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## New diocesan book invites consecrated virgins to live out Mary's 'Yes'

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LA CROSSE – Consecrated virgins living in the world have a new tool for enriching their vocation.

Recently published by the Diocese of La Crosse, "Meditation on Mary" is the first in a series of books that will help consecrated virgins living in the world live out their vocation in imitation of Christ and His mother.

Its author, herself a consecrated virgin, Barbara Swieciak, has been preparing to write the book since 1984 – the year she chose to say "Yes" to God by receiving the Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World at the Cathedral of St. Joseph the Workman, La Crosse.

In 2011, Swieciak finally began to put pen to paper when Bishop William Patrick Callahan asked her to develop a program for those discerning a call to consecrated virginity and those already consecrated.

A sturdy hardcover book, "Meditations on Mary" combines prayers, meditations and reflections on the life of the Blessed Virgin to help women explore this little-known but powerful vocation.

While not a sacrament, consecrated virginity offers women a way to serve the Church as a living sacramental, imitating the life of Christ and of His mother Mary, both of whom lived out their virginity in the world.

"Meditations on Mary" is part of a larger publishing project sponsored by the diocese which will include materials that cover other aspects of spirituality for consecrated virgins.

A woman consecrated to perpetual virginity serves as a witness to Christ through her life; she wears neither habit nor special clothing to distinguish her in the world; she works without financial aid from the diocese, chooses her own way of life to support herself, and through works of penance and mercy witness-



CT/Joseph O'Brien

A consecrated virgin living in the world since 1984, Barbara Swieciak recently wrote "Meditations on Mary" as part of a formation program she's been developing at the direction of Bishop William Patrick Callahan. Serving as librarian at the Holy Cross Diocesan Center's curia library and housekeeper at the rectory for St. James Parish, La Crosse, Swieciak said that she relied on her experiences as consecrated virgin over the past 30 years to write the book with the hope that both women considering the vocation and those already living as consecrated virgins would be enriched by the example which Our Lady sets for them.

es to Christ, to whom she is eternally espoused at her consecration.

Recognized by the Second Vatican Council as one of the oldest sacramentals in the Church, this state of life was restored by the council in 1970. According to a 2013 report in the National Catholic Register, there are about 3,000 consecrated virgins worldwide, and 215 in the United States.

### 30 years of preparation

According to Swieciak, she began developing the ideas for "Meditations on Mary" while preparing for the day she was consecrated by the late Bishop John Paul, the seventh bishop of the diocese.

During the homily for the Mass of Consecration – which consecrated virgins have customarily taken as their personal marching orders from the Church – Swieciak was inspired by Bishop Paul's observation that in their

vocations, consecrated virgins imitate the life of Mary.

"One of the main ways to live out this imitation is through the mysteries of the rosary," she said, "and I've used the Rite of Consecration and rosary together as a way to mediate on my vocation for years."

In March 2011, Bishop Callahan asked Swieciak to develop a formation program for consecrated virgins.

"So I knew that part of that program was the importance of the woman discerning the gift of virginity and the gift of the call to that state in life, which was that devotion to Our Lady," she said. "That really is the essence of consecrated virgins living in world, imitating the Mother of God in her life of holiness, in her purity of heart and intention, and in devoting herself totally to our Lord."

### Simple and accessible

In developing the program, Swieciak said that she sought

to develop materials that are simple, accessible and versatile – so that anyone, including married couples, priests and seminarians, can incorporate them into their prayer life.

Swieciak said that the character and aim of the book's format was shaped in part by suggestions from other consecrated virgins around the country.

"The print is large enough that if someone has problems with their eyesight, they can read it," she said. "There's a little color on the pages throughout – and one side of the page is blank if they want to write their own meditations."

While Swieciak acknowledges that the book seems a bit "pricey," she said that the cost covers printing and neither she nor the diocese makes a profit on the book's sales.

"The virgins who have used the book already said they like that it's hardcover and library-bound, so it won't easily fall apart over the years," she said.

"That's Bishop Callahan's vision and my vision – to make something durable – something that will last."

### Saying "Yes"

The book begins with the Angelus, Swieciak said, because Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI explained the importance of the Incarnation in a 1988 homily he delivered as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger during a Mass of Consecration of Virgins.

"In this homily, Cardinal Ratzinger said that the Incarnation, where our Lord, the Word, becomes flesh in the womb of Our Lady, is the beginning of the vocation of consecrated virginity. The Angelus recalls the Incarnation.

This prayer is at the beginning of the book then because it is the beginning of the vocation which the book seeks to address."

Adding a personal touch to the book, Swieciak said that some of the meditations were inspired by her own spiritual life as a consecrated virgin.

"Mary's call and Mary's response echo through time into eternity," Swieciak writes in the book's closing reflection, "Living the Gospel of 'Yes.'" "She is like the reed when the wind blows, gently swaying, first this way then back again, being faithful all along the way to the movements of grace to respond with loving charity to the lives and needs of those around her."

In the end, Swieciak said, the book has succeeded if it inspires women to either consider this vocation for the first time or, if already consecrated virgins, to renew their understanding of their vocation.

"Over the last 30 years," she said, reflecting on her own vocation, "I've discovered that the rite is always fresh, and the more I ponder it, the more I learn from it.

We can never learn enough about our vocations, and never learn enough about the unity that God calls us to, and about God's generous love for each of us individually."