

1988 Homily from Mass of the Consecration of a Virgin

“The day of the Annunciation of the Lord to the Virgin Mary is the origin of Christian virginity: it is born in the moment of the “Yes” of the Virgin to the divine maternity. Contrary to this affirmation one could say: but there already existed at least attempts at a virginal life motivated by religious ideas. Even at the time of the birth of Jesus there was being formed a virginal monastic life for men and women in the locality of Qumran, that religious movement which John the Baptist was probably close to. And we also find these mysterious words on the lips of the Virgin Mary: “How is it possible? I do not know man.” (Luke 1, 34)

All this is true and one could say that the development of a virginal life in the bosom of a chosen people precisely in the messianic time was an inclination of the soul of Israel towards the Lord, a sign of the fullness of time. But it is also true that it did not yet have to do with Christian virginity. We don't know with certainty what the true significance is of the statement of Mary: “I don't know man.” In any case, such a declaration of the Virgin appears in that moment incompatible with the will of the Father which is, for Mary, divine motherhood. And her words even seem, at first glance, to be an obstacle rather than adherence to the Will of God. In order to become fully available, the decision of the Virgin Mary would need to be transformed. And it was transformed in the dialogue with the angel, to whom the Virgin responded: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word.” (Luke 1, 38)

The Word was born in this way and only by means of this, Christian virginity; in fact Christian virginity is to enter in this word, to participate in the mystery of this word, which is the mystery of the Incarnation of the divine Word, the Christological center of our faith. Because it is like this: Christian virginity is never just a private, personal, decision but a gift received in the Church from the hands of God- a consecration in which one's own will is accepted by God and transformed into His Will. It is essential for consecrated virginity that it not be only and simply a private decision- it could become in this way an obstacle to the divine will, my will opposing His will. It is essential that my will comes to be offered abandoned, handed over into the hands of God; that virginity become complete availability to the Lord, letting ourselves be guided by Him, in the organism of His mystical Body for the good of the entire Church. It is deduced from this that consecrated virginity is a state in the Church, a Marian state, not less necessary for the fecundity of the Church than the ministerial state of the Priesthood in the succession of the Apostles. The Church must always be Marian and Petrine in order to correspond to her original vocation.

With these reflections we have substantially responded to the question: What is the newness of Christian virginity born of the “Yes” of Mary to the Annunciation of the Lord? The essential point lies in the dialogical character of virginity: It is a matter of my “I” being a response to a divine proposal. Renunciation of marriage counts less; what is crucial is the renunciation of self-will in one's own life, of self-sufficiency of an “I” shut up in one's self. So it is not the “No” that is dominant – the renunciation of certain values; predominant is the “yes” to a higher value, to the divine “You”. Virginity is not something negative, it is the most important thing in the world, a great “Yes”: “Here I am, I am the servant of the Lord, may it be done to me as you have said.” Christian virginity is a dialogical “yes”; in other words, it is an act of love. In fact the ancient liturgy illustrated the occurrence of that day with a wedding psalm (Psalm 45/44), characterized by the Hebraic tradition as a “canticle of love”: “Listen, daughter, consider, incline your ear, forget your people

and your father's house and the King will desire your beauty." Christian virginity is a spousal mystery, a quest for the true beauty which pleases Jesus the King.

A second element follows the first: dialogue with God is never a dialogue between two isolated individuals. God is Trinitarian love. God is the Creator; the Son is before all things and all subsist in Him. He is also the head of the body the Church; He is the beginning, the first born of those who have risen from the dead." To be in dialogue with God implies being open to all creatures. Dialogue with God is linked to the Body of Christ. Therefore Christian virginity always has an ecclesial character. With her "yes" at the Annunciation, Mary became the first Church, because the Church, in her most fundamental nature, is no other than the "yes" of the creature to God. In this way one also understands how virginity and motherhood, virginity and fertility, are inseparable. The virginity of Mary became Christian virginity at the same moment in which it became motherhood. It is here that the passage from the Old to the New Testament is realized

It is not possible for me to explicate right now all that flows from these assertions. I would like only to draw your attention towards what seems to me to be a fundamental aspect. By chance – but there is no "by chance" in Christian life – this year the Feast of the Annunciation coincides with that which at one time was the Friday of the Passion, dedicated in the popular tradition to the Sorrowful Virgin and, as such, was celebrated liturgically.

The Annunciation is a joyful feast –"Rejoice Mary", the Angel said to the Virgin. But the great, invincible joy was born in a definitive manner only from the Cross, in the Resurrection. The principle of the grain of wheat fallen to the earth, which brings forth fruit only by dying, is the fundamental image of Christian virginity. (John 12, 24) Only by letting go of ourselves do we find ourselves: "At Your word, I will let down the nets!" Virginity is a radical act of faith and therefore is an intimate union with the crucified Lord in the sense of the word of St. Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me." I – but no longer I - I am dead and risen in communion with the Body of Christ – this is the transformation accomplished in the virginal consecration: to abandon oneself and to find oneself again in the hands of the Lord. The Marian mystery is a mystery of the Cross and for this reason it is a joyful mystery, in the glory of the Risen Lord. I and no longer I, cross and Resurrection, virginity and motherhood, is fulfilled in that Yes of the Madonna, which is the origin and permanent locale of the virginal state.

We thank God for this gift, for this powerful and concrete sign of His Presence in the world and we pray that the "Yes" given today by our sister be accomplished always by grace and by the divine blessing. Amen

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

