

# Concerning Virgins

*by Sister Consolata V.S.*

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Those of us who are anxious to implement as fully and as quickly as possible the Constitutions and Decrees of the Second Vatican Council have enough and more than enough to inspire, encourage and occupy us. So much to be done, and each of us has only a life-time in which to do our utmost – so that the less obvious and less exciting things, which will apparently have little immediate result, are liable to pass unnoticed. For example, since 1936 there have been numerous pronouncements concerning vocations to the priestly and religious life. It is only in the past year or so, in England at any rate, that it has ceased to be bad form to refer to the appalling shortage of vocations, so that now there is no need to speak of it in veiled and polite terms, and we can face it for what it is, a rapidly accelerating process which will take all our prayer, determination and ingenuity to arrest. The first necessity of course is that we should want to do something about it, and not, as living members of the Church, exempt ourselves from the responsibility.

On April 26th, last year, speaking on Good Shepherd Sunday, which is the annual World Prayer Day for Vocations, Paul VI said:

‘This most noble work of promoting sacerdotal and religious vocations, so essential to the life of the Church and so beneficial to the whole world, demands profound attention in all aspects. In other words it must be promoted with infectious enthusiasm, supported by ardent prayers, stimulated by intense desires, pursued with constant zeal and sustained by universal charity.’

He spoke of the Church’s

‘formidable mission of evangelisation and salvation’

and went on

‘we trust that from the generous multitude of Catholics of the whole world, mindful of their grave and responsible duty, and united with Us in anxiety, there will arise sympathetic and fervent supplications, especially on this World Day of Prayer.’

The Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of the Religious Life, promulgated on October 28th, 1965, called for more than sympathetic and fervent supplications, declaring ‘Priests and Christian educators should make serious efforts to foster religious vocations, thereby increasing the strength of the Church, corresponding to its needs.’ The Decree on Priestly Training, promulgated on the same day had a good deal more to say on the subject, and notably this:

‘The duty of fostering vocations pertains to the whole Christian Community, which should exercise it above all by a fully Christian life. The principal contributors to this are the families which, animated by the spirit of faith and love and by the sense of duty, become a kind of initial seminary, and the parishes in whose rich life the people take part. The teachers and all those who are in any way in charge of the training of boys and young men, especially Catholic associations, should carefully guide the young people entrusted to them, so that they will recognise and freely accept a divine vocation.’

There is a good deal more in the same strain, which leads to one obvious conclusion. We, as a community, are responsible for fostering and encouraging priestly and religious vocations. We may tackle it from various points of view, according to where it seems to us the reason for a vocation shortage lies, but tackle it we must.

In this article I shall be referring indiscriminately to priests, brothers and nuns, as ‘consecrated men and women’. Most certainly the term ‘consecrated’ belongs to the baptised Christian, but as it is exceedingly difficult to find any term which will cover the three categories, let it be for the present ‘consecrated men and women’ and ‘consecrated people’.

Two more quotations, to justify these ‘whole-time’ consecrated lives. First, Cardinal Suenens, writing in 1962:

‘At a time when communism is trying to impose by force a new social order which destroys the spiritual personality of man, it is more than ever important that the Church should be able to offer the world a picture of living communities where a voluntary communism reigns, based on divine worship and brotherly love, as a foretaste of what in many aspects a society open to social Christianity and faithful to the Gospel would be.

This apostolic life . . . includes the supreme reason for its existence, the apostolate par excellence, which consists of “testifying with great power to the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ”. This testifying must continue on a living faith in the resurrection of Christ.’

Finally, a splendid tour de force from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which insists that the religious life be seen as

‘a sign which has the power of effectively attracting all the Church’s members to a lively performance of the duties of the Christian Vocation. The People of God have here no abiding city; they are seeking rather the city that is to come. The religious state, while giving its followers greater independence of earthly cares, gives all believers a clearer demonstration of the truth that the good things of heaven are already present in this age. It also bears a greater witness to the gaining of the new and eternal life which comes from Christ’s redemption. It gives notice of the resurrection to come and the glory of the kingdom of heaven. It is

a closer imitation, a perpetual presentation in the Church of the way of life which the Son of God took up on His entry into the world to do the Father's will, and which He proposed to the disciples, His followers. To sum up, it has a particular way of bringing to light the kingdom of God in its elevated position above all earthly goods, and the supremacy of its requirements; it shows all men the massive dominance of Christ's rule, and the unlimited nature of the Holy Spirit's power at work in the Church in a remarkable way.'

If the Church is a sign whereby all mankind can know that God has visited His people, consecrated men and women are an intensification, a personification of that sign. A vocation to this life makes one more 'significant', and while it is true that it is, aside from the priesthood, a state of life which should be aiming, all the time, at making itself unnecessary, it is going to continue to be very necessary for a long time to come. Until Christians can be seen more and more fully to be the light of the world, we are going to need 'recognisable' professionals. Until the ultimate manifestation of Christ seems predictably just around the corner, there will be a place for, and a challenge for consecrated virginity. Nor is there any lack of young people with the vitality to respond to the challenge and to concentrate all their energies of loving on being leaders and visible witnesses in the people of God. Nevertheless, along with the fact that this life is a sign, and a necessary sign for men; along with the fact that there are plenty of young people vital enough, enlightened enough to live it; along with the fact, above all, that God calls to this life, and gives abundant strength and blessing to those who will respond, there is the negative side. Less people are undertaking it, and more people who have undertaken it are abandoning it. From all walks of life emerge all sorts of explanations and suggested remedies, most of them with a certain amount of truth in them. The reasons for the many breakdowns and real and apparent defections have become by now so complex that it is immensely difficult to discern them. I do not think we can legitimately place most of the blame at the feet of 'young people today' and 'the world of today'. Young people vary very little over the ages, and the world is still groaning its way towards unity, with a little more conscious help from humanity than it has had in the past. Since it is our duty to study the problem and try to arrive at the cause and remedy, I suggest that there is one more or less recognisable reason for the 'vocation crisis' for which we are all to some extent responsible, and which we can do something about. It helps me, in my thinking, to call it a threefold breakdown in communication:

1. between 'consecrated' people and their contemporaries 'in the world'.
2. between religious themselves in their own communities; priests in their parishes; between the clergy, secular and regular.

### 3. between priests and nuns.

The first has been recognised by the Church, and provided we ourselves participate fully in our own sphere, we may confidently look forward to the implementing of the instructions and plans concerning pastoral care, seminaries, and the adaptation and renovation of the religious life. There is no need to refer to it here except perhaps on one point – that while much is demanded of priests and religious, that they should become more ‘human’ and more ‘relevant’ to the lives of men, there is also a habit among the laity which must be acquired with some determination. An attitude of mind which looks upon priests and nuns as people, as human beings and individuals, will help enormously those priests and nuns, in particular the shy ones, and those who have been trying in time-honoured fashion for years and years to cultivate their ‘custody of the eyes’, their ‘otherness’, bravely to meet their fellow-men with friendliness and fellowship. Gentleness and courtesy in easing these new-born overtures into the world, will help the birth and reduce the inevitable trauma.

I think there is cause for optimism as regards the second factor, although it is a dreadful reality that sheer lack of human communication is still causing numbers of consecrated people to give up the struggle, and seek human love and understanding and real community outside their consecrated state. (Let me hasten to say that this is not a universal condemnation of religious community life; but even a few religious families living as strangers are a few too many.) Gradually, and perceptibly, the ice floes are breaking up and melting, and there are signs of spring in places where those dedicated to love live together. ‘Where there is charity and love, there the God of love abides.’ The oil has not ceased entirely to trickle down Aaron’s beard and now it is truly beginning to flow down the neck of his garments. Lack of personal relationships is seen at last as psychological disorder, and not as holy detachment.

The third factor has not, as far as I know, been considered very much. This is no attempt to deal with it fully – it is rather a pat on a sleeping dog, who may turn out to be a Cerberus or a St. Bernard. Yet I believe that if there were more conscious co-operation, greater mutual trust and respect between consecrated men and women who exercise a complementary function and can therefore ill-afford to underrate each other’s existence, it would have a very positive contribution to make in reducing the breakdown of vocations, as well as in increasing the efficacy of the apostolate. Here and there we find already signs of a rapprochement, with outstandingly good results.

Fr Ferdinand Valentine, O.P., writing in 1954, touched on the subject briefly:

‘The influence of religious sisters is immeasurably greater than is generally supposed. By reason of their womanhood, and sense of motherhood expressed in the care of the sick, needy and helpless,

they are, as women fitting consorts and helpmeets of the priesthood and indeed its inspiration insofar as they reflect the maternal heart of Mary. Their influence also tends to bring forth and to fortify the natural manly and resolute qualities of the true priest and to encourage him to appreciate still more the dignity of his priestly acts as one who wields the divine power of spiritual fecundation. It is in this sense that we should look upon and revere the religious sister as the heart of the priest. This relationship is more fruitful because both participate in the virginity of the Mystical Body which releases into the apostolate a paternal and maternal love, as dispositive and complementary endowments contributing to the salvation of souls.'

Like the prophets of old, the writer may well have uttered words he did not fully understand, for which the time was not ripe. It may not be ripe yet – or it may be almost past.

The Church, sacrament of the unity of humankind, is con-corporate with the risen Christ, the perfect Man, and forms together with Him the perfect community. This reality is reflected again in sign when the consecrated man and woman work together to hasten the coming of the Kingdom. Admittedly, many a heresy has come between them to prevent them consciously associating in the task. Nuns are veiled in anonymity to the average priest, while 'Father in the parlour' can still cause a flutter of linen table-cloths. Is it not conceivable that they will grow to fuller stature in Christ if a little more attention is paid to the greatest human source of psychological development? In no sphere, even that of consecrated virginity, does man or woman go to God alone. The old-womanish or too-jolly bachelor, and the girlish or desiccated spinster are as immature and sterile in the service of God as anywhere else. Even those who are called by God to remain 'in the world' and not to enter the clerical or religious state, need a miracle of grace and nature combined to attain to a mature psychological balance and full vitality without at least normal social relations with the opposite sex. No one will deny that grace can, and often does, supply the balance, and that for many consecrated people the direct relationship with God in prayer brings about a breadth of vision, a compassion, an all-embracing love of humanity; but for the majority of us the kind of psychological segregation which we regard as the inevitable and necessary concomitant of physical virginity, often brings about an imbalance, if not a diminution. I have even read in spiritual books that nuns must necessarily remain immature to a certain extent, that they will never be as fully 'developed' as their married sisters in the world. Can this really be so? Should celibacy really produce so much effeminacy, so many over-grown school-boys? Surely the total gift of self to God, which directs every energy towards the generating of His love, should not bring about so many cases of apparent diminishment of personality.

Various voices have been raised in the 'No celibacy' slogan. This seems to miss the whole point, for it fails to locate consecrated man and woman in the forward thrust of humanity. In the evolving Church, priests and religious are leaders in love if they are anything at all. We know that in human history the love of man and woman has inspired tremendous achievements, urged talent into genius, called forth fidelity and sacrifice. Every true and holy love has brought mankind steadily nearer to fulfilment in God, for love cannot be divided and to make love is to incarnate Him. We may well ask ourselves how consecrated virginity can lead to greater heights than this. And yet, after hacking our way through an undergrowth of fear and negation, we come inevitably to the sacredness of that garden enclosed, wherein springs the fountain of life. To see the advantage of virginity totally in terms of availability for the work of God has proved a satisfactory answer for some. Certainly consecrated men and women are needed to co-operate in building-up the people of God. But the 'availability' explanation leaves, I think, a good deal to be desired. There is still great truth in the concepts of 'father in God' and 'spiritual maternity' but this can begin to look suspiciously like our childhood games of mothers and fathers, even if carried on at a wholly commendable and highly spiritual level. One needs to be aware of a deeper truth, that it is something to do with the complementary function of consecrated men and women; something to do with growth of the Church as she leads the people in love towards the 'kingdom's full achievement'. We are unique in being able to co-operate consciously in our own evolution. Consecrated men and women have accepted a breath-taking vocation, that of leading the people of God forward into the new mode of loving, which will transcend physical union, since we shall know not only God but each other face to face. They are the path finders, who lead the people to the end of exploration. They are not to go single-file, as separate armies of Titans and Amazons. They are to lead as men and women towards the perfection of man – and womanhood.

All this is very grand and theoretical, but isn't it highly dangerous and full of naughty implications? Dangerous, indeed, as every worthwhile forward thrust must be, but divinely guaranteed. Certainly it is not a cry of 'Take your partners for the parousia'. The implications are too urgent and too sacred. What is implied is that consecrated people need to be aware of their complementary function, and of the help and support it is their sacred duty and privilege to give to each other. By acting all too frequently, implicitly at any rate, as separate species, consecrated men and women reduce tragically and even culpably their potential for good. It is as though they tried to go one better than Paul, whose affectionate greetings to and appreciation of his female co-workers be-sprinkle his letters. Is there a practical hint at least for us? Many of us are aware of parishes where relations between presbytery and convent are either

strained or non-existent; where the rivalry between male and female leaders of the 'caring community' is a source of scandal to the laity. At a slightly higher level we may find priests appreciative of the nuns who 'do the sacristy' and clean the church, and nuns speaking in touching humility and gratitude of father who is so kind to them and occasionally asks them to help him by visiting the hardened sinner who won't let the priest come in. This is co-operation of a kind, certainly, but mingled with a condescension on the one hand and a servility on the other which is surely not that meant by Paul when he refers to his co-workers in Christ. Consecrated men and women must increasingly recognise and respect one another as persons with a complementary function, must love each other with Christian love, or admit to total inadequacy as signs of the ultimate community. Just as we are setting about to repair the scandal whereby the Eucharistic meal has become to many the sign of disunity in the Christian heart, so too must we all accept our responsibility in making consecrated manhood and womanhood the sign of 'how these Christians love one another'. If we do not see the consecrated vocation in this light we may well see it as a 'strange, piteous and futile thing' and one who embraces it as having chosen annihilation; a nothingness neither divine nor human.

The Church has laid upon us the charge of fostering vocations to what are known as the 'states of perfection.' We are jointly responsible, under God, for the building up of this 'inner community' – an élite certainly – whose divine vocation it is to lead the people of God in love. If we accept this duty, as indeed we must, we shall work in our own sphere to increase understanding of and commitment to the consecrated life. The outward manifestation of this life is changing gradually to a more obvious conformity with its inner reality. We must encourage, promote and appreciate this renovation and adaptation and meet it with a response of our own; a response which will not only cause us to strive in every way to bridge the gaps and build up the communication, but will also consciously foster in the young a desire to embark on this adventurous journey into the future. Our own awareness of consecration as baptised people and the impact which our membership of the caring community has on our own domestic professional and social surroundings, will create a milieu in which the life of consecrated men and women is seen in its full glory and a divine call to that life as something to be earnestly prayed for and eagerly accepted.