Derksen: ‘Belonging to God in a radical way’ is the rare vocation of consecrated virgin

Each of us experiences God in a unique way. My relationship with God will not be identical to yours.

Some of us relate to God as to a loving father. Others relate best to Jesus as a brother, teacher, healer, or best friend. Our God is all of these, and so much more. For Rose Marie Fowler, Jesus is not only friend and companion, but bridegroom.

Fowler is the only consecrated virgin in the Archdiocese of Edmonton, and in all of Alberta. Consecrated virginity, or the Ordo Virginum, is an ancient but little-known vocation for women in the Church. It is a rare, and extremely intimate call, from God to become a spouse of Jesus Christ. Earlier this month, the Vatican released a document with updated guidelines for discerning and living this way of life.

“The spousal relationship with Jesus … that’s the core of the vocation,” Fowler explains, when I meet with her in her Edmonton apartment. Her gentle, thoughtful way of speaking and interacting with me is a fruit of her deep life of prayer, faithfully lived out over many years.

Consecrated virgins are similar to religious sisters in that they practise celibacy in order to give themselves fully to Jesus in a relationship of spousal love. They differ from religious sisters in that they do not usually live in community, or wear a habit or distinctive clothing.
Consecrated virgins live in ordinary homes, wear ordinary clothes, and have ordinary jobs. They do not profess vows, but are consecrated to a life of virginity by their diocesan bishop. According to the Rite of Consecration, they are “mystically espoused to Christ.”

The desire to be a bride of Christ, but to remain in the midst of the world, is at the heart of the call to consecrated virginity. The rhythm of ordinary life, with work, friends and family, is combined with solitude and prayer in the privacy of the virgin’s home.

The process of discerning her vocation was not always easy for Fowler. Although she was raised in a Catholic home, she didn’t learn about consecrated virginity until adulthood. From a young age, however, she was attracted to the idea of consecrated life, of belonging to God in a radical way.

“I was fascinated, as a child, particularly by contemplative sisters,” she recalls. “But it wasn’t until I was in my early 20s that I really felt that I might have a religious vocation.”

At that point, however, nothing seemed to come of her sense of calling. Fowler studied nursing in Edmonton, and eventually found herself working as a
supervisor of nurses in First Nations communities in Saskatchewan.

She enjoyed her life and work, but when she was in her 30s, she again sensed God calling her to something more. During this time of discernment, she was still unaware of the existence of consecrated virginity. She decided to enter a religious community, the Missionaries of Charity (the community founded by Mother Teresa). She spent about five months discerning with the Missionaries before realizing that God was calling her to something different.

“I determined that that wasn’t where God was calling me,” she says, “but although I didn’t feel called to that community, I felt confirmation in the fact that I was called to consecrated life.”

She returned to Edmonton and resumed her nursing career. After a couple of years, she decided to study theology full-time at Newman Theological College. Throughout this time, her sense of seeking continued.

“It was very difficult. It’s a difficult process,” she shares. “You know there’s a longing, and a yearning, but you don’t know where to go.”
Still searching, Fowler decided to take some time away. She visited St. Peter’s Benedictine Abbey in Muenster, Sask., for an eight-day retreat. She returned for another retreat the following year, and was introduced to a consecrated virgin who was living on the abbey grounds. Fowler asked her retreat director for more information about consecrated virginity. He gave her the Rite of Consecration to read.

“As soon as I read the rite, I realized that I was being called to consecrated virginity,” she remembers. “There wasn’t a doubt in my mind.”

On June 26, 1998, Fowler was espoused to Christ through the Rite of Consecration. She wholeheartedly embraced every aspect of her vocation, including the discipline of an intense life of prayer. Like religious sisters, consecrated virgins pray the Liturgy of the Hours each day, in addition to attending daily Mass.

Now retired, and living just steps away from Corpus Christi Chapel of Perpetual Adoration in north Edmonton, Fowler balances prayer with family obligations and service to her community.

Every consecrated virgin’s daily routine looks different, depending on where they work and their individual responsibilities. Since her retirement, Fowler has more time for prayer and contemplation. She rises early – around 5:30 a.m. – and spends an hour in prayer. She attends daily Mass each morning, then gets busy with household tasks. She returns to the chapel for prayer in the afternoon, and again in the evening, praying the Liturgy of the Hours and the rosary each day.

Fowler’s favourite passage of Scripture sums up her vocation well. Colossians 3:3 says, “your life is hidden with Christ in God.” If you meet Fowler on the street or at the grocery store, you might not realize that you are meeting a spouse of Christ.

Without the distinctive clothing of a religious sister, she truly is “hidden with Christ” in the midst of the world. For those who are blessed to be aware of her remarkable vocation, however, she is an eschatological sign of the union with Christ to which all of us are ultimately called, and which we will experience one day in heaven.

Consecrated virgins, like religious sisters, embrace this reality here and now, and the result is the beginning of heaven on earth.

– Rose Derksen is a pastoral assistant at the parishes of St. Alphonsus and St. Clare in Edmonton.