



When speaking about vocational life, the first people who come to mind are often married couples, priests or nuns. Lesser known is the vocation of consecrated virginity, although it is the oldest recognized formed of consecrated life in the Catholic Church.

“Almost no one knows that it exists, let alone what is involved,” said Dr. Janet Smith, a consecrated virgin in the Archdiocese of Detroit and professor at Sacred Heart Seminary.

“But I am always touched by how many Catholics deeply respect the vocation when they hear about it,” Smith told CNA.

Andrea Polito, who recently dedicated herself as a consecrated virgin in the Archdiocese of Denver and works as a pediatric oncology nurse, would agree that there is often a sense of mystery surrounding the vocation.

“Most people even within the Church have no idea what this vocation is. And in their defense, consecration in the lay state at all is not widely known,” Polito told CNA.

What is a consecrated virgin?

A consecrated virgin is a never-married woman who dedicates her perpetual virginity to God and is set aside as a sacred person who belongs to Christ in the Catholic Church.

According to the Code of Canon Law, women who are seeking out this particular vocation must be consecrated to God through the diocesan bishop, according to the rite approved by the Church. Upon consecration, they are betrothed mystically to Christ and are dedicated to the service of the Church, while remaining in a public state of life. Consecrated virgins live individually and receive direction from the diocesan bishop. Their consecration and life of perpetual virginity is permanent.

Their call to a secular state of life means that consecrated virgins have jobs and lives much like that of the average person. They provide for their own needs and the local diocese is not financially responsible for them.

“My life looks pretty ordinary. I have a full-time job and volunteer with a few things,” Polito said.

“I do the same things everyone else does in Colorado – enjoy the beautiful mountains and really good beer, spend time with friends and family and try really hard to be holy,” she continued.

As a professor, Dr. Smith said she spends most of her days “preparing for the classes I teach and doing the work involved for all the invitations I accept.” She also tries to speak at local engagements and is involved with a bible study group.

Unlike most religious orders, consecrated virgins do not have habits or use the title “Sister.” They remain in their own diocese to serve the local Church community under the authority of the bishop.

A consecrated virgin also has a particular focus on prayer, which is usually lived out through Mass, Liturgy of the Hours, spiritual reading and personal prayer.

“My day begins and ends with prayer, specifically for the Church of Denver – her bishops, priests and people – that is the mission of a consecrated virgin,” Polito said.

Smith also said that she prays the Divine Office and engages “in meditative prayer and spiritual reading.”

One of the primary goals of consecrated virgins is to point towards a bigger reality: Christ is the ultimate fulfillment. As such, consecrated virgins live out their daily lives as witnesses of this radical love of Christ – not as single persons, but as spouses of Christ.

Illustrating this point, the consecration ceremony has some similarities to a wedding, with the woman who is entering the vocation wearing a wedding dress and receiving a ring.

“Being consecrated and being single are in opposition by their definition,” Polito said.

“I am a bride of Christ, I am wed to Him. I am not consecrated so I can live the free, single life and do whatever I want. I am consecrated so I am completely available to the desires and work of my spouse.”

History of consecrated virginity

References of consecrated virginity can be found in sections of the New Testament, such as Matthew 19:12 and 1 Corinthians 7:25-40. Early church fathers, such as St. Ignatius of Antioch, have also mentioned consecrated virgins as a distinct group within the Catholic Church, dating back to 110 A.D.

Before women were able to enter a religious order, many dedicated themselves as consecrated virgins. St. Agnes, St. Agatha, St. Cecilia and St. Lucy are among the early saints recognized by the Catholic Church as consecrated virgins.

During the sixth century, the practice of consecrated virginity fell by the wayside as the popularity of monastic religious life grew, and became extremely rare the Middle Ages. However, consecrated virginity made a comeback as religious orders began to preserve the “Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity.” Vatican II also ensured consecrated virginity’s restoration in the modern world when it revised the “Rite of Consecration.”

Currently in the universal Catholic Church, there are around 3,000 consecrated virgins, 235 of whom live in the United States, according to the Association of Consecrated Virgins.

Discernment of consecrated virginity

For Polito, discerning the vocation to consecrated virginity was unique because she wanted to consecrate herself to the Lord, but was not attracted to the religious life. She felt torn.

“I brought these struggles to a priest who introduced me to consecrated life in the lay state and was very convicted of its importance,” Polito said.

She then spent years in prayer about consecrated life, and started to discern consecrated virginity more specifically. The two things that drew her to this vocation were the bridal and ordinary aspects of its calling.

“In being his bride, I am gifted a deeper sense of self, of love, of femininity – it is as if I never knew who I was until I entered my vocation and I now know myself only in Christ. It’s incredible,” Polito said.

“And then the ordinary – my life looks pretty similar to the average Joe, and there is something intriguing about that. I think I have been able to have many conversations about Christ and the Church because of that. It’s a beautifully ordinary and profound mission,” she continued.

Dr. Smith, who teaches at a seminary, said her road of discernment started by being inspired through the witness of the seminarians.

“It caused me to consider whether I had made the commitment to which God was calling me,” Smith said.

After this prompting, she attended several retreats, in which the path toward the vocation grew clearer.

“Becoming consecrated formalizes the relationship with amazing graces that enable one to live more confidently the vocation, to have greater clarity and confidence. I had no idea how transforming it would be,” she continued.

For women who are discerning consecrated virginity, Smith suggested that women should “read a lot about it” and “talk to those who are living it; go on a retreat and see if God is calling you to it.”

Polito’s biggest piece of advice was “to be not afraid.”

“The Lord plants desire in our hearts and will grow that desire into something beautiful, fruitful and fulfilling,” she said, adding that “Christ will lead you to where he wants you.”

“I would be lying if I said this vocation was easy, but Christ is real, His grace is real and His mission is needed.”