

## **CONSECRATED WOMEN LIVING IN THE WORLD**

### **A Personal Journey to Wholeness**

*Marion Morgan*

**T**HERE HAS LONG BEEN DISCUSSION regarding the balance between private devotion and public liturgy. This is a story of how I moved from a very subjective faith to the discovery of the concept of Church, through becoming a consecrated woman.

I was baptized and brought up as an Anglican. I taught at Sunday School and was a regular attender at our local church. In my teens, my mother fell ill and I became involved in looking after her. I had always been faithful to my nightly Bible reading and prayers and had developed a relationship with God. This relationship deepened as I tried to come to terms with the circumstances I was now in. Long walks with the dog on the golf links, often at night, led me into the beginnings of contemplative prayer.

By now I was also working full time in a managerial position, and trying to have a social life as well. The stress became too much and I realised that I had to leave home, even though this would leave the burden of caring for my mother on my father alone. I applied for a transfer at work and moved to Bristol. I was 25.

One of my first priorities was to find a church, preferably one which would satisfy my needs and bring me to some answers about the meaning of life and suffering, work and play. This was necessarily a time for a strong subjective faith! I asked for instruction in the Roman Catholic faith. In those days there was no Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults—I received a private course of 26 instructions with the parish priest. A few weeks into the instruction, I had an intense

experience in prayer in which I was sure I was being invited to a celibate life with Christ. I accepted the invitation, joyfully.

I was received into the Church four months later. Subsequently I was accepted by Bristol University as a theology student and life went on from there.

After some twenty years working in ecumenism, and after the deaths of my father and mother in the late 1980s, I needed to re-evaluate my life. My 'interior' prayer had dried up. I felt a great need to discover my faith anew in the 'outside', conscious dimension of my life. I became a freelance writer for the local free newspaper and in this capacity visited all sort of voluntary organizations, individuals, artists

and entrepreneurs, and wrote about their hopes and needs, achievements and aspirations. In the process, my mind gradually began to take in some of the momentous events in my own life.

I am currently a full-time carer for an autistic adult—who is quite demanding! It is just not possible for me to go on an organized retreat. Instead, we rent a cottage in the country and I make my retreat there, using the local church or religious community, where there is one, for the sacramental input. It was on one of these retreats that I realised that living a dedicated life on my own, without any formal structure, was only half the possible picture. All creation was ordered: it seemed to me that Christ was inviting me also to become part of this



*Marion Morgan at her consecration*

pattern and, specifically, part of the structure of the visible Church. When I returned home, I immediately made enquiries about becoming a consecrated woman as a member of the OCV (Order of Consecrated Virgins).

I had known about the OCV for many years, since Sr Elizabeth Rees was consecrated in 1980 and wrote about it in the *Catholic Gazette*. She now lives about twenty miles away, in my diocese, so I rang her. She told me that there were about 200 consecrated women in the UK, with more in the USA, continental Europe and elsewhere in the world. In our diocese there were eight. She sent me some information and said that the first step was to contact the bishop, which I did. After a year's preparation, I had the great joy of being consecrated myself on 31 July 2009.

The main question that everyone asked, was; 'What difference does it make?' There are many single men and women faithfully working in the Church and in their own fields, many of whom quite obviously base their life on Christ. Why make a public display of it? It was explained to me that consecration was a way of asking God's blessing on both myself and any work that I was doing, and of invoking the help of the Church.

In fact, the consecration itself was more even than that. It was arranged to take place at the regular 5.30 Mass at St Mary-on-the-Quay, Bristol, on a Friday evening. (St Mary's is where I was received into the Church, and was staffed by Jesuits until 1992. It is now served by the Society of the Divine Word.) Bishop Declan Lang came to carry out the ceremony and there were seven other priests concelebrating, including the three from the parish. Many friends, parishioners and family attended. I had expected to feel a warmth of intimacy with the Lord at the occasion, but I didn't. Instead, I experienced a deep awareness of the Christian and parish community and their love for me! The Church had been cleaned beautifully—no easy task, as the electricians had been working there in the previous week—the flowers were stunning, the choir and organist had been practising. Afterwards there was a buffet consisting entirely of gifts of food which people had brought. There was plenty for everyone, with lots over which was given to the local hostel for the homeless.

Everyone said how deeply moving they had found the ceremony and how much they enjoyed the happy atmosphere. It was one of those

moments when the interior reality perfectly matched the events taking place. The community was real, and I was a part of it. Christ was real, both within me and as I experienced him through the community. And I know that the community also were aware of Christ coming to them in their own hearts as the service of dedication proceeded, through the specific words of the ceremony.

Being an OCV is a new way of living out consecrated life; it is also growing and developing. So far, this year alone, there have been a further five consecrations in my diocese of Clifton, including one to the Order of Widows. As Sr Elizabeth said to me, there are new forms of community life springing up, comprising both men and women, married and celibate. There are growing numbers of women coming forward to have their lives, often already privately dedicated to Christ in celibacy, blessed and officially recognised by the Church through their bishop. OCVs have an obligation to read the Divine Office and, according to the British National Office for Vocation:

- A woman must be single, never having married or had children.
- She must have a living faith, already committed to a life of prayer and service.
- She must be financially responsible for herself.
- She must also be emotionally and psychologically stable and mature.

Consecrated women living in the world are not, of course, a new phenomenon. They are very ancient! They predate the enclosed religious orders and existed from the beginnings of the Church; initially girls from the age of twelve were able to choose between consecration to the Church and marriage. Moreover the word 'Order' can be misunderstood; in the early Church it meant a 'rank' or 'grouping', alongside the orders of bishops, priests, deacons and widows. Although there are consecrated women living in the world in very many countries, they have no international organizational structure, as one finds in the religious orders. The vows are made to the local bishop, within the local community (for us, the parish.) The Rite of Consecration itself was revived in 1970 following the Second Vatican Council.

There is networking, of course. There is a twice-yearly newsletter in the UK and an annual five-day summer gathering at Douai Abbey; every two years there is a retreat for Consecrated Widows at Ampleforth. There are links with other European countries and opportunities to attend international OCV conventions in Rome. But each member of OCV is unique in pursuing her own vocation and working out its implications and practical application in her life.

The fact that each vowed woman is free to discern her own specific call to love and service makes this particular form of living out consecrated life uniquely appropriate to today's social situation. Women, particularly in the West, frequently live alone, for a variety of reasons. Very many of them are not responsible to anyone except themselves. They may work alone or with others; they may have fulfilled professional lives and develop their own commitments. Although in previous centuries it was expected that consecrated women should live with others if they were going to engage in active ministry, their vocation can equally be lived out under these new conditions.

Consecrated women living in the world each have their own unique vocation and find God within this. Some work in parishes; some work in the caring or teaching professions; some are retired; some specialise in retreat work and spiritual direction. Some, like myself, are full-time carers. Because we have already found our way of serving Christ, it does not seem appropriate to join an order where our loyalty and commitment would be expressed through that particular order's charism and through their existing works and commitments. The primary commitment of the OCV is to be a woman of prayer. She normally lives within a parish, although this does not necessarily imply working in the parish: a number of consecrated women are solitaires.

In the third century Pseudo-Clement addressed two letters to the 'Consecrated Virgins', both male and female, describing their varied ministry, which included visiting the sick in their homes in order to pray and lay hands on them. In the early Syrian Church, it was normal to vow celibacy at baptism. Candidates were very thoroughly prepared over a long period of time, so consecrated life was rooted in the local community, with vowed men and women each responsible to their bishop. Similarly, today's consecrated women are ultimately responsible to their local bishop, while evolving their own style of life and ministry.

This adaptability and flexibility enables them to practise a ‘polyfills’ ministry—filling in the gaps and being available, since they have no community obligation, to do whatever is needed and is appropriate to their gifts.

An interesting aspect of this vocation is that consecrated women living in the world have no common spirituality. Of course they share a commitment to dedicated life. But their spirituality can be expressed through the Benedictine way, the Carmelite way, the Ignatian way, the eremitical way, or through a personal blend of these.

My consecration service reflected the Jesuit influence upon my own life and that of my parish, which the Jesuits served until recently. The Mass was that of St Ignatius, including the Rite of Consecration, with its call from and response to Christ the bridegroom. The hymns reflected the idea of consecration to the service of God through Christ. I am looking forward to exploring further the interplay between different traditions of spirituality as I come to know my fellow sisters more deeply. I feel more complete than I thought possible, and am happy to have found my place within our multifaceted Church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For further information about the Order of Consecrated Virgins and the Order of Consecrated Widows, please contact Sr Elizabeth Rees on 01458 851561; email: elizabethrees\_ocv@hotmail.com.