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THE RITE OF CONSECRATION AND
THE VOCATION OF CONSECRATED VIRGINITY LIVED IN THE WORLD

Introduction

1. The reflection upon the vocation of consecrated virginity lived in the world requires a careful study of the liturgical rite by which a virgin living in the world is consecrated in the Church. According to the ancient wisdom of the Church, the Sacred Liturgy is a “privileged witness of the apostolic tradition.”¹ The Church’s wisdom is expressed in an adage of Prosper of Aquitaine: “The law of praying establishes the law of believing.”² The Sacred Liturgy is the highest expression of our life in Christ. Rightly, we turn to the rites of the Sacred Liturgy, in order to understand more deeply each aspect of the Christian life. The Sacred Liturgy remains an essential source of our understanding of the faith and its practice.

2. In order to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the gift of consecrated virginity in the Church, it is necessary to study the liturgical rite by which a virgin presents herself for consecration and is consecrated as a Bride of Christ. Both for the virgin who is discerning the call to consecration and for the virgin who is already consecrated, the Rite of Consecration provides a fundamental and essential meditation by which the distinct vocation of consecrated virginity is correctly identified, so that the virgin may discern her vocation and its distinct beauty in the Church.

3. From her earliest days, the Church recognized the call given to the virgin to offer her virginity

¹ “un témoin privilégié de la tradition apostolique.” A. G. Martimort, *L’Église en prière: Introduction à la Liturgie*, 3rd edition, Paris: Desclée, 1965, p. 231.

² “Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi.” Quoted in Martimort, p. 231.

to Christ for ever, in imitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Like Mary Immaculate, the Virgin responds to her vocation in the world, drawing the world to Heaven and offering to the world a sign of the presence of its heavenly destiny. The Order of Virgins has its origins in Apostolic times.³ The consecration of virgins living in the world goes back to the earliest centuries of the Church's life.⁴

4. The virgin, who heard the call to give her virginity to Christ in a mystical espousal, presented herself and her holy resolve to the Church, in the person of the Bishop, a successor to the Apostles. After careful examination, the Church responded by consecrating the virgin, setting her apart as a sacred person, calling down upon her the grace of the Holy Spirit for the faithful and enduring response to her vocation. The rite of consecration has a rich history which has been documented and studied in a most accessible manner by the late Father René Metz. In 1954, he published his masterwork on the subject: *La Consécration des vierges dans l'Église romaine: Étude d'histoire de la liturgie*. Then, in 2001, he published a second magisterial treatment of the subject: *La consécration des vierges: Hier, aujourd'hui, demain*, completing his original work with the history of consecrated virginity since the restoration of the Rite by the Decree of the Sacred Congregation of Divine Worship of May 31, 1970, with the publication of the *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum*.

5. There are two forms of the rite of consecration to a life of virginity, one for women living in the world, and one for nuns, which, in some way, is to include perpetual religious profession.⁵ I am limiting my reflection to the first form which corresponds to the most ancient form of the vocation, namely, the call to virginity lived in the world. It is also the most commonly celebrated form of the rite.

³ Gabriel Ramis, *La consagración de la mujer en las liturgias occidentales*, Roma: C.L.V. – Edizioni Liturgiche, 1990, pp. 17-28.

⁴ Gabriel Ramis, *La consagración*, pp. 29-34.

⁵ Pontificale Romanum ex Decreto Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Pauli Pp. VI promulgatum, *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum*, 31 May 1970, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 9th printing, 1978, Praenotanda, p. 7, no. 4b. Hereafter, *OCV*.

***Praenotanda* or Preliminary Notes**

6. For the full understanding of any liturgical rite, it is important to study, first, the *Praenotanda* or Preliminary Notes, in which the Church expresses the nature of the rite and the requirements for its fitting and valid celebration. The Preliminary Notes are integral to the rite itself.

7. The Preliminary Notes to the Order of the Consecration of Virgins, with its two rites, the Rite of Consecration of Virgins and the Rite of Consecration of Virgins United to the Profession of Nuns, accordingly, treat six subjects: 1) The Nature and Force of the Consecration; 2) Principal Duties of Virgins; 3) Those Women to Whom the Consecration of Virgins Can Be Imparted; 4) The Minister of the Rite; 5) The Form of the Rite; and 6) The Mass to be Employed in the Rite of Consecration of Virgins.⁶

Nature and Force of the Rite

8. Regarding the nature and force of the Rite, the Introduction recalls that “the custom of consecrating virgins, which flourished even in the early Christian Church,” made it necessary to establish a “solemn rite by which the virgin is constituted a sacred person, a transcendent sign of the love of the Church towards Christ, the eschatological image of the heavenly Bride and future life.”⁷ The Introduction continues: “By the Rite of Consecration, the Church manifests her love of virginity, implores the supreme grace of God upon virgins, and, with insistence, asks for the

⁶ *OCV*, pp. 7-9, nos. 1-10.

⁷ “Mos virgines consecrandi, qui et in prisca vigit christianorum Ecclesia, effecit ut conderetur solemnus ritus, quo virgo constitueretur persona sacrata, signum transcendens amoris Ecclesiae erga Christum, imago eschatologica Sponsae caelestis vitaeque futurae.” *OCV*, *Praenotanda*, p. 7, no. 1. The author has made his own English translation of the Latin texts of the *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum*, in order to provide a fuller and more accurate rendering of the Latin original than is found in the official English translation which follows the principle of dynamic equivalence. The official English translation is found in: International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *The Roman Pontifical* revised by decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and published by authority of Pope Paul VI, 1978 . The author has not studied the translations into other modern languages.

outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”⁸

9. The Introduction makes clear that the Rite effects the consecration of the virgin who presents herself and, thereby, constitutes her a sacred person in the Church. Once consecrated, once constituted a sacred person, the virgin has the grace of manifesting the love of the Church, the Bride, for her Bridegroom, Christ, and the grace of foreshadowing the heavenly wedding feast of Christ and the Church. The virgin does not consecrate herself as the religious does through the profession of the evangelical counsels. Rather, she presents herself to be consecrated by the Church.

10. How does the Church constitute the virgin a sacred person? The Introduction makes it clear that the consecration is accomplished by the supreme grace of God, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which the Church implores and for which she asks with insistence.

11. The description of the nature of the Consecration of Virgins uncovers an analogy with the Ordination of Priests, which is also reflected in certain aspects of the Rite of Consecration.⁹ While the Consecration of Virgins and the Ordination of Priests are essentially different, they are similar in the basic form of the two rites. In both rites, the candidate presents himself for ordination or herself for consecration, and the Church consecrates the candidate. In both cases, the whole person is consecrated. The priest is consecrated to act in the person of Christ the Shepherd and Head of the flock, above all, in the celebration of the Sacraments. The consecration of the priest is a sacrament which imprints an indelible character upon his soul. The consecration of the virgin is a sacramental with the force of conferring the lasting identity of a Bride of Christ, a living sign of the love of the Church for her Bridegroom, Christ, and of the destiny of the Heavenly Wedding Feast. The consecration sets the virgin apart as a sacred

⁸ “Consecrationis ritu Ecclesia suum erga virginitatem amorem patefacit, supernam Dei gratiam in virgines implorat Sanctique Spiritus effusionem instanter rogat.” *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 7, no. 1.

⁹ René Metz, *La consécration des vierges: Hier, aujourd’hui, demain*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2001, pp. 91, 108, and 188-189.

person in the Church, as a member of a distinct portion of the faithful, the Order of Virgins, not in the sense of a religious congregation but in the sense of a distinct group of faithful in the Church, for example, the Order of Widows, the Order of Bishops, the Order of Priests, and the Order of Deacons.¹⁰ Once the consecration has been conferred, it cannot be taken back. From the early centuries of the Church, the difficulty of the unfaithful consecrated virgin was confronted.¹¹ The virgin once consecrated remains consecrated. Hence, the Bishop should not proceed with the consecration of a virgin, until he is assured that she is firm in her resolve to give her virginity to Christ for the rest of her life.

Principal Duties of the Virgin

12. The Introduction describes the principal responsibility of the sacred virgin in these words: “[S]acred virgins, urged by the Holy Spirit, dedicate their chastity by which they love Christ more ardently and, thereby, serve more effectively their brothers and sisters.”¹² By the virtue of chastity, the virgin preserves her virginal state, so that she may be totally for Christ and, in Christ, totally for others.

13. Consecrated as a bride of Christ, the virgin, in accord with her state and her gifts, should devote time to penance, works of mercy, apostolic engagement, and holy prayer.¹³ Regarding the duty to pray, consecrated virgins are most strongly urged to recite daily the Divine Office, above all, Morning Prayer (Lauds) and Evening Prayer (Vespers). By so doing, “they, uniting their voices with Christ, the High Priest, and holy Church, they will praise the heavenly Father

¹⁰ René Metz, *La consécration*, pp. 17-18, and 29-30.

¹¹ René Metz, *La consécration*, p. 39. At the Council of Elvira in the early years of the Fourth Century, the following discipline was adopted: the consecrated virgin who would violate her covenant of virginity (*pactum virginitatis*) by sexual commerce with a man should be denied Holy Communion; if she would repent and leave the man with whom she had sexual relations, she could be admitted again to receive Holy Communion “at the end of her days.” Cf. Gabriel Ramis, *La consagración*, pp. 31-32.

¹² “virgines sacrae, Spiritu Sancto impulsae, suam castitatem devovent quo Christum ardentius diligant fratribusque expeditius deserviant.” *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 7, no. 2.

¹³ *OCV*, p. 7, no. 2.

unceasingly, and they will intercede for the salvation of the whole world.”¹⁴ The relationship of the virginal state to the priestly office is seen in the requirement of the praying of the Liturgy of the Hours with the priests and for the sake of the priestly mission of Christ.

Those to Whom the Consecration Can Be Imparted

14. To whom may the Church impart the virginal consecration? There are two categories of candidates: nuns and women carrying out a secular life. The first requirement is the same for both: the candidate must “never have been married and must never have lived publicly or manifestly in a state contrary to chastity.”¹⁵ In some places, at least in North America, there has been a confusion about the second part of the requirement. Some further explanation will be helpful.

15. The requirement of never living publicly or manifestly in a state contrary to chastity guarantees the integrity of the consecration. In other words, the consecration is for a woman who has preserved her virginity and offers her virginity to Christ and His Church for consecration. Public or manifest acts are committed with another and, therefore, are clearly known by another, even if by only one individual. An act contrary to chastity in what pertains to the state of virginity is the conscious and deliberate giving of one’s body for sexual union by which the state of virginity is lost. Once the virgin has knowingly and willingly given up her virginity, even by a single act, she no longer has the gift of virginity to offer to Christ and the Church. In the case of rape or involuntary incest, one can rightly say that the woman still has the gift of her virginity to offer, for she has not knowingly and willingly given it up.

16. What about the woman who sadly has given up her virginity but now wants to offer to Christ a totally chaste life, even though she does not hear the call to another form of consecrated life, for example, religious life or consecrated secularity? While she does not have virginity to offer

¹⁴ “vocem suam cum Christo summo Sacerdote sanctaque Ecclesia, caelestem Patrem sine intermissione laudabunt et pro totius mundi salute intercedent.” *OCV*, p. 7, no.2.

¹⁵ “numquam nuptias celebraverint neque publice seu manifeste in statu castitati contrario vixerint.” *OCV*, pp. 7-8, nos. 4a and 5a.

for consecration, she certainly can consecrate herself totally to Christ by a private vow of chastity, which is recognized by the Church and is made before the Bishop or priest, also within the celebration of the Holy Mass.

17. Virgins living in the world also “must offer confidence that they will persevere in a chaste life and in a life dedicated to the service of the Church and neighbor.”¹⁶ Such confidence is manifested by age, by prudence, and by proven morals to the agreement of all. A minimum age is no longer given.¹⁷ Age must be understood to constitute living in the state of virginity for a number of years, after attaining adulthood. The virgin who presents herself for consecration must have reached the age at which she is serene in the practice of the chastity by which she is able to fulfill her resolve to remain in the virginal state for her lifetime.

18. The final condition is the admission for the consecration by the Bishop who is the Ordinary of the place, that is, in the language of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, the Diocesan Bishop.¹⁸ The listing of the requirements for the imparting of the consecration concludes by noting that it is for the Bishop to establish “by what manner and rationale the virgins living in the world are to oblige themselves to embrace perpetually the virginal life.”¹⁹ Here, the question arises regarding the right of a virgin who is fully disposed for the consecration to receive the consecration. Some Bishops have refused to celebrate the Rite of Consecration for various reasons which have nothing to do with the virgin who is requesting the consecration. Some, for instance, fear that they will become civilly liable for any misdeed of the virgin, once she has been consecrated. In any case, it does not seem just to deny the vocation to consecrated virginity in a person without good reason.

The Minister of the Consecration

19. The fourth subject is the minister of the Consecration. The Introduction indicates one only

¹⁶ “fidem praebeant in vita casta atque Ecclesiae proximique servitio dicata se perseveraturas.” *OCV*, p. 8, no. 5b.

¹⁷ René Metz, *La consécration*, pp. 58-60.

¹⁸ *OCV*, p. 8, no. 5c.

¹⁹ “statuere quo modo ac ratione virgines vitam saecularem agentes se obligent ad vitam

minister of the consecration of virgins, namely, the Bishop who is Ordinary of the place, that is, the Diocesan Bishop. Such is the ancient discipline of the Church. In the United States of America, at least, there has been a significant confusion or inattention regarding the proper minister of the Rite of Consecration. Some Diocesan Bishops insist that the consecration of virgins living in the world be carried out by a priest or auxiliary bishop. Because it is the Diocesan Bishop who admits the virgin for consecration and to whom she responds as her sole superior in the consecrated life, it is clear that the Diocesan Bishop should impart the consecration.

20. What about the validity of the consecration imparted by a priest or bishop other than the Diocesan Bishop? I have learned only today of an official response from the Holy See, indicating that the consecration is not validly imparted by a priest and that, in the case of a virgin who was consecrated by a priest, the situation must be sanated by the private imparting of the consecration by the Diocesan Bishop. I do not have in hand the response and, therefore, cannot comment further. I do not believe that there has been any other official response to the question. It would seem to me that the consecration carried out by a priest or auxiliary Bishop, at the explicit direction of the Diocesan Bishop, is validly imparted, even though the full sign of the consecration by the Diocesan Bishop is not rightly respected. In other words, in the case of the consecration imparted by a priest or auxiliary Bishop, at the direction of the Diocesan Bishop, it seems clear that the Church intended to consecrate the virgin. It must be observed, nevertheless, that liturgical law indicates one only minister of the Consecration of Virgins Living in the World, namely, the Diocesan Bishop. I note the commentary of the late Father René Metz on the question:

It is then, indeed, the bishop who is competent, and he alone, in principle, to consecrate virgins. The ritual (Preliminary Notes, no. 6), furthermore, makes clear that the true minister is not just any bishop but the bishop who has the actual charge of a diocese: “the Bishop ordinary of the place” (*episcopus ordinarius loci*). That means that the role which falls to the minister of the consecration is not that of a simple executor, notably

virginalem perpetuo amplectendam.” *OCV*, p. 8, no. 5.

when the candidate for the consecration has decided to lead the independent life in the world. The Church confides to the Bishop the effective responsibility for this woman and for the life which she will lead subsequently as a consecrated virgin.²⁰

21. To further underline the particular relationship between the Bishop and the consecrated virgin, the first part of the rite specifies that on a day near the day of the celebration or, at least, on the day before the celebration of the rite, the virgin to be consecrated meets with the Diocesan Bishop to begin a pastoral conversation between herself and “the Father of the diocese.”²¹ The conversation with the Diocesan Bishop, which begins in the days before the consecration is to continue regularly throughout the years of life of the consecrated virgin.

22. Regarding the form of the Rite of Consecration, I note one observation regarding the consecration of nuns, for seemingly, by error, it has been introduced into the Rite of Consecration for Virgins living in the world. The Preliminary Notes state that the rite of religious profession and the rite of consecration to virginity, which are usually united, can be separated, but with the caution that parts of the rite not be duplicated.²² In the Rite of Consecration for virgins living in the world, the option of not giving the veil, which is among the most ancient of the insignia of the consecration, seems to have come from the situation of the professed nun who would already have received the veil and for whom it would not make sense to repeat that part of the rite.²³

²⁰ “C’est donc bien l’évêque qui est compétent, et lui seul en principe, pour consacrer les vierges. Cependant le rituel (Notes préliminaires, n. 6) précise que le véritable ministre n’est pas n’importe quel évêque, mais l’évêque qui a la charge actuelle d’un diocèse: « l’évêque ordinaire du lieu » (*episcopus ordinarius loci*). Cela signifie bien que le rôle qui revient au ministre de la consécration n’est pas celui d’un simple exécutant, notamment quand la candidate à la consécration est décidée à mener la vie indépendante dans le monde. L’Église confie à l’évêque la responsabilité effective de cette femme et de la vie qu’elle mènera par la suite en tant que vierge consacrée.” René Metz, *La consécration*, pp. 166-167.

²¹ “dioeceseos Patrem.” *OCV*, Caput I, no. 2.

²² *OCV*, Praenotanda, no. 7.

²³ *OCV*, Caput I, no. 26; and Caput II, no. 66.

Form of the Rite

23. The form of the Rite of Consecration is sevenfold. First, the virgin is called forward, similar to the call of the candidate in the Rite of Ordination of Priests, and she presents herself, together with two companions, either already consecrated virgins or lay women, before the Bishop.²⁴ Secondly, the Bishop gives the homily or instruction regarding consecrated virginity. Thirdly, the Bishop questions the virgin, asking whether she wishes to persevere in her resolve of remaining in the virginal state forever and to receive the consecration. In the fourth place is the Litany of the Saints by which prayer is directed to God the Father, and the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the Saints is sought. In the fifth place, the virgin declares again her resolve of chastity in the virginal state. The sixth and the central part is the solemn consecration of the virgin by which “Mother Church prays to the heavenly Father, in order that he pour out abundantly upon the virgin the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵ Lastly, the insignia of the consecration are handed over to the newly consecrated virgin. The insignia express externally what has happened to the virgin internally.²⁶

The Mass To Be Employed

24. The last part of the Preliminary Notes treats the Mass within which the Rite of Consecration is to be celebrated. The first and most fitting possibility is the Ritual Mass, “On the Day of Consecration of Virgins.” If, however, the consecration is to take place on a solemnity or on a Sunday of Advent, Lent or Easter, the Mass of the Day must be used, with, however, the addition of the special formularies in the Eucharistic Prayer and the Final Blessing.²⁷

25. Because the Liturgy of the Word, adopted for the Consecration of Virgins, is strong in illustrating the good of virginity and its service in the Church, when it is not possible to celebrate the Ritual Mass, one of the particular readings from the Lectionary for the Consecration of

²⁴ *OCV*, Caput I, no. 13.

²⁵ “qua Mater Ecclesia Patrem caelestem exorat ut Sancti Spiritus dona super virgines abundanter effundat.” *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 9, no. 7f.

²⁶ *OCV*, Praenotanda, pp. 8-9, no. 7.

²⁷ *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 9, no. 8.

Virgins may be used, except during the Sacred Triduum, on the Solemnities of the Nativity of Our Lord, the Epiphany, the Ascension, Pentecost and Corpus Christi, and on other holy days of obligation.²⁸ In the first chapter of the Rite, it is further indicated that it is fitting to celebrate the consecration of virgins during the Octave of Easter, on solemnities, above all, which have reference to the Incarnation of our Lord, on Sundays, on the feast days of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the virgin saints.²⁹

26. Finally, the Introduction establishes that white is the proper liturgical color for the Ritual Mass.³⁰

Place of the Celebration of the Consecration

27. The relationship of the consecrated virgin to the diocese and the Diocesan Bishop makes it very fitting that the Rite of Consecration take place in the Cathedral church, unless local circumstances or customs suggest otherwise.³¹ Also, given the profound spiritual significance of the consecration of virgins, the notice of the day, time, and place of the consecration should be given to the whole diocese, “most of all to foster the praise of chastity itself, the ecclesial sense, and the edification and participation of the people of God.”³²

The Rite Itself

28. The custom is for the Bishop to consecrate the virgin at the cathedra or chair of the Bishop. A faldstool for the Bishop, placed before the altar, can be used if it helps the participation of the faithful. A seat for the virgin to be consecrated is also placed in the sanctuary.³³

29. Fittingly, the virgin to be consecrated is part of the procession at the beginning of the

²⁸ *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 9, no. 9.

²⁹ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 10, no. 1.

³⁰ *OCV*, Praenotanda, p. 9, no. 10.

³¹ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 10, no. 3.

³² “Maxime ad castitatis laudem, sensum ecclesiale, aedificationem concursusque populi Dei fovendum.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 10, no. 4.

³³ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 10, no. 6.

celebration of the Mass. The virgin is to be accompanied by two already consecrated virgins or by two women chosen from the laity. They also lead the virgin to the altar, when she is called to present herself before the Bishop.³⁴

30. At the beginning of the Mass, the virgin to be consecrated remains in the pews or body of the church.³⁵ The same practice occurs in the ordination of priests; the candidate for ordination remains in the pews until he is called to present himself before the Bishop.

31. The Liturgy of the Word takes place in the usual manner, with attention to the special readings which illustrate the gift of consecrated virginity in the Church. The Profession of Faith is not said, even if the rubrics call for it to be said. Since there is the Litany of the Saints, the General Intercessions are also omitted.³⁶

32. Following the reading of the Gospel, the Bishop is seated at the Cathedra or faldstool prepared for him. When the virgin to be consecrated is called, she approaches, with lighted candle and in the company of her two companions. Like the candle, like Christ, she is to be consumed by pure and selfless love. The lighted candle symbolizes her following of Christ the Bridegroom in purity and chastity. At the call, the virgin comes to the entrance of the sanctuary, with her two companions, but remains outside the sanctuary.³⁷ The Bishop then calls the virgin to be consecrated, and she responds with the singing of a beautiful text, and, while she is singing, she enters into the sanctuary. The text which the virgin sings speaks of following Christ and implores from God the fulfillment of her hope of consecration.³⁸ There is also an alternative rite of calling, if the lighted candle is not used.³⁹ Once the virgin has entered the sanctuary, the candle is placed in a stand, in which it remains until it is restored to her, at the end of the Mass,

³⁴ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 11, no. 10.

³⁵ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 11, no. 11.

³⁶ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 11, no. 12a-c.

³⁷ *OCV*, Caput I, pp. 11-12, no. 13.

³⁸ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 12, no. 14.

³⁹ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 12, no. 15; and Caput III, pp. 54-55, nos. 138-139.

for the recessional.⁴⁰

Homily or Instruction

33. The Bishop then gives the homily or instruction. The rite contains a suggested text which expresses the supreme good of consecrated virginity for the Church. Some phrases of the text are particularly illustrative. It speaks of the virgin receiving the virginal consecration from “Mother Church.”⁴¹ It recalls that the consecration is a call to greater fervor “in spreading the kingdom of God and more ardently informing the temporal order with the Christian spirit.”⁴² The text glories in the good which the consecration represents for the Church. The text reminds the virgin that God Himself is the source of her virginity which is an image of “the divine and eternal incorruptibility.”⁴³

34. The suggested homily underlines the great good of virginity for the Church as it is reflected in God’s choice of the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the Mother of His Incarnate Son. It recalls how God the Son took our human nature in the virgin’s womb, making a marriage between human nature and the divine nature. It goes on to recall Christ’s own teaching regarding virginity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, and how He brought the Church into being as Virgin, Bride and Mother: “Virgin for the sake of the integrity of the faith; Bride for the sake of the indissoluble marriage with Christ; Mother for the sake of a multitude of children.”⁴⁴

35. The suggested text recalls the baptism of the virgin to be consecrated and declares that, through the ministry of the Bishop, Christ will anoint her with a new grace and consecrate her to God by a new title. The text declares: “He binds you, raised to the dignity of bride of Christ, to

⁴⁰ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 12, nos. 14 and 38.

⁴¹ “ab Ecclesia Matre.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 13, no. 16.

⁴² “Regno Dei dilatando et ordini rerum temporalium spiritu christiano formando ardentius.” *OCV*, p. 13, no. 16.

⁴³ “divinae aeternaeque incorruptibilitatis.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 13, no. 16.

⁴⁴ “Virginem propter fidei integritatem; Sponsam propter indissolubile cum Christo coniugium; Mater propter filiorum multitudinem.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 13, no. 16.

the Son of God by an indissoluble bond.”⁴⁵ The text goes on to relate the spousal nature of the relationship between the consecrated virgin and Christ to the spousal relationship between the Church and Christ. The consecrated virgins “constitute a visible sign of the great mystery, which, while it was announced at the origins of the human race, was brought to fullness by the spousal union of Christ with the Church.”⁴⁶

36. The text exhorts the virgin regarding the virtues required of a bride of Christ. It urges the following of the Mother of God in her virginity and in her abundant fruitfulness because of her total communion with Christ. It urges the virgin to nourish herself with the Heavenly Food of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist; to strengthen herself by self-denial; to grow in knowledge of Christ through the study of the Holy Scriptures, prayer and works of mercy. Referring to the *Letter to the Colossians*, the text urges the virgins: “Let your life be hidden with Christ in God.”⁴⁷

37. The text asks the virgins to devote themselves to prayer for the spread of the Gospel and for Christian unity. Virgins are urged: “Pour out solicitous prayers to the Lord for the married.”⁴⁸ The consecrated virgin is related to the married, in a special way, for she is a visible sign of Christ’s spousal love of the Church, of which the married life is a sacrament. Finally, the virgins are to remember those who, “having forgotten the Fatherly goodness, have abandoned love, so that the merciful God may save by mercy those whom He cannot save by justice.”⁴⁹

38. The virgin is reminded that, by her consecration, she will belong totally to the Church and to

⁴⁵ “vos, ad sponsae Christi dignitatem propectas, indissolubili vinculo Dei Filio conjungit.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 14, no. 16.

⁴⁶ “signum manifestum illius magni existitis sacramenti, quod, cum in humani generis primordiis nuntiatum esset, sponsali Christi cum Ecclesia connubio perfectum est.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 14, no. 16.

⁴⁷ “vita vestra abscondita sit cum Christo in Deo.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 14, no. 16. Cf. *Col* 3:3.

⁴⁸ “Sollicitas pro coniugibus preces Domino effundite.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 14, no. 16.

⁴⁹ “paternae bonitatis obliti, amore defecerunt, ut misericors Deus salvet clementia quos non potest salvare iustitia.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 14, no. 16.

all her brothers and sisters. Virgins “exercising, however, their apostolate, both in the Church and in the world, both in the spiritual order and in the temporal order, are thus to let their light shine before men, so that the heavenly Father is glorified and his counsel is fulfilled, by which He wishes to restore all things in Christ.”⁵⁰ These words reflect the distinctive nature of consecrated virginity lived in the world. It is a call to a life totally for Christ and, in Christ, totally for others. The consecrated virgin, therefore, is to show God’s merciful love to all, without boundary. The text exhorts the virgin: “According to your strengths, help the poor, care for the sick, teach the ignorant, protect the little ones, sustain the old, comfort widows and the afflicted.”⁵¹

39. The suggested homily recalls to the virgin that her renunciation of the good of marriage “for the sake of Christ” is not a denial of her maternal gifts. She is to exercise a spiritual maternity, “so that countless children may be born into or restored to the life of grace.”⁵²

40. The text concludes by reminding the virgins: “Christ, the Son of the Virgin and the Bridegroom of Virgins, will be, already on earth, your joy and your crown, until He leads you into the heavenly marriage and into his kingdom, where singing a new song, you will follow the Divine Lamb Himself, wherever He will go.”⁵³

Examination

41. The examination consists of three questions which underline the reality of the consecration, namely, the presentation of the virgin who both is firm in her holy resolve to remain in the state

⁵⁰ “Exercentes autem apostolatam vestrum tam in Ecclesia quam in mundo, tam in ordine spirituali quam in ordine temporali, sic luceat lux vestra coram hominibus ut caelestis Pater glorificetur eiusque perficiatur consilium quod vult in Christo omnia instaurare.” *OCV*, Caput I, pp. 14-15, no. 16.

⁵¹ “Pro viribus subvenite pauperibus, infirmos curate, docete indoctos, parvulos protegitte, senes sublevate, viduas afflictosque confortate.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 15, no. 16.

⁵² “ut innumeri filii vitae gratiae pariantur aut restituantur.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 15, no. 16.

⁵³ “Christus, Virginis filius ac virginum Sponsus, iam nunc in terris vestrum gaudium erit vestraque corona, dum inducat vos in caelestem thalamum atque in regnum suum, ubi canentes canticum novum, ipsum divinum Agnum, quocumque ibit, sequimini.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 15, no. 16.

of virginity for the sake of giving witness to the love of Christ and to be a sign of the Kingdom which is to come, and requests to be consecrated to Christ as His Bride.

42. The consecrating Bishop asks the virgin: 1) whether she wishes to persevere in her holy resolve of virginity and to serve the Lord and the Church to the end of life; 2) whether she wishes to embrace the resolved following of Christ in the Gospel, embraced in such a manner that she may offer a witness of charity and a visible sign of the future Kingdom; and 3) whether she wishes to be consecrated and solemnly espoused to our Lord Jesus Christ, the Most High Son of God.⁵⁴

Litany of the Saints and Prostration

43. As in every solemn consecration, the Church, before proceeding to the act of consecration, asks the intercession of the Mother of God and of all the saints.⁵⁵ The invocation of the saints precedes immediately the Prayer of Consecration and asks, through the intercession of the Saints, an abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the virgin whom the Lord has chosen for Himself.

44. During the Litany of the Saints, it is most fitting for the virgin to prostrate herself, an external sign of the disposition of her whole being to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the consecration. If the prostration, for some reason, is not possible or fitting, then it may be omitted.⁵⁶ In the prostration, the analogy between the priestly consecration and the consecration of virgins is seen, once again.

45. The Litany of the Saints contains the invocation of a number of virgin saints. The names of other saints venerated in the place or to whom the virgin has special devotion may be added.

46. The Litany concludes with intercessions asking that the parents of the virgin be abundantly

⁵⁴ *OCV*, Caput I, pp. 15-17, no. 17.

⁵⁵ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 16, no. 18.

blessed with heavenly gifts, and that the Lord would deign to bless, sanctify and consecrate the virgin.

Renewal of Resolve of Chastity

47. Before proceeding to the Solemn Prayer of Consecration, the virgin renews her resolve to remain in the virginal state for the rest of her life. The manner of declaring the resolve can include placing her hands in the hands of the Bishop. In any case, she asks the Bishop, as her spiritual father, to accept her resolve of perfect chastity and the following of Christ, which, with the help of the Lord, she is declaring before the Bishop and the holy people of God.

Prayer of Consecration

48. The Prayer of Consecration follows the ancient formula found in the Leonine Sacramentary. The Prayer makes reference to the holy resolve which the virgin has placed into the hands of God through the hands of the Bishop, and which resolve is itself a gift of God's love poured forth into her heart. The Latin text reads: "They offer their devotion to Him from Whom they have received the very desires (*ipsa vota*)."⁵⁷ In some places, the word, *vota*, is translated with the same word as is used for the vows of religious. It must be made clear that the word, *vota*, here refers to the holy desires of the virgin, which are contained in her resolve to remain a virgin for the rest of her life. It does not refer to the taking of vows.

49. In a wonderful expression, the Prayer of Consecration expresses the relationship of the call to consecrated virginity with the call to the married life:

Also this gift in certain souls
you have poured forth from the font of your bounty,
so that, while no prohibitions have diminished the honor of marriage
and upon the sacred union
the original blessing has remained,

⁵⁶ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 17, no. 19. Cf. René Metz, *La consécration*, pp. 75 ad 97.

⁵⁷ "ei devotionem suam offerunt, a quo ipsa vota sumpserunt." *OCV*, Caput I, p. 27, no.

there exist, however, souls,
 who by the counsel of your Providence,
 renounce chaste marriage
 but desire its sign,
 not imitating what pertains to marriage
 but loving what is foreshadowed by marriage.⁵⁸

By her consecration, the virgin is, in a particular way, devoted to fostering the faithful and enduring love of the married. Here is also an analogy with the promise of celibacy of the priest, which also places the priest in a special relationship of example and support to those called to the married life.

50. The Prayer of Consecration asks for the protection of God upon those who make such a holy resolve and prays that they be vigilant against anything which would betray their perfect virginity and, at the same time, the purity which is to mark the love of the married.

51. The Prayer of Consecration then calls down upon the virgin the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, giving the virgin the gifts of modesty, right judgment, kindness, wisdom, gentleness, strength of character, freedom, and, above all, the grace of chastity. It asks that the virgin be endowed with the warmth of love, that her life be worthy of praise, that she give glory to God by her holiness of life, that she love and fear and serve God. It also asks that God be the all of the virgin, her comfort, her wisdom, her protection, her patience, her riches, her spiritual food, and her remedy in every suffering or trial.

52. The Prayer of Consecration concludes: “In You, Whom they have chosen above all things,

24.

⁵⁸ “etiam hoc donum in quasdam mentes de largitatis tuae fonte defluxit, ut, cum honorem nuptiarum nulla interdicta minuissent ac super sanctum coniugium initialis benedictio permaneret, existerent tamen animae, quae, tuae Providentiae consilio, casto renuntiarent connubio at eius concupiscerent sacramentum, nec imitarentur quod nuptiis agitur, sed diligenter quo nuptiis praentotatur.” *OCV*, Caput I, pp.27-28, no. 24.

may they have all things.”⁵⁹

Presentation of the Insignia

53. After the Prayer of Consecration, the faithful are seated and the newly consecrated virgin, together with her companions, presents herself before the consecrating Bishop to receive the insignia of her consecration. The insignia are the external signs of the interior grace which she has just received for a lifetime of faithful and enduring chastity in the virginal state. In earlier forms of the Rite of Consecration, the presentation of the insignia was much more elaborate.⁶⁰

54. The veil is the most ancient of the insignia, representing the espousal of the virgin to Christ for ever.⁶¹ While the Rite indicates that the option of not giving the veil, the option must be understood to refer to the situation of a professed nun who has already received the veil. The veil is imparted to the virgin as it is imparted to the bride in the Sacrament of Marriage. It is not a part of a religious habit, but a vesture which symbolizes the new reality of the consecrated virgin and may be worn by her from time to time, for instance at Mass on the anniversary of her consecration. Such a practice respects the state of the virgin living in the world.

55. While the imparting of the ring was introduced into the Rite of Consecration at a later date, it also is rich in spousal symbolism for the consecrated virgin.⁶² The ring represents the total gift of her virginity to Christ for ever.

56. The veil and ring are visible reminders to the virgins and to the Church of the great gift of consecrated virginity and of the care which must be taken to preserve it in its integrity. In giving the veil and ring, the consecrating Bishop says to the newly consecrated virgin: “Receive, dearest daughters, the veil and ring, the insignia of your consecration; and preserve inviolate fidelity to your Spouse, and never forget that you are bound to the service of Christ and to His Body which

⁵⁹ “In te habeant omnia, quem elegere super omnia.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 29, no. 24.

⁶⁰ René Metz, *La consécration*, pp. 191-192.

⁶¹ René Metz, *La consécration*, p. 191.

⁶² René Metz, *La consécration*, p. 192.

is the Church.”⁶³

57. Finally, the consecrating Bishop hands over to the newly consecrated virgin the book of the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours for her daily prayer for the salvation of the world. Once again, the Rite states that the Liturgy of the Hours is handed over to the virgin, if fitting. Seemingly, it would be always fitting to give the Liturgy of the Hours to the newly consecrated virgin, unless she had already been praying the Divine Office, as a professed nun. In handing over the Divine Office, the consecrating Bishop says: “Receive the book of the prayer of the Church, so that the praises of the heavenly Father may resound in your mouth without ceasing, and you may intercede for the salvation of the whole world.”⁶⁴ As a sacred person in the Church, the consecrated virgin is bound to give praise and worship to God always and to pray for the salvation of the world. The Liturgy of the Hours is the public prayer of the Church, offered throughout the day, in praise of God and for the salvation of souls.

58. At the conclusion of the giving of the insignia, a beautiful antiphon is suggested, which expresses the great grace which the consecrated virgin has received. The consecrated virgin is invited to sing these words: “I am espoused to Him Whom the angels serve, Whose beauty the sun and moon admire.”⁶⁵

Continuation of the Mass

59. The celebration of the Mass continues, as usual, with some additions which express the new reality of the consecrated virgin in the Church. It is fitting that the consecrated virgin should participate in the presentation of the bread and wine which will become the Body and Blood of

⁶³ “Accipite, filiae carissimae, velamen et anulum, vestrae consecrationis insignia; et fidem Sponso vestro intactam servate, nec umquam obliviscamini vos Christi servitio mancipari et Corpori eius, quod est Ecclesia.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 29, no. 25.

⁶⁴ “Accipite librum orationis Ecclesiae ut caelestis Patris laudes sine intermissione in ore resonent vestro et pro totius mundi intercedatis salute.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 31, no. 28.

⁶⁵ “Ipsi sum desponsata, cui Angeli serviunt, cuius pulchritudinem sol et luna mirantur.” *OCV*, Caput I, p. 32, no. 29.

Christ.⁶⁶ There are also special texts to insert into the Eucharistic Prayer.⁶⁷ The Rite also indicates that, at the Sign of Peace, it is fitting for the consecrating Bishop to offer the Sign of Peace to the newly consecrated virgin.⁶⁸

60. At the Communion Rite, the newly consecrated virgin should approach the altar to receive Holy Communion after the consecrating Bishop and concelebrants have received. It is also appropriate for the newly consecrated virgins, her companions, parents and other relatives to receive Holy Communion under both species.⁶⁹

61. At the time of the Final Blessing and Dismissal, the consecrated virgin presents herself once more before the consecrating Bishop. The Bishop offers three invocations before imparting the Blessing, which are most expressive of the Church's faith and life in what pertains to consecrated virginity. He prays: 1) "May the almighty Father keep inviolate by His protection the resolve of holy virginity which He infused in your hearts"⁷⁰; 2) "May the Lord Jesus, Who joins the hearts of sacred virgins to Himself by a spousal covenant, render your minds fruitful with the word of divine seed"⁷¹; and 3) "May the Holy Spirit, Who overshadowed the Virgin and Who consecrated your hearts today by His outpouring, inflame you most strongly for the service of God and the Church."⁷² There is also an alternate formula which aptly expresses the new reality of the consecrated virgin in the Church.

62. Before the recessional, the consecrated virgin fittingly receives once again the lighted candle which she carried when the Bishop called her forth for consecration, and she carries it in the

⁶⁶ cf. *OCV*, Caput I, p. 32, no. 32.

⁶⁷ cf. *OCV*, Caput I, p. 32, no. 33.

⁶⁸ cf. *OCV*, Caput I, p. 32, no. 34.

⁶⁹ cf. *OCV*, Caput I, p. 32, no. 35.

⁷⁰ "Omnipotens Pater, beatæ virginitatis propositum, quod pectoribus vestris infudit, sua protectione inviolatum custodiat." *OCV*, Caput I, pp. 32-33, no. 36.

⁷¹ "Dominus Iesus, qui sacrarum virginum corda sponsali sibi foedere iungit, mentes vestras divini seminis verbo fecundet." *OCV*, Caput I, p. 33, no. 36.

⁷² "Spiritus Sanctus, qui supervenit in Virginem quique cordo vestra hodie suo sacravit illapsu, ad Dei Ecclesiaeque servitium vos vehementer accendat." *OCV*, p. 33, no. 36.

recessional.⁷³

Conclusion

63. It is my hope that the extended and somewhat detailed reflection on the Sacred Liturgy for the consecration of virgins has helped us all to understand and appreciate more deeply and with new enthusiasm the great gift to the Church which is the vocation to consecrated virginity. In the Sacred Liturgy, the vocation is identified in its distinct nature and its dignity in the Church is made strikingly evident.

64. While the study of the Rite of Consecration uncovers anew the gift of the Holy Spirit given to the virgin who presents herself for consecration, it also reminds us of the care which should be taken in the preparation and celebration of the Rite of Consecration, lest, by carelessness or neglect, the faith and practice of the Church be not fully expressed and reflected, and the faithful be led into confusion or even error regarding the reality of consecrated virginity in the Church.

65. Through the careful celebration of the Rite of Consecration, we see the action of the Holy Spirit consecrating the resolve of the virgin to remain in the virginal state for her lifetime, constituting her a sacred person in the Church, espousing her to Christ, the Bridegroom, and constituting her a sign of Christ's unfailing spousal love of the Church, and of its fulness to come in the Wedding Feast of the Lamb in Heaven. Indeed, "the law of praying establishes the law of believing."⁷⁴

(Most Rev.) Raymond L. Burke
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⁷³ *OCV*, Caput I, p. 33, no. 38.

⁷⁴ cf. footnote no. 2, above.