

Consecrated virginity- a contradiction in the world?
by Bishop William Patrick Callahan, Bishop of La Crosse, Wisconsin



**Study Guide Workbook for the Rite of Consecration
to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World**

Faith is a gift. For many of us this gift was given to us at our infant baptism.

Others received it as they grew in wisdom and knowledge of Our Lord Jesus Christ through the Sacred Scriptures or an encounter with the lives of Catholics on fire with the love of Christ, faithful witnesses of the world to come.

From the earliest days of the Church there have been countless women who have followed the teachings and example of Jesus in a particular and unique way: to live their lives for the love of God and the sake of the Kingdom. They were given the grace,

the insight, and the gift of offering their virginity for a deeper love and a greater good, the life of the world to come, that eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God.

The most profound example we have is, of course, Our Blessed Mother, who even before the invitation by the Archangel Gabriel to be the Mother of God, had made a resolve in her heart, soul, mind and will to offer her life to be for God alone. This self-offering freed her to be open for God's grace and the divine invitation to receive the Word of the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Her answer was: "Fiat." "Yes." "I am willing." "Be it done unto me..."

Each time we pray the first Eucharistic Prayer at Mass, the Roman Canon as it has been called, we recall the lives of early virgin and martyr saints, Agatha, Lucy and Agnes. These young virgins knew of our Blessed Mother's example. They learned from their families the teachings of Christ, the beauty and dignity of living for Him alone. They continued living in their midst of family and friends, praying, serving the needs of others, living the Gospel, living the faith they professed but more importantly, living with an undivided heart; that is, living with their eyes and hearts set on the Kingdom of God, that "pearl of great price."

Virginity is consecrated to God for the sake of the Kingdom. Consecrated virginity lives in the world as we know it today.

Our Holy Mother, the Church has established a rite to solemnly bless and consecrate this resolve that a virgin makes in her heart to live for Christ alone for the sake of the Kingdom. This strength and courage to live this life of virginity is indeed a gift – a unique grace. It is given to the soul at an early age. We may even say it is a gift from God at her baptism. But, nonetheless, it is a gift. Not all are called, as Our Blessed Lord Himself says, but to those to whom it has been given. We all know of those young souls who have that "specialness" about them seemingly to be "other worldly" with a profound love for Jesus and Mary. We have witnessed virgins in our diocese who serve the needs of others by their living out the Gospel in the world, by their prayer and joyful witness to the Love of Christ and His Church.

The Consecration for Virgins living in the world is not a religious order as we traditionally know, but is the way women gave their lives to Christ before founders of such orders like St. Francis, St. Dominic, St. Benedict came on the scene. The diocesan bishop presides over the Mass of Consecration. It is a public celebration which sets the virgin aside as a sacred person. Her main job is to be a woman of prayer, praying for the needs of the Church and the praise of God all the while living in the midst of the people of God doing everything from teaching, to office work, to the many professions and occupations that women have in our busy society.

The Catechism Of the Catholic Church and the Code of Canon Law offer some further definition and information: "Virgins who, committed to the holy plan of following Christ more closely, are consecrated by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, are betrothed mystically to Christ, the Son of God, and are dedicated to the service of Christ and His Church" (CCC #923; C.604#1).

In this Year of Faith, I am introducing a work in our diocese for those who are called to live out this ancient form of consecrated life in the Church.

It is a discernment and formation program for those virgins who are given the gift of the vocation to live in the world as the virgins did in the early Church, with their hearts set on the Kingdom of God. The Study Guide Workbook is a three-part program exploring the beauty of the Rite of Consecration given to us by Holy Mother Church.

It invites the virgin along with her spiritual director to enter into the beauty of the rite which the Church holds out as a way for her to receive the graces to be that more faithful witness we are called to be in this Year of Faith particularly. Additional resources include "Reflections on the Rite," which could be described as the spirituality of the Rite of Consecration, "Additional Resources," which is a fourth volume containing the complete text of the references made in the Study Guide.

Other works being prepared are all based on the Rite of Consecration. They include "Meditations on Mary for the Consecrated Virgin; Seasons of Love" – reflections on the Liturgy of the Hours for the Church year and the Rite of Consecration; and "Uncommon Love" – passages from the common of virgins and the Blessed Virgin Mary paralleled with the Rite of Consecration for meditation and study. These resources will be not only part of the preparation of and continuing education of consecrated virgins but will serve as an aid for priests and spiritual directors who are helping women discern the gift of consecrated virginity lived in the world.

As all such works in the Church, this work needs some financial support to get to the printers. If you are interested in supporting this project, you will, of course, be remembered in our prayers; further you may choose to be acknowledged by having your name added to a page in the book, a page of signatures, of those who support this vocation, this gift to the Church.

As we respond the Holy Father's Year of Faith and enter more deeply into the history, the roots of our call to holiness, truly seeking the Face of Jesus, it is time to seriously consider the vocation and gift of consecrated virginity as a Divine call for women in the world.