

Lord, You Want *Me*?
***All* of Me?**

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INTRODUCTION

All people are called to be chaste, irrespective of their vocation. Even married people are called to be chaste which means they are sexually intimate within marriage alone and faithful to it; seek the good of their spouse (rather than their own gratification); and are open to life. Without chastity no one can faithfully live according to the image of God in whom we are made. God is a communion of Persons where the Father and the Son are committed to One another and seek nothing but the good of One another. Furthermore, just as the conception of life proceeds from the love between husband and wife, as we say in the Creed, the Holy Spirit eternally “proceeds from the Father and the Son.” Chastity also enables marriage to be a sacrament by which the loving bond between husband and wife is modelled upon and is an expression of Christ’s love for his Church.

Some people are called to consecrate their chastity to Christ which means that they abstain from all forms of deliberate sexual pleasure. Why would they want to be celibate given that the vocation of marriage is so beautiful and profound? Why would they not want to have children? This booklet contains answers to these and other questions which are designed to help us see that consecrated chastity is no less striking and profound than marriage. So doing, this booklet will help us to understand what motivates religious sisters, priests, brothers, consecrated virgins, and hermits to make a vow of chastity and why diocesan priests and lay consecrated men and women freely choose to make a promise of celibacy.

All people, including consecrated men and women, are called to enter into a spousal relationship. Firstly, we will reflect upon the vocation of women who are called to be spiritually espoused to Christ. By understanding that their love for Christ is both virginal and spousal, we will see that they are symbols of the Church. Also consistent with Christ having identified himself as the Bridegroom, we will see that consecrated men enter a spousal relationship. This they do insofar as they represent Christ who loves his Bride, the Church. Understanding virginal love will also enable us to understand spiritual fatherhood and motherhood.

This booklet also contains some information on the common signs of a calling to consecrated chastity. This is offered to assist those who are discerning the possibility that Christ may be calling them to consecrate their lives to him.

Why is bridal imagery associated with women who consecrate their lives to God? What on earth has *marriage* got to do with *perpetual virginity*?

Some women resist the idea of voluntary perpetual virginity on the grounds that being espoused to Christ is a *sentimentalisation* of their vocation as women. Terms such as “wedding,” “marriage,” and “bride” – when applied to consecrated chastity – bring to their minds images of a romanticising complete with bridal gowns, veils and confetti. It is not something they can relate to because these romantic images on face value have nothing whatsoever to do with perpetual virginity! The spousal imagery associated with consecrated chastity is therefore seen to be hollow and pretentious. This is unfortunate for the contrary is true in keeping with the ten following reasons.

Firstly, consecrated chastity embodies and participates in a unique way in the spousal nature of the Church, who is the virginal Bride of Christ. On this point Fr Thomas Dubay, SM, a well-known expert in the spiritual life, explains:

Actually there is no more apt and normal image of an intimate, total self-gift between two in love than the spousal one. Biblical writers inspired by the Spirit knew this, and they liberally used the symbolism to describe the everlasting and unending love of the Lord for his people. Isaiah speaks of Yahweh delighting in his chosen ones as a bridegroom rejoices in his radiantly beautiful bride (Isa 62:2-5). Hosea writes of this God wooing his wife in the wilderness that he may speak to her heart and win her back from her infidelity (Hosea 2:16).¹

What God reveals about his love for his chosen people in the Old Testament, likening it to spousal love, is further revealed in the New Testament. During Christ’s public ministry on earth he identified himself as the Bridegroom (Mt 9:15; 25:1-10; Mk 2:19-20; Lk 5:34-35). St John the Baptist also identified Jesus as the Bridegroom (Jn 3:29). His mission was to prepare the People of God for the coming of the Bridegroom and to introduce him to his Bride. With this understanding we can readily understand what St Paul writes about when explaining Christ’s relationship with his Church:

The Corinthian church is for St Paul a virgin bride wedded to one husband, Christ (2 Cor 11:2; cf. Eph 5:25f). Each member of the *ekklesia* [church] is to cling so intimately to the Bridegroom as to become one spirit with him (1 Cor 6:17), and their love is to be absolutely total – to love with their whole mind, their whole heart, their whole soul, and with all their strength (Mt 22:37). It is a love so profoundly inter-indwelling, each living within the other (1 Jn 4:16).²

¹ Fr Thomas Dubay, SM, “...And You Are Christ’s” – *the Charism of Virginity and the Celibate Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), pp. 40-41.

² *Ibid.*

In short, “The nuptial dimension belongs to the whole Church, but consecrated life is a vivid image of it, since it more clearly expresses the impulse toward the Bridegroom.”³

Secondly, what enables us to understand with further clarity why it is indeed appropriate to associate bridal imagery with consecrated chastity is the biblical depiction of a bride wearing “ornaments” and “jewels,” dressed “in linen shining white,” and “adorned” for her husband. This not only pertains to women espoused to their husbands (as we would expect), but the People of God espoused to Christ (see Isa 49:18, 61:10; Rev 19:8; 21:2).

Scripture is not the only place where this correlation in dress between married and religious women is found. It is also found in the Church’s tradition. For example, the bridal veil, an ancient symbol of holiness or dedication which was worn in ancient Israel by married women whenever in public was seen to be a sign of their marital status. Christians have continued with this practice since the apostolic era (1 Cor 11:1-16). The modern remnant of this in many cultures today is the ‘wedding veil’ the bride wears during her wedding. The veil of religious women correlates with this bridal imagery. From the beginning, the early Church began to swell with myriads of unmarried women dedicating their lives to the Church (1 Cor 7:8, 32-38; 1 Tim 4:9-16). They eventually took to wearing the marriage veil as a sign to the single men of the community that they were ‘married to Christ,’ thus declaring themselves as ‘unavailable.’ “By the time of St Ambrose, a ceremony of consecration had been developed in which the veil was conferred upon the virgin as a public symbol of the wedding of Christ to the Church.”⁴

As for finger rings, it is not at all unusual for consecrated women to wear a ring as a sign of their espousal with Christ. This too has historical significance. Although there is no reference to the use of betrothal or wedding rings in the Bible, we know that they were worn by Roman brides as early as the second century BC. The Jews also used wedding rings, but only during the wedding ceremony.⁵ Formalised rituals for the dedication of virgins originated in the early centuries of the Church. “The first of these which survives is a description of the dedication of Marcellina, the sister of St Ambrose (d.397).”⁶ This rite included the presentation of a ring and since the fourteenth century, most professed nuns and sisters are given rings as a sign of their complete dedication to Christ.⁷

³ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life, *Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns (Verbi Sponsa)*, 1999, no. 4.

⁴ Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, *The Foundations of Religious Life – Revisiting the Vision*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2009), p. 62.

⁵ cf. www.weddingringorigins.com

⁶ Edward Foley, *Rites of Religious Profession: Pastoral Introduction and Complete Text* (Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, Inc., 1989), p. 14.

⁷ cf. F. X. Murphy, “Rings” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XII (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), p. 506.

This correlation between *married* and *religious* women which is reflected both in Scripture and the Church's tradition in terms of what they have both known to wear also helps us to understand why bridal imagery is associated with consecrated chastity.

Thirdly, consecrated women dedicate themselves to Christ in a manner consistent with a wife's preoccupation with her husband.

The individual consecrated virgin embraces a way of life in which she so exclusively focuses on her one Beloved that she declines a marital relationship with any other man. When St Paul explains who a virgin is, he makes this very point in three ways. First, he deals with virginity in spousal context, immediately after considering earthly marriage. Second, he declares that a dedicated virgin is related to Christ as a married woman is related to her husband. Third, she gives to him an undivided attention, which, as undivided, is a marital preoccupation (1 Cor 7:32-35).⁸

Fourthly, the Book of Revelation describes how, at the end of time, Christ and his Church will be intimately united as a bridegroom unites himself to his bride. Here, we contemplate the remarkable capacity the consecrated woman has to remind us of what joys will be ours, please God, when we get to heaven. This she achieves by anticipating the final age in which there is no earthly marriage (Mt 22:30) because in heaven all marriages will be subordinate to the one marriage between Christ and his Church (Rev 21:1-3); a marriage in which all those who are redeemed in Christ will be espoused to him in the final enthralling fulfilment of all human life.

Failing to recognise the significance of consecrated women's bridal relationship with Christ in this regard is a consequence of being too immersed in this world and failing to heed the words of St Paul, "...seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col 3:1-2). As Father Dubay states, we can see that:

...consecrated virginity is poles apart from the world's dismal, myopic view of it. The virgin who fully lives her vocation is vibrantly alive, much more alive than she could be with an earthly husband, for her Beloved is infinitely more alive than any mere man could be.⁹

What the whole Church is to be in heaven, namely, the virginal bride of Christ,¹⁰ the individual virgin already is by vocation and "with no merely human spousal intermediary."¹¹

⁸ "...*And You Are Christ's*", pp. 41-42.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 34.

¹⁰ "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away; and the sea is no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven of God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of the throne saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.'" (Rev 21:1-2).

That there is no spousal intermediary (that is, a physical person who mediates Christ her Bridegroom) marks the special dignity and holiness of consecrated chastity which brings us to the fifth point worthy of note. The Hebrew word for holiness, “*kodesh*” or “*kiddushin*” literally means, “*set apart.*” At this point you may be beginning to think, “What does being set apart have in common with marriage? When something is set apart it is not just set apart at a *distance*; it is set apart for *consecration*. Consecration is not for being *isolated*; rather, it is for being *united*. In fact, the Hebrew word for “holiness,” “*kiddushin*” is the same word used for “*wedding*,” or “*marriage.*” Why? Because when a man gets married he sets one woman apart from all the other women on earth. She becomes consecrated to him, and he becomes consecrated to her. They become “holy”; his wife is set apart, not to be distanced from her husband, but to be united to him. Although spouses consecrate themselves to one another, their consecration is no mere human act, for as Jesus said, “What therefore *God has joined together*, let not man separate” (Mk 10:9).

Likewise, those who embrace evangelical chastity are consecrated. They are not set apart from everyone else just for the sake of it. They would become very lonely were that the case! Rather, they are set apart so that they can unite themselves to God. The same applies for priests and religious brothers.

Sixthly, consecrated chastity is spousal because it mirrors Mary’s virginal motherhood. The Church teaches that Religious women “see themselves especially in the Virgin Mary, Bride and Mother, figure of the Church; and sharing the blessedness of those who believe (cf. Lk 1:45; 11:28), they echo her “yes” and her loving adoration of the Word of life, becoming with her the living “memory” of the Church’s spousal love (cf. Lk 2:19, 51).”¹² Blessed Pope John Paul II stated: “*Virginity and motherhood co-exist in her: they do not mutually exclude each other or place limits on each other. Indeed, the person of the Mother of God helps everyone – especially women – to see how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as persons, explain and complete each other.*”¹³

This brings us to the seventh significance of consecrated chastity, namely, the privilege and beauty of spiritual motherhood. Conceiving children of the spirit is no less fruitful than conceiving children of the flesh¹⁴ as we shall see in the answer to Question Two below.

The eighth reason why consecrated women are indeed spouses is that they offer themselves as a gift to their Divine Spouse. As Blessed Pope John Paul stated, “A woman is “married” either through the sacrament of marriage or spiritually through marriage to Christ. *In both cases marriage* signifies the “sincere gift of the person” of the bride to the

¹¹ “...*And You Are Christ’s*”, p. 42.

¹² *Verbi Sponsa*, no. 1.

¹³ Apostolic Letter, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women (Mulieris Dignitatem)*, 1988, no. 17.

¹⁴ Jesus said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn 3:6).

groom.”¹⁵ Giving themselves totally includes the gift of their bodies. On this point the Church teaches: “To the gift of Christ the Bridegroom, who on the cross offered his body unreservedly, the nun responds in like terms with the gift of the “body,” offering herself with Jesus Christ to the Father and cooperating with him in the work of redemption.”¹⁶

Ninthly, bridal imagery is associated with consecrated chastity because living this vocation is motivated by the charity of her Divine Spouse. Whether chastity is exercised within marriage or the consecrated life it is always motivated by charity and leads to an increase of charity, although for consecrated women it extends to all people in a way that exceeds the usual limits. The best way to understand this is to see that a married woman does not see her husband in all men, but a consecrated woman sees her Divine Spouse in *everyone*, and fidelity to Christ is her fidelity to them!

Finally, consecrated chastity pertains to a vocation, not a career. Father Dubay explains this well:

If a study were to be made of why some women resist the idea of virginity being a bridal relationship and if the study could tap the unconscious, I would expect that seeing their life as a career rather than a vocation of being in love would emerge as the real source of the difficulty.¹⁷

Women who feel called to give their lives to God “who see their life primarily, if not exclusively, as a job to be done are likely enough to reject spousal love as foreign to what they are about.” Conversely, women who view their resolve to offer their virginity to Christ as “chiefly aimed at being in love with God are easily and naturally inclined and attracted to the nuptial explanation.”¹⁸ St Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), a reformer of the Carmelite Order and prominent Spanish mystic, was certainly convinced of this. Writing to her Sisters she expresses on numerous occasions the relationship that they, as religious women, enjoy with God on account of their espousal with Christ. On one of these occasions she goes so far as to boldly describe this relationship in a manner which goes well beyond the usual expectations of being a bride during her time:

They say that for a woman to be a good wife toward her husband she must be sad when he is sad, and joyful when he is joyful, even though she may not be so. (See what deception you have been freed from Sisters!) The Lord, without deception, truly acts that way with us. He is the one who submits, and He wants you to be the lady with the authority to rule; He submits to your will.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 21.

¹⁶ *Verbi Sponsa*, no. 3.

¹⁷ “...*And You Are Christ's*”, p. 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *The Way of Perfection*, ch. 26, no. 4.

St Teresa is describing her experience of prayer here, not any of her work for Christ. Her words emphasise that it is in virtue of her spousal relationship which renders her intercession so powerful before God. Although prayer is primary for consecrated women it does not mean that their apostolate is not important. On the contrary, not being married obviously provides a greater amount of freedom for apostolic work, work that is to be applauded. However, ‘at the end of the day’ (to be more precise, *throughout the entire day*) they are in love with their Divine Spouse, not their work. If we defined their vocation by their work we would find it difficult to comprehend the espousal with Christ they enjoy, let alone the unique witness they give to him. This understanding was clearly taught by the Second Vatican Council as it declared that religious are in a diocese not primarily for apostolic work, but for prayer, penance, and example.²⁰ We find this concisely stipulated in Canon Law: “Contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer is to be the first and foremost duty of all religious.”²¹

The Church’s teaching on this subject is consistent with Sacred Scripture. Nowhere in Jesus’ teaching about celibacy do we find an explanation on how it provides freedom for apostolic work, important and meritorious as it is. Neither Jesus nor Paul speak about the work that needs to be done by those who offer their virginity for the kingdom. Rather, they refer to a deepened state of being, of total availability to the Lord in un-distracted communion, absorption in the Beloved, and being in harmony with the kingdom. Devotion to prayer and more freedom for this is always the primary New Testament rationale for consecrated chastity. After the model of Jesus himself, those who consecrate their lives to Christ are consumed by nothing other than doing the Father’s will (Jn 4:54), thus they are utterly free for the kingdom, completely available to their sole love. In short, the consecrated woman is before else a woman of prayer because she is literally in love with her Divine Spouse.²²

Although the answer to this question centres predominantly on women (since, to state the obvious, they are the ones who become brides), this article can help us better understand the vocation of men who consecrate their virginity to God too. As Blessed Pope John Paul II stated: “In the Church every human being – male and female – is the “Bride,” in that he or she accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person.”²³ Father Dubay explains this further:

When the male responds fully to his celibate gift and thus begins to grow in a total, burning love for Christ, he sees himself not, obviously, as a bride, but as an intimate friend and brother ... Yet men with the celibate charism need to be reminded that

²⁰ *Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops In the Church (Christus Dominus)*, 1965, no. 33.

²¹ Canon 663, §1.

²² cf. “...*And You Are Christ’s*”, pp. 37, 39, 42-43, 98.

²³ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 25.

they, along with all men and women, are members of the virgin Church wedded to one husband. Before God each person is receptive, feminine.²⁴

In other words, men see in religious women symbols of the Church of which they themselves are members, and in which they too are called to be receptive to the love of Christ.

In conclusion, if a woman consecrated her virginity to Christ for the sake of *virginity*, rather than for the sake of the *Kingdom* (Mt 19:12), we could all agree that the bridal imagery associated with her relationship with Christ is hollow and pretentious. However, we have seen that associating bridal imagery to her relationship with Christ is by no means a sentimental exaggeration because her virginal love is:

- (i) an embodiment and participation in the *spousal nature of the Church*;
- (ii) associated with *bridal adornments* in Sacred Scripture and the Church's tradition;
- (iii) *undivided* in a manner consistent with a wife's preoccupation with her husband;
- (iv) gives witness to our *marriage with God* in the life to come;
- (v) *set apart* exclusively for Christ, her Bridegroom;
- (vi) a mirror of *Mary's virginal motherhood*;
- (vii) *conceives life* (virginal love is no less fruitful than conjugal love);
- (viii) consistent with marriage on the basis that she *gives herself as a sincere gift* to Christ, the Bridegroom;
- (ix) motivated by the charity of her Divine Spouse in Whom she sees and serves in all; and
- (x) related to a *vocation*, not a career.

It is for these reasons that the liturgy for the profession of a religious woman has always given prominence to the bridal theme. Her religious profession is indeed a wedding. As we have seen, it is most appropriate that bridal imagery be associated with women who consecrate themselves to God because although they *renounce* sex and marriage they do not *denounce* sex and marriage; rather, they *announce* the ultimate truth and meaning of sexuality and marriage in accord with what is revealed in Sacred Scripture. That is, what the whole Church is to be, the consecrated woman already is by vocation. In virtue of this, St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) explained that the bridal connection with the Saviour women consecrated to God enjoy is more prominent than for those who are married. She refers to the Book of Revelation to illustrate this: "They want to belong pre-eminently to the Lamb for all eternity, to follow him wherever he goes, and to sing the song of the virgins that no one else can sing (Rev 14:1-5)."²⁵

²⁴ "...And You Are Christ's", pp. 9-10.

²⁵ *The Marriage of the Lamb* (14 September 1940) *The Hidden Life*, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. IV, ICS Publications 1992, p. 99.

What is spiritual fatherhood and motherhood?

Both spiritual fatherhood and spiritual motherhood is richly biblical. In Sacred Scripture we see that giving birth biologically is not the only way life is generated, for in the Scriptures there are testimonies not only of Christ's virginal birth, but numerous 'virgin births' of Christians. That is to say, of the 'conception' of Christ in souls through the conversions which come about through the proclamation of the Word of God. Lest we take for granted how radical this is we would do well to remind ourselves that in the Old Testament what was important was biological generation. It was a terrible thing not to have a progeny. Take Hannah for example (see 1 Sam 1:2-16). She is praying in the Temple – barren – afraid that she was despised by her husband because another woman with whom he was living had brought forth a child. Another example of how important biological generation was in the Old Testament is that priests were always sons of priests. As you can see, in the order of nature *generation* is all important.

This emphasis upon generation ends in the New Testament. In the New Testament what matters, is not *biological* generation, but *spiritual* generation. Therefore, in this new order we have Our Lord speaking of another kind of progeny. This spiritual progeny can be seen in Christ's response to his mother. Remember when she was worried about him and sent a message to him? Here Jesus responded by saying, "Who is my mother?" Can you imagine a son saying that about his mother? I cannot, unless he was trying to make a point. Making a point is what he does do indeed, for notice how he did not answer this question by saying, "He who is a blood-line descendent of Abraham..." Rather, he said, "He who does the will of my Father is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt 12:48-50; Mk 3:34-35). In other words, Jesus was making it clear that relationships in the order of blood are subordinate to the order of the spirit.

In stating this, I am not claiming that there is no sanctity in having children within marriage. However, the point that Jesus is making is that the most significant form of progeny is spiritual. That is why Jesus called his Apostles, "my children" (Jn 13:33). They were not his children! How could he call James and John his children when Matthew and Mark clearly state in their Gospels that they are the sons of Zebedee (Mt 4:21; Mk 10:35)? Because we are no longer living in the *biological order* of *physical* generation, but in the *Kingdom of God order* of *spiritual* generation. In his letter St John calls his converts his own children countless times, and in his letter to the Galatians St Paul said, "You are my children and I was in labour with you over and over again until you took the shape of Christ" (Gal 4:19).

When he wrote to Philemon about the runaway slave St Paul said, "I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment" (Phile 1:10). Likewise, he addressed Timothy as "my own son in the faith" (1 Tim 1:2), and again as his "well beloved son" (2 Tim 1:2). The Apostle St John knew only too well of these 'virgin births' because he said, "to all who received him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn 1:12-13).

St Ambrose said, “Every soul who has believed both conceives and generates the Word of God ... According to the flesh one woman [the Blessed Virgin Mary] is the mother of Christ, but according to faith, Christ is the fruit of all men.”²⁶ This being the case, if a priest or consecrated woman is instrumental in helping Christ become born anew in the soul of someone else, he is participating in the Fatherhood of God, while she is participating in the Motherhood of the Church. While most of us are familiar with spiritual fatherhood on account of calling our Parish Priest “Father,” perhaps spiritual motherhood is not so commonly understood given that a religious woman’s title is not “Mother”, but, “Sister.”²⁷ Although he may not have been referring to spiritual mothers and sisters, it is interesting on this point that St Paul said we should treat “older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim 5:2).

Just as some men are called to image Christ in His Priesthood, some women are called to image the Church, His Bride. St Gregory of Nyssa (a bishop of modern day Turkey who lived in the fourth century) said of women who have consecrated themselves to God: “Truly and solidly does the virgin mother rejoice, for she by her spiritual work gives birth to immortal children.”

St Peter the Apostle preached about this spiritual progeny: “Your new birth was not from any mortal seed but from the everlasting word of the living and eternal God” (1 Pet 1:23). St Paul was even emphatic about this, for he said: “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor 4:15). Virginal love is indeed fruitful. This was foretold by the prophet Isaiah. For example, as regards women first of all, he proclaimed: “Sing aloud oh barren woman who never bore a child. Break into cries of joy you who have never been in labour. For you shall have more sons than she who lives in wedlock” (Isa 54:1). The Prophet Isaiah further foretells how the eunuchs of God’s Kingdom would not be fruitless:

...do not let the eunuch say: “Behold, I am just a dry tree.” For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give to them in my house, and within my walls, a place and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name, a name imperishable for all times (Isa 56:3-5).

Having looked at the Scriptures, what then is celibacy? Celibacy is recognition of a ‘virgin birth’; that our ultimate birth is not from nature, but from God. Without this understanding of consecrated chastity Fr Dubay explains that we are bound to define it in negative terms:

For them, this consecration is a non-experience of genital sexuality. It may be seen also as a non-marriage for the kingdom. These negative concepts are true. But they

²⁶ *Commentary on Luke’s Gospel*, Bk 2, 19.23.

²⁷ Unless she is a Mother Superior within a religious congregation. Another exception are some (not all) fully cloistered nuns, such as all the nuns in a Tyburn monastery, who become spiritual mothers to many, even those with whom they do not come into direct contact on account of their fully contemplative way of life, that is, their complete, full-time dedication to prayer.

omit what is most important, what is positive. To speak of virginity as a not-something is like speaking of Susan's marriage to James as a not-marrying of Robert or Philip and omitting to say that it is first of all a mutual self-gift with James.²⁸

The special intimacy with Christ that those who have consecrated their lives to God enjoy is all too often overlooked because most people fail to perceive that the command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28) is a law for the consecrated celibate's life *no less* than biological life. Fulton Sheen (1885–1979), an Archbishop who is famous for his preaching and his work on television and radio, explained this well:

The production of new life is generation, a function that does not pertain exclusively, or even primarily to the flesh. God is the source of all generation. Begetting is not an impulse from below, but a gift from above; rather than an evolution from animals, it is a descent from deity.²⁹

The power to beget life not only comes *from* God, but is *in* God, that is, in His own Being because the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. It may appear to be remote and obscure to contemplate how the Son is generated eternally from the Father. On this point Fulton Sheen states:

Somewhat more precise – though still, of course, analogical – is the operation of the human intellect when it "conceives" ideas ... In like manner, God the Eternal Thinker has a Thought, a Word. Because this Wisdom was "generated," we call God-Who-Thinks the Father, and the Word or Idea Who is "generated" the Son.³⁰

As you can see, our ability to conceive life ultimately derives from our participation in God's own inner-life.

As for spiritual maternity in particular, the Mother of Jesus is the model of all those who are called to be spiritual mothers due to the special relationship she has with the Blessed Trinity. It was through her "Yes" that the "Word" who existed from all eternity "was made flesh" (Jn 1:14) when he was conceived in her virginal womb through the power of the Holy Spirit. She is also a model of the Church because when the Holy Spirit came upon her, together with Peter and the other Apostles, the Church became:

an instrument of the Spirit for bringing new sons and daughters to birth through the preaching of the word, the celebration of the Sacraments and the giving of pastoral care. In Mary the aspect of spousal receptivity is particularly clear; it is under this aspect that the Church, through her perfect virginal life, brings divine life to fruition within herself. The consecrated life has always been seen primarily in terms of Mary — Virgin and Bride. This virginal love is the source of a particular fruitfulness which

²⁸ "...And You Are Christ's", p. 51.

²⁹ *The Priest Is Not His Own* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2005), p. 57.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 57-58. See also *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 19.

fosters the birth and growth of divine life in people's hearts. Following in the footsteps of Mary, the New Eve, consecrated persons express their spiritual fruitfulness by becoming receptive to the Word, in order to contribute to the growth of a new humanity by their unconditional dedication and their living witness.³¹

By mediating the fecundity of the Blessed Virgin Mary through the 'mirror' of their own virginal femininity (which like her, they have consecrated to God), religious women render their hearts to be evermore fertile for Christ to be conceived deeper in the hearts of those who are entrusted to their care. Like Mary, it can be said of each consecrated woman: "What she has conceived is of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1:20). Spiritual maternity is instrumental both in conceiving Christ in souls for the first time (as in the case of those who are Baptised) or in restoring his divine life within those who had deprived themselves from His grace through sin. Regarding the latter, St Teresa Benedicta said:

No earthly maternal joy resembles the bliss of a soul permitted to enkindle the light of grace in the night of sins. The way to this is the Cross. Beneath the Cross the Virgin of virgins becomes the Mother of grace.³²

Further to helping Christ to be conceived in the souls of others, the intercession and apostolate of consecrated women helps Christ to be nurtured within all those who are entrusted to their care. In this we can see, as Blessed Pope John Paul II explained, that:

virginity does not deprive a woman of her prerogatives ... it can express itself as a concern for people, especially the most needy: the sick, the handicapped, the abandoned, orphans, the elderly, children, young people, the imprisoned and, in general, people on the edges of society. *In this way a consecrated woman finds her Spouse, different and the same in each and every person, according to his very own words: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). Spousal love always involves a special readiness to be poured out for the sake of those who come within one's range of activity. In marriage this readiness, even though open to all, consists mainly in love that parents give to their children. In virginity this readiness is open to all people, who are embraced by the love of Christ the Spouse ... is also predisposed to being open to each and every person.*³³

Furthermore, even though priests are spiritual fathers, they too are able to benefit from their spiritual motherhood for it is of consecrated virginity that Scripture declares: "...your fathers shall be your sons" (Psalm 45:16). Here we can see that the fruitfulness of

³¹ Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *The Consecrated Life (Vita Consecrata)*, 1996, no. 34.

³² *Exaltation of the Cross* (14 September 1941) *The Hidden Life*, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. IV, ICS Publications 1992, p. 104.

³³ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 21.

spiritual maternity is so extraordinary that it surpasses the limits found in the biological order. Speaking for myself as a Catholic priest, while it has always been humbling for me to contemplate how Christ is using my poor humanity as His “living instrument”³⁴ to enable him to be present to and minister to others, I see how profoundly moving it must thereby be for religious women to contemplate how they are able to love and nurture Christ who is born anew not only in the lives they serve, but in the souls of priests. Through the fruitfulness of their consecrated chastity and life of prayer, Christ is nurtured within priests in the measure that their intercession assists them to represent Christ faithfully.

A beautiful illustration of this is found in the autobiography St Teresa of Avila was asked to write under the direction of her confessor, Fr Pedro Ibáñez. She recounts how one of her previous confessors, Fr Garcia de Toledo, OP, was humble enough to ask her to call him her son. And so, she refers to him as such. “O my son!” she writes.³⁵ St Thérèse of Lisieux also acknowledged how her spiritual motherhood assists priests. Writing to Sr Genevieve (her sister, Celine), she states: “Ah, Celine, I feel that Jesus is asking *both of us* to quench *His thirst* by giving Him souls, the souls of *priests* especially.”³⁶

What is more, religious women who pray for priestly vocations realise their spiritual motherhood in a very special way (see Appendix A). While it is true that “all you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27), Christ is present in an exemplary manner in priests because those who are ordained become an *alter Christus* (Latin: “another Christ”). This being the case, if the Ordination of a priest is the fruit of a religious woman’s prayer and sacrifice, she brings Christ into the world in a manner similar to the Blessed Virgin Mary insofar as “every priest in his own way represents the person of Christ Himself.”³⁷

Why is the consecration of religious not a sacrament?

When celibate men and women consecrate their lives to Christ they do not receive a sacrament. As we shall see, they enjoy a dignity that enables them to both give *witness* to and *experience* something beyond what the sacraments accomplish on earth.

The sacraments are outward signs instituted by Christ to bestow grace. They use earthly realities as vehicles to communicate God’s grace. However, when a person is consecrated, God communicates grace to the soul directly, acting without an earthly, tangible intermediary or channel used in the ceremony. For example, in the Sacrament of

³⁴ The Sacrament of Holy Orders enables priests to “become living instruments of Christ the eternal priest” (Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (Presbyterorum Ordinis)*, 1965, no. 12.

³⁵ *The Book of Her Life*, ch. 16, no. 6

³⁶ *The Letters of St Thérèse of Lisieux and Those Who Knew Her: General Correspondence*, Vol. 1, trans. John Clarke, OCD, (ICS Publications, 1982), Letter 96, 15 October 1889.

³⁷ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 12.

Marriage the loving marital bond of the bride and groom is the sign, whereas no physical sign is employed when a celibate person is consecrated.

While conjugal love goes to Christ the Bridegroom through a human union, virginal love goes directly to the person of Christ through an immediate union with him without intermediaries: a truly complete and decisive spiritual espousal.³⁸

Furthermore, in the grace and call of their vocation to offer their virginity as a gift their soul is taken up by God in a most special way because the state into which they are assumed is more closely associated with heaven than earth. On account of this consecrated chastity is said to be a sign and figure of the *eschatological state*, that is, one that is not of earth, but rather is a sign in anticipation of life in heaven where souls are united face-to-face with God.

Consecrated celibates and those who are married both bear witness to the same reality, namely, the union of Christ with his Bride, the Church (see Ephesians 5:20-32). Marriage symbolises what heaven will consist of in the future, whereas the consecrated celibate lives what love in heaven consists of *now*. Marriage, being a sacrament, involves an earthly sign, namely, the sexual union of the couple, whereas consecrated chastity involves no sacramental sign for it gives witness to what marriage can only symbolise.

The following analogy may help explain further why it would be less significant if consecrated celibates received a sacrament. Think of marriage as a road sign. Life on earth is the road that leads us to heaven. To get there, we need to follow the road signs. Marriage is one of the most beautiful signs because unity in the flesh is a sacramental sign of the unity between Christ and his Church, and the heart-felt joy that accompanies the consummation of marriage is a foretaste of the happiness that we will experience in our heart and soul when we possess God in heaven.

But what happens when, please God, we get to heaven? Do we need any signs when we get there? If we are already there, why would we need a sign? Even if there is a sign in heaven saying, “H-E-A-V-E-N” would you run up, embrace it, smother it with kisses and say, “Look, I found Heaven!” This would be absurd because a sign is no longer needed when you come to the reality. This is consistent with the words of Jesus when he said: “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage” (Mt 22:23-30. See also Mk 12:25; Lk 20:34-36). This may not necessarily mean that each married couple will no longer be known as “husband and wife” in heaven. However, the intimacy and ecstasy of their love will no longer be *exclusive*, for in heaven they will love everyone else with the same level of ardour that they loved their spouse on earth, in fact, even more so.

³⁸ John Paul II cited in Basil Cole, OP & Paul Conner, OP, *Christian Totality* (Staten Island, New York: Alba House, 1997), p. 36.

This will happen because in heaven we will not need one person to fulfil our need for love, because according to what Jesus said, love is perfect in heaven (see Mt 22:25-30; Mk 12:20-25; Lk 20:34-36). We will know and love one other so closely on account of what it is to be united to God who is the source of love itself. It is for this reason that consecrated celibates give witness *here and now* on earth to what loving one another will consist of in heaven, a witness that involves no finite earthly sign because they are already beginning to taste the infinite reality that a sign could only symbolise. Referring to consecrated virgins, St Cyprian said, “What we shall be, you have already begun to be. You possess, already in this world, the glory of the resurrection.”³⁹

Is consecration to God a vocation superior to the vocation of marriage?

The Church teaches that celibacy is superior to marriage. In doing so, she is not comparing the worth of these vocations (for both are needed); nor does the Church teach that one is preferable to the other because a vocation pertains to God’s call, not to one’s personal preference; nor is the Church comparing individual persons before God, but their ways of life. Someone consecrated to God is using a greater means for sanctification than a married person, however, it is indeed true that a saintly married person is surely more pleasing to God than a mediocre priest, religious sister or brother.

Giving one’s life to Christ is superior to giving one’s life to a creature for another reason, namely, consecration to God requires *perfect and perpetual continence* (that is, complete and life-long abstinence from all forms of deliberate sexual pleasure) which is a higher level of abstinence than what is required in marriage (sometimes charity and prudence will mandate abstinence because the time is not right for a child or because of the ill health of a spouse). This is analogous to what we find in most sports (not that we are trying to say that any vocation is a mere sport!) It is superior to swim in the Olympic Games than at a local school sports swimming carnival. Those who compete in the Olympic level are required to meet higher standards and must, therefore, go into stricter training. This is not to say that Olympic swimmers are better or more necessary than swimmers who compete locally. Nevertheless, more is expected of swimmers who compete at the Olympic level.

While there is no disgrace if Olympic swimmers do not race well, there is scandal if they do not apply themselves to the standards required of them by not training or if they lead a lifestyle which compromises their ability to compete at their best. Despite this, they do not diminish the *reality* that it is superior to compete at the Olympics. Likewise, if a priest or religious fails to keep up the standards required by his/her vocation he/she

³⁹ *The Dress of Virgins*, ch. 22.

also causes scandal as in the case of sexual abuse, but he/she does not diminish the reality that their vocation is superior to marriage. Just as a person can win in a local school swimming carnival and a person can win in the Olympic Games, and yet both receive the award for first prize, so can married people become holy in their vocation as illustrated in the lives of canonised married saints. What is more, just as someone competing in a local school swimming carnival can break an Olympic record, a married person can rise to a greater degree of holiness than a priest or religious. Again, however, this does not diminish from the reality that consecration to God is a vocation that is superior to the vocation of marriage no less than it is superior to compete at the Olympic Games than at a local level.

This analogy helps us to see that all Christians are called to be holy and pursue the perfection of charity. It also enables us to see, as St Thomas Aquinas held, that bishops and religious occupy the state of perfection within the Church, for they are consecrated exclusively to God and for his service.⁴⁰ For this reason the Church has consistently referred to the consecrated life as the “state of perfection.”⁴¹ It is true that a person can be in the state of perfection and yet be deficient in inner perfection. However, this does not change the fact that God has revealed that celibacy is superior to marriage. Jesus said:

“Truly I tell you ... no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life” (Lk 18:28-30). St Paul also clearly says that virginity for the sake of the kingdom is superior to marriage. When he explains that in this admirable state a virgin enjoys full freedom to give her “undivided attention to the Lord” he concludes that her father “does well to give her in marriage, but he who does not give her in marriage does better” (1 Cor 7:32-35, 38).

In the Church’s teaching we find further explanations for the superiority of consecrated chastity. We find such explanations in the Fathers of the Church, the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,⁴² as well as the teaching of various popes, including Pope Pius XII,⁴³ and Blessed Pope John Paul II. The “consecrated life, which mirrors Christ’s own way of life,” states John Paul II, “is an especially rich manifestation of gospel values and a more complete expression of the Church’s purpose, which is the sanctification of humanity.” The gospel values that people consecrated to God manifest are “especially rich” due to their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. These enable them to live in greater conformity to Christ who was himself poor, chaste and obedient. This is why these vows are called the *Evangelical*

⁴⁰ cf. *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 184, a. 5, ad 2; II-II q. 186, a. 2, ad 1.

⁴¹ Paul VI, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Light of the Nations (Lumen gentium)*, 1964, no. 43; Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelical Witness (Evangelica testificatio)*, 1971, no. 36; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gift of Redemption (Redemptionis donum)*, 1984, no. 4; *Vita Consecrata*, 1996, no. 35.

⁴² no. 916.

⁴³ Encyclical, *On Consecrated Virginity (Sacra Virginitas)*, 1954, no. 32.

Counsels. “Evangelical” comes from the Greek word, “Euangelion” which means “good news.” The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience help spread the Good News, that is, they help *evangelise* because they unambiguously give witness to the Gospel (see Appendix B).

Blessed Pope John Paul II also stated that consecrated chastity proclaims and in a certain way anticipates the future age, when the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven will be achieved.⁴⁴ In other words, a person already begins to live in the here and now through consecrated chastity what will be the reality for all the faithful in heaven, where they, as Jesus said, “neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels” (Mt 22:30). Celibacy is, therefore, superior to marriage as heaven is superior to earth.

Can those who have lost their virginity consecrate their lives to God?

Some people may have lost their virginity without being unchaste, whereas others may have lost it by sinning against chastity. So, the answer to this question relates to people who fall into two categories: (i) those who were faithfully married, but are widowed or their marriage has been annulled; and (ii) those who have had sexual relations outside marriage, but have repented (this does not include women who have been victims of violence or abuse because in itself victimhood constitutes neither a violation of chastity nor a sin). Those among the first category can make an application to enter a religious congregation if they receive a pontifical dispensation and any children from their marriage are self-reliant, while those of the second category would need to remain chaste long enough to demonstrate that they are capable of dedicating themselves to perfect and perpetual continence (refraining from any deliberate form of sexual pleasure).

Those of the second category may ask, “If I was unchaste how can I now consecrate my chastity to God? How can I offer God something which he esteems, but which I have lost, stained, abused and broken?” Such people can feel unworthy, not only on account of the loss of their sexual integrity, but their memories of past sins and their struggle to turn away from all this. Before we consider how such people can respond to their vocation to consecrate themselves to Christ, we would do well to consider that these questions underlie what people called to marriage should also experience. If they do not, they would be mistaken to think that marriage is a simple ‘fix it’ solution to their struggles to be chaste.

Moreover, those who take for granted the importance of maintaining their sexual integrity are not likely to be able to give themselves totally as a gift to their spouse because chastity does not simply relate to what a person does *not do*, but what he or she *does do*, that is, donate themselves completely to their beloved. Being unchaste impairs

⁴⁴ *Vita Consecrata*, no. 32.

people's ability to give themselves as a sincere gift – whether their beloved be a human spouse or Christ – because it conditions them to: (i) hold back part of their gift for themselves; (ii) to see their beloved as the object of their own self-satisfaction; and (iii) love others only for their own sake, rather than love others for God's own sake.

As we can see, although much human effort and divine healing is required if a person has been unchaste, God can make all things new when a person repents. St Thomas Aquinas taught that since the effects of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (otherwise known as Confession) are always in proportion to the excellence of the dispositions with which this sacrament is received, the opportunity exists to arise to an even greater grace than that which a person had before he or she sinned, as was the case with Mary Magdalene.⁴⁵

St Paul said that a person who has been reconciled with Christ has become “a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). This means God makes all things new when a person repents of losing his or her virginity, or being unchaste. In one sense such a person's virginity is restored in a new way so that it is possible to offer it to God. Furthermore, when people consecrate their chastity to God, it is not only *their* chastity (along with their vows of obedience and poverty) which they live, but *Christ's*. The same can be said for every other dimension of their being. This happens on account of St Paul's words, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God” (Gal 2:20). This has coherence with what the Church teaches about the essential dimension of sacrifice:

Outward sacrifice to be genuine, must be the expression of spiritual sacrifice ...
The only perfect sacrifice is the one that Christ offered on the Cross as a total offering to the Father's love and for our salvation. By uniting ourselves with his sacrifice we can make our lives a sacrifice to God.⁴⁶

We would do well to apply what St Paul said to what we are considering. Despite whatever you have done with your body in the past, in order for you “to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God,” this form of “spiritual worship” can only be made when you do “not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect” (Rom 12:1-2).

The explanation above may help you to understand what Pope Pius XII wrote on this subject:

⁴⁵ cf. *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 89, art. 2.

⁴⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2100.

Innumerable is the multitude of those who from the beginning of the Church until our time have offered their chastity to God. Some have preserved their virginity unspoiled, others after the death of their spouse, have consecrated to God their remaining years in the unmarried state, and still others, after repenting their sins, have chosen to lead a life of perfect chastity; all of them at one in this common oblation, that is, for love of God to abstain for the rest of their lives from sexual pleasure. May then what the Fathers of the Church preached about the glory and merit of virginity be an invitation, a help, and a source of strength to those who have made the sacrifice to persevere with constancy, and not take back or claim for themselves even the smallest part of the holocaust they have laid on the altar of God.⁴⁷

As you can see, we would do well to consider that esteem for virginity is not overly focused on a person's body to the exclusion of valuing his or her heart, mind, and soul because the Church sees virginity primarily as a moral and spiritual state of being. Physical virginity is not the totality of what it means to be a virgin; rather, it is an outward sign of an undivided heart. For this reason, most religious congregations accept men and women who have lost their virginity, however, there are some forms of consecrated chastity which do require physical virginity, such as the Order of Virgins, otherwise known as Consecrated Virginity for Women Living in the World. Due to historical reasons (see Appendix C) the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity states in its introduction that a woman intending to enter this particular form of consecrated life must "have never been married or lived in public or flagrant violation of chastity." Thus, the Rite is direct and unambiguous in stating that consecrated virginity is not a possibility for widows, nor for women who have reconciled with the Church after being unchaste, such as premarital cohabitation.

If you still have any questions regarding this matter you would do well to raise them with your spiritual director or a priest you can trust.

What are the different ways a person can consecrate his or her life to God?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the various ways of consecrated life as "one great tree with many branches."⁴⁸ It delineates them as follows:

The eremitic life

Without always professing the three evangelical counsels publicly, hermits devote their life to the praise of God and salvation of the world through a stricter separation from the world, the silence of solitude and assiduous prayer and penance.

They manifest to everyone the interior aspect of the mystery of the Church, that is, personal intimacy with Christ. Hidden from the eyes of men, the life of the hermit is a silent preaching of the Lord, to whom he has surrendered his life simply because he

⁴⁷ *Sacra Virginitas*, nos. 6-7.

⁴⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, no. 917.

is everything to him. Here is a particular call to find in the desert, in the thick of spiritual battle, the glory of the Crucified One.

Consecrated virgins and widows

From apostolic times Christian virgins (cf. 1 Cor 7:34-36) and widows, 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 the respective status of virginity or perpetual chastity "for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven" (cf. Mt 19:12).

Virgins who, committed to the holy plan of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God 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 the Church. 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.

As with other forms of consecrated life, the order of virgins establishes the woman living in the world (or the nun) in prayer, penance, service of her brethren, and apostolic activity, according to the state of life and spiritual gifts given to her. Consecrated virgins can form themselves into associations to observe their commitment more faithfully.

Religious life

Religious life was born in the East during the first centuries of Christianity. Lived within institutes canonically erected by the Church, it is distinguished from other forms of consecrated life by its liturgical character, public profession of the evangelical counsels, fraternal life led in common, and witness given to the union of Christ with the Church.

Religious life derives from the mystery of the Church. It is a gift she has received from her Lord, a gift she offers as a stable way of life to the faithful called by God to profess the counsels. Thus, the Church can both show forth Christ and acknowledge herself to be the Saviour's bride. Religious life in its various forms is called to signify the very charity of God in the language of our time...

Secular institutes

A secular institute is an institute of consecrated life in which the Christian faithful living in the world strive for the perfection of charity and work for the sanctification of the world especially from within.

By a life perfectly and entirely consecrated to such sanctification, the members of these institutes share in the Church's task of evangelisation, in the world and from within the world, where their presence acts as "leaven in the world." Their witness of a Christian life aims to order temporal things according to God and inform the world with the power of the gospel. They commit themselves to the evangelical counsels by

sacred bonds and observe among themselves the communion and fellowship appropriate to their particular secular way of life.

Societies of apostolic life

Alongside the different forms of consecrated life are societies of apostolic life whose members without religious vows pursue the particular apostolic purpose of their society, and lead a life as brothers or sisters in common according to a particular manner of life, strive for the perfection of charity through the observance of the constitutions. Among these there are societies in which the members embrace the evangelical counsels according to their constitutions.⁴⁹

What are some common signs a person is called to one of these forms of consecrated chastity?

The most obvious sign

One of the most common signs is also the most obvious, so you may be thinking, “Why describe it?” The answer is simple. At the beginning stages of their discernment many who are called to consecrated chastity deny this particular sign, or are at least afraid of acknowledging it. What is it? It is a felt attraction to give oneself completely to Christ. If you feel this attraction, there is no need to be afraid because God always gives more than he asks.

Joy, peace, and tranquillity of spirit

A second sign is related to the one explained above because it is perceived as a consequence of the attraction. There is usually an unwillingness to make any sacrifice at the beginning stages of discernment due to human nature’s natural attraction to the opposite sex, but the surrender is happily made on account of perceiving the invitation to embrace a higher love. If you had to forgo a large sum of money in order to purchase your ‘dream home,’ you would no doubt feel the loss because there are many other items you could now not afford. Nonetheless, the surrender is joyfully made because you would be happy with the house you now value to be yours.

This is the main thrust of the *Parable of the Hidden Treasure* and the *Parable of the Pearl of Great Price*. The treasure and the pearl are analogous to our vocation. Jesus says of the man who finds the treasure buried in a field, “In his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Mt 13:44). As for the merchant who finds the glistening pearl of great price, “he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Mt 13:46). Notice how the cost involved does not impede these men from gaining a greater good, nor is

⁴⁹ CCC, nos. 920 – 930. For more information about each of these forms of consecrated life you would do well to read *Vita Consecrata*, nos. 9-11 which can be downloaded from: www.vatican.va

there any hint of dissatisfaction in the sacrifice required. On the contrary, it is with “joy” that the man sells all that he has in order to buy the field in which the treasure is buried. This joy, as the Song of Songs expresses, is consistent with what it is to be in love because “for love, a man will give up all that he has in the world, and think nothing of his loss” (Sg 8:7).

Jacques Philippe summarises the insights the Church has gained regarding the peace and tranquility of spirit that often accompany this joy:

The experience of the Church and the saints demonstrates a general law: what comes from the Spirit of God brings with it joy, peace, tranquility of spirit, gentleness, simplicity, and light. On the other hand, what comes from the spirit of evil brings sadness, trouble, agitation, worry, confusion, and darkness. These marks of the good and the evil spirits are unmistakable signs in themselves. Peace, joy, and the like, are certain fruits of the Holy Spirit; the devil is incapable of producing them in a lasting way. And since, by contrast, trouble and sadness are the sure marks of the evil spirit, the Holy Spirit cannot be the source of them.

There is, of course, the ‘sadness that leads to repentance,’ which is caused by the Holy Spirit. But if it really does lead us to repent, it quickly turns into joy. Moreover, that sadness does not itself actually come from the Holy Spirit, only insofar as the Holy Spirit has brought to light something within us that is wrong and needs to be made right. Out of all the marks of the good and evil spirits, the most characteristic of all is peace. The Spirit of God unfailingly produces ‘peace’ in our souls, and the devil unfailingly produces ‘agitation.’

In practice, however, things are more complex. An inspiration may come from God and still cause a lot of turbulence in us. But this turbulence does not come from the inspiration, which in itself (like everything that comes from the Spirit of God), is gentle and peaceable. The turbulence comes from our resistance to that inspiration. Once we accept the inspiration and cease to put up resistance to it, then our heart finds itself settled in deep peace.

This situation happens frequently. Certain inspirations of grace, when they reach us, meet with resistance from us, whether or not we are aware of it, and they arouse fear on the human plane, come up against our attachments to our own habits and the like. The idea of putting what the Holy Spirit is suggesting into practice worries us, and we start thinking: “How can I? What are other people going to think about me? Do I have the strength to do it?” and so on.

To describe this situation, we can use the image of a great river flowing tranquilly which produces eddies and whirlpools when it meets obstacles. If an inspiration truly comes from God, and we silence our fears and consent to it wholeheartedly, in the end we shall be filled with irresistible peace; for the Holy Spirit will not fail to produce such peace in those who allow themselves to be led by Him. This peace

sometimes dwells only in the very deepest part of the soul, while questions and worries remain at the human and psychological level, but it is there and it is recognizable.

By contrast, if an inspiration comes from the devil or from our own ambitions, selfishness, exaggerated need for being recognized by others, and so forth, and we consent to it, it can never leave our heart in total deep peace. Any peace it does bring will only be superficial and will soon disappear, to be replaced by disturbance. We may refuse to acknowledge this disturbance and relegate it to the depths of our minds, but it is still there, ready to re-emerge at the moment of truth.

We need to note this important point: *A divine inspiration can disturb us to begin with, but to the extent that we do not refuse it, but open ourselves to it and consent to it, little by little it will establish peace in us.* That is a fundamental law, which applies in the ‘normal’ situations of the spiritual life, and for those who are sincerely disposed to do God’s will in everything. However, the spiritual life and the interaction between the spiritual and psychological elements are complex, and so there may sometimes be trying situations, or particular temperaments, that make it difficult to apply this criterion in practice. But it is still a basic one and is found throughout the traditions of the Church.⁵⁰

Consistency

What may start as an unsettling idea becomes a recurring thought. People called to consecrate their lives to Christ increasingly find that there is a restlessness of spirit that only the things of God seem to fill. This experience does not emerge infrequently; rather, it is ‘like a dripping tap.’ Furthermore, the light God sheds about your vocation is not exclusively experienced during moments of prayer. That your calling can emerge during times when you are not even thinking about God is consistent with the fact that your vocation comes from God, not primarily from your own initiative and conscious effort to discern. Jesus made this clear when he said, “You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you” (Jn 15:16).

Desire to exclusively associate yourself with Christ and his Church

If you sense a desire to exclusively associate yourself with Christ in your own person, then you would do well to consider that this desire does not begin with yourself. Rather, it is a reciprocation of God’s desire to associate himself with you. St John of the Cross (who, together with St Teresa of Avila founded the Discalced Carmelites and whose writings are considered the summit of mystical Spanish literature) articulates this dynamic beautifully: “In the first place it should be known that if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more.”⁵¹ In other words, if your desire for God is so great, can you imagine what his desire for you is like in order for you to

⁵⁰ *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Helena Scott (New York: Scepter, 2002), pp. 51-54.

⁵¹ *Living Flame of Love*, stanza 3, no. 28.

desire him? It is this perception of being ‘sought after’ by the Lord which informs the desire of those called to represent Christ and his Church to others.

Sense of unworthiness

A consequence of wanting to associate oneself exclusively with Christ and his Church is a heightened sense of one’s unworthiness. You would do well to note here that while this is a common sign of a religious vocation, it need not be perceived as a disincentive. Many people who feel called to consecrate their lives to God often ask themselves if they are strong enough, holy enough or perfect enough. This is understandable because what underlies this question is a sincere desire to faithfully exemplify who they feel called to represent, namely, Christ and his Church. But what characterises a religious vocation is not perfection already achieved because if you had already attained perfection, why would you need a vocation to help you grow in perfection? Rather, a religious vocation is characterised by the conviction that God through Jesus Christ comes to us in our weakness with a power that penetrates our defenses, and leaves us in no doubt that we are loved, loveable and capable of giving love. Though the apostles were ordinary men with many failings God was able to do many things with them and through them.

An authentic calling humbles you

If you are humbled by the prospect that God may be calling you to a particular vocation this may be a sign that what you are perceiving is authentic. For example, St John of the Cross held that “communications which are truly from God have this trait: they simultaneously exalt and humble the soul.”⁵² Humility is a sign that trust in the Lord is not lacking and that one is placing little confidence in his own insights and is thereby less likely to be deceived by self interest (cf. Prov 3:5; 28:26). Father Dubay further explains:

Through the long centuries of the Christian dispensation, spiritual directors have considered humility as an important sign of authenticity. When St John of the Cross was asked his opinion of a nun who reportedly had extraordinary experiences, his analysis of her written account was negative because indications of humility were lacking. She had, he said, little fear of being mistaken. She was overly confident of her opinion. Where this healthy fear is absent, remarked the saint, the Spirit of God is never present. She seemed to desire to persuade others of the goodness of her experiences; she gave little evidence of humility, and her style lacked simplicity – it was exaggerated and affected. The saint was consequently little impressed with her experiences.⁵³

⁵² *Dark Night of the Soul*, Bk II, ch. 18, no. 2.

⁵³ *Authenticity – A Biblical Theology of Discernment* (San Francisco: Ignatius), pp. 132-133.

What is more, the humble man is less likely to err because, as the Book of Proverbs tells us, humility enables him to know where the source of light is (cf. Prov 3:5).

Desire to love inclusively

For those who value their faith and are called to marriage they would want God to be first in their heart too, but their love for him would be expressed primarily through their spouse and children. Consecrated chastity, on the other hand, enables those who embrace it to love Christ with an undivided heart. That is, their heart, together with the service they offer, is available to all his people. This being the case, those who are called to this vocation will sense within them a desire to live a way of life which makes this inclusive way of loving possible. If this desire is not realised it may, as St Paul said, lead to anxiety (see 1 Cor 7:32-35).

An increased capacity to love when considering your vocation

If you discover your vocation, what you discover above all is the way you are called to respond to the love of God. St Thérèse of Lisieux knew this deeply. “My vocation is love” she writes in her autobiography.⁵⁴ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that whenever you consider the prospects of your vocation, such consideration dilates your heart and enables it to love more. Tasks which you attempt to perform during moments when you are not so clear about your vocation feel to be difficult, burdensome, and therefore, tiring. Whereas, the same tasks, while considering them within the framework of God’s plan for you are often met with greater energy and fulfilment. This may not always be the case, particularly when such tasks are not associated in any way with what you perceive your vocation would require of you. Nevertheless, noticing this difference in kind can be helpful.

You can see yourself as a good husband or wife

No, this page is not out of place. You are still reading a booklet about consecrated chastity. It is unfortunate that many people see marriage and celibacy as states of life which detract from one another. Without an understanding of why marriage is a sacrament, consecrated chastity would make little or no sense. The answers to many of the questions above explain why this is indeed the case, however, let me further illustrate this with an experience of mine.

One of the most defining moments in the discernment of my vocation was a particular conversation I had with Fr Ron Hickman (a priest of the Archdiocese of Sydney who was much loved for the warmth of his charity), who I had been seeing for spiritual direction. He was the Parish Priest of Balmain at the time. He died in January 2010. As you may know, spiritual direction is usually only as helpful as what the one

⁵⁴ *Story of a Soul*, Manuscript B, ch. IX.

seeking direction discloses, unless the one providing guidance is gifted by the Holy Spirit to sense what the one seeking direction has not yet seen within his own heart. Fr Ron indeed had this gift, no doubt due to the wisdom he had accrued over the years because he asked me: “Does it worry you that you think you would be a good *husband* and *father*?” And with a twinkle in his eye he said, “...and a good *lover*?”

At that moment I thought, “Uh-oh, where is he taking me with this?” Then I thought to myself, “Maybe he’s right. Maybe he can see what I cannot see. Maybe I’m not discerning my vocation correctly. Perhaps the Priesthood is just a starry-eyed deliberation and that my real vocation is marriage because he perceives in me what I know to be true: that I have all the natural desires for marriage.” So I was honest with him and said, “Yes, it does worry me.” Upon hearing this, he lent forward, his eyes lit up and his face became visibly excited and he said, “GOOD! That means you will be a great priest!”

He went on to say that a priest is not called a “father” for nothing due to the spiritual paternity of his ministry and that just as a husband dedicates himself totally to his bride a priest dedicates himself totally to the Church which is the Bride of Christ. I could identify with what he was saying as it affirmed the true nature of my calling. I also felt that his guidance gave me an insight into his own fatherly heart.

This conversation enabled me to rejoice on account of discovering that the vocation to which God was calling me would take the fullness of my sexuality as a man seriously. When I freely and willingly consecrated myself to God in response to his love he took it, elevated it and supernaturalised it so that my natural desire to give myself in a communion of love with a woman is not denied, nor is it undermined or suppressed or repressed, but rather channelled and redirected to the Bride of Christ, the Church so that my love for her may be both passionate and fruitful.

Likewise, women who are called to consecrate themselves to Christ have the opportunity to channel their natural desire for spousal love towards Christ so that upon devoting themselves to him as his brides their love may also be fulfilling and fruitful.

Gravitation towards a founder and charism of a particular religious congregation

A common characteristic of a vocation to join a religious congregation is an attraction to its *founder* for the simple reason that it is how the first religious communities in the early Church were formed. What was true for Catholics then is true for us today. Those who joined the Benedictines, for example, were attracted by the sanctity of St Benedict. What they saw in him they wanted for themselves. Those who have become Benedictine monks or nuns today will tell you that they too were drawn by the spirit of St Benedict. The same can be said for those who have entered other religious congregations in relation to their respective founders, such as St Ignatius Loyola, St Francis of Assisi, St Dominic, St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, Venerable Catherine

McAuley, St Jeanne Jugan, and so on. This means that the most effective means of discerning which religious community God may be calling you to join is to find out as much as you can about its founder.

Those who have joined a religious congregation will also tell you that they resonate with the *charism* of that particular community. “Charism” comes from the Latin word, “charis” which means, “gift.” The Holy Spirit has given charisms to religious congregations throughout the centuries to assist the Church meet the most pressing needs of the times. Each of these charisms is given first and foremost to the founder or foundress and is passed on to each member only through the religious institute which extends it in time, making it visibly present in the world through its communal life and apostolate.⁵⁵ To give some examples, St Dominic was given the charism of sacred truth, hence to this day the Order of Preachers’ have an apostolate in preaching. Venerable Catherine McAuley was given the charism of being Mercy, hence the Religious Sisters of Mercy’s continue to bring the Mercy of God to others.

A desire to live the Word of God fully

We can clearly see this sign in the prime example of St Anthony of Egypt (250-350). St Anthony was a son of well-to-do parents, and on their death, in his twentieth year, he inherited their possessions. He had a desire to imitate the life of the Apostles and the early Christians, and while he was in a church one day, he was deeply touched when he heard the following words: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21).

He received these words of Christ as spoken personally to himself, sold his property and goods, and devoted himself exclusively to religious exercises. He began to excel in his spiritual life by visiting various other ascetics in the Egyptian desert, studying their lives, and trying to assimilate their own various practices, virtues and observances into his own life. Soon, many people came to visit him to learn from his sanctity. Thus a community of ascetics was formed. In this it is said that St Anthony was the founder of monasticism.

Generally, married people do not respond to the Word of God to the same extent as St Anthony did, nor should they be expected to because if they sold all their possessions this may very well lead them to neglect their responsibility to provide for their children. Those like St Anthony, however, who feel called to consecrate their lives to God by making vows of poverty, chastity and obedience feel called to live the word of God fully, that is, to take on all that Jesus says in a way which they know would not be possible in any other state in life. This sign does not just pertain to the initial response to

⁵⁵ cf. *Vita Consecrata*, nos. 19, 73; Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, *Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate* (1983), no. 25; World Synod of Bishops, *The Consecrated Life and its Role in the Church and in the World* (1994), no. 60.

their call, but to their desire to *contemplate continuously the Word of God*. On this point Pope Benedict XVI stated that this relates especially with:

regard to those forms of contemplative life whose specific charism to devote a great part of their day to imitating the Mother of God, who diligently pondered the words and deeds of her Son (cf Lk 2:19, 51), and Mary of Bethany, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened attentively to his words (cf. Lk 10:38). I think in particular of monks and cloistered nuns, who by virtue of their separation from the world are all the more closely united to Christ, the heart of the world ... the world today is often caught up in outward activities and risks losing its bearings. Contemplative men and women, by their lives of prayer, attentive hearing and meditation on God's Word, remind us that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (cf. Mt 4:4).⁵⁶

Furthermore, men and women called to consecrate their lives to Christ sense in their contemplation of the Word of God a desire to live it fully so that they give as much *witness* to it as possible. Regarding this Pope Benedict XVI stated: "A life devoted to following Christ in his chastity, poverty and obedience thus becomes a living 'exegesis' (Greek: 'explanation' or 'interpretation') of God's word ... Every charism and every rule springs from it and seeks to be an expression of it ... marked by the radicalism of the Gospel."⁵⁷

Calling is sometimes manifested through others.

It is not uncommon for those who are called to the Priesthood or the one of the consecrated ways of life to 'hear' the Lord calling them through the invitation of others. It could be something as simple as, "You would make a great priest", or "I can see you have the makings of a great religious sister/brother." No matter what a person's vocation is, it is always Christ who calls, not the community, but his call is often manifest through others and the Church. Sometimes a person through whom Christ speaks is the last person you would ever expect to help you consider your possible vocation, such as a person you have never met before. In my case it was someone with whom I was considering marriage! In the case of a religious sister I know, it was, of all people, an atheist! Other times it may emerge from people we know and trust. Despite who it is who brings our possible vocation to our attention we do well to open to the possibility that he or she is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Constancy

What St Paul says about our efforts to strive for our *salvation* can also be applied to our efforts to respond to our *vocation*. Pondering his words helps us to understand why

⁵⁶ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church (Verbum Domini)*, 2010, no. 83.

⁵⁷ *Verbum Domini*, no. 83.

constancy is a common characteristic of an authentic inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He says: “God is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose” (Phil 2:13). If God makes us “willing and able” then it is reasonable to conclude that we would experience the *constant assistance of the Holy Spirit*. (This would not be the case if we placed any obstacle in his path, such as ingratitude, an attachment to some form of immorality, or disrespect for his will.) Whether or not we are *constantly* moved by the Holy Spirit is what distinguishes an authentic inspiration of the Holy Spirit from an inauthentic one. Jacques Philippe provides a good explanation of this:

One of the characteristics of God’s Spirit is constancy. And by contrast what comes from our flesh or the evil spirit is unstable and changing. There is nothing more inconstant than our moods and wishes, as we know. The same is true of the devil: he pushes us in one direction, then another, distracts us from one project to take up a new one, so that in the end nothing gets done at all. One of the strategies he often uses to stop us from accomplishing a good project is to paint a different one in glowing colours, to distract us from the first one. Divine inspirations, on the other hand, are stable and constant.⁵⁸

What is so remarkable about this particular sign is not only the stable and lasting duration in which it is experienced, but how it inspires people to persevere in their pursuit of accomplishing God’s will, despite the fact that they had desired a different vocation for themselves prior to their discernment and/or despite whatever difficulty they may encounter in their initial response. This happens because when the Holy Spirit moves us to accomplish God’s will, in addition to enlightening our mind and touching our heart, he also moves our *passions*.⁵⁹ God wants us to serve him out of heartfelt passion, not mere duty. This is why we experience great fulfilment in doing God’s will even when doing so has its challenges. In short, when we experience this particular sign we perceive that God is not calling us to bend our vocation to ourselves, but to bend ourselves to our vocation.

Although an authentic calling motivates us in these ways which are almost measurable, that is, with a firm and constant influence, you cannot really experience this sign unless you subject it to the test of time. Without at least taking a first step you will not be able to sense whether or not your calling is stable and constant. If your calling and the sense of fulfilment it brings soon vanishes completely after spending some time with a religious community, this ‘evaporation’ could be a sign that God is not calling you to this vocation, or at least that he is not calling you to join that particular community.

⁵⁸ *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, pp. 54-55.

⁵⁹ This is evident in the lives of the saints. For example, if you read the following passages of Scripture you will see that St Paul was very passionate about spreading the Gospel: 1 Cor 9:26:27; 2 Tim 2:8-10.

Love for prayer

Another common characteristic of a celibate vocation is a love for prayer. This sign is also experienced in people who are not called to consecrated chastity, however, St John of the Cross explains that the ability to contemplate is experienced especially by those who consecrate their lives to God:

This occurs in some persons after a very short time, especially with religious; in denying the things of the world more quickly, they accommodate their senses and appetites to God and pass on to the spirit in their activity, God thus working in them.⁶⁰

Since a deepened ability to pray is experienced “especially [but not exclusively] with religious,” this sign may provide greater clarity, but only if it is experienced in conjunction with the other signs noted above. People in love are drawn to spending time with their beloved. A person called to consecrated chastity feels drawn to prayer no less than a husband and wife are drawn to enjoy one another’s company. For those who are called to consecrate their lives to Christ they experience prayer, particularly their ability to contemplate, as a tremendous gift.

St John of Cross describes three things which accompany the beginning stages in which a soul is receiving the gift of contemplation from God: (i) *lack of satisfaction* or pleasure in anything; (ii) *an awareness of God* that returns persistently in spite of distractions. This consciousness of God is indistinct and obscure, yet very real. Necessary occupations which demand the mind’s full attention naturally tend to inhibit a conscious awareness of God, but the thought of God returns as soon as one is free from them. This leads the soul to want closer union with God.

It may also lead to thinking that God is not being served well enough; and (iii) *difficulty meditating*, that is, employing the imagination in prayer. A person might even be unable to comprehend a book, yet, outside of prayer, one can carry on ordinary duties without the same difficulty. This happens on account of how God now begins to communicate himself to the soul, no longer through the senses, but by means of pure spirit. This third sign is not attributed to laxity or sin because when dryness in prayer derives from these causes they do not lead to the second sign stated above, namely, the persistent return of God in one’s memory, or an increased desire to serve God.⁶¹

If you possess a desire for more prayer than your present schedule permits you would do well to ask a religious congregation you are interested in if you could have a “live-in experience.” Most religious congregations at least have a room for guests where they can stay for a few days so that they can get a feel for and ‘test’ whether or not they feel fulfilled by the life of prayer lived by that community.

⁶⁰ cf. *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 3, no. 32.

⁶¹ cf. *Ibid*, Stanza 3, nos. 32ff; *The Dark Night*, Bk I, ch. 9, no. 2.

Increased love for the Eucharist

If Jesus truly is the Bridegroom of his Church we would expect that he would give his own body to us, just as every bridegroom gives his body to his bride and unites himself to her. It is *above all in the Eucharist* that Jesus does exactly this!⁶² Knowing this, it is precisely because consecrated chastity is motivated by spousal love for the Divine Bridegroom that a growing love for the Eucharist is a prominent sign that a woman may be called to this vocation. This spousal love also relates to men called to be priests. In virtue of being called to identify themselves with the Person of Christ they see being a minister of the Eucharist enables them to offer themselves in union with the Divine Bridegroom as they give their entire selves as a gift to Christ's Bride, the Church.

An increased love for the Eucharist not only includes a growing appreciation for the Mass, but an ardent longing to spend time before the Blessed Sacrament. For this reason the prospects of being able to 'live under the same roof' with the Lord in the tabernacle is among the most attractive elements of a vocational calling to the Priesthood and the Consecrated Life. This sign is not exclusively experienced by those who are called to the Priesthood and the Consecrated Life, however, it may provide further clarification if it is perceived in conjunction with the other signs described above.

Love for souls

The salvation of souls is central to the entire existence of those who have consecrated their lives to Christ. St John Vianney acknowledged this on a number of occasions when he was discerning his vocation upon which he said to his parish priest, "If I were to be a priest I would wish to win many souls to God." St Faustina also expresses this in a prayer she wrote:

O Eternal Love, who enkindle a new life within me, a life of love and of mercy, support me with Your grace, so that I may worthily answer Your call, so that what You yourself have intended to accomplish in souls through me, might indeed be accomplished.⁶³

Similar to love for prayer and an increased love for the Eucharist, this sign is not exclusive to virginal love because married people can share this same passion too, especially married evangelists, missionaries, catechists, teachers, and so on who are keen to spread the Gospel. Indeed it is in virtue of Baptism that all Catholics are called to help build up the Church. For this reason it may not help to see this sign in isolation. However, since this sign is keenly felt it would be good to describe it here so that you can allow this sign to give clarity in discernment by analysing it along with the other signs noted above.

⁶² cf. Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 26.

⁶³ *Divine Mercy in my Soul: Diary of Sister M. Faustina Kowalska*, (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Helpers, 1990), no. 1365.

Virginal love consists of a desire to centre all of one's energies exclusively on Christ and to seek to be enthralled by no one else but him. Consequently, this vocation brings about a yearning to see the object of their love become assimilated in the lives of others. St Teresa of Avila describes what it was like for her to experience this:

I've experienced this for some years: as soon as I see a [religious] person who greatly pleases me, with longings I sometimes cannot bear, I want to see him give himself totally to God. And although I desire that all serve God, the longings come with very great impulses in the case of these persons I like; so I beg the Lord very much on their behalf."⁶⁴

Love for souls does not only consist of loving those in whom Christ dwells, but for those who are estranged from him and are in need of his mercy. While contemplating an image of Christ on the Cross St Thérèse of Lisieux describes how her love for souls in sin is a participation in Christ's own thirst:

The cry of Jesus on the Cross sounded continually in my heart: "I thirst!" These words ignited within me an unknown and very living fire. I wanted to give my Beloved to drink and I felt myself consumed with a thirst for souls ... It was a true interchange of love: to souls I was giving the blood of Jesus, to Jesus I was offering these same souls refreshed by the divine dew. I slaked my thirst and the more I gave Him to drink, the more the thirst of my poor little soul increased, and it was this ardent thirst He was giving me as the most delightful drink of His love.⁶⁵

In writing to her sister, Celine, St Thérèse of Lisieux explains what motivates her in her love for souls:

Jesus wills that the salvation of *souls* depends on the sacrifices of our love. He is begging for souls from us ... Let us make our life a continual sacrifice, a martyrdom of love, in order to console Jesus ... to love Jesus with all the strength of our heart and to save souls for Him so that He may be *loved* ... Oh, make Jesus loved!⁶⁶

Such people cannot rest content without seeing everyone become more intimately united to Christ, especially since this desire not only relates to what is realised in the present, but in eternity.

Desire for spiritual guidance

Fr Thomas Dubay provides a good explanation of why a desire for spiritual guidance can be a sign of an authentic inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

⁶⁴ *The Book of her Life*, ch. 34, no. 7. See also *The Way of Perfection*, ch. 6, nos. 7-9.

⁶⁵ *Story of a Soul*, Manuscript A, ch. 5.

⁶⁶ *The Letters of St Thérèse of Lisieux and Those Who Knew Her: General Correspondence*, Letter 96, 15 October 1889.

In the work of spiritual direction, I consistently find that persons who give every sign of genuine prayer development and authentic holiness instinctively follow this practice. The Holy Spirit gives them the inner inclination, even a felt need, to submit the apparently divine communication to a priest in whom they can confide. This inclination may be taken as a sign of a genuine communication from God, whereas its absence suggests otherwise.⁶⁷

St John of the Cross states something similar:

As often as He reveals something to a person, He confers upon his soul a kind of inclination to manifest this to the appropriate person ... This is the trait of a humble person: he does not dare deal with God independently, nor can he be completely satisfied without human counsel and direction.⁶⁸

If you would like to find out more information about the consecrated life and/or if you would like to receive some assistance in discernment you are welcome to make an appointment for a confidential one-on-one chat with:

The Archdiocese of Sydney's Director
of Vocations, Father Michael de Stoop
Vocation Centre, Lv 11, Polding Centre
133 Liverpool Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
Phone: (02) 9390 5280
fr.michael.destoop@sydneycatholic.org

The Archdiocese's Vocations Promoter
Sister Anthony Mary Diago, RSM
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133 Liverpool Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
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Appendix A

The following publication relates to spiritual motherhood which is explained on pages ??-??.

In 2007, in result of a deepening awareness of the fruitfulness of spiritual motherhood, the Congregation for the Clergy requested women, especially those consecrated to the Lord, to pray that men will respond to their call to the Priesthood, thereby becoming their spiritual mothers. So doing, it produced a document entitled, *Adoration, Reparation, Spiritual Motherhood for Priests*⁶⁹ which contains true stories of women who have fostered priestly vocations in remarkable ways.

⁶⁷ *Authenticity – A Biblical Theology of Discernment*, p. 120.

⁶⁸ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk II, ch. 22, nos. 9, 11.

⁶⁹ www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2008-01/25-13/Adoration.pdf

Appendix B

The information regarding the Evangelical Counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience is provided here after having introduced them on page ??.

Poverty enables each member of a religious community to be thinking first of the needs of others before their own, while at the same time, gives witness to their faith in God's providence and that he alone can fulfil all their needs, both material and spiritual.

Chastity enables religious men and women to give witness to how love, for which all human persons deeply long, can only ultimately be fulfilled by the very source of love itself, namely, God. Consecrated chastity does not dispense religious men and women from the central task of human and Christian living, that is, to become persons of charity capable of deep, intimate relationships. If it did, they would not truly live according the image and likeness of God. This is where we see that consecrated chastity is fundamentally and essentially about *relationship*, not isolation. For this reason a celibate person would not be able live out his or her vocation without community just as a married man could not live his vocation without his wife! This is true even for a hermit. Although hermits do not live in a religious community as do other religious, they are still associated with a monastery and are under the obedience of a superior. Furthermore, their life is spent for the sake of the Church and the world and they still come into contact with the needs and gifts of others in doing so.

The adherence of religious to the evangelical counsel of *obedience* finds its expression in being faithful to the authority of their religious superiors and following their *horarium* which is their schedule, including prayer, common meals, and the work of its members. In addition to assisting them to be united in Christ, obedience enables them to live in conformity with him by taking delight only in the will of the Father (cf. Jn. 4:34).

Appendix C

The following information regarding the Order of Virgins relates to what is presented on page ??.

The Order of Virgins is the oldest recognised form of consecrated life in the Catholic Church, predating Religious Life by centuries. In the early Church virginity was principally an interior, personal decision that became publicly known only when a woman manifested her desire not to marry, or in the case of the virgin-martyrs, who died defending the faith, together with their own virginity, since they saw themselves as "betrothed to Christ." Consecrated virgins from the early Church include martyrs such as St Agnes, St Agatha, St Cecilia, and St Lucy.

The high regard for virginity was placed in the same level as martyrdom. Evidence of this is found in early Church writings which refer to the “crown of virginity” being parallel to the “crown of martyrdom.” Far from being considered as a misfortune, Martyrdom was highly esteemed as a way of finishing the Christian journey. It was considered to be the *dies natalis* (day of birth). This esteem and appreciation of martyrdom became evident in all the letters of St Ignatius of Antioch, particularly in his letter to the Christian community of Rome. The pervading message of this letter was that martyrdom is the best way to resemble Jesus Christ.

When the persecution of Christians lifted, the most serious Christian would search for a substitute to martyrdom, and would find it in the way of spiritual martyrdom, that is, in asceticism (self-denial), prayer, and the practice of charity. From here, the monastic current gradually developed upon which virginity eventually became separated from martyrdom. In his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, Origen of Alexandria (185–254 AD) was the first to express an appreciation for virginity, not in relation with martyrdom, but to the spiritual espousal of the virgin soul to the Word of God. His theological insights in virginity laid the groundwork for the writings of other Fathers of the Church. By the time of St Ambrose (340–397 AD) a ceremony of consecration had been developed upon which the virgin was spiritually espoused to Christ.

With the rise of monastic Religious Life beginning in the sixth century, the practice of consecrating women living in the world gradually fell into disuse as women gravitated more to living in monasteries until the Order of Virgins discontinued in the Middle Ages. However, the *Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity* was preserved by certain Religious Orders, who continued to use this *Rite* in conjunction with the solemn profession of contemplative nuns. Then in the latter half of the twentieth century, in accord with the Vatican II document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the *Rite of Consecration* was revised and the vocation of consecrated virginity in the world was restored.

Ever since virginity was separated from martyrdom, monastic life (and some of the other forms of consecrated life that have evolved since then), have not strictly required physical virginity as the Order of Virgins did. Now that the Order of Virgins has been re-established in the Church, that is, Consecrated Virginity for Women Living in the World, it still retains physical virginity as a requirement in keeping with its origins.