

THE BRIDE OF CHRIST:  
RE-DISCOVERING THE DIVINE DESIGN  
OF THE MARRIED AND THE  
CONSECRATED LIFE

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ISABELLA RENTMEESTER





Eugène Médard, *The Consecration of St. Genevieve*, 1874.

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Juan de Flandes, *The Marriage Feast at Cana*, c. 1500-1504.

# The Bride of Christ: Re-Discovering the Divine Design of the Married and the Consecrated Life

Isabella Rentmeester

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The topic of vocations is ever popular in our modern church climate. Church leaders appeal to young people to discern God's will for their lives, "answer the call", and rise up as a new generation ready to meet the challenges of an increasingly secular society. They especially emphasize religious vocations, which make up the hidden heart of the Church. Yet as our leaders stress the sufferings of a Church lacking vocations, the good-willed goal of this campaign can easily become distorted, and young people may find themselves overwhelmed with the apparent weight of their decision and the prospect of one ultimate answer which is both elusive and unique to them. In their efforts to "just follow God's will" they become confused by what feels like an insurmountable web of conflicting advice, and left with the presumption that the religious and married states of life are inherently opposed to one another. This situation reflects a deep theological error that could intensely hinder the spiritual discernment of many young people, and it would be helpful for the Church to revisit this topic, using biblical and ecclesial texts to paint a more accurate, authoritative picture of the parallels that unite the married life and consecrated life. One should possess an accurate picture of both vocations for their discernment to be a well-informed choice and, perhaps more importantly, this prevents the unnecessary avoidance of one's calling due to false assumptions. The purpose of this presentation is to determine, through the writings of Pope John Paul II, the specific merits and values unique to the married state and to the consecrated life, whether one vocation is truly "higher" than the other, and how both these callings are united in the same vision of love between Christ and His Church.

We will begin by examining marriage, considering the foundations of this vocation and how it translates to everyday life. The spousal relationship is the first and primary interhuman relationship, which God

established at the very beginning of the creation of man, blessing male and female together and instructing them to "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). In the moments before Eve when Adam was without human companionship, creation seems to be lacking in some way, indicated by God's words, "It is not good that the man [male] should be alone" (Genesis 2:18). Surrounded by plants and animals of all types, this leads us to the realization that, as "the only creature in the visible world that God willed 'for its own sake'... man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self"<sup>1</sup>. Lacking the condition of a rational mind, the animals were not able to offer Adam a relationship marked by a *reciprocal* gift of self. Even God, being in the garden with Adam, is not defined by a physical body, and thus deemed that Eve be made of Adam's own flesh and bone in order to fill that good which Adam lacked, by joining together with him as his wife, persons in a lifelong covenant of service to one another. From this moment on, man reflected the image of God not only in his own individual humanity, but also through a "community of persons, which men and women form from the very beginning."<sup>2</sup>

Husband and wife are each entrusted with a particular role to live out within marriage. A woman best gives the gift of herself by understanding and living out the reality of her own femininity, and it is a man's responsibility to receive and protect that truth in full. When each lives out his or her part their own dignity and humanity are affirmed by their well-ordered living, bringing into fruition the reciprocity of the relationship. In this way, spouses are constantly reminded of their own unique purpose and identity, which creates a productive, efficient, and fulfilling life based on that continual renewal of their natural strengths. This carries over to the reality that God has given us this gift in part to better understand ourselves, and what our character ought to be. Marriage also allows human

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, Michael Waldstein trans. (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 186.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *A Theology of the Body*, 163.

beings to partake in the mystery of creation along with God the Father. Each time spouses share in the conjugal union, the mystery of creation “in all its original depth and vital power,” is renewed in a real way, as “procreation is rooted in creation.”<sup>3</sup> This union of husband and wife, which unites them so closely as to becoming “one flesh,” presupposes the thorough understanding of the spousal meaning of the body as being a gift for the other, which allows them to “recognize each other reciprocally and to call each other by name, as they did the first time.”<sup>4</sup> The spouses are continually affirmed in their own dignity and humanity, united to each other, and bonded to the Father by their partaking in the act of creation.

Those called to marriage generally live out their vocation in a domestic environment, with their “self-giving” call directed first at their spouse, then to any children they may have, and lastly to the Church and to the general society. They strive to maintain a holy being while fulfilling the duties of everyday life, living “in the world, but not of it”. Husbands are called to be the head of the household, to lead, protect, and provide for their family in a corporal way; this is the form of sacrificial devotion with which he acts as the “lover” to his spouse. A wife typically cultivates the inner workings of their life together; she finds her dignity and purpose in tending to that which her husband provides, taking her place as “the one who is loved” and being a source of comfort, support, and guidance for him.

It is clear by its abundant fruitfulness that this vocation is good, necessary, and fulfilling in a common emotional way, but it would also be a gross misrepresentation to fail to recognize the constant challenges of marriage and parenthood. Tasked with remaining faithful and being fruitful in a dangerous world, married couples face a life full of hardship and unpredictability.

Couples experience the stress of constant disagreements and emotional hardship. They must resist becoming distracted despite limitations and obstacles to prayer, maintaining an enthusiasm for the faith despite the constant “noise” their obligations provoke. For these reasons, marriage is sometimes thought to be the “harder” path for devout Catholics to undertake, as by nature it is more difficult to maintain a life of prayer and devotion while dually committed to one’s spouse

and family. On this point, Pope John Paul II says, “It is certain that, when husband and wife are subject to one another ‘in the fear of Christ’, everything will find a just balance, that is, such as to correspond to their Christian vocation in the mystery of Christ” (TB 474). Marriage nevertheless remains the first good and holy vocation which God gave to mankind, and through a beautiful and fulfilling life of continual self-giving, husband and wife mutually lead each other to heaven.

Many of the principal aspects of the married life then extend to form the foundation of consecrated life as well. The consecrated life is another gift of love from God, one addressed “to His Church through the Holy Spirit. While marriage is the “indispensable condition for the transmission of life to new generations,”<sup>5</sup> God chooses a select few to respond to him with “complete and exclusive devotion”<sup>6</sup>, to fulfill that profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience which are also an integral part of the life of the Church. As in marriage, the consecrated life revolves around the relationship of an individual and their spouse, their spouse being Jesus, and their family mission consisting of the whole Church. Pope John Paul II writes,

*The consecrated life can never fail to be one of her [the Church’s] essential and characteristic elements, for it expresses her very nature...The idea of a church made-up of only sacred ministers and laypeople does not therefore conform to the intentions of her Divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament.*<sup>7</sup>

Because a desire for marriage is only natural to the human spirit, the call to live as a consecrated religious is accompanied by a specific grace from the Holy Spirit, which makes possible a life lived out in complete fidelity to Christ. While married persons juggle the obligations of the world with the spiritual life, consecrated persons “direct and offer everything that they are and have, freeing themselves from the obstacles which could hinder the totality of their response”<sup>8</sup>. They first are drawn to open their hearts to the promptings of the Spirit, allowing themselves to be formed according to Him, then equipped with the call and graces to serve the Church through vows of poverty,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, vatican.va, accessed August 15, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html), 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12.



chastity, and obedience. These virtues reflect the “expression of that total gift of self which the three divine persons make to one another”, and act as a reflection of the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a “liberating beauty of a dependence which is not servile but filial.”<sup>9</sup>

There exist many different orders and congregations that men and women may find themselves called to join, each established within the Spirit’s work of spiritual diversity which is found in the many devotions and charisms found in one communion in the Church. Each one, whether active or contemplative, lived in community or alone, reflects the same eschatological goal to which all things are ordered. Most religious wear some type of particular vestment which identifies them as consecrated to the Lord. The life of a religious brother or sister revolves around constant prayer and service in either an active or contemplative way. Most orders have rigid schedules for the community to follow. A typical day for an active religious sister might involve morning prayer, mass, work, midday prayer, more work, and returning for dinner and fellowship, and compline. A contemplative sister finds a similar balance of prayer and labor, but her duties are completed within the convent rather than outside in the world, and her work is a spiritual labor rather than a physical one. In daily life, these sisters practice fidelity to the particular focus or charism of their community, and live a life of great asceticism. The implications of this extreme self-abandonment and constant sacrifice can also lead people to believe the consecrated life is the more difficult vocation to live out, because, though they operate in an environment cultivated to the spiritual life, consecrated persons must have a profound devotion to God in *all* things. For these reasons, fidelity to the daily practices of their order is necessary, so that they may be renewed every day in the supernatural grace which allows them to forsake the comforts of the world.

The vocation to the consecrated life is not possible for everyone. “Continenence for the Kingdom of heaven, as the fruit of a charismatic choice, is an *exception* with respect to the other state, that is, the state in which man came to share from the beginning and still does share during his whole earthly existence... For this reason Christ says ‘Let anyone understand this who can’. Immediately before this, he says ‘not all can understand

it, but only those to whom it has been granted.”<sup>10</sup> By this Jesus indicates that the choice to accept the call to consecrated life, in addition to being a personal decision, must be fueled by a particular grace, having aspects which are both voluntary and supernatural. The lifestyle of a consecrated religious is a radical one, directly imitating Jesus’ divine way of living out the Gospel on earth. In many ways, Jesus is the archetype for consecrated life, as He is “the supreme consecrated one”<sup>11</sup> by accepting *His* consecration by the Father. Those discerning the religious life must understand this unique opportunity to live in close imitation of Jesus, in which “their fidelity to the one love is revealed and confirmed in the humility of a hidden life, in the acceptance of sufferings for the sake of completing in their own flesh what is lacking in Christ afflictions, in silent sacrifice and abandonment to God’s holy will, and in serene fidelity even as their strength and personal authority wane” (VC 11). Consecrated religious also participate in a special way in the Paschal mystery of Christ, their sense of mission contributing to that of Jesus’, and therefore allowing them to take part in the renewal of the world. For our religious brothers and sisters, “Eschatological expectation becomes mission, so that the Kingdom may become ever more fully established here and now”. Those called to consecration also imitate in an integral way the life of Mary, who is “the model of the acceptance of grace by human creatures... Indeed, if the new motherhood conferred on Mary at Calvary is a gift for all Christians, it has a specific value for those who have completely consecrated their lives to Christ”. Like Mary, consecrated religious are called to contemplate the face of Christ in an intimate way, and with their closeness to Him, pursue a wholly transfigured existence. This special relationship leads us to the understanding that, while all are personally called to holiness, those consecrated to Christ are offered a unique opportunity to imitate Christ in a fuller and more direct way.

This leads us to our next question, as to whether one can Be Called, “Most Holy?” Pope John Paul II points out that Christ did “indirectly indicate that if marriage possesses its full fittingness and value for the Kingdom of heaven, which is a *fundamental*, universal, and ordinary *value*, faithful to its original institution by the Creator, then continence on its part possesses a *particular and “exceptional” value* for this Kingdom. Yet, Jesus also does not set the question of these two

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *A Theology of the Body*, 414.

vocations in opposition to one another, and the sacrament of marriage is in no way reduced by the value of the consecrated life. Instead, each vocation only reveals more about the other, for “Marriage helps us to understand continence for the Kingdom of heaven, but that continence itself throws a particular light on marriage, viewed in the mystery of creation and redemption” God calls all people to the same type of radical humility and self-denial regardless of their vocation, for we know it is in denying oneself and accepting one’s cross that the Christian life is readily achieved. The only difference is “the kind of responsibility for the chosen good, just as the kind of good chosen is different.”

As they guide us to holiness in daily life, the theological significance of marriage and the consecrated life then reveal many truths about our value and dignity as human persons. From the beginning of time, our need for companionship has been apparent. In the words of Pope John Paul II, “To be human means to be called to interpersonal communion”. This need for community signifies humanity’s call to “live in a community of love, and in this way mirror to the world the community of love that is [the Triune] God”. In light of this divine relationship, we are led to the understanding of the true significance of our innermost desires for interpersonal communion as being sourced in our creation in the image and likeness of God. God also makes it clear through the spousal nature of these vocations that we, as humans, have always been called to exist for one another. Our universal vocation is a self-giving life. Pope John Paul II writes, “Being a person means striving towards self-realization through the gift of self”, and in his mercy and intimate love for each and every individual soul, God has instituted multiple ways of life through which we may live out this call to service. With both vocations seeming to satisfy various aspects of human nature, what can ultimately be deemed regarding the essence of masculinity and femininity, and how can this discovery lend to the strengthening of our vocations?

While the ordering of our human sexuality is perhaps most evident in marriage, it is helpful to understand its evidence in religious life as well. For example, the fullest act of self-giving for a woman is found in motherhood. Motherhood necessitates a special openness unique to the feminine heart, in which she welcomes life and is prepared to serve God by the complete self-giving of herself to her child or children. In marriage, the implications of this reality are obvious; a woman conceives, carries her child in a very intimate way, and raises that child until he or she has reached maturity. While parenthood, of course, belongs to both a mother and a father, it actually comes to further realization in

the woman, who is connected to her child in such an intimate way from the moment of conception. The inclination to motherhood is no different to women in religious life. These women are called to a spiritual motherhood, a special dimension of motherhood in which a sister encounters her Spouse in those around her. “Conjugal love which finds its expression in continence for the kingdom of heaven must lead in its normal development to paternity or maternity in a spiritual sense in a way analogous to conjugal love. Furthermore, Pope John Paul II writes, “We cannot think that [consecrated life] can be made consciously and freely without reference to one’s masculinity or femininity, and to that nuptial meaning which is proper to man precisely in the masculinity or femininity of his being as a personal subject”. Thus God desires for us to understand the meaning of our spousal bodies as male and female in a dimension deeper than that of merely a corporal reality. With this theme, he leads us into the mystery of how these vocations both reflect the same loving spousal relationship between Christ and His bride, the Church.

Using the spousal model of Christ and the Church, we can better understand how these vocations ultimately complement and connect to one another, and the deep personal love which God desires us to partake in as His bride. St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians best summarizes this reality:

*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a glorious church, without stain or wrinkle or any such blemish, but holy and blameless. In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. Indeed, no one ever hated his own body, but he nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church. For we are members of His body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, but I am speaking about Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-33).*

By this letter, St. Paul shares the truth that Christ desires to take upon Himself the Church as His beloved bride, inviting her into a spousal love and a lasting covenant. As the divine bridegroom, Christ always



remains faithful to His Church, even when she proves herself to be unfaithful to Him. In this way, disciples called to each vocation can find the “measure of true spousal love” in Christ, the model for all human love.

Given this ultimate eschatological value, it is of a particular importance that the Church operates vocational discernment with effective outreach and proper caution. The Church is aching for a vital shift which will bring joy and life back into the vocational discussion. Firstly, she ought to take careful notice of her primary audience, being the youth of the Church. As youth, the majority of those addressed are only beginning their walk with the Lord; they perhaps have not yet formed the grounding habits or developed a trust with the faith that drives and secures the more seasoned Catholic through times of confusion, hardship, and discernment. The Church ought to take care to develop its youth as well-rounded Catholics, always encouraging, through practical opportunities of guidance and service, a healthy prayer life, the frequenting of the sacraments, and most importantly, a personal relationship with our Lord. She should also be mindful in her formation of the youth to prevent some of the characteristic Catholic pitfalls. “Occupational hazards” for Catholics such as shame, guilt, and scrupulosity have crept into our parishes and been a primary complaint of lapsed Catholics for generations, and this current trend which puts pressure on children with limited catechetical knowledge and only a budding relationship with God is a prime way to continue this cycle of deeply damaging religious trauma.

While this marked period of growth and development in one’s life can indeed make him or her more susceptible to improper formation, it is also a wonderful opportunity for the Church to reveal the rich truths of one’s unique and individual soul, graces, worth, and identity as imparted by God. Before applying the

greater needs of the Church and the world at large, leaders should focus on emphatically proclaiming the unfathomable love of God for each individual, and the unparalleled freedom to be found in living out one’s *truest identity*, which ultimately reveals God’s will for his or her life. This re-orientation will make the task of discernment not one of fearful obligation but of eager self-discovery as one gradually grows stronger in their identity, revealing more naturally the true desires of his or her heart. Proactivity in this area would be a prime way to encourage healthy formation and distance from an experience of shame, guilt, or undue pressure; creating standards of youth engagement and addresses for diocesan priests and faith formation leaders would help to ensure that the young members of our parishes have already cultivated a progressing spiritual life, before beginning talk of vocations. Then, establishing opportunities for unbiased education observing *both* the married life and the consecrated life (along with singleness and others) will prevent misunderstandings regarding the virtue, value, or sacrifice of either vocation. Vocation fairs, retreats, and the like which focus on religious vocations are beautiful educational opportunities which should be encouraged, but Catholic schools and churches must also spend the appropriate time and effort to educate on the spiritual value of the married life as well, and not neglect it for being the more “obvious” vocation. Most importantly, the Church needs to shift the conversation surrounding one’s period of vocational discernment to an exciting journey of spiritual growth and self-discovery, and ultimately, an exercise in free will. Our capacity for decision is a Divine gift, and one that God will never take from us. Our vocational choices will always be our judgement call to make, the Bridegroom does not force us into marriage, but instead, gently leads us to a life of peace. There ought to be no fear in our discernment. As St. Catherine of Sienna once said, “Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire”.



# The Bride of Christ: Re-Discovering the Divine Design of the Married and the Consecrated Life

Isabella Rentmeester

*Original treatise, submitted August 6, 2025*

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The topic of vocations is ever popular in the modern church climate. Church leaders appeal to young people strongly to discern God's will for their lives, "answer the call", and rise up as a new generation ready to meet the challenges of an increasingly secular society. They emphasize religious vocations which will bring about parish revival, bring the light of Christ to the far reaches of the world, and live lives of radical witness to the kingdom of God on Earth. Yet as leaders stress the sufferings of a Church lacking vocations, the good-willed goal of this campaign can easily become distorted, and young people may find themselves overwhelmed with the apparent weight of their decision and the prospect of one ultimate answer which is both elusive and unique to them. In their efforts to "just follow God's will", they become dazed, confused by what feels like a myriad of advice being thrown at them and left weighing the values of the religious and the married states as options opposed to one another. Under the risk of any type of general theological uncertainty, it can be helpful for the Church to revisit that topic which is in question, using any authoritative sources, biblical or other, which accurately represent the Magisterium's teaching, and in order to better consider Earthly concepts from the most critical Divine overview. For anyone to discern rightly, they should generally possess a thorough knowledge accurately depicting the beauty and crosses of both the consecrated life and the married life, for it is this critical aspect of education which makes their discernment a well-informed choice and, more importantly, prevents the unnecessary avoidance of one's vocation due to some misconstrued vision of that life to which they are called. Thus, in order that the Church may more closely imitate Mary's full and perfect "fiat" to God in response to His vocational call, it is good to pursue an understanding of the original value and purpose which intended between these two selected vocations, and the ultimate communion of love which they reflect and feed. The purpose of this essay is an attempt to determine, through the writings of Pope John Paul II, the specific merits and value unique to the married state and to the consecrated life, which vocation, if either, is

truly the "higher" good, and how both these callings are united in the same vision of love between God and His Church.

## **The Vocation of Marriage in Principle and Application**

We will begin by examining marriage, considering the basic foundation of this vocation and how it is realistically practiced in everyday life. The spousal relationship is the first and primary interhuman relationship, which God established at the very beginning of the creation of man, blessing male and female together and instructing them to "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). In the moments before Eve when Adam was without human companionship, creation seems to be lacking in some way, indicated by God's words, "It is not good that the man [male] should be alone" (Genesis 2:18). Yet, Adam was not alone; he was surrounded by plants and animals of all types, living creatures also created by God. Why, then, should Adam require a creature like himself to keep him company? This apparent lacking leads us to the truth that, as "the only creature in the visible world that God willed 'for its own sake',... man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self" (TB 186). Lacking the condition of a rational mind, the animals were not able to offer Adam a relationship marked by a *reciprocal* gift of self. Eve, being of Adam's own flesh and bone, was the only being capable of filling that good which Adam lacked by joining together with him as his wife. This first meeting of a masculine essence and a feminine essence was a pivotal moment for all mankind, as the female finally completed the masculine figure and enriched the whole reality of his being. From this moment on, man reflected the image of God not only in his own individual humanity, but also through a "community of persons, which men and women form from the very beginning" (TB 163).

Husband and wife each have a particular role to live out within marriage. A woman best gives the gift of herself by understanding and living out the reality of



her own femininity, and it is a man's responsibility to receive and protect that truth in full. When each lives out his or her part their own dignity and humanity are affirmed, bringing into fruition this reciprocal relationship. In this way, spouses are constantly reminded of their own unique purpose and identity, which allows them to shape their lives and activity in a productive way upon that continual renewal of their natural strengths. This therefore contributes to the reality that God has given this gift in part to better understand ourselves, and what our character ought to be. In this process of directing and making meaningful the lives of men and women, marriage also allows human beings to partake in the mystery of creation along with God the Father. Each time spouses share in the conjugal union, the mystery of creation "in all its original depth and vital power", is renewed in a real way, as "procreation is rooted in creation" (TB 169). This union of husband and wife, which unites them so closely as to becoming "one flesh", presupposes the thorough understanding of the spousal meaning of the body as being a gift for the other, which allows them to "recognize each other reciprocally and to call each other by name, as they did the first time" (TB 167). The spouses are continually affirmed in their own dignity and humanity, united to each other, and bonded to the Father by their partaking in the act of creation.

Living in this state of unity, those called to marriage typically live out their masculine or feminine identity in a domestic environment, with their call to "self-giving" directed first at their spouse, then any children they may have, and lastly to the Church. They strive to maintain a holy being while fulfilling the duties of everyday life, living "in the world, but not of it". Husbands are called to be the head of the household, to lead, protect, and provide for their family in a corporal way. Traditionally, this involves work outside of the home, being the "breadwinner" of the family, and making their gift of self-giving by focusing their efforts on providing those material and spiritual elements which the family, as a unit, requires to live and grow. This is the form of sacrificial devotion with which he acts as the "lover" to his spouse. A wife typically cultivates the inner workings of their life together, tending to the home and being the primary caretaker of their children. She finds her dignity and purpose in tending to that which her husband provides, taking her place as "the one who is loved" and being a source of comfort, support, and guidance for him. It is clear by its abundant fruitfulness that this vocation is good, necessary, and is often even nicely fulfilling in an everyday, emotional way, but it would be a gross misrepresentation to underestimate the constant challenges of marriage and parenthood. Surrounded by the dangers and temptations of the world and tasked with

the immense duty of raising children, married couples face a life full of hardship and unpredictability. Couples, vowed to retain one another for the rest of their lives, experience the stress of constant disagreements and emotional hardship. They must resist becoming distracted despite limitations and obstacles to prayer, maintaining an enthusiasm for the faith despite the constant noise and labor coming from the world and all their duties within it. For these reasons, marriage is sometimes thought to be the "harder" path for devout Catholics to undertake, as by nature it is more difficult to maintain a life of prayer and devotion while dually committed to one's spouse and family. Pope John Paul II offers some words of encouragement to those called to the married life, saying, "It is certain that, when husband and wife are subject to one another 'in the fear of Christ', everything will find a just balance, that is, such as to correspond to their Christian vocation in the mystery of Christ" (TB 474). Thus, though it might involve what appears to be many obstacles to the path of holiness, marriage nevertheless remains the first good and holy vocation which God gave to mankind, and through a beautiful and fulfilling life of continual self-giving, husband and wife mutually lead each other to heaven.

### **The Vocation of Religious Life in Principle and Application**

Though very different in the substance of the day-to-day, many of the principal aspects of the married life extend to form the foundation of consecrated life as well, only in an alternate way. The consecrated life is another gift of love from God, this time one addressed "to His Church through the Holy Spirit. By the profession of the evangelical counsels, the characteristic features of Jesus - the chaste, poor, and obedient One - are made constantly visible in the midst of the world and the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God" (VC 1). While marriage is the "indispensable condition for the transmission of life to new generations" (MD 6), God chooses a select few to respond to him with "complete and exclusive devotion" (VC 8), to fulfill that profession of the evangelical counsels which is also an integral part of the Church's life. As in marriage, the consecrated life revolves around the relationship of an individual and their spouse, only their spouse is Jesus, and their family mission consists of the whole Church. Pope John Paul II writes, "The consecrated life can never fail to be one of her [the Church's] essential and characteristic elements, for it expresses her very nature... The idea of a church made-up of only sacred ministers and lay-people does not therefore conform to the intentions of her Divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament" (VC 14).

Because a desire for marriage is only natural to the human spirit, the call to live as a consecrated religious is accompanied by a specific grace from the Holy Spirit, which makes possible a life lived out in complete fidelity to Christ. While married persons juggle the obligations of the world with the spiritual life, consecrated persons “direct and offer everything that they are and have, freeing themselves from the obstacles which could hinder the totality of their response” (VC 12). They first are drawn to open their hearts to the promptings of the Spirit, allowing themselves to be formed according to Him, then equipped with the call and graces to serve the Church through vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Poverty reflects the relationship of the Holy Trinity, in the “expression of that total gift of self which the three divine persons make to one another”, and asserting that “God is man’s only real treasure” (VC 9). Chastity is a true testament to one’s devotion to God with a whole and undivided heart, and demonstrates a deep trust in the fulfilling love of God. Obedience is also a reflection of the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, showing the “liberating beauty of a dependence which is not servile but filial” (VC 9).

There exist many different orders and congregations that men and women may find themselves called to join, each established within the Spirit’s work of spiritual diversity which is visible in the many devotions and charisms found in one communion in the Church. Yet each one, whether active or contemplative, lived in community or alone, reflects the same eschatological goal to which all things are ordered. Most religious wear some type of particular vestment, or a clear outward sign which identifies them as consecrated to the Lord and “corresponds in dignity and simplicity to the nature of the vocation” (VC 12). The life of a religious brother or sister revolves around constant prayer and service in either an active or contemplative way. Most orders have rigid schedules for the community to follow. A typical day for an active religious sister might involve morning prayer, mass, breakfast, work, midday prayer, more work, returning for dinner and fellowship, and compline. One common form of service for religious sisters is in caring for the needy, in whom they encounter the face of Christ, living and suffering in the lives of the poor. “Many consecrated persons have given their lives in service to victims of contagious diseases” (VC 42), freely choosing complete love with the gift of their very lives. A contemplative sister finds a similar balance of prayer and labor, but her duties are completed within the convent rather than outside in the world, and her work is more of a spiritual labor rather than a physical one. In daily life, they practice fidelity to the particular focus or charism of their community, and

live a life of great asceticism, in an effort to remain faithful to this way of life despite its difficulties. The implications of this extreme self-abandonment and constant sacrifice can also lead people to believe the consecrated life is the more difficult vocation to live out, because, though they operate in an environment cultivated to growing in virtue and prayer, consecrated persons must have a profound devotion to God in *all* things. For these reasons, fidelity to the daily practices of their order is necessary, so that they may be renewed every day in the love of Christ and the supernatural grace which allows them to forsake the things of the world and resist being conformed to it.

The vocation to the consecrated life is certainly not for everyone. “Contenance for the Kingdom of heaven, as the fruit of a charismatic choice, is an *exception* with respect to the other state, that is, the state in which man came to share from the beginning and still does share during his whole earthly existence... For this reason Christ says ‘Let anyone understand this who can’. Immediately before this, he says ‘not all can understand it, but only those to whom it has been granted’” (TB 414). Here, Jesus indicates that the choice to accept the call to consecrated life, in addition to being a personal decision, must be fueled by a particular grace, having aspects which are both voluntary and supernatural. The lifestyle of a consecrated religious is a radical one, directly imitating Jesus’ divine way of living out the Gospel on earth. In many ways, Jesus is the archetype for consecrated life, as He is “the supreme consecrated one” (VC 9) by accepting *His* consecration by the Father. Those discerning the religious life must understand this unique opportunity to live in close imitation of Jesus, in which “their fidelity to the one love is revealed and confirmed in the humility of a hidden life, in the acceptance of sufferings for the sake of completing in their own flesh what is lacking in Christ afflictions, in silent sacrifice and abandonment to God’s holy will, and in serene fidelity even as their strength and personal authority wane” (VC 11). Consecrated religious also participate in a special way in the Paschal mystery of Christ, their sense of mission contributing to that of Jesus’, and therefore allowing them to take part in the renewal of the world. For our religious brothers and sisters, “Eschatological expectation becomes mission, so that the Kingdom may become ever more fully established here and now” (VC 13). Those called to consecration also imitate in an integral way the life of Mary. “Mary is the model of the acceptance of grace by human creatures... Indeed, if the new motherhood conferred on Mary at Calvary is a gift for all Christians, it has a specific value for those who have completely consecrated their lives to Christ... They, like John, are called to take the Blessed Virgin Mary to themselves, loving her and imitating her in the

radical manner which benefits their vocation and experiencing in return her special motherly love” (VC 13). Like Mary, consecrated religious are called to contemplate the face of Christ in an intimate way, and with their closeness to Him, pursue a wholly transfigured existence. This special relationship seems to reflect the common theme of religious life, that, while all are personally called to a deep holiness, people consecrated to Christ are offered a unique opportunity to imitate Christ in a fuller and more direct way.

### Can One Be Called, “Most Holy?”

Pope John Paul II points out that Christ did “indirectly indicated that if *marriage* possesses its full fittingness and value for the Kingdom of heaven, a *fundamental*, universal, and ordinary *value*, faithful to its original institution by the Creator, then continence on its part possesses a *particular and “exceptional” value* for this Kingdom. Yet, Jesus also does not set the question of these two vocations in opposition to one another, and the sacrament of marriage is in no way reduced by the value of the consecrated life. Instead, each vocation actually reveals more about the other, for “Marriage helps us to understand continence for the Kingdom of heaven, but also that continence itself throws a particular light on marriage, viewed in the mystery of creation and redemption” (TB 425). God calls all people to the same type of radical humility and self-denial regardless of their vocation, for we know it is in denying oneself and accepting one’s cross that the Christian life is readily achieved. The only difference is “the kind of responsibility for the chosen good, just as the kind of good chosen is different” (TB 28). For one to rightly choose the vocation to the consecrated life, he must also be “fully aware of what he is renouncing (the consciousness at stake here is exactly the consciousness of the value in the ‘ideal’ sense; nevertheless this consciousness is completely ‘realistic’)” (TB 441).

Beyond directing our everyday lives towards holiness, Pope John Paul II also speaks to the deeper theological significance of marriage and the consecrated life, which reveals many truths about our value and dignity as human persons, and helps us to enrich our understanding of each vocation through complementary aspects of the other. From the very beginning of time, our need for companionship has been apparent. In the words of Pope John Paul II, “To be human means to be called to interpersonal communion” (MD 6). This need for community signifies humanity’s call to “live in a community of love, and in this way mirror to the world the community of love that is [the Triune] God” (MD 6). In the knowledge of this divine relationship, we are led to understanding the true significance of our inner desire for interpersonal communion as being

sourced in our creation in the image and likeness of God. God also makes it clear to through the spousal nature of these vocations that we, as humans, have always been called to exist for one another. Our universal vocation is a self-giving life. Pope John Paul II writes, “Being a person means striving towards self-realization through the gift of self” (MD 7), and in his mercy and intimate love for each and every individual soul, God has instituted multiple ways of life through which we may live out this call to service in the truest desires of each heart.

### The True Expression of Sexuality as Revealed Through Vocations

With both vocations seeming to satisfy various aspects of our human nature, what can ultimately be deemed regarding the essence of masculinity and femininity, and how can that understanding aid those rightly seeking for that truest innermost desire to be revealed? Pope John Paul II writes on this topic, “Christ is the one who knows what is in man, in man and woman. He knows the dignity of man, his worth in God’s eyes.” (MD 14). Therefore, since God allows our nature to be fulfilled through the life lived out in our vocations, our masculinity and femininity can become more fully realized through these states of living.

While the ordering of our human sexuality is perhaps most evident in marriage, understanding how it applies to religious life as well only furthers the possible depth of understanding. For example, women’s primary self-giving is found in motherhood. Motherhood necessitates a special openness unique to the feminine heart, in which she welcomes life and is prepared to serve God by the complete self-giving of herself to her child/children. In marriage, the implications of this reality are obvious; a woman conceives, carries her child in a very intimate way, and raises that child until they have reached maturity. While parenthood, of course, belongs to both a mother and a father, it actually comes to further realization in the woman, who is connected to her child in a deeply intimate way from the moment of their conception. The inclination to motherhood is no different to women in religious life. These women God calls to a spiritual motherhood, a special dimension of motherhood in which a sister encounters her Spouse in those around her. “Conjugal love which finds its expression in continence for the kingdom of heaven must lead in its normal development to paternity or maternity in a spiritual sense (in other words, precisely to that fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit that we have already spoken about), in a way analogous to conjugal love, which matures in physical paternity and maternity, and in this way confirms itself as conjugal love” (TB 432). Furthermore, Pope John Paul II writes,



“We cannot think that this second kind of choice [consecrated life] can be made consciously and freely without reference to one's masculinity or femininity, and to that nuptial meaning which is proper to man precisely in the masculinity or femininity of his being as a personal subject”. Clearly, his words indicate God's desire for us to understand the meaning of our spousal bodies, as male and female, in a dimension deeper than that of a corporal reality. With this theme, he leads us into the mystery of how these vocations both reflect the same loving spousal relationship between Christ and His bride, the Church.

Using the spousal model of Christ and the Church, we can better understand how these vocations ultimately complement and connect to one another, and the deep personal love which God desires us to partake in as His bride. St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians best summarizes this reality:

*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives,*

*just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a glorious church, without stain or wrinkle or any such blemish, but holy and blameless. In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. Indeed, no one ever hated his own body, but he nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church. For we are members of His body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, but I am speaking about Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-33)*

By this letter, St. Paul shares the truth that Christ desires to take upon Himself the Church as His beloved bride, inviting her into a spousal love and a lasting covenant. As the divine bridegroom, Christ always remains faithful to His Church, even when she proves herself to be unfaithful to Him. In this way, disciples called to each vocation can find the “measure of true spousal love” (MD 26) in Christ, the model for all human love.