

Ottawa Archbishop will receive three women as Consecrated Virgins

The Archbishop of Ottawa will receive and bless three local women as Consecrated Virgins Living in the World on July 6.

The ancient practice of consecrating a virgin was revived in 1970 after the Second Vatican Council.

According to canon law, the order of virgins is similar to other forms of consecrated life, though they live and work in the secular community. They must never have married or lived in any open violation of chastity, and must show the character and prudence necessary to dedicate themselves to a chaste life in service of the Church.

After “expressing the holy resolution of following Christ more closely,” the diocesan bishop consecrates the virgins “according to the approved liturgical rite” through which they are “mystically betrothed to Christ, the Son of God, and are dedicated to the service of the Church.”

There are about 60 consecrated virgins in Canada and about 5,000 internationally, according to a 2018 release from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Archbishop Terrence Prendergast said there were three consecrated virgins in the Ottawa archdiocese when he was installed in 2007. Each has since passed away, but “the last of them encouraged our three local women candidates before her death.”

According to Rev. Geoffrey Kerslake, the three women contacted him independently not long after he began serving as Episcopal Vicar for Pastoral Services for the archdiocese seven years ago, “asking about the vocation to a life of consecrated virginity.”

“At that moment, none were aware of each other’s existence,” Kerslake said. “In short order, I found myself in charge of creating a formation program and journeying over the course of several years with three different, faith-filled women who felt a call to this way of life.

“During the formation period with these three women, despite their differences in age and life experiences, there was a shared sense of call to this ancient vocation,” Kerslake said. “Listening to their stories, it was inspiring to see how the Lord was working in each of their lives, gently guiding them along the path to Him.

"As we prayed, engaged in teaching sessions and journeyed together, it became clear that the Diocesan Order of Consecrated Virgins met a need for women who wanted to give their lives totally to Christ and His Church but who were not called to the vocation of religious life," he said.

"Their quiet witness would be in the world in their secular jobs, in their parishes and the relationships they had with family, friends and co-workers, the leaven hidden in the loaf of the world or the little bit of salt that flavours the dish."

Kerslake called the experience a "unique opportunity to rediscover an ancient vocation and see it rise once more as part of the continuing work of the Spirit, alive and active in the lives of Christians and the world."

One of the women prepared a reflection on how she discerned this vocation. Because of her work in a secular environment, she asked that her name be kept confidential.

"My Catholic Christian faith had always been an important part of my life as a child, but my search in understanding and accepting the faith became more serious and intentional in my high school and university years," she said.

"The first inclination of pursuing a religious calling first entered my mind in high school. However, I also felt called to pursue a professional career. Not knowing how to reconcile the two at the time, I decided to focus first on completing my professional studies. However, the call to live in deeper relationship with Christ never left me and I never stopped searching for what God was calling me to be."

"In the midst of my professional studies, I completed a Holy Hour of Adoration at my church and stayed behind to pray before the Blessed Sacrament," she said.

"On the kneeler before the tabernacle, I found a prayer card to the Blessed Sacrament that made such an impression upon me that, while kneeling in prayer, I spontaneously made an offering of myself and of my life to the Lord. God evidently heard this prayer and received my offering, because He began to complete His work in me from that day forward."

As the woman continued her search, she found a link to the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins and downloaded information.

"Reading the 400-page document on the vocation of consecrated virginity filled my heart with joy, and I was captivated by the beauty of this vocation; the text resonated so clearly within me, I knew in a moment that this was the vocation to which I had been called, and the answer for which I had been searching," she said.

"The vocation perfectly matched my personality, attributes and the deepest desires of my heart, to give myself fully to the Lord so that I may live in

greater freedom and openness in responding to whatever the Lord is calling me to be or do for Him. My life is the greatest gift I could give back to a God who has been exceedingly kind and gracious to me; in gratitude, I make this offering of my life and everything He has given me, in thanksgiving for His many blessings.

“As I near the appointed time to receive the Rite of Consecration to Virginity lived in the world, it has become increasingly evident to me that this call is indeed God’s will for my life, and that my acceptance of the consecration is simply my response to His pursuit of my heart, which He has captured and taken as His own,” she said. “As St. Augustine knew intimately, my heart rests only when it rests in Him.

“Although this is a vocation not chosen by many, and difficult to understand for most, I am confident that it is within this vocation that my life will attain its greatest fulfilment and joy, in becoming what I was created to be, in and for this world, as I serve the needs of people in my professional work and as an ambassador for Christ as His chosen and beloved bride.”