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Presentation of the Instruction "Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago" on the "Ordo virginum"

Presentation by His Eminence Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, prefect of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life

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“Consecrated virgins are the image of the Church, bride of Christ”: thus the decree of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship which, by the mandate of Blessed Paul VI, promulgated the new Rite of Consecration for virgins, presented consecrated women in the *Ordo virginum*. It was 31 May 1970. As occurred in the apostolic communities and in the patristic age, after centuries the possibility of receiving this consecration was granted also to women who remain in their own ordinary life context, and was therefore no longer reserved to nuns.

The instruction *Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago*, which the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life present today, returns to that definition. After the liturgical rite and the norms contained therein, the Instruction is the first document of the Apostolic See that examines the features and the discipline of this form of life.

In two years' time, in 2020, the restored Rite will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary: over the past half century, with the rediscovery of the particular Church, this peculiar female vocation has been known and loved all over the world. Consecrated virgins are present in all the continents, in very numerous dioceses, and offer their own witness of life in every area of society and of the Church. In 2016, during the Year of Consecrated Life, an approximate statistic estimated by default the presence of over five thousand consecrated virgins in the world, in continuous growth.

The Instruction on the *Ordo virginum* intends to respond to the requests that numerous bishops and virgins consecrated in recent years have presented to the Congregation for Consecrated Life about the vocation and witness of the *Ordo virginum* and its presence in the universal Church and, in particular, on vocational formation and discernment.

Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago is intended to help discover the beauty of this vocation, and to help show the beauty of the Lord Who transfigures the life of so many women who experience it every day.

Today I express my hope of organizing and seeing the consecrated virgins of the whole world gather in Rome for a new international meeting in 2020, to celebrate with Peter the fiftieth anniversary of the Rite.

Presentation by H.E. Msgr. Rodríguez José Carballo, O.F.M., secretary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life

On the eve of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the restoration of the ancient *Ordo virginum*, at the behest of Blessed Paul VI in 1970, and considering the great development of this form of consecrated life throughout the world, the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life wishes to offer to all bishops, consecrated virgins, women in formation and to those who are interested in this particular vocation, a document of guidance and promotion.

The Instruction *Ecclesia Sponsae Imago* on the *Ordo virginum* is the result of wide consultation, a synodal work that has involved the participation of bishops, consecrated virgins and experts from all over the world, who have all offered their contribution to highlighting the specificities and the riches of this form of consecrated life.

The context in which the document arises, the reasons for its publication and its objectives are outlined in the Introduction, after a broad historical premise, aimed at highlighting the peculiarities of the *Ordo virginum* and its original ecclesial configuration.

Some passages of the New Testament show that already in the apostolic communities women were present who, welcoming the charism of virginity, embraced it as a stable condition of life so as occupy themselves with an undivided heart to matters of the Lord. Together with other forms of ascetic life, the choice of virginity flourishes spontaneously in all the regions where Christianity spread, assuming the characteristics of a state of life publicly recognised in the Church as the *Ordo virginum*, with an expression analogous to that used to indicate other *Ordines* (*Ordo episcoporum*, *ordo presbyterorum*, *Ordo diaconorum*, *Ordo viduarum*).

Referring to Pauline teaching, the Fathers also referred to Christian virgins the title of *sponsa Christi*, which is proper to the Church: indeed in them they saw reflected the image of the Church, virgin because she preserves the integrity of faith, bride because she is inextricably united with Christ her Spouse, mother because the Risen Crucified generates new life in her according to the Spirit. During the period of persecution, numerous Christian virgins faced martyrdom; later their virginal choice continued to be surrounded by particular esteem and consideration. Since the fourth century, entry into this state of life took place through the solemn rite of *consecratio virginum*, presided over by the diocesan Bishop. The consecrated virgins remained in their family and social environment, and participated actively in the life of the Christian community gathered around the bishop, manifesting the eschatological character of the Church, the Bride purified and made holy by the love of the Spouse, watchfully awaiting his glorious return and anticipating the encounter with Him.

During the Middle Ages, with the establishment of monasticism and for complex historical and cultural reasons, the consecrated virgins gradually gathered in monasteries, and in canonical legislation the state of consecrated life of women came to be identified with the cloistered contemplative life. The rite of the *consecratio virginum*, used only in some monasteries, was enriched in its celebratory form, but its belonging to the monastic community made it less rooted in the Christian community, as had been characteristic of the primitive and patristic age, with its direct reference to episcopal authority. Except for very few exceptions, this situation persisted until Vatican Council II.

The impetus to ecclesial renewal that preceded the Council inspired new interest also with regard to the rite of *consecratio virginum* and laid the foundations for its revision, then ordered by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 80.

On the special mandate of Blessed Paul VI, on 31 May 1970, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship promulgated the new *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum*, in which it was possible to consecrate women who remain in their ordinary life context, according to the modalities of the ancient *Ordo virginum*. The liturgical text itself and the norms contained in it delineate in the essential elements the physiognomy and the discipline of this form of consecrated life, whose institutional character - precisely and distinct from that of the institutes of consecrated life - was subsequently confirmed for the Latin Church. from the Code of Canon Law in can. 604.

Resumed after many centuries and in a radically changed historical, social and ecclesial context, this consecration was revealed to have a surprising force of attraction. Today, fifty years have not yet passed since the promulgation of the *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum*, and there are virgins consecrated in the five continents, in many dioceses, in very different ecclesial and social contexts. During the Year of Consecrated Life, it was estimated, very approximately, that there are over five thousand consecrated virgins in the world. Numerous diocesan bishops have promoted the reappearance of this form of consecrated life, directly entrusted to their pastoral care.

With the Instruction *Ecclesiae Sponsae Imago*, the Congregation for Consecrated Life, which in accordance with its own competences has always paid constant attention to the *Ordo virginum*, intends to respond to the requests received from many parts, for indications to guide the action of diocesan bishops in its pastoral care. The elaboration of the document has treasured the experience of these decades, from which it clearly appears that the identity of the *Ordo virginum* must be preserved respecting and enhancing the diversity of the ecclesial, cultural and social contexts in which the charism expresses itself, and taking into account local situations.

The Instruction is divided into three parts: the vocation and witness of the *Ordo virginum*; the configuration of the *Ordo virginum* in the particular Churches and in the universal Church; vocational discernment and formation for the *Ordo virginum*.

Starting from the biblical and Christological foundation of consecrated virginity, and having the consecration ritual as its constant reference, the first part presents the charism, the spiritual features and the form of life assumed by the women who constitute the *Ordo virginum*. The indissoluble connection between baptismal consecration, which integrates into the generative and fraternal fabric of ecclesial relationships, and virginal consecration, for which the woman is constituted an eschatological sign of the Church as Bride and in the virginal condition, opens up to the gift of spiritual motherhood. The Instruction emphasizes the absolute gratuitousness and the Marian profile of this vocation, recalling that the Virgin Mother of God is *Virgo virginum*, mother, sister and teacher of the consecrated virgins. Called in the *sequela Christi* to embrace her chaste, poor and obedient lifestyle, consecrated persons dedicate themselves to prayer, penance, works of mercy and the apostolate, each according to their own charisms, welcoming the Gospel as a fundamental rule for the their life. The peculiar element of the *Ordo virginum*, which distinguishes it from the Institutes of consecrated life, is that the charism of virginity is harmonized with the proper charism of each consecrated person, giving rise to a great variety of responses to the vocation, in a creative freedom. that demands a sense of responsibility and the exercise of serious spiritual discernment. Although we can draw on the richness of the different spiritualities present in the Church, the virginal charism is shaped above all by prayerful meditation on the Word of God, by the celebration of the Sacraments and the Liturgy of the Hours: they find unity and orientation not only in the other practices of prayer and asceticism, but also their concrete "being close" to the women and men of their time. Indeed, consecration reserves them to God without removing them from the environment in which they live. They can live alone, in the family, together with other consecrated persons or in other situations favourable to the expression of their vocation and to the implementation of their concrete project of life. They provide for their livelihoods with the fruits of their work, which they freely choose and in which they place themselves at the service of the integral progress of society. Keeping a contemplative gaze on reality, they share in the joys and hopes, the sadness and the anguish of the people of their time, especially the poorest, and contribute to the renewal of culture according to the spirit of the Gospel.

In the second part, dedicated to the ecclesial configuration of the *Ordo virginum*, the Instruction focuses on the concrete implications of diocesan rootedness. This is a special bond of love and mutual belonging: the consecrated person recognizes herself as the daughter of a particular Church, shares her history of holiness, and with her own gifts contributes to her edification and participates in her mission. In this perspective, in

addition to the pastoral responsibility of the diocesan bishop, it is emphasized that belonging to the *Ordo virginum*, although usually lived in conditions of solitude, establishes profound relationships of communion. And since diocesan rootedness does not consist of a particularistic closure within the boundaries of the diocese, consecrated persons open themselves to the horizons of the universal mission of the Church and experience forms of communion also in the supradiocesan sphere, both at the level of the groupings of particular Churches, with the support of the respective Episcopal Conferences, and at the level of the universal Church, referring to the Holy See and in particular to our dicastery.

In light of the diocesan rootedness, the second part of the Instruction considers then the temporary stay and the transfers in other dioceses; the possible establishment of foundations for the economic support of the *Ordo virginum* or associations and the experiences of common life; the possible involvement in other ecclesial aggregations; and the different hypotheses of separation from the *Ordo virginum*.

The third part of the Instruction identifies the fundamental principles and criteria for vocational discernment, pre-consecration formation and ongoing formation. As previously illustrated, the *Ordo virginum* is presented in from a pedagogical perspective, highlighting the primacy of the action of the Holy Spirit, the responsibility of the women called to this vocation, and the ecclesial sense of the processes of discernment and formation. In particular, it outlines the role of the diocesan bishop, who is responsible for discerning the vocation of aspirants and candidates; ensure that each can receive an accurate initial formation; complete discernment regarding admission to consecration; preside over the celebration and subsequently accompanies and supports the journey of the ongoing formation of the consecrated. To carry out these important and demanding tasks, the bishop will have to make good use of the resources present in the diocese, primarily the experience and competence of consecrated virgins, and activate the appropriate collaborations to effectively set up vocational discernment and formation, so as to avoid the generalization, disorganization, haste, and risk of excessive uniformity that would not be respectful towards the singularity of each vocation, and the opposite risk of individualism that would undermine not only the acquisition of the sense of belonging to the *Ordo virginum*, but more profoundly the understanding of the ecclesial value of this consecration.

I will conclude with two brief considerations. To re-propose this form of life in the Church seems to be anachronistic, but it is an act of faith in the action of the Holy Spirit, which is leading many women to welcome and interpret this vocation in the light of the path taken by the Church over the centuries and in accordance with the needs of the current historical context: it is a true path of sanctification, fascinating and demanding.

Finally, the reappearance of the *Ordo virginum*, a specifically female vocation, is a significant fact, not only for understanding and valuing the presence of women in the people of God, but also and more radically in terms of deepening the Church's awareness of herself as the Bride of Christ, the people of God who journey towards eschatological fulfilment in history.

With trust and hope we therefore entrust to the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, all the *Ordo virginum* and the women who will belong to it in the future, along with the reception of this Instruction.
