



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Canon Law

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CONSECRATED VIRGINS Guidelines for Diocesan Bishops

Introduction

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

From apostolic times Christian virgins, called by the Lord to cling only to Him with greater freedom of heart, body and spirit, have decided with the Church's approval to live in a state of virginity 'for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven' (Matt 19:12). By this solemn rite (*Consecratio Virginum*) the virgin is constituted ... a sacred person, a transcendent sign of the Church's love for Christ, and an eschatological image of this heavenly Bride of Christ and of the life to come. (par. 922-923).

Pope John Paul II, in his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita consecrata*, stated:

It is a source of joy and hope to witness in our time a new flowering of the ancient Order of Virgins, known in Christian communities ever since apostolic times. Consecrated by the diocesan Bishop, these women acquire a particular link with the Church, which they are committed to serve while remaining in the world. Either alone or in association with others, they constitute a special eschatological image of the Heavenly Bride and of the life to come, when the Church will at last fully live her love for Christ the Bridegroom.¹

History

As early as the third century consecrated virgins existed in the church. The words "betrothals" and "nuptials" were used in reference to them. In the fourth century the phrase, "Sponsa Christi" was used of them. From the second half of the fourth century, references were made to a special celebration of Consecration. The bishop reserved to himself the right to preside at the consecration of virgins. Thus the bishop was *in persona Christi* and the consecration of a virgin was looked upon as a marriage between Christ and the woman.

Over the centuries the rite of consecration became commonly used in monasteries of nuns with solemn vows. It became less commonly used for women living a secular life. In 1927 the Sacred Congregation for Religious refused permission for the Rite of Consecration to be used for individual secular women.

However, in 1963, the Vatican Council's decree, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, stated "The rite of the consecration of virgins contained in the Roman Pontifical is to be revised" (n. 80). The revised Rite for the Consecration of Virgins was promulgated in 1970 for implementation on 6 January 1971.

¹ Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita consecrata*, 25 March 1996, n. 7.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata_en.html

In 2008 Pope Benedict XVI spoke of consecrated virginity as “a gift in the Church and for the Church”.²

Theology

Consecrated virginity, a special expression of consecrated life that blossomed anew in the Church after the Second Vatican Council, is a true and proper solemn, public consecration, conferred by the Bishop in an evocative liturgical rite which made the consecrated woman the *sponsa Christi*, an image of the Church as Bride. It is deeply grounded in the particular Church to which the consecrated virgin belongs. The charism of consecrated virginity entails a total gift to Christ. It is a vocation to holiness, but also a vocation to service³ within the particular church.

Law

Concerning consecrated virgins, the Code of Canon Law states in canon 604:

Can. 604 §1 The order of virgins is also to be added to these forms of consecrated life. Through their pledge to follow Christ more closely, virgins are consecrated to God, mystically espoused to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church, when the diocesan Bishop consecrates them according to the approved liturgical rite.

§2 Virgins can be associated together to fulfill their pledge more faithfully, and to assist each other to serve the Church in a way that befits their state.

Recognized as a form of consecrated life although not lived in common, general principles can be drawn from those canons under the Title of *Norms Common to All Institutes of Consecrated Life*. These principles may be stated:

- Consecrated virginity is a stable form of living, dedicated to seeking God and at the service of the Church. (c. 573)
- The diocesan bishop has responsibility for approving a way of living (c. 576)
- Provided that there are no impediments, a person who has the right intention, appropriate qualities and has undertaken suitable preparation may be consecrated. (c. 597).

Assessment of candidate and her motives

The introductory norms of the Rite of Consecration of Virgins state the following criteria for admission to the Order of Virgins:

- a) they have never entered into marriage and have not publicly or openly lived in a state contrary to chastity.
- b) by their age, their prudence, and their universally approved pattern of life, they give evidence that they will persevere in their dedication to a chaste life and to the service of the church and their neighbour.
- c) they be admitted to the consecration by their bishop, the Ordinary.⁴

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to Order of Virgins*, 15 May 2008
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080515_ordo-virginum_en.html

³ Rite of Consecration of Virgins n.16, 17; Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the Order of Virgins*, 15 May 2008.

⁴ Norms, n.5 in *Commentarium pro Religiosis*, 51 (1970) 373-375, and *Canon Law Digest* Vol 7. 421-425.

Because the Ordinary admits her to consecration, he must be certain that the woman is suitable for this way of life and truly understands what she is undertaking. He will understand that issues of public liability may arise⁵. He must ascertain that she

- has the necessary prudence and approved character; this could be evaluated using a form of assessment as used by members of religious institutes
- will persevere in chastity
- will commit to serve the particular church
- is committed to prayer, including the praying of the Liturgy of the Hours
- understands clearly the Rite of Consecration of Virgins and the essential elements of living as a Consecrated virgin
- understands that the Church does not take on any financial responsibility for her; she must assure the Bishop that she is in a financially viable situation for the rest of her life.

To assess the suitability of the woman to be consecrated, the diocesan bishop would normally determine that she be accompanied by an experienced person, possibly the Vicar for Religious.

Formation

Before any celebration of the Rite of Consecration, the woman should undertake a period of formation and discernment.⁶ During this period, which should last three years, the woman would be accompanied by an experienced person, (another consecrated virgin or a religious). This person will be known to the Bishop. She will draw up a way of life, which should be approved by her accompanier and spiritual director. This period should be a time of discernment on the part of both the woman herself, as well as the bishop, assisted by the accompanier.

Rule of Life⁷

The consecrated virgin commits herself to the service of God and his Church.⁸ “Christian virgins, each according to her state and her charism, must spend time in works of penance and mercy, in apostolic activity and holy prayer.”⁹ Each consecrated woman normally remains in her own life context, with no special external changes.¹⁰ Her rule of life will include participation in the Eucharist when possible, the Liturgy of the Hours¹¹, prayer and spiritual reading. As the virgin commits herself to the service of the Church her way of life should include some periods of practical activity undertaken in the service of the church. She should commit to ongoing formation.

⁵ The Bishop should advise Catholic Church Insurances of her consecration and her commitment of the service of the church.

⁶ C. 597§2.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Order of Virgins, 15 May 2008.

⁸ *Rite of Consecration of Virgins*, n.17.

⁹ Norms, n.2.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Order of Virgins, 15 May 2008.

¹¹ “To discharge their duty to pray, sacred virgins are strongly encouraged to recite daily the Divine Office, especially Lauds and Vespers; by thus joining their voice with Christ, the high priest, and holy Church, they will praise the heavenly Father without ceasing and intercede for the salvation of the whole world.” Norms, n.2

Financial Responsibility

The Consecrated Virgin should ensure her ongoing financial security, including housing and upkeep, care in times of ill-health and provision for old age. This should be documented in an agreement between herself and the Diocesan Bishop.

A Consecrated Virgin should be required to do what other ordinary citizens would wisely do. Accordingly she should have a will valid in law and health insurance.

Should she leave the diocese the Diocesan Bishop need have no responsibility for her. The Diocesan Bishop of the new Diocese also does not have any financial responsibility for her.

Role and responsibility of Diocesan Bishop

It is the Diocesan bishop's task to recognize the charism of virginity in each woman who seeks to be consecrated.¹² He must ensure that she has undertaken a period of discernment and preparation and that she clearly understands the life that she is choosing.

It "belongs to the bishop to stipulate in what way and according to what plan of life virgins who lead their life in the world are to obligate themselves to perpetually embracing the virginal life".¹³ He should meet with her on an annual basis.

He should include her in the Annual Statistical Questionnaire.

The fact of the consecration should be entered in the Baptismal Register.

The consecrated virgin commits herself to serve the particular church where she receives consecration. The Bishop should be aware of the form of her service to the church. This service should be the subject of review from time to time.

If the consecrating Bishop is transferred or retires, the new Diocesan Bishop would continue he responsibility for the virgin.

If the consecrated virgin transfers to another diocese, the new diocesan bishop has no responsibility for her.

Rite of consecration of virgins

As the vocation of consecrated virginity is "deeply rooted in the particular Church to which the woman belongs"¹⁴ the Diocesan bishop is the Celebrant of the Rite of Consecration¹⁵ which is normally celebrated in the Cathedral Church. Both the celebrant and the place of celebration are signs of her place in and commitment to the particular church.

The Rite of Consecration of Virgins provides for the presentation of the insignia of consecration (a ring and optionally a veil) and the Liturgy of the Hours. The rite does not include the profession of public vows.

Practical Considerations

A written agreement should be drawn up which clearly states the reciprocal responsibilities of the Diocesan Bishop and the consecrated virgin.

Important issues

- In any discernment it is important that the person seeking consecration is grounded in a sound, current, ecclesiology

¹² Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Order of Virgins, 15 May 2008.

¹³ Norms, n.5.

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Order of Virgins, 15 May 2008.

¹⁵ *Rite of Consecration of Virgins*, n. 3

- Her commitment to the church and church authority recognizes the authority of the diocesan bishop and those appointed by him.
- Consecrated Virginité is not an alternative to religious life; a person who has left religious life should not be consecrated a virgin without some lengthy period of discernment. When a person who leaves religious life seeks to live the life of a consecrated virgin, the reasons for her leaving the religious community should be sought; this will probably involve confidential communication with her previous superior in the congregation.
- She should always be focused on the essentials of consecrated life; externals should be of lesser importance.
- The life of a consecrated virgin brings with it no 'status'.

References

Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita consecrata*, 25 March 1996.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata_en.html

Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Order of Virgins, 15 May 2008.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080515_ordo-virginum_en.html

Rite of Consecration of Virgins

<http://consecratedvirgins.org/usacv/sites/default/files/documents/VocRes/rite.pdf>

Norms, in *Commentarium pro Religiosis*, 51 (1970) 373-375, and *Canon Law Digest* Vol 7. 421-425.

Holland, Sharon IHM, "Consecrated Virgins for Today's Church" *Consecrated Life* 24/2, 2002.