the glory of God. The consecrated virgin, as a spouse of Christ, partakes of this angelic calling. She will sing before the throne of God and of the Lamb a new canticle, which virgins alone can sing (Apoc. 14:3) She is raised to the likeness of angels because her whole life is praise of God, because her undivided surrender to Christ realizes by anticipation the state of the perfect creatures in heaven. She lives in that immediate union with God which fills the creature completely with bliss. She joins already here in the heavenly liturgy, which will continue after the end of time when faith and hope are no more, but charity remains.

Both church and virgin are temples of God. In the midst of the church stands the altar, which is Christ himself. In the heart of the consecrated virgin lives Christ. The dedication of a church and the consecration of a virgin both dedicate a temple to God: the one a house of stone, the other a living temple of soul, flesh and blood.

The consecration of virgins did not develop by chance. It took its inspiration from two liturgical sources: the marriage rite and the rite of ordination. Nevertheless, the liturgy of the consecration of virgins remains basically a marriage ceremony.

## VIRGINITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE RESURRECTION

Christian self-discipline, or ascetical life, is the participation in the mystery of Christ's struggle against evil. Christian life and Christian martyrdom are the participation in Christ's death by a life-long dying to self. Both self-discipline and martyrdom will concern, at least to a certain extent, every Christian. For consecrated persons their implications will reach further.

Even paganism knew a sort of virginity. But it was of a different kind. You might call it a forced virginity. It lacked that character of free decision, of triumph and joy, which are the distinguishing mark of Christian virginity. The Jews of the Old Testament considered the unmarried woman as one stricken with a curse. For them, blessing was found only in fecundity in this world.

In estimating virginity so highly, the Church shows that she is not of this world, in spite of still being in this world.

Virginity cannot be had without asceticism, without doing violence to natural forces, without self-discipline. But such life-long martyrdom and self-discipline are not yet identical with virginity. Self-discipline is of obligation; virginity is not. A life of self-discipline continues Christ's struggle against evil; dying to self, martyrdom, continues his death. But Christ was more than man; he was a virgin. In sharing this particular mystery of Christ, virginity opens the road to that place from which Christ came. In virginity the lost paradise is found and re-opened again.

Ever since the days of the early Fathers, martyrdom and virginity have been considered as the highest perfection of Christian life. Martyrdom and self-discipline mean a dying, and most likely a painful dying. Both mean death to self. But virginity means a life. Consequently, and by contrast to martyrdom and self-discipline, virginity is a participation less in the death than in the resurrection of Christ. The feast day of virginity is not Good Friday but Easter.

Christian life is for all the faithful the realization of the Easter mystery of Christ. There is a mysterious identity of all Christians, of the whole Mystical Body, with the risen Lord. This mystery points to man's final destiny beyond the grave. Christ's resurrection is a sign and symbol of a major evolution of the whole perceptible world. In his material body the world has attained already its highest perfection, its transfiguration into glory. The whole Christian liturgy, of which the consecration of virgins is part, flows from the Lord's heavenly way of using outward signs to convince man of the reality and glory of his risen body. Man now has the power of bringing down that unseen and supernatural world into the sphere accessible to his senses. In consecrated virginity, the unseen becomes visible.

It is the evangelical counsel of chastity alone that is essential to consecrated life — for all forms of consecrated life. Virginity is the sign of immortality. What is incorrupt, is immortal. Marriage perpetuates humanity by natural fecundity. But the procreation of the

human race is a rather inefficient remedy for death. The race may live on; the individual still has to die. The situation of virginity is quite different. Because what is mortal has been renounced, virginity and its integrity bestow the life of the spirit which does not die. Those who do not marry for the sake of the kingdom of God, belong to the world to come. While they still live on earth, they are, in the words of Christ, children of the resurrection. Virginity embodies the spirit of the kingdom; marriage is an institution of this world, albeit by its sacramental value it is directed to the world to come.

Virginity is a charism, a gift, which God bestows upon whom he wishes. No man, unless he be called by God, can venture on this way. But once he is called, he becomes a vessel of divine election. Virginity is not a sign or image of solitude and sterility. It is, on the contrary, the sign of love, of a spiritual union. No spiritual love is solitary and sterile. Virginity is the sign and image of the soul's rebirth to union with God who is pure spirit.

The whole concept of supernatural life is linked with that of the Holy Trinity. The supernatural, as this term is understood in theology, has always to do with the participation of the creature in the very inner life and activity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Where there is no understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, there can be no understanding of the supernatural in the strict sense. In the Old Testament there is no awareness that God is triune in personality. This is the reason why God did not — and perhaps could not — demand virginity of Israel. First, God had to become man, and a man who was a virgin, so that now, under the new dispensation, Christian virginity could become the nuptial union of virgins with the virgin Christ. Virginity for the love of Christ, caused by supernatural grace, could give a share in his resurrection. The transition from the Old to the New Testament, from figure to truth, from sign to reality, has been accomplished. Under the New Law, virginity, now in truth and reality, is no longer of the order of a sign. It is the realization of the life to come, of that life into which Christ ascended to the Father.

Only virginity undertaken for the love of Christ can be Christian virginity. But the love of Christ includes, all by itself, love of man. Virginity cannot afford to shut itself up and live apart from one's fellow men. Virginity means a closer sharing in the life of Christ. Consequently, it will restore, in some sort, natural integrity and wholesomeness, a widened horizon regarding duties to others, that all may be one, and one whole. Only virginity can fully understand and attain this goal. It is for the same reason that the Latin Church imposes celibacy upon her priests. She implicitly admits and requires that the life of a priest is inseparable from a life of doing good to others. From the same point of view, virginity will be perfect only if it recognizes its responsibilities to others. It has a social function. Virginity, as a charism, is granted to individual Christians not for their personal sanctification but for the spiritual welfare of others. It will radiate perfect charity through the total gift of body and soul to the divine spouse.

## SPIRITUALITY OF THE CONSECRATION

### Pneuma

Instead of the spiritual impact of the consecration, it might be a good idea to speak of its *pneumatic* impact. This word occurs throughout St. Paul. He meant by it the whole complex of supernatural inspirations and gifts, blessings, endowments and graces, which are co-natural to the baptized Christian. *Pneuma* and *pneumatic* are the Greek for spirit and spiritual, applied in the particular sense of God's spirit given to man, that divine life of God which we receive with the sanctifying grace of all the sacraments. It is the same spirit of God, *pneuma*, which descended upon Christ at his baptism in the Jordan and ever since desires to descend upon us. The ceremony of consecration is filled with it.

The Spirit, *pneuma*, the Holy Spirit, is sent by the Father. It is that same power by which the Word became flesh, which overshadowed Mary, that Spirit which is the soul of the Church. At our baptism, our fleshly self-existence vanishes into a spiritual co-existence in union with God.

The Holy Spirit lowers that barrier of sin which stood between God and man since the dawn of history. He carries life to man. The result is a new being: man enjoys communion of life with God. A new unit has been created: two — not mixed or blended — are born one, of love. We could never do it by our own power. We must let go and call: Lord, come, send Your Holy Spirit that we may be re-created. Since our baptism we have had to work at spiritual maturity, to attune ourselves to the never-ending inspirations of the Holy Spirit, to his *pneuma*. Our being renewed will never end. One step of our spiritual growth can be our consecration, which is filled with the *pneuma* of God.

As the mysterious power of the Spirit of God flowed into Jesus and overflowed into his words and actions, the same power must operate in us, that *pneuma* which makes spiritual beings of us sensual beings. We must empty our hearts, lift our hearts, that they may be filled by the *pneuma*. And then suddenly, unknown possibilities will unfold creative powers of which we were totally unaware. In virginity one can give herself entirely to the one who is the source of her being; he gives divine life. She will no longer live for herself, but Christ will live in her. She will become a living temple of the living God. The *pneuma* will invade the life of the whole person and all her activities.

The consecration could and should mean a complete re-making of the spiritual life. The inspirations of the Holy Spirit improve, make more vivid the soul's knowledge of things already known. This divine aid consists in enlightening the mind and stirring up the will. Under its influence one perceives supernatural truths better than she could without this help. The saints are endowed with a particular sensitiveness to even the smallest suggestions and inspirations of the Holy Spirit. The reason is that through their extreme fidelity, their recollection of mind, their innate instinct for the *pneuma* all things spiritual seem to be the only air in which they can breathe naturally.

With anyone's vocation, God had that person in mind when he created her. His vocation and call can become a reality, something which lives and develops, only through action taken not by God but by that very person. This is the challenge to that living force within to which each person must give expression. And that living force will become more effective in the measure in which one works on herself in the light of the *pneuma* received at the consecration.

Since God is love, and since God can do everything, there cannot be anything which love cannot do. Consecration is received for a purpose: the purpose is growth in holiness. Will growth in holiness include suffering? Perhaps. Christ never attempted to do away with suffering. Neither was he a social reformer fighting for a more just distribution of wealth. Besides, social reformers aim at lessening suffering, if possible at removing it. For Christ, the problem is quite different. The greatest evil of suffering is not the suffering in itself but our rebellion against it, the state of inner revolt within us. Christ knew all that, and he sees the mystery of suffering much more profoundly, inseparable from sin, deep at the root of fallen human nature, inseparable from the estrangement from God. . . because that is the only suffering which counts. Before he healed the sick man in his body, he forgave his sins. They were the cause of all his sufferings and pain. Besides, Christ did not try to avoid pain as we do. He did not ignore it but he received it into his heart. He voluntarily shared human affliction, just as he mingled with sinners because it was they who needed him. And herein lies the depth and breadth of his love. To love him in return requires faith. When he saw the sick man's faith, he forgave his sins because sin is a perversion of God's plan, sin is at the bottom of all human disorder. Only then, almost as a finishing touch, did he cure him.

The *pneuma* is meant for all, though perhaps not for all to the same degree. Within the Christian community, even within the community of the whole Church, the strong are to support the weak. Consecrated virgins before all should know that they so contribute to maintain and to carry the whole Church, just as in the heavens each single star is necessary to maintain the balance of the whole universe.

In a world which enjoys egoistic enjoyments, virginity gives the great testimony to the primacy of the spiritual order: that God is near and that it is worth sacrificing all for being one with him. Virginity glorifies Christ in our body. Virginity is the reflection, the expression of Christ in us.

Spirit, by its nature, is creative. It must find an outlet in better thoughts, better words, better actions. We have to lose our life to the world. And the losing of our life begins with the little things of everyday existence. We have to begin here and now. We have to make ourselves aware of the *pneuma* of our consecration, and then we will experience that blissful spiral, that counter-action of doing, knowing, and doing better still. Instead of self-confidence, we should know, perhaps with fear and trembling, confidence in God.

St. Francis de Sales said that the devil stirs up a lot of good works so that no good should be done. It is not a question of doing holy things but of being holy. What really will count is less what one does and thinks and prays, than what one is: that our whole being

as consecrated virgins reflects Christ, that our living example will draw others into the *pneuma* of Christ. We need not be much worried about giving an example if we only are an example. Consecration is meant as a new beginning, a new beginning of new trusts, new hopes, new prayers, new work in the interest of him to whom we are wedded. And he is very much interested in what we are, whether our being reflects what we are supposed to be. Strange to say, his interest always coincides with our own very best interest. Only sometimes it seems he knows so much better than we do.

The love of the husband asks of the woman her virginity. But the love of Christ preserved the virgin in virginity. Courting between man and woman is based primarily on the beauty of the body, and all they mutually receive is often based on not much more than bodily love. But Christ courts, woos you by the sacrifice of his life, by his blood and his sacrificed body. And in return you give him the purest and most spiritual love there is: virginal love.

Consecration is not only a mystical espousal, a symbol, a ceremony. It is much more. It is something very real. The consecrated virgin is wedded no less than any Catholic woman is wedded in church. Christian virginity finds its final fulfilment not in relation to man but in relation to Christ. And that implies spiritual motherhood. The virgin does not receive corporeal life from man, but spirit, the divine *pneuma*, from the Son of God. In the surrender of all the powers of her feminine being to this communication of eternal life, she forms, as it were, a new spiritual body. She gives birth by ever shaping anew the life of the spirit according to the spirit of Christ. She becomes the image of the Church. She, the virgin mother, makes real her vocation to motherhood in the spotless womb of the baptismal font.

To be consecrated meant for the virgin of the early centuries her complete surrender to God. It was a proposition not of discipline and asceticism but of spirituality. Her consecration was a pneumatic act, caused by the grace of God to which she surrendered. God had called and made the virgin his own. She followed a call and with herself gave all she was and had. Under this influence of the *pneuma*, nobody thought of any further legal assertions. No vows in our sense were required, as Canon Law elaborated them later. The consecration integrated the virgin pneumatically into her state of consecrated virginity. In receiving her consecration, she was fully approved by God.

We should be aware, and not without regret, that during later centuries a shift of emphasis has taken place. Dedication to God no longer meant to be consecrated by God, but to dedicate oneself to God. What is now expressed in the various rites of religious profession and their canonical regulations shows a shift of emphasis from the passive voice to the active voice. In profession, a public formula is read, a contract signed and deposited on the altar. Consecration shows a completely different approach to God. Consecration is not concerned about the consecrated person who takes credit for herself but about the consecrated person whom God accredits. Consecration still preserves the ancient concept, the original meaning: the ceremony is dominated not by vow and profession — which are man's work — but by consecration through the grace of the spirit of Christ — which is God's work. This grace of the sacramental is effective *per opere operantis ec-*

*clesiae*, through the efficacy of the prayer of the Church. It needs no further ratification by what we now call vows.

The early solitaries had fought self. But the early virgins, especially after persecutions and martyrdom had ceased, shifted the emphasis in their search of perfection from the sacrifice of life for Christ to a life of sacrifice for Christ. In the consecration, one offers to God the sacrifice of chastity, that is, the chastity of the body. And in return she receives from God chastity of spirit. Consecration is much more a self-surrender than a self-conquest. The human person cannot do it. But, if she surrenders, God's *pneuma* will do for her and in her what she could not do. Love is triumphant only in surrender. Hence the close relation between Mass and consecration. Christ will do in her what she cannot do herself — offer herself in total surrender to the Father. And every Mass is a nuptial Mass — the celebration of the espousal of Christ with his bride, the Church.

The mystery of divine love is that God made himself vulnerable, open to our acceptance or refusal, that we may respond to his love by ours.

Woman stands at the beginning of human history, and she stands also at the conclusion of all history, the apocalyptic figure in St. John's Apocalypse. The sign of woman is: Be it done unto me. Mary did not say: I will do it. But, she said: Be it done to me, as you have said. We have a choice: either pride or surrender. We cannot consecrate ourselves; it must be done to us. In the virgin, the Son of God has found where to lay his head.