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“Consecrated Virginity in the World: Witness to the Nuptial Mystery of Life in Christ”
Homily – 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year “A”
Cathedral of Christ the Light
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Introduction

In today’s Mass we have the rare privilege of witnessing a rite not many Catholics have the opportunity to see: the Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity in the World. This form of consecrated life is a revival in our time of an ancient order in the Church, going back, really, to the very beginning. The names of the early Christian virgins, many of them also martyrs, are familiar to us, as many have been entered into the ancient Roman Canon: Agnes, Agatha, Lucy, Cecilia, to name a few.

Consecrated Virginity and the Nuptial Mystery

This is a form of consecrated life lived out in the world, a *permanent, public* state in the Church; it is not a matter of taking vows characteristic of the consecrated life of religious, a consecration lived out in community life in a particular religious order, according to the rule of the order, and bound by the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Rather, this consecration is received through the hand of the diocesan bishop, and it establishes a particular important link to the local church – the consecrated virgin, like the diocesan priest, is given to the local church, she gives herself in prayer and sacrifice. One might ask, though: what meaning does this have for the life of the Church in our own time?

In 1996, following up on the Synod of Bishops on Consecrated Life, Pope John Paul II issued his Apostolic Exhortation – a sort of pastoral plan for the universal Church – entitled, simply, *Vita Consecrata*. He describes there the witness of the life of consecrated virgins: “They constitute a special eschatological image of the heavenly bride and of the life to come when the Church will at last fully live her love for Christ the bridegroom.” What he means is that the ultimate, eternal destiny of every Christian is union with Christ, a union very much like that of marriage, in which the two become one: our union with Christ is the union of spouses, as he is the Bridegroom and we are members of his Bride, the Church.

The modern vocation of consecrated virginity lived *in* the world, then, is a vocation which bears witness to this nuptial reality that lies *beyond* this world. In this sense, the consecrated virgin is an icon of the Church, and so becomes a bride of Christ. However, unlike religious consecration which is lived apart from the world in some way – apostolic as well as cloistered – the consecrated virgin stands in the midst of a myopic culture as a living witness of the future life of God’s Kingdom, a life in which there will be no giving or taking in marriage, but a life of intimacy with God for all eternity.

All of the various forms of consecrated life in the Church, though, stand as a witness and inspiration to all of the faithful to heed the basic command our Lord utters to every believer: “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” The numerous commands and exhortations we hear from God in both Old and New Testaments all have the purpose of helping us respond to this one basic commandment. This call to holiness stands in stark contrast – indeed, as a direct reversal – of the pagan religions in the ancient world. The pagan people worshipped gods *they* made in *their* own likeness; we worship the God Who made *us* in *His* likeness.

The Call to Holiness and the Sacramental World View

In today's gospel, our Lord explains fully what such holiness looks like: it is a life that goes beyond minimum observance; it is the imitation of his perfect love for us in his death on the Cross. On the Cross most especially he practices what he preaches: "pray for those who persecute you" – "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." To claim to be a Christian means that our lives must be visibly different from non-believers. "Do not the pagans do the same?" is a very sobering prompting of the conscience. If our lives are not visibly different, going way beyond the minimal ethical conduct generally expected, then our faith is in vain.

This is the essence of our Lord's teaching here and all throughout the Sermon on the Mount. And it is this essential moral teaching of our Lord which has become the moral foundation of Western Civilization, established and built upon by the Church for two millennia. The values enshrined in this moral teaching continue to be held in esteem and cherished by all down to our own time, values such as non-violence, selfless generosity, mercy and forgiveness.

This foundation of civilization is reflected in the teaching of St. Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians, which we heard proclaimed in the second reading for our Mass today: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" Everyone in the ancient world knew that the temple was the dwelling place of God. Thus, St. Paul is telling us that God dwells within us, and so our body is holy. The respect and reverence that is due to a church building, as the dwelling place of God, is also due to our bodies. This explains the profound respect the Church has always had for the body, and for all of human life, as witnessed to by the good works to which she has always selflessly dedicated her resources: health care, education, orphanages, homeless shelters, and so many other forms of outreach to the poor. Even the traditional prohibition against cremation is explained by this profound respect for the body. While the discipline has now been relaxed and cremation is allowed, the teaching has not changed, and so the Rite of Christian Burial requires that the cremated remains be treated in the same way and with the same respect as the body.

Our call to holiness, then, must be lived out *in our bodies*. Paganism was characterized by dualism, a separation between body and spirit: the body, as pertaining to the realm of the material, was seen as evil, or at least as inconsequential. All that mattered was the spirit, a consideration independent of the body. The Christian way of viewing the world is not dualistic, but sacramental: the physical world is the means through which God reveals the hidden, spiritual world of His Kingdom, the world for which He created us. This sacramental understanding of the created order engenders a profound sense of the sacred: in our worship, in our relationships, toward our bodies, and most especially with regard to marriage as the primary, privileged institution by which God reveals the mystery of His life in us. This is that higher wisdom of which St. Paul speaks: "the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God."

It is a curious irony that, in this post-modern age, the old pagan idea is popular once again: what one does with one's body has nothing to do with what it means to live in Christ. This is for sure that ancient pagan dualism, and the consequences are all around us, perhaps affecting even believers in subtle ways: a loss of the sense of the sacred, often even within the temple in the sense of the church building, characterized by a loss of the respect and reverence owed to the house of God. Even more so, it is characterized by a disregard for human life in a whole variety of ways, and disregard even of marriage. What is meant to be a lesson in self-oblation, of giving oneself to another, has become inverted and is now seen as a relationship that

is all about me: what *I* get out of it, what makes *me* happy, and so a relationship worth staying in as long as *I* derive some benefit from it.

Sadly, this way of thinking leaves innumerable victims in its wake: not only children deprived of growing up with both parents, but also those spouses who are committed to working out their marital difficulties but to whom the law gives no special claim over their husband or wife who cares only about their own immediate benefit. This is the culture we live in, it's all around us and in the air we breathe and so, again, affects even people of good will. That is why sometimes even when both spouses want to work through their difficulties, they do not find the support and wherewithal to do so. The now popular idea of marriage as an arrangement for the satisfaction of the adults who enter into it and who define it as they will is the ultimate profanation of the sacred, the banalization of the most precious, sublime gift that God has given us for the common good and for the good of our salvation.

Such thinking is that wisdom of this world which is "foolishness in the eyes of God." It is completely earth-bound, a way of living in which one is closed in on oneself and closed off from the transcendent dimension of our being created in God's image. This is the mentality that sees the pursuit of a religious vocation – be it one of the various forms of Consecrated Life, or the vocation of Priesthood – as "a waste." It sees only the material, and cannot see the spiritual dimension. It therefore fails to understand the sacramental meaning of the body in such a vocation. Notice that, while there are many male religious orders of consecrated life, there is no rite of consecration to a life of virginity lived in the world for a man. This is not because men are not called to the same purity; rather, it is because only a woman's body can convey what it means to be a bride, and thus serve as an icon of the Church, the Bride of Christ. In the same way, only a man's body can convey what it means to be a bridegroom, and so only a man can be an icon of Christ, the Bridegroom, in the sacramental order of the Priesthood.

Those who lack a sacramental understanding of the world see these states of life not as vocations, but as jobs, no different from a number of any other jobs in the Church. This, though, is just one consequence of looking at the world this way. So, for example, instead of understanding our worship as a participation in the heavenly worship joined in the communion of saints and as a form of ritual which is given to us by the Church for us to appropriate to ourselves, they see it as an action of the community, by the community and for the community to change and adapt as we will for our own self-affirmation. Ultimately, the very sense of vocation is undermined: it is not the commitment and very identity to which God calls me to persevere, in good times and in bad, for the sake of my salvation, but a way of life to which I give myself as I deem fit and for as long as it makes me happy.

It cannot be that way with us. No, we must regulate our life according to the sacramental understanding of the created order, marked as it is by a profound sense of the sacred and sensitivity to the spiritual, transcendent dimension of our human nature. *This* is what must distinguish our life as different from those who do not believe, and we must manifest it in very concrete ways through our attitudes and behavior, respecting the sacredness of our bodies, of our worship, of all human life, of the gift of our vocation.

Conclusion

The commandments God gives us are to help us in the pursuit of holiness, so that we might be like him. For the true believer they are not burdensome, but are rather like instructions a bride receives on how to prepare for her wedding day. As members of the Church we are that bride, called to join ourselves as one in Christ. To live in this way requires wisdom from above,

a wisdom which is folly to this world, but to those who believe, the wisdom that opens us to the divine grace that brings to perfection our life in Christ, so that we become perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect.