



SACRA VIRGINITAS

ENCYCLICAL OF POPE PIUS XII ON CONSECRATED VIRGINITY MARCH 25, 1954

To Our Venerable Brothers, the Patriarchs, Primate, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Local Ordinaries in Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.

Holy virginity and that perfect chastity which is consecrated to the service of God is without doubt among the most precious treasures which the Founder of the Church has left in heritage to the society which He established.

2. This assuredly was the reason why the Fathers of the Church confidently asserted that perpetual virginity is a very noble gift which the Christian religion has bestowed on the world. They rightly noted that the pagans of antiquity imposed this way of life on the Vestals only for a certain time;^[1] and that, although in the Old Testament virginity is ordered to be kept and preserved, it is only a previous requisite for marriage;^[2] and furthermore, as Ambrose writes,^[3] "We read that also in the temple of Jerusalem there were virgins. But what does the Apostle say? 'Now all these things happened to them in figure',^[4] that this might be a foreshadowing of what was to come "

3. Indeed, right from Apostolic times this virtue has been thriving and flourishing in the garden of the Church. When the Acts of the Apostles^[5] say that Philip the deacon was the father of four virgins, the word certainly refers to their state of life rather than to their age. And not much later Ignatius of Antioch salutes the virgins,^[6] who together with the widows, formed a not insignificant part of the Christian community of Smyrna. In the second century, as St. Justin testifies, "many men and women, sixty and seventy years old, imbued from childhood with the teachings of Christ, keep their integrity."^[7] Gradually the number of men and women who had vowed their chastity to God grew; likewise the importance of the office they fulfilled in the Church increased notably, as We have shown more at length in Our apostolic constitution, "Sponsa Christi."^[8]

4. Further, the Fathers of the Church, such as Cyprian, Athanasius, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and many others, have sung the praises of virginity. And this doctrine of the Fathers, augmented through the course of

centuries by the Doctors of the Church and the masters of asceticism, helps greatly either to inspire in the faithful of both sexes the firm resolution of dedicating themselves to God by the practice of perfect chastity and of persevering thus till death, or to strengthen them in the resolution already taken.

5. Innumerable is the multitude of those who from the beginning of the Church until our time have offered their chastity to God. Some have preserved their virginity unspoiled, others after the death of their spouse, have consecrated to God their remaining years in the unmarried state, and still others, after repenting their sins, have chosen to lead a life of perfect chastity; all of them at one in this common oblation, that is, for love of God to abstain for the rest of their lives from sexual pleasure. May then what the Fathers of the Church preached about the glory and merit of virginity be an invitation, a help, and a source of strength to those who have made the sacrifice to persevere with constancy, and not take back or claim for themselves even the smallest part of the holocaust they have laid on the altar of God.

6. And while this perfect chastity is the subject of one of the three vows which constitute the religious state,[9] and is also required by the Latin Church of clerics in major orders[10] and demanded from members of Secular Institutes,[11] it also flourishes among many who are lay people in the full sense: men and women who are not constituted in a public state of perfection and yet by private promise or vow completely abstain from marriage and sexual pleasures, in order to serve their neighbor more freely and to be united with God more easily and more closely.

7. To all of these beloved sons and daughters who in any way have consecrated their bodies and souls to God, We address Ourselves, and exhort them earnestly to strengthen their holy resolution and be faithful to it.

8. However, since there are some who, straying from the right path in this matter, so exalt marriage as to rank it ahead of virginity and thus depreciate chastity consecrated to God and clerical celibacy, Our apostolic duty demands that We now in a particular manner declare and uphold the Church's teaching on the sublime state of virginity, and so defend Catholic truth against these errors.

9. First of all, We think it should be noted that the Church has taken what is capital in her teaching on virginity from the very lips of her Divine Spouse.

10. For when the disciples thought that the obligations and burdens of marriage, which their Master's discourse had made clear, seemed extremely heavy, they said to Him: "If the case stands so between man and wife, it is better not to marry at all." [12] Jesus Christ replied that His ideal is not understood by everybody but only by those who have received the gift; for some are hindered from marriage because of some defect of nature, others because of the violence and malice of men, while still others freely abstain of their own will, and this "for the kingdom of heaven." And He concludes with these words, "He that can take it, let him take it." [13]

11. By these words the divine Master is speaking not of bodily impediments to marriage, but of a resolution freely made to abstain all one's life from marriage and sexual pleasure. For in likening those who of their own free will have determined to renounce these pleasures to those who by nature or the violence of men are forced to do so, is not the Divine Redeemer teaching us that chastity to be really perfect must be perpetual?

12. Here also it must be added, as the Fathers and Doctors of the Church have clearly taught, that virginity is not a Christian virtue unless we embrace it "for the kingdom of heaven;"[14] that is, unless we take up this way of life precisely to be able to devote ourselves more freely to divine things to attain heaven more surely, and with skillful efforts to lead others more readily to the kingdom of heaven.

13. Those therefore, who do not marry because of exaggerated self-interest, or because, as Augustine says,[15] they shun the burdens of marriage or because like Pharisees they proudly flaunt their physical integrity, an attitude which has been condemned by the Council of Gangra lest men and women renounce marriage as though it were something despicable instead of because virginity is something beautiful and holy, -- none of these can claim for themselves the honor of Christian virginity.[16]

14. Moreover, the Apostle of the Gentiles, writing under divine inspiration, makes this point: "He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God. . . And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and spirit."[17]

15. This then is the primary purpose, this the central idea of Christian virginity: to aim only at the divine, to turn thereto the whole mind and soul; to want to please God in everything, to think of Him continually, to consecrate body and soul completely to Him.

16. This is the way the Fathers of the Church have always interpreted the words of Jesus Christ and the teaching of the Apostle of the Gentiles; for from the very earliest days of the Church they have considered virginity a consecration of body and soul offered to God. Thus, St. Cyprian demands of virgins that "once they have dedicated themselves to Christ by renouncing the pleasures of the flesh, they have vowed themselves body and soul to God . . . and should seek to adorn themselves only for their Lord and please only Him."[18] And the Bishop of Hippo, going further, says, "Virginity is not honored because it is bodily integrity, but because it is something dedicated to God. . . Nor do we extol virgins because they are virgins, but because they are virgins dedicated to God in loving continence."[19] And the masters of Sacred Theology, St. Thomas Aquinas[20] and St. Bonaventure,[21] supported by the authority of Augustine, teach that virginity does not possess the stability of virtue unless there is a vow to keep it forever intact. And certainly those who obligate themselves by perpetual vow to keep their virginity put into practice in the most perfect way possible what Christ said about perpetual abstinence from marriage; nor can it justly be affirmed that the intention of those who wish to leave open a way of escape from this state of life is better and more perfect.

17. Moreover the Fathers of the Church considered this obligation of perfect chastity as a kind of spiritual marriage, in which the soul is wedded to Christ; so that some go so far as to compare breaking the vow with adultery.[22] Thus, St. Athanasius writes that the Catholic Church has been accustomed to call those who have the virtue of virginity the spouses of Christ.[23] And St. Ambrose, writing succinctly of the consecrated virgin, says, "She is a virgin who is married to God." [24] In fact, as is clear from the writings of the same Doctor of Milan,[25] as early as the fourth century the rite of consecration of a virgin was very like the rite the Church uses in our own day in the marriage blessing.[26]

18. For the same reason the Fathers exhort virgins to love their Divine Spouse more ardently than they would love a husband had they married, and always in their thoughts and actions to fulfill His will.[27] Augustine writes to virgins: "Love with all your hearts Him Who is the most beautiful of the sons of men: you are free, your hearts are not fettered by conjugal bonds . . . if, then, you would owe your husbands great love, how great is the love you owe Him because of Whom you have willed to have not husbands? Let Him Who was fastened to the cross be securely fastened to your hearts." [28] And this in other respects too is in harmony with the sentiments and resolutions which the Church herself requires of virgins on the day they are solemnly consecrated to God by inviting them to recite these words: "The kingdom of this earth and all worldly trappings I have valued as worthless for love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Whom I have seen, loved, believed, and preferred above all else." [29] It is nothing else but love of Him that sweetly constrains the virgin to consecrate her body and soul entirely to her Divine Redeemer; thus St. Methodius, Bishop of Olympus, places these beautiful words on her lips: "You yourself, O Christ, are my all. For you I keep myself chaste, and holding aloft my shining lamp I run to meet you, my Spouse." [30] Certainly it is the love of Christ that urges a virgin to retire behind convent walls and remain there all her life, in order to contemplate and love the heavenly Spouse more easily and without hindrance; certainly it is the same love that strongly inspires her to spend her life and strength in works of mercy for the sake of her neighbor.

19. As for those men "who were not defiled with women, being virgins," [31] the Apostle John asserts that, "they follow the Lamb wherever he goes." [32] Let us meditate, then, on the exhortation Augustine gives to all men of this class: "You follow the Lamb because the body of the Lamb is indeed virginal. . . Rightly do you follow Him in virginity of heart and body wherever He goes. For what does following mean but imitation? Christ has suffered for us, leaving us an example, as the Apostle Peter says 'that we should follow in his footsteps'." [33] Hence all these disciples and spouses of Christ embraced the state of virginity, as St. Bonaventure says, "in order to become like unto Christ the spouse, for that state makes virgins like unto Him." [34] It would hardly satisfy their burning love for Christ to be united with Him by the bonds of affection, but this love had perforce to express itself by the imitation of His virtues, and especially by conformity to His way of life, which was lived completely for the benefit and salvation of the human race. If priests, religious men and women, and others who in any way have vowed themselves to the divine service, cultivate perfect chastity, it is certainly for the reason that their Divine Master remained all His life a virgin. St. Fulgentius exclaims: "This is the only-begotten Son of God, the only-begotten Son of a virgin also, the only spouse of all holy virgins, the fruit, the glory, the gift of holy virginity, whom holy virginity brought forth physically, to whom holy virginity is wedded spiritually, by whom holy virginity is made fruitful and kept inviolate, by whom she is adorned, to remain ever beautiful, by whom she is crowned, to reign forever glorious." [35]

20. And here We think it opportune, Venerable Brothers, to expose more fully and to explain more carefully why the love of Christ moves generous souls to abstain from marriage, and what is the mystical connection between virginity and the perfection of Christian charity. From our Lord's words referred to above, it has

already been implied that this complete renunciation of marriage frees men from its grave duties and obligations. Writing by divine inspiration, the Apostle of the Gentiles proposes the reason for this freedom in these words: "And I would have you to be without solicitude. . . But he that is with a wife, is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife; and he is divided." [36] Here however it must be noted that the Apostle is not reproving men because they are concerned about their wives, nor does he reprehend wives because they seek to please their husbands; rather is he asserting clearly that their hearts are divided between love of God and love of their spouse, and beset by gnawing cares, and so by reason of the duties of their married state they can hardly be free to contemplate the divine. For the duty of the married life to which they are bound clearly demands: "They shall be two in one flesh." [37] For spouses are to be bound to each other by mutual bonds both in joy and in sorrow. [38] It is easy to see, therefore, why persons who desire to consecrate themselves to God's service embrace the state of virginity as a liberation, in order to be more entirely at God's disposition and devoted to the good of their neighbor. How, for example, could a missionary such as the wonderful St. Francis Xavier, a father of the poor such as the merciful St. Vincent de Paul, a zealous educator of youth like St. John Bosco, a tireless "mother of emigrants" like St. Francis Xavier Cabrini, have accomplished such gigantic and painful labors, if each had to look after the corporal and spiritual needs of a wife or husband and children?

21. There is yet another reason why souls desirous of a total consecration to the service of God and neighbor embrace the state of virginity. It is, as the holy Fathers have abundantly illustrated, the numerous advantages for advancement in spiritual life which derive from a complete renouncement of all sexual pleasure. It is not to be thought that such pleasure, when it arises from lawful marriage, is reprehensible in itself; on the contrary, the chaste use of marriage is ennobled and sanctified by a special sacrament, as the Fathers themselves have clearly remarked. Nevertheless, it must be equally admitted that as a consequence of the fall of Adam the lower faculties of human nature are no longer obedient to right reason, and may involve man in dishonorable actions. As the Angelic Doctor has it, the use of marriage "keeps the soul from full abandon to the service of God." [39]

22. It is that they may acquire this spiritual liberty of body and soul, and that they may be freed from temporal cares, that the Latin Church demands of her sacred ministers that they voluntarily oblige themselves to observe perfect chastity. [40] And "if a similar law," as Our predecessor of immortal memory Pius XI declared, "does not bind the ministers of the Oriental Church to the same degree, nevertheless among them too ecclesiastical celibacy occupies a place of honor, and, in certain cases, especially when the higher grades of the hierarchy are in question, it is a necessary and obligatory condition." [41]

23. Consider again that sacred ministers do not renounce marriage solely on account of their apostolic ministry, but also by reason of their service at the altar. For, if even the priests of the Old Testament had to abstain from the use of marriage during the period of their service in the Temple, for fear of being declared impure by the Law just as other men, [42] is it not much more fitting that the ministers of Jesus Christ, who offer every day the Eucharistic Sacrifice, possess

perfect chastity? St. Peter Damian, exhorting priests to perfect continence, asks: "If Our Redeemer so loved the flower of unimpaired modesty that not only was He born from a virginal womb, but was also cared for by a virgin nurse even when He was still an infant crying in the cradle, by whom, I ask, does He wish His body to be handled now that He reigns, limitless, in heaven?"[43]

24. It is first and foremost for the foregoing reasons that, according to the teaching of the Church, holy virginity surpasses marriage in excellence. Our Divine Redeemer had already given it to His disciples as a counsel for a more perfect life.[44] St. Paul, after having said that the father who gives his daughter in marriage "does well," adds immediately "and he that gives her not, does better."[45] Several times in the course of his comparison between marriage and virginity the Apostle reveals his mind, and especially in these words: "for I would that all men were even as myself. . . But I say to the unmarried and to widows: it is good for them if they so continue, even as I."[46] Virginity is preferable to marriage then, as We have said, above all else because it has a higher aim:[47] that is to say, it is a very efficacious means for devoting oneself wholly to the service of God, while the heart of married persons will remain more or less "divided." [48]

25. Turning next to the fruitful effects of virginity, our appreciation of its value will be enhanced; for "by the fruit the tree is known." [49]

26. We feel the deepest joy at the thought of the innumerable army of virgins and apostles who, from the first centuries of the Church up to our own day, have given up marriage to devote themselves more easily and fully to the salvation of their neighbor for the love of Christ, and have thus been enabled to undertake and carry through admirable works of religion and charity. We by no means wish to detract from the merits and apostolic fruits of the active members of Catholic Action: by their zealous efforts they can often touch souls that priests and religious cannot gain. Nevertheless, works of charity are for the most part the field of action of consecrated persons. These generous souls are to be found laboring among men of every age and condition, and when they fall worn out or sick, they bequeath their sacred mission to others who take their place. Hence it often happens that a child, immediately after birth, is placed in the care of consecrated persons, who supply in so far as they can for a mother's love; at the age of reason he is entrusted to educators who see to his Christian instruction together with the development of his mind and the formation of his character; if he is sick, the child or adult will find nurses moved by the love of Christ who will care for him with unwearying devotion; the orphan, the person fallen into material destitution or moral abjection, the prisoner, will not be abandoned. Priests, religious, consecrated virgins will see in him a suffering member of Christ's Mystical Body, and recall the words of the Divine Redeemer: "For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; naked, and you covered me; sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me. . . Amen I say to you, as long you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me." [50] Who can ever praise enough the missionaries who toil for the conversion of the pagan multitudes, exiles from their native country, or the nuns who render them indispensable assistance?" To each and every one We gladly apply these words of Our Apostolic Exhortation, "Menti Nostrae:" ". . . by this law of

celibacy the priest not only does not abdicate his paternity, but increases it immensely, for he begets not for an earthly and transitory life but for the heavenly and eternal one." [51]

27. The fruit of virginity is not only in these external works, to which it allows one to devote oneself more easily and fully, but also in the earnest prayer offered for others and the trials willingly and generously endured for their sake, which are other very perfect forms of charity toward one's neighbor. To such also the servants and spouses of Christ, especially those who live within the convent or monastery walls, have consecrated their whole lives.

28. finally, virginity consecrated to Christ is in itself such an evidence of faith in the kingdom of heaven, such a proof of love for our Divine Redeemer, that there is little wonder if it bears abundant fruits of sanctity. Innumerable are the virgins and apostles vowed to perfect chastity who are the honor of the Church by the lofty sanctity of their lives. In truth, virginity gives souls a force of spirit capable of leading them even to martyrdom, if needs be: such is the clear lesson of history which proposes a whole host of virgins to our admiration, from Agnes of Rome to Maria Goretti.

29. Virginity fully deserves the name of angelic virtue, which St. Cyprian writing to virgins affirms: "What we are to be, you have already commenced to be. You already possess in this world the glory of the resurrection; you pass through the world without suffering its contagion. In preserving virgin chastity, you are the equals of the angels of God." [52] To souls, restless for a purer life or inflamed with the desire to possess the kingdom of heaven, virginity offers itself as "a pearl of great price," for which one "sells all that he has, and buys it." [53] Married people and even those who are captives of vice, at the contact of virgin souls, often admire the splendor of their transparent purity, and feel themselves moved to rise above the pleasures of sense. When St. Thomas states "that to virginity is awarded the tribute of the highest beauty," [54] it is because its example is captivating; and, besides, by their perfect chastity do not all these men and women give a striking proof that the mastery of the spirit over the body is the result of a divine assistance and the sign of proven virtue?

30. Worthy of special consideration is the reflection that the most delicate fruit of virginity consists in this, that virgins make tangible, as it were, the perfect virginity of their mother, the Church and the sanctity of her intimate union with Christ. In the ceremony of the consecration of virgins, the consecrating prelate prays God: "that there may exist more noble souls who disdain the marriage which consists in the bodily union of man and woman, but desire the mystery it enshrines, who reject its practice while loving its mystic signification." [55]

31. The greatest glory of virgins is undoubtedly to be the living images of the perfect integrity of the union between the Church and her divine Spouse. For this society founded by Christ it is a profound joy that virgins should be the marvelous sign of its sanctity and fecundity, as St. Cyprian so well expressed it: "They are the flower of the Church, the beauty and ornament of spiritual grace, a subject of joy, a perfect and unsullied homage of praise and honor, the image of God corresponding to the sanctity of the Lord, the most illustrious portion of Christ's flock. In them the glorious fecundity of our mother, the Church, finds expression and she rejoices; the

more the number of virgins increases, the greater is this mother's joy."[56]

32. This doctrine of the excellence of virginity and of celibacy and of their superiority over the married state was, as We have already said, revealed by our Divine Redeemer and by the Apostle of the Gentiles; so too, it was solemnly defined as a dogma of divine faith by the holy council of Trent,[57] and explained in the same way by all the holy Fathers and Doctors of the Church. Finally, We and Our Predecessors have often expounded it and earnestly advocated it whenever occasion offered. But recent attacks on this traditional doctrine of the Church, the danger they constitute, and the harm they do to the souls of the faithful lead Us, in fulfillment of the duties of Our charge, to take up the matter once again in this Encyclical Letter, and to reprove these errors which are so often propounded under a specious appearance of truth.

33. First of all, it is against common sense, which the Church always holds in esteem, to consider the sexual instinct as the most important and the deepest of human tendencies, and to conclude from this that man cannot restrain it for his whole life without danger to his vital nervous system, and consequently without injuring the harmony of his personality.

34. As St. Thomas very rightly observes, the deepest natural instinct is the instinct of conservation; the sexual instinct comes second. In addition, it is for the rational inclination, which is the distinguishing privilege of our nature, to regulate these fundamental instincts and by dominating to ennoble them.[58]

35. It is, alas, true that the sin of Adam has caused a deep disturbance in our corporal faculties and our passions, so that they wish to gain control of the life of the senses and even of the spirit, obscuring our reason and weakening our will. But Christ's grace is given us, especially by the sacraments, to help us to keep our bodies in subjection and to live by the spirit.[59] The virtue of chastity does not mean that we are insensible to the urge of concupiscence, but that we subordinate it to reason and the law of grace, by striving wholeheartedly after what is noblest in human and Christian life.

36. In order to acquire this perfect mastery of the spirit over the senses, it is not enough to refrain from acts directly contrary to chastity, but it is necessary also generously to renounce anything that may offend this virtue nearly or remotely; at such a price will the soul be able to reign fully over the body and lead its spiritual life in peace and liberty. Who then does not see, in the light of Catholic principles, that perfect chastity and virginity, far from harming the normal unfolding of man or woman, on the contrary endow them with the highest moral nobility.

37. We have recently with sorrow censured the opinion of those who contend that marriage is the only means of assuring the natural development and perfection of the human personality.[60] For there are those who maintain that the grace of the sacrament, conferred *ex opere operato*, renders the use of marriage so holy as to be a fitter instrument than virginity for uniting souls with God; for marriage is a sacrament, but not virginity. We denounce this doctrine as a dangerous error. Certainly, the sacrament grants the married couple the grace to accomplish holily the duties of their married state, and it strengthens the bonds of mutual affection that unite them; but the purpose of its institution was not to make the employment of marriage the means, most suitable in itself, for uniting the souls of the husband

and wife with God by the bonds of charity.[61]

38. Or rather does not the Apostle Paul admit that they have the right of abstaining for a time from the use of marriage, so that they may be more free for prayer,[62] precisely because such abstinence gives greater freedom to the soul which wishes to give itself over to spiritual thoughts and prayer to God?

39. Finally, it may not be asserted, as some do, that the "mutual help,"[63] which is sought in Christian Marriage, is a more effective aid in striving for personal sanctity than the solitude of the heart, as they term it, of virgins and celibates. For although all those who have embraced a life of perfect chastity have deprived themselves of the expression of human love permitted in the married state, nonetheless it cannot thereby be affirmed that because of this privation they have diminished and despoiled the human personality. For they receive from the Giver of heavenly gifts something spiritual which far exceeds that "mutual help" which husband and wife confer on each other. They consecrate themselves to Him Who is their source, and Who shares with them His divine life, and thus personality suffers no loss, but gains immensely. For who, more than the virgin, can apply to himself that marvelous phrase of the Apostle Paul: "I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me."[64]

40. For this reason the Church has most wisely held that the celibacy of her priests must be retained; she knows it is and will be a source of spiritual graces by which they will be ever more closely united with God.

41. We feel it opportune, moreover, to touch somewhat briefly here on the error of those who, in order to turn boys and girls away from Seminaries and Religious Institutes, strive to impress upon their minds that the Church today has a greater need of the help and of the profession of Christian virtue on the part of those who, united in marriage, lead a life together with others in the world, than of priest and consecrated virgins, who, because of their vow of chastity, are, as it were, withdrawn from human society. No one can fail to see, Venerable Brothers, how utterly false and harmful is such an opinion.

42. Of course, it is not Our intention to deny that Catholic spouses, because of the example of their Christian life, can, wherever they live and whatever be their circumstances, produce rich and salutary fruits as a witness to their virtue. Yet whoever for this reason argues that it is preferable to live in matrimony than to consecrate oneself completely to God, without doubt perverts the right order. Indeed We earnestly wish, Venerable Brothers, that those who have already contracted marriage, or desire to enter this state, be properly taught their serious obligations not only to educate properly and carefully whatever children they have or will have, but also to help others, within their capacity, by the testimony of their faith and the example of their virtue. And yet, as Our duty demands, We cannot but censure all those who strive to turn young people away from the Seminary or Religious Orders and Institutes, and from the taking of sacred vows, persuading them that they can, if joined in marriage, as fathers and mothers of families pursue a greater spiritual good by an open and public profession of their Christian life. Certainly their conduct would be more proper and correct, if, instead of trying to distract from a life of virginity those young men and women, who desire to give themselves to the service of God, too few alas today, they were to exhort with all

the zeal at their command the vast numbers of those who live in wedlock to promote apostolic works in the ranks of the laity. On this point, Ambrose fittingly writes: "To sow the seeds of perfect purity and to arouse a desire for virginity has always belonged to the function of the priesthood." [65]

43. We think it necessary, moreover, to warn that it is altogether false to assert that those who are vowed to perfect chastity are practically outside the community of men. Are not consecrated virgins, who dedicate their lives to the service of the poor and the sick, without making any distinction as to race, social rank, or religion, are not these virgins united intimately with their miseries and sorrows, and affectionately drawn to them, as though they were their mothers? And does not the priest likewise, moved by the example of his Divine Master, perform the function of a good shepherd, who knows his flock and calls them by name? [66] Indeed it is from that perfect chastity which they cultivate that priests and religious men and women find the motive for giving themselves to all, and love all men with the love of Christ. And they too, who live the contemplative life, precisely because they not only offer to God prayer and supplication but immolate themselves for the salvation of others, accomplish much for the good of the Church; indeed, when in circumstances like the present they dedicate themselves to works of charity and of the apostolate, according to the norms which We laid down in the Apostolic Letter "Sponsa Christi," [67] they are very much to be praised; nor can they be said to be separated from contact with men, since they labor for their spiritual progress in this twofold way.

44. From the Church's teaching on the excellence of virginity, let Us now come, Venerable Brothers, to some points which are of practical application.

45. In the first place, it must be clearly stated that because virginity should be esteemed as something more perfect than marriage, it does not follow that it is necessary for Christian perfection.

46. Holiness of life can really be attained, even without a chastity that is consecrated to God. Witness to this are the many holy men and women, who are publicly honored by the Church, and who were faithful spouses and stood out as an example of excellent fathers and mothers; indeed it is not rare to find married people who are very earnest in their efforts for Christian perfection.

47. It should be pointed out, also, that God does not urge all Christians to virginity, as the Apostle Paul teaches us with these words: "Now concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord; but I give counsel." [68] We are, therefore, merely invited by counsel to embrace perfect chastity, as something which can lead those "to whom it is given" [69] more safely and successfully to the evangelical perfection they seek, and to the conquest of the kingdom of heaven. Wherefore it is "not imposed, but proposed," as St. Ambrose so aptly observed. [70]

48. Hence, perfect chastity demands, first, a free choice by Christians before they consecrate themselves to God and then, from God, supernatural help and grace. [71] Our Divine Redeemer Himself has taught us this in the following words: "All men take not his word, but they to whom it is given. . . He that can take it, let him take it." [72] St. Jerome, intently pondering this sacred phrase of Jesus Christ, exhorts all "that each one study his own powers, whether he can fulfill the precepts of virginal modesty. For of itself chastity is charming and attractive to all. But one's

forces must be considered, that he who can may take it. The Lord's word is as it were an exhortation, stirring on His soldiers to the prize of purity. He that can take it, let him take it: let him who can, fight, conquer and receive his reward." [73] 49. For virginity is a difficult virtue; that one be able to embrace it there is needed not only a strong and declared determination of completely and perpetually abstaining from those legitimate pleasures derived from marriage; but also a constant vigilance and struggle to contain and dominate rebellious movements of body and soul, a flight from the importunings of this world, a struggle to conquer the wiles of Satan. How true is that saying of Chrysostom: "the root, and the flower, too, of virginity is a crucified life." [74] For virginity, according to Ambrose, is as a sacrificial offering, and the virgin "an oblation of modesty, a victim of chastity." [75] Indeed, St. Methodius, Bishop of Olympus, compares virgins to martyrs, [76] and St. Gregory the Great teaches that perfect chastity substitutes for martyrdom: "Now, though the era of persecution is gone, yet our peace has its martyrdom, because though we bend not the neck to the sword, yet with a spiritual weapon we slay fleshly desires in our hearts." [77] Hence a chastity dedicated to God demands strong and noble souls, souls ready to do battle and conquer "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." [78]

50. Prior, therefore, to entering upon this most difficult path, all who by experience know they are too weak in spirit should humbly heed this warning of Paul the Apostle: "But if they do not contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be burnt." [79] For many, undoubtedly, the burden of perpetual continence is a heavier one than they should be persuaded to shoulder. And so priests, who are under grave obligation of helping by their advice young people who declare they are drawn by some movement of soul to aspire to the priesthood or enter religious life, must urge them to ponder the matter carefully, lest they enter a way which they cannot hope to follow sturdily and happily to its end. They should prudently examine the fitness of candidates, even obtaining, as often as is proper, the opinion of experts; and then, if serious doubt remains, especially if it is based on past experience, they should make use of their authority to make candidates cease from seeking a state of perfect chastity, nor should these latter ever be admitted to Holy Orders, or to religious profession.

51. And yet, although chastity pledged to God is a difficult virtue, those who after serious consideration generously answer Christ's invitation and do all in their power to attain it, can perfectly and faithfully preserve it. For since they have eagerly embraced the state of virginity or celibacy they will certainly receive from God that gift* of grace through whose help they will be able to carry out their promise. Wherefore, if there are any "who do not feel they have the gift of chastity even though they have vowed it," [80] let them not declare they cannot fulfill their obligations in this matter. "For," says the Council of Trent, quoting St. Augustine, "God does not command the impossible, but in commanding serves notice that one do what he can, and pray for what he cannot," [81] and He helps us to accomplish it." [82] This truth, so full of encouragement, We recall to those also whose will has been weakened by upset nerves and whom some doctors, sometimes even Catholic doctors, are too quick to persuade that they should be freed from such an obligation, advancing the specious reason that they cannot preserve their chastity

without suffering some harm to their mental balance. How much more useful and opportune it is to help the infirm of this type to strengthen their will, and to advise them that not even to them is chastity impossible, according to the word of the Apostle: "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able: but will make also with temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it."[83]

52. Here are the helps, commended to us by our Divine Redeemer, by which we may efficaciously protect our virtue: constant vigilance, whereby we diligently do all that we can; moreover, constant prayer to God, asking for what we cannot attain by ourselves, because of our weakness. "Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."[84] A vigilance which guards every moment of our lives and every type of circumstance is absolutely necessary for us: "For the flesh lusteth against the spirit: and the spirit against the flesh."[85] But if anyone grants however little to the enticements of the flesh, he will see himself quickly pulled toward those "works of the flesh" which the Apostle lists,[86] the basest and ugliest vices of man.

53. Hence we must watch particularly over the movements of our passions and of our senses, and so control them by voluntary discipline in our lives and by bodily mortification that we render them obedient to right reason and God's law: "And they that are Christ's have crucified their flesh, with its vices and concupiscences."[87] The Apostle of the Gentiles says this about himself: "But I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway."[88] All holy men and women have most carefully guarded the movements of their senses and their passions, and at times have very harshly crushed them, in keeping with the teaching of the Divine Master: "But I say to you, that whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart. And if thy right eye scandalize thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee. For it is expedient for thee that one of thy members should perish, rather than that thy whole body be cast into hell."[89] It is abundantly clear that with this warning Our Savior demands of us above all that we never consent to any sin, even internally, and that we steadfastly remove far from us anything that can even slightly tarnish the beautiful virtue of purity. In this matter no diligence, no severity can be considered exaggerated. If ill health or other reasons do not allow one heavier corporal austerities, yet they never free one from vigilance and internal self-control.

54. On this point it should be noted, as indeed the Fathers[90] and Doctors[91] of the Church teach, that we can more easily struggle against and repress the wiles of evil and the enticements of the passions if we do not struggle directly against them, but rather flee from them as best we may. For the preserving of chastity, according to the teaching of Jerome, flight is more effective than open warfare: "Therefore I flee, lest I be overcome."[92] Flight must be understood in this sense, that not only do we diligently avoid occasion of sin, but especially that in struggles of this kind we lift our minds and hearts to God, intent above all on Him to Whom we have vowed our virginity. "Look upon the beauty of your Lover,"[93] St. Augustine tells us.

55. Flight and alert vigilance, by which we carefully avoid the occasions of sin,

have always been considered by holy men and women as the most effective method of combat in this matter; today however it does not seem that everybody holds the same opinion. Some indeed claim that all Christians, and the clergy in particular, should not be "separated from the world" as in the past, but should be "close to the world;" therefore they should "take the risk" and put their chastity to the test in order to show whether or not they have the strength to resist; therefore, they say, let young clerics see everything so that they may accustom themselves to gaze at everything with equanimity, and thus render themselves immune to all temptations. For this reason they readily grant young clerics the liberty to turn their eyes in any direction without the slightest concern for modesty; they may attend motion pictures, even those forbidden by ecclesiastical censorship; they may peruse even obscene periodicals; they may read novels which are listed in the Index of forbidden books or prohibited by the Natural Law. All this they allow because today the multitudes are fed by this kind of amusement and publication and because those who are minded to help them should understand their way of thinking and feeling. But it is easily seen that this method of educating and training the clergy to acquire the sanctity proper to their calling is wrong and harmful. For "he that loveth danger shall perish in it;"[94] most appropriate in this connection is the admonition of Augustine: "Do not say that you have a chaste mind if your eyes are unchaste, because an unchaste eye betrays an unchaste heart."[95]

56. No doubt this pernicious method is based upon serious confusion of thought. Indeed Christ Our Lord asserted of His Apostles, "I have sent them into the world;"[96] yet previously He had said of them, "They are not of the world, as I also am not of the world,"[97] and He had prayed to His Heavenly Father in these words, "I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from evil."[98] Motivated by the same principles, and in order to protect priests from temptations to evil, to which all those are ordinarily subject who are in intimate contact with the world, the Church has promulgated appropriate and wise laws,[99] whose purpose is to safeguard sacerdotal sanctity from the cares and pleasures of the laity.

57. All the more reason why the young clergy, because they are to be trained in the spiritual life, in sacerdotal and religious perfection, must be separated from the tumult of the world before entering the lists of combat; for long years they must remain in a Seminary or Scholasticate where they receive a sound and careful education which provides them with a gradual approach to and a prudent knowledge of those problems which our times have brought to the fore, in accordance with the norms which We established in the Apostolic Exhortation "Menti Nostrae." [100] What gardener would expose young plants, choice indeed but weak, to violent storms in order that they might give proof of the strength which they have not yet acquired? Seminarians and scholastics are surely to be considered like young and weak plants who must still be protected and gradually trained to resist and to fight.

58. The educators of the young clergy would render a more valuable and useful service, if they would inculcate in youthful minds the precepts of Christian modesty, which is so important for the preservation of perfect chastity and which is truly called the prudence of chastity. For modesty foresees threatening danger,

forbids us to expose ourselves to risks, demands the avoidance of those occasions which the imprudent do not shun. It does not like impure or loose talk, it shrinks from the slightest immodesty, it carefully avoids suspect familiarity with persons of the other sex, since it brings the soul to show due reverence to the body, as being a member of Christ^[101] and the temple of the Holy Spirit.^[102] He who possesses the treasure of Christian modesty abominates every sin of impurity and instantly flees whenever he is tempted by its seductions.

59. Modesty will moreover suggest and provide suitable words for parents and educators by which the youthful conscience will be formed in matters of chastity. "Wherefore," as We said in a recent address, "this modesty is not to be so understood as to be equivalent to a perpetual silence on this subject, nor as allowing no place for sober and cautious discussion about these matters in imparting moral instruction."^[103] In modern times however there are some teachers and educators who too frequently think it their duty to initiate innocent boys and girls into the secrets of human generation in such a way as to offend their sense of shame. But in this matter just temperance and moderation must be used, as Christian modesty demands.

60. This modesty is nourished by the fear of God, that filial fear which is founded on the virtue of profound Christian humility, and which creates in us utter abhorrence for the slightest sin, as Our predecessor, St. Clement I, stated in these words, "he who is chaste in flesh should not be proud, for he should know that he owes the gift of continence to another."^[104] How important Christian humility is for the protection of virginity, no one perhaps has taught more clearly than Augustine. "Because perpetual continence, and virginity above all, is a great good in the saints of God, extreme vigilance must be exercised lest it be corrupted by pride. . . The more clearly I see the greatness of this gift, the more truly do I fear lest it be plundered by thieving pride. No one therefore protects virginity, but God Himself Who bestowed it: and 'God is charity.'^[105] The guardian therefore of virginity is charity; the habitat of this guardian is humility."^[106]

61. Moreover there is another argument worthy of attentive consideration: to preserve chastity unstained neither vigilance nor modesty suffice. Those helps must also be used which entirely surpass the powers of nature, namely prayer to God, the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist, a fervent devotion to the most holy Mother of God.

62. Never should it be forgotten that perfect chastity is a great gift of God. For this reason Jerome wrote these succinct words, "It is given to those,^[107] who have asked for it, who have desired it, who have worked to receive it. For it will be given to everyone who asks, the seeker will find, to the importunate it will be opened."^[108] Ambrose adds that the constant fidelity of virgins to their Divine Spouse depends upon prayer.^[109] With that fervent piety for which he was noted St. Alphonsus Liguori taught that there is no help more necessary and certain for conquering temptations against the beautiful virtue of chastity than instant recourse to God in prayer.^[110]

63. To prayer must be added frequent and fervent use of the Sacrament of Penance which, as a spiritual medicine, purifies and heals us; likewise it is necessary to receive the Eucharist, which as Our predecessor of happy memory

Leo XIII asserted, is the best remedy against lust.[111] The more pure and chaste is a soul, the more it hungers for this bread, from which it derives strength to resist all temptations to sins of impurity, and by which it is more intimately united with the Divine Spouse; "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood, abides in me and I in him." [112]

64. The eminent way to protect and nourish an unsullied and perfect chastity, as proven by experience time and again throughout the course of centuries, is solid and fervent devotion to the Virgin Mother of God. In a certain way all other helps are contained in this devotion; there is no doubt that whoever is sincerely and earnestly animated by this devotion is salutarily inspired to constant vigilance, to continual prayer, to receive the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist. Therefore in a paternal way We exhort all priests, religious men and women, to entrust themselves to the special protection of the holy Mother of God who is the Virgin of virgins and the "teacher of virginity," as Ambrose says,[113] and the most powerful Mother of those in particular who have vowed and consecrated themselves to the service of God.

65. That virginity owes its origin to Mary is the testimony of Athanasius,[114] and Augustine clearly teaches that "The dignity of virginity began with the Mother of the Lord." [115] Pursuing the ideas of Athanasius,[116] Ambrose holds up the life of the Virgin Mary as the model of virgins. "Imitate her, my daughters. . . ! [117] Let Mary's life be for you like the portrayal of virginity, for from her, as though from a mirror, is reflected the beauty of chastity and the ideal of virtue. See in her the pattern of your life, for in her, as though in a model, manifest teachings of goodness show what you should correct, what you should copy and what preserve. . . She is the image of virginity. For such was Mary that her life alone suffices for the instruction of all. . . [118] Therefore let holy Mary guide your way of life." [119] "Her grace was so great that it not only preserved in her the grace of virginity, but bestowed the grace of chastity upon those on whom she gazed." [120] How true is the saying of Ambrose, "Oh the richness of the virginity of Mary!" [121] Because of this richness it will be very useful for religious men and women and for priests of our day to contemplate the virginity of Mary, in order that they may more faithfully and perfectly practice the chastity of their calling.

66. But it is not enough, beloved sons and daughters, to meditate on the virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary: with absolute confidence fly to her and obey the counsel of St. Bernard, "let us seek grace and seek it through Mary." [122] In a special way entrust to her during the Marian Year the care of your spiritual life and perfection, imitating the example of Jerome who asserted, "My virginity is dedicated in Mary and to Christ." [123]

67. In the midst of the grave difficulties with which the Church must contend today, the heart of the Supreme Pastor is greatly comforted, Venerable Brothers, when We see that virginity, which is flourishing throughout the world, is held in great honor and repute in the present as it was in past centuries, even though, as We have said, it is being attacked by errors which, We trust, will soon be dispelled and pass away.

68. Nevertheless We do not deny that this Our joy is overshadowed by a certain sorrow since We learn that in not a few countries the number of vocations to the

priesthood and to the religious life is constantly decreasing. We have already given the principal reasons which account for this fact and there is no reason why We should return to them now. Rather do We trust that those educators of youth who have succumbed to errors in this matter, will repudiate them as soon as they are detected, and will consequently seriously resolve both to correct them and to do what they can to provide every help for the youth entrusted to their care who feel themselves called by divine grace to aspire to the priesthood or to embrace the religious life, in order that they may be able to reach so noble a goal. May God grant that new and larger ranks of priests, religious men and women, equal in number and virtue to the current necessities of the Church, may soon go forth to cultivate the vineyard of the Lord.

69. Moreover, as the obligation of Our Apostolic Office demands, We urge fathers and mothers to willingly offer to the service of God those of their children who are called to it. But if this be a source of trouble, sorrow or regret, let them seriously meditate upon the admonition which Ambrose gave to the mothers of Milan. "The majority of the young women whom I knew wanted to be virgins were forbidden to leave by their mothers. . . If your daughters want to love a man, the laws allow them to choose whom they will. But those who have a right to choose a man, have no right to choose God." [124]

70. Let parents consider what a great honor it is to see their son elevated to the priesthood, or their daughter consecrate her virginity to her Divine Spouse. In regard to consecrated virgins, the Bishop of Milan writes, "You have heard, parents, that a virgin is a gift of God, the oblation of parents, the priesthood of chastity. The virgin is a mother's victim, by whose daily sacrifice divine anger is appeased." [125]

71. Before We come to the end of this Encyclical Letter, We wish, Venerable Brothers, to turn Our mind and heart in a special manner to those men and women, who, vowed to the service of God, are suffering bitter and terrible persecutions in not a few countries. Let them imitate the example of the consecrated virgins of the early Church who with courageous and indomitable hearts suffered martyrdom for the sake of their virginity. [126]

72. May all who have vowed to serve Christ, bravely persevere "even to death." [127] May they realize that their pains, sufferings and prayers are of great value in the sight of God for the restoration of His Kingdom in their countries and in the universal Church; may they be most certain that those "who follow the Lamb whither He goeth," [128] will sing forever a "new canticle," [129] which no one else can sing.

73. Our paternal heart is filled with compassion for priests, religious men and women, who are bravely professing their faith even to the extent of martyrdom; and not only for them, but for all those who in every part of the world are totally dedicated and consecrated to the divine service, We implore God with suppliant prayer to sustain, strength and console them. We earnestly invite each and every one of you, Venerable Brothers, and your faithful to pray with Us and to implore for all these souls the consolations, gifts and graces which they need from God.

74. Let the Apostolic Blessing, which with loving heart We impart to you, Venerable Brothers, to all priests and consecrated virgins, to those especially "who suffer

persecution for justice's sake"[130] and to all your faithful, be a pledge of heavenly grace and a testimony of Our paternal benevolence.

75. Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, March 25th, Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1954, in the sixteenth year of Our Pontificate.

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2. Cf. Ex. XXII, 16-17; Deut. XXII, 23-29; Eccli. XLII, 9.
3. S. Ambros., *De virginibus*, lib. 1, c. 3, n. 12; PL XVI, 192.
4. I Cor. X, 11.
5. Act. XXI, 9.
6. Cf. S. Ignat. Antioch., *Ep. ad Smyrn.*, c. 13; ed. FunkDiekamp, *Patres Apostolici*, Vol. 1, p. 286.
7. S. Iustin., *Apol. I pro christ.*, c. 15; PG VI, 349.
- 8 Cf. apostolic constitution *Sponsa Christi*, AAS XLII, 1951, pp. 5-8.
9. Cf. C.I.C., can. 487.
10. Cf. C.I.C., can. 132, section 1.
11. Cf. apostolic constitution *Provida Mater*, art. m, section 2; AAS XXXIX, 1947, p. 121.
12. Matth. XIX, 10.
13. *Ibid.*, XIX, 11-12.
14. *Ibid.*, XIX, 12.
15. S. Augustin., *De sancta virginitate*, c. 22; PL XL, 407.
16. Cf. can. 9; Mansi, *Coll. concil.*, II, 1096.
17. I Cor. VII, 32, 34.
18. S. Cypr., *De habitu virginum*, 4; PL IV, 443.
19. S. Augustin., *De Sancta virginitate*, cc. 8, 11; PL XL, 400, 401.
20. S. Thom., *Summa Th.*, II-II, q. 152, a. 3, ad 4.
21. S. Bonav., *De perfectione evangelica*, q. 3, a. 3, sol. 5.
22. Cf. S. Cypr. *De habitu virginum*, c. 20; PL IV, 459.
23. Cf. S. Athanas., *Apol. ad Constant.*, 33; PG XXV, 640.
24. S. Ambros., *De virginibus*, lib. 1, c. 8; n. 52; PL XVI, 202.
25. Cf. *Ibid.*, lib. m, cc 1-3, nn. 1-14; *De institutione virginis*, c. 17, nn. 104-114; PL XVI, 219-224, 333-336.
26. Cf. *Sacramentarium Leonianum*, XXX; PL LV, 129; *Pontificale Romanum: De benedictione et consecratione virginum* .
27. Cf. S. Cypr., *De habitu virginum*, 4 et. 22; PL IV, 443-444 et 462; S. Ambros., *De virginibus*, lib. 1, c. 7, n. 37; PL XVI, 199.
28. S. Augustin., *De sancta virginitate*, cc. 54-55; PL XL, 428.
29. *Pontificale Romanum: De benedictione et consecratione virginum*.
30. S. Methodius Olympi, *Convivium decem virginum*, orat. XI, c. 2; PG XVIII, 209.
31. Apoc. XIV, 4.
32. *Ibid.*
33. I Petr. 11, 21; S. Augustin., *De sancta virginitate*, c. 27; PL XL, 411 .
34. S. Bonav., *De perfectione evangelica*, q. 3, a. 3.

35. S. Fulgent., Epist. 3, c. 4, n. 6; PL LXV, 326.
36. I Cor. VII, 32-33.
37. Gen. II, 24i Cf. Matth, XIX, 5.
38. Cf. I Cor., VII, 39.
39. S. Thom., Summa Th., II-II, q. 186, a. 4.
40. Cf. C.I.C., can. 132, section 1.
41. Cf. litt. enc. Ad catholici sacerdotii AAS XXVIII, 1936, pp. 24-25.
42. Cf. Lev. XV, 16- 7 XXII, 4; I Sam. XXI, 5-7; cf. S. Siric. Papa, Ep. ad Himer. 7; PL LVI, 558-559.
43. S. Petrus Dam., De coelibatu sacerdotum, c. 3; PL CXLV, 384.
44. Cf. Matth. XIX, 10-11.
45. I Cor., VII,38.
46. Ibid., VII 7-8; Cfr. 1 et 26.
47. Cf. S. Thom., Summa Th., II-II, q. 152, aa. 34.
48. Cf. I Cor., vn, 33.
49. Matth. XII, 33.
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51. AAS XLII, 1950, p. 663.
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57. Sess. XXIV, can 10.
58. Cf. S. Thom., Summa Th., I-II, q. 94, a. 2.
59. Cf. Gal. V, 25; I Cor. IX, 27.
60. Cf. Allocutio ad Moderatrices supremas Ordinum et Institutorum Religiosarum, d. 15 septembris 1952; AAS XLIV, 1952, p. 824.
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123. S. Hieronym., Epist. 22, n. 18; PL XXII, 405.
124. S. Ambros., De virginibus, lib. 1, c. 10, n. 58; PL XVI, 205.
- 125 Ibid., c. 7, n. 32; PL XVI, 198.
- 126 Cf. S. Ambros., De virginibus, lib. II, c. 4, n. 32; PL XVI, 215-216.
127. Phil., II,8.
128. Apoc. XIV, 4.
129. Ibid., 3.
- 130 Matth. V, 10.