

# AUTONOMOUS RELIGIOUS LIFE: THE CONSECRATED VIRGIN LIVING IN THE WORLD

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ONE OF THE MORE challenging tasks for those drawing up the new Code of Canon Law was to formulate law in areas where there had been no law previously. An important example of this is the description of hermits and virgins in canons 603 and 604 of the new Code. There have always been hermits and virgins in the Church, but canonists have not tried to define them legally until now. This is because they do not fit into normal roman categories of religious life-style. Every other style of religious life involves belonging to a group — an institute, a congregation or a religious order. Its members live in a monastery, a priory, a convent. There is a superior and a rule. Hermits and virgins, on the other hand, are autonomous vowed men and women. They make profession in the hands of their bishop, and their vows are binding for life, but they remain responsible for their own life. The eastern Orthodox have a name for this. They call it 'idiorhythmic' life — life according to one's own rhythm. This autonomous vowed life has always been lived in the eastern and western Churches from earliest times, but it has generally been more important for the roman Church to legislate for its larger groupings of religious, rather than for its individuals. The present rite of consecration of a virgin was promulgated ten years ago, and is published in *The rites of the Catholic Church as revised by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council*, Vol 2 (Pueblo, New York, 1980). This year, legislation for hermits and virgins appears in the new Code for Canon Law.

The new legislation is to be found in Book 2 of the new Code, which is called 'The People of God'. The first part of this book (canons 204-329) deals with the faithful, including the clergy. The second part turns its attention to the pope, the bishops and the organization of the Church (cc. 330-572). Part 3 deals with religious life (cc. 573-746). It is here that the legislation for hermits and virgins appears. The section opens by defining religious life as 'a

stable form of living by which members of the faithful, following Christ more closely, are totally dedicated to God' (c. 573). The evangelical counsels are then described (cc. 575-601). Next the 'fraternal life' of an institute is discussed (c. 602) and then the autonomous life-style of hermits (c. 603) and virgins (c. 604).

Canon 604 runs as follows:

1. The order of virgins is also to be added to these forms of consecrated life. They are consecrated to God, mystically espoused to Christ, and dedicated to the service of the Church. Their intention of following Christ more closely is declared when the diocesan bishop consecrates them according to the approved liturgical rites.
2. Virgins can be associated together to observe their intentions more faithfully, to serve the Church in a way that befits their state and for their mutual help.

For the last few centuries we have consistently ignored autonomous religious life. We have urged people into institutions hemmed round with canonical safeguards, and insisted that anyone living outside the walls of these institutions cannot be a religious. The new Code of Canon Law invites us to a broader vision. Consecrated virgins living in the world publicly vow virginity in the hands of their bishop before the gathered christian community. Their vow is binding for life, though its dispensation may be obtained from Rome. Since canon 604 appears in the middle of the legislation concerning religious, virgins are obviously regarded as religious. In practical terms, this means that the Church regards them as religious sisters.

Why do virgins make one vow instead of three? Before answering this it is necessary to remember that different religious orders make different vows. Benedictines vow stability, conversion of life and obedience (chastity is not mentioned!). Dominicans simply vow obedience. Congregations founded more recently vow poverty, chastity and obedience. The different vow formulas which have evolved all express the same desire — to live according to the gospel counsels, with a solemn promise to try to do so.

The consecrated virgin is autonomous. She has no congregation or mother superior. She is answerable to her bishop as leader of the church in her locality. Canon law does not define the relationship between the virgin and her bishop: he simply consecrates her. He is not responsible for providing her with work, or housing or a salary. But it is desirable that he should be solicitous for her as one of his religious, and it is equally valuable for her to take the initiative and spend time with him every now and then. This has been a tradition

since the time of the great bishops like St Ambrose and their virgins. A virgin is not confined to live in one diocese. In these times of mobility, it can easily happen that she moves from one diocese to another. It is a courtesy for her to inform her bishop of this.

Is there provision for common life for the consecrated virgin? Virgins have lived a regulated common life for centuries in monasteries. Those who choose to be autonomous have a wide spectrum of possibilities open to them. They may remain single and solitary, living with their parents or on their own or attached to a religious house. They may live in small groups of two or three, as has been traditional with solitaries for centuries. They may find their community through living and/or working in a parish team, a school or college, a lively parish. Canon 604 makes no stipulations, but suggests that virgins might come together in groups for mutual support.

Who can become a consecrated virgin? Traditionally, the single woman. Canon law does recommend that 'what is laid down concerning members of institutes of consecrated life applies equally to both sexes' (c. 606), and there have always been autonomous religious of both sexes. However, the rite of consecration of a virgin, with its strong bridal imagery, is designed for a woman. In the past, men wishing to become solitaries have devised their own ceremonies, and may presumably do so again. In practice, few men are seeking such consecration today. Their need for autonomous vowed life, a life of service to the church, under the bishop, not necessarily lived in community, is largely fulfilled in the secular priesthood. Can widows become consecrated virgins? Again, the rite was not designed for this, though in medieval times in, for example Spain, widows became abbesses of large monasteries, and were considered to be suitable religious leaders because of their maturity and experience. Indeed, there is some evidence that the first virgins formed a young minority appearing among the ranks of the widows. Tertullian speaks of a 'a virgin sitting among the widows' (*De virginitate*) and Ignatius of Antioch (*d.* 107) talks of 'those virgins whom you call widows' (Letter to the Smyrnaeans). In much the same way a thousand years later, Catherine of Siena, young though she was, managed to get herself enrolled among the older members of the Third Order of St Dominic. Widows and single men looking for autonomous religious life will have to take to themselves canon 605 which encourages new forms of consecrated life that may emerge in the future: 'Diocesan bishops must strive to discern new gifts of consecrated life entrusted to the Church by the Holy Spirit, and aid their promoters to a better expression of their proposals and their safeguarding by appropriate statutes'.