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Pope to Convention of Consecrated Virgins

You Are Sign of Church's Virginity

On 31 May 1970 the revised Ritual for the Consecration of Virgins was promulgated by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship. For the 25th anniversary of that promising event, an international convention of consecrated virgins was held in Rome and on Friday, 2 June, the participants were received in audience by the Holy Father. The Pope spoke of the enduring value of consecrated virginity in the life of the Church and urged women faithfully to "persevere in your vocation with the help of the Blessed Virgin. Take as your example the holy Virgins who have enriched the Church's life in every age". Here is a translation of his address, which was given in Italian.

Dear Sisters,

1. I am pleased to have this audience which offers me the opportunity to meet you on the occasion of the International Convention organized to celebrate the 25 anniversary of the promulgation, on 31 May 1970, of the revised Ritual for the Consecration of Virgins. I greet the Convention's organizers and all of you who have gathered here.

It was the Second Vatican Council which decided that the rite of the Consecration of Virgins found in the Roman Pontifical should be revised (cf. *Const. Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 80). It was not only a question of beginning a careful revision of the liturgical formulas and ritual gestures, but of *restoring a rite* "which for many centuries had fallen into disuse with regard to women who did not belong to institutes of consecrated life. Along with the rite there was also a restoration of the "Ordo virginum", which was to find its juridical expression, as distinct from that of institutes, in can. 599 of the new *Code of Canon Law*. A renewed rite, then, and an "Ordo" restored to the Church community: the Lord's *twofold gift* to his Church. You rejoice over this gift, you thank the Lord for it and on this occasion you wish to draw from it motivation and inspiration for renewing your fervor and commitment.

Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her

2. For my part, I would like to speak to you with the warm affection expressed by Bishops of old when they addressed the virgins of their Churches: the warmth of Methodius of Olympus, the first to sing of Christian Virginity, of Athanasius of Alexandria and Cyprian of Carthage, who considered consecrated virgins to be the chosen portion of Christ's flock; of John Chrysostom, whose writings are rich in ideas for nourishing the spiritual life of virgins; of Ambrose of Milan, whose works testify to an extraordinary pastoral concern for consecrated virgins; of Augustine of Hippo, the astute, profound theologian of virginity embraced for the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt. 19:12); of the great and holy Pope Leo; who is most likely the

author of the marvelous consecratory prayer *Deus castorum corporum*; of Leander of Seville, who wrote an exquisite letter to his sister, Florentina, on the occasion of her consecration as a virgin. It is an episcopal tradition with which I am pleased to be associated.

3. On this significant occasion, I would like to underscore several basic points that cannot fail to guide your unique vocation in the Church and in the world.

Love Christ, the reason for your life. For the consecrated virgin, as St. Leander of Seville stated, Christ is everything: "bridegroom, brother, friend, inheritance, reward, God and Lord" (*Regula sancti Leandri*, Intro.).

The mystery of the Incarnation was given a spousal reading by the holy Fathers, following the interpretation given by the Apostle Paul to the Lord's death: "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her (Eph. 5:25). Even the Resurrection was seen as nuptial meeting between the Risen One and the new messianic community, for whom the Easter Vigil itself was celebrated as "the Church's wedding night" (St. Asterius of Amasea, Homilia .XIX, in Psalmum V, oratio V).

Christ's entire life is thus marked by the sign of the mystery of his wedding with the Church (cf. Eph. 5:32). Dear sisters, you also belong to that mystery through the gift of the Spirit and by virtue of a "new spiritual anointing" (cf. *Pontificale Romanum: Ordo consecrationis virginum*, n.16).

Consecrated virginity reflects Gospel radicalism

4. Return Christ's infinite love with your own total and exclusive love.

Love him as he wants to be loved, in the concrete circumstances of life: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (In 14:15; cf. 14:21). Love him in the way that befits your spousal state; by adopting his sentiments (cf. Phil 2:5); by sharing his manner of life, a life of humility and gentleness, of love and mercy, of service and joyful availability, of tireless zeal for the Father's glory and salvation of the human race.

The state of consecrated virginity enables you to praise Christ more spontaneously, to listen to his word more easily, to serve him more joyfully; it provides you with more frequent occasions to offer him the homage of your love. However, *consecrated virginity is not a privilege, but a gift of God* that implies a strong commitment to following him and to be his disciple.

The following of the Lamb in heaven (cf. Rv. 14:4) begins on earth by taking the narrow way (cf. Mt 7:14). Your *sequela Christi* will be all the more radical, the more you love Christ and the more clearly you grasp the meaning of virginal consecration. In discussing the "evangelical ideal of virginity" in the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* I recalled the "in [consecrated] virginity the radicalism of the Gospel finds expression: 'Leave everything and follow Christ'" (n.20).

Your *discipleship* will be all the more intense, the more deeply you are convinced that Jesus is the one Teacher (cf. Mt.23:8), whose words are "spirit and life" (In

6:63). Dear sisters, remember that your place, like Mary of Bethany's (cf. Lk. 10:39), is at the feet of Jesus, listening to the gracious words that proceed out of His mouth (cf. Lk4:22).

5. Love the Church: she is your mother. Through the solemn rite presided over by the diocesan Bishop (*Ordo consecrationis virginum; Praenotanda*, n.6, p.8), you have received from her the gift of consecration; you have been dedicated to her service. You must always feel closely bound to the Church.

According to the teaching of the Fathers, virgins receive from the Lord the "consecration of virginity" and become a visible sign of the Church's virginity, a means of her fruitfulness, a witness of her fidelity to Christ. Virgins are also a reminder that the Church is oriented toward the good things to come and a warning to keep the eschatological tension alive.

It is also the task of virgins to be the hard-working hands of the local Church's generosity, the voice of her prayer, the expression of her mercy, the relief of her poor, the comfort of her suffering sons and daughters, and the support of her orphans and widows. We could say; at the time of the fathers, the Church's *pietas* and *caritas* were largely expressed through the heart and hands of consecrated virgins.

These forms of commitment are still valid today. I myself stressed the anthropological value of choosing virginity in the Church: it is a path on which the consecrated virgin "realizes her womanhood". By freely choosing virginity, women confirm themselves as persons, as beings whom the Creator from the beginning has willed for their own sake. At the same time they realize the personal value of their own femininity" (*Mulieris dignitatem*, n.20).

No less than the woman who follows the path of marriage, the consecrated virgin is able to live and express spousal love: "in this kind of Love" she becomes, in the Church, a gift for God, for Christ, the Redeemer, for every brother and sister.

Mary is the perfect icon of the Church

6. Love the children of God Your total and exclusive love for Christ does not deter you from loving all men and women, your brothers and sisters, because the horizons of your charity precisely because you belong to the Lord-are Christ's own horizons.

According to the Apostle, the virgin "is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit" (I Cor 7:34); she seeks the "things that are above, where Christ is seated at God's right hand" (Col 3: 1). But that does not make you strangers to the great values of creation and to the sufferings of humanity, nor to the suffering of the earthly city, to its conflicts and sorrows caused by war, hunger, disease, from the widespread "culture of death". Have a merciful heart and share in

the sufferings of your brethren. Commit yourselves to the defense of life, to the advancement of women and to respect for their freedom and dignity.

You know it: "You who are virgins for Christ" become "mothers in the spirit" (*Ordo consecrationis virginum*, n.16), by lovingly co-operating in the evangelization of man and in his advancement.

7. ***Love Mary of Nazareth***, the first fruits of Christian virginity. Humble and poor, "betrothed to Joseph" (Mt 1:18), the just man "of the House of David" (Lk. 1:27), Mary, by a singular privilege and by her fidelity to the Lord's call, became the virgin mother of God's Son.

Mary is thus the perfect icon of the Church as mystery of communion and love, of her being *Church as Virgin, Bride and Mother*.

Mary is also as St. Leander of Seville noted, the "summit and prototype of virginity". In body and spirit she was fully what you long to be with all your strength: virgins in heart and body, spouses by your total and exclusive commitment to the love of Christ, mothers by the gift of the Spirit.

8. Dear sisters, Mary is your mother, sister, teacher. Learn from her to fulfill God's will and to welcome his saving plan; to keep his word and to face life's events with it; sing his praises for his "great works" on behalf of humanity; to share the mystery of pain; to bring Christ to men and women and to intercede for the needy.

Be with Mary in the hall of the wedding feast where Christ reveals himself to his disciples as the messianic Bridegroom; be with Mary at the cross, where Christ offers his life for the Church; stay with her in the Upper Room, the house of the Spirit, who is poured forth as divine Love in the Church, the Bride.

Faithfully persevere in your vocation with the help of the Blessed Virgin. Take as your example the holy Virgins who have enriched the Church's life in every age.

May the assurance of my constant prayer go with you, as well as a special blessing.