

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

### The Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas*<sup>1</sup>

On 25 March of this year the Holy Father issued an Encyclical letter entitled *Sacra Virginitas*. As the title suggests this Encyclical deals with the teaching of the Church on the value and dignity of virginity and perfect chastity, and vindicates this teaching against the errors and attacks which are directed against it. The Encyclical is, moreover, a message of exhortation, of courage and of hope to all who have consecrated their lives to virginity and celibacy and, in a special way, to those of them who, in not a few countries, are faced by the dark shadows of persecution.

The teaching of the Church on the value and dignity of virginity and perfect chastity is based upon Sacred Scripture, upon the express words of Our Lord<sup>2</sup> and of St. Paul.<sup>3</sup> Little wonder then that from the earliest times these virtues should have been held in the highest regard in the Christian fold and extolled by writers of every age and should have been practised, in imitation of the Divine Master, by innumerable faithful souls down the centuries. Even pagan writers have acknowledged and have paid generous tribute to the cultivation of these virtues in the Christian communities. Indeed, it can be said that the practice of life-long consecrated virginity and chastity was something specifically Christian and was among the greatest gifts and most elevating influences that Christianity brought to a pagan world. As the Holy Father notes in the opening paragraph of his Encyclical: "Holy Virginitas 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."

In view of this constant teaching and practice, it may be asked why it was deemed necessary to issue, in these days, a lengthy Encyclical in praise of virginity and chastity. In the introductory section the Holy Father summarises his reasons for speaking: "Since there are some who, straying from the right path in this matter, so exalt marriage<sup>4</sup> as to rank it superior to virginity and in this way depreciate

<sup>1</sup> AAS, XXXXVI (1954) pp. 161-191.

<sup>2</sup> St. Math. 19 : 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> I Cor. 7 : 32-34.

<sup>4</sup> The Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas* is not, of course, in any sense a disparagement of Christian marriage. It is hardly necessary to recall the teaching of the Church on the dignity of this sacred institution. In their Encyclical letters and addresses the Popes have constantly, and particularly in recent times, rung the changes on that dignity. They have eloquently echoed the words of St. Paul to the Ephesians (5 : 32) *Sacramentum hoc magnum est*. Pope Leo XIII in his Encyclical *Arcanum* (10 Feb. 1880) spoke of marriage as *sua vi, sua natura, sua sponte sacrum*. The opening words of the Encyclical on marriage issued by Pope Pius XI (31 Dec., 1930) are: *Casti connubii quanta sit dignitas . . .* The present Holy Father has, on innumerable occasions, referred to the value, nobility and dignity of Christian marriage. But great though this dignity is, it is of lesser degree than that of dedicated virginity and perfect chastity. This then may be said to be part of the theme of the Encyclical under consideration here.

chastity and clerical celibacy consecrated to God, Our apostolic duty demands that we now, in a particular way, declare and uphold the teaching of the Church on the sublime state of virginity and so defend Catholic truth against these errors."

In the first part of the Encyclical the nature of the Christian virtues of virginity and perfect chastity is set out and the state resulting therefrom is compared and contrasted, in accordance with the teaching of Sacred Scripture, with that of marriage. The Christian virtues of virginity and perfect chastity are based upon a resolution, freely made, to abstain for life from marriage and from all sexual pleasure. This resolution must be made not for any earthly or selfish motives, not to escape the burdens of married life, not to flaunt, as did the Pharisees, physical virginity but "for the kingdom of heaven."<sup>1</sup> The resolution implies a consecration to God of the entire personality, body and soul, in order to attain complete devotion of one's powers to the service of Christ and the neighbour. "Virginity is honoured," St. Augustine says<sup>2</sup> "not because of the bodily integrity it implies but because it is something dedicated to God." And St. Thomas teaches that virginity and chastity are virtues in the true sense only when they are confirmed and kept intact by a vow: *Virginitas secundum quod est virtus importat propositum voto firmatum integritatis perpetuo servandae.*<sup>3</sup> Complete consecration and dedication to Christ are the keynotes of these virtues. Though marriage is a sacrament and though the due exercise of marital rights is a virtuous act, nevertheless the heart of the married person must be divided<sup>4</sup> and the use of marriage, as St. Thomas says, prevents the soul from fully abandoning itself to the service of God: *Usus carnalis copulae retrahit animum ne feratur totaliter in Dei servitium dupliciter; uno modo propter vehementiam delectationis . . . et inde est quod usus venerorum retrahit animam ab illa perfecta intentione in Deum . . . alio modo propter sollicitudinem quam ingerit homini de gubernatione uxoris et filiorum et rerum temporalium quae ad eorum sustentationem sufficiant.*<sup>5</sup> The state of virginity and perfect chastity, implying, as it does, the total renunciation of marriage and of its rights liberates the soul from many temporal and earthly cares and enables it to be more entirely attached to God and to His service. As the spiritual writers often express it, the person who has consecrated his virginity and perfect chastity to God enters into spiritual wedlock, is wedded to Christ in love, becomes, as St. John states, "a follower of the Lamb wherever He goes."<sup>6</sup> There is a mystical connexion between the consecration of virginity and chastity and the perfection of the Christian life, which is charity. In the spiritual order, then, this consecrated state is preferable to marriage because of its higher purpose and orientation, because it frees the soul for full attachment to the love and service of Christ. In the Latin Church perfect chastity is demanded from all sacred ministers so that they may whole-heartedly engage themselves in the apostolic ministry and also that they may more worthily serve at the altar of Him who is the prototype and highest exemplar of this virtue.

<sup>1</sup> St. Math. 19: 12.

<sup>2</sup> P.L. 40, 400.

<sup>3</sup> S. Theol., 2-2, 152, 3 ad 4.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 7: 33.

<sup>5</sup> S. Theol., 2-2, 186, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Apoc. 14: 4.

The effects of the cultivation, in the Catholic Church, of consecrated virginity and perfect chastity are manifold both in the sphere of external works of religion and charity and in the intimate sphere of the interior life. At every stage in the history of the Church there have been vast numbers of men and women who have renounced their right to marry in order to devote themselves completely, out of love of Christ, to the salvation of souls. The spiritual and corporal works of mercy in the mission fields, in hospitals and orphanages, are, for the most part, the fruits of the labours of those consecrated to virginity and chastity, of those who have taken Christ for their spouse and who see in their fellow men members of His mystical Body. By these efforts for the extensive and intensive growth of the Mystical Body the dedicated workers achieve a spiritual parenthood. The effects of consecrated virginity and chastity are manifold also in the interior life. This consecration opens the way to a more intimate union of prayer—and not of a merely selfish kind but prayer the object and effect of which extend far beyond the boundaries of enclosures to inspire the hearts and to raise the burden of mankind. The life consecrated to virginity and chastity is evidence of love and attachment to Christ ; it is sacrificial ; it is a witness of the sanctity of the Church ; it reflects the virginal union of Christ with His Church ; it gives power and strength to the human spirit to endure all, even martyrdom, for Christ ; it can be a potent influence on others, even on the greatest sinners ; it demonstrates the mastery, under the grace of God, of the spirit over the flesh.

In the second part of the Encyclical the Holy Father examines and refutes the specious errors which have recently been propounded regarding the virginal and celibate state. In particular, he refutes the error of those who suggest that marriage and the use of the sexual instinct are essential to and are demanded for a full human life, for an integral expression of personality both in the individual and social order. It is pointed out firstly that the superiority of the virginal and celibate state to that of marriage is part of expressly revealed doctrine<sup>1</sup>—a doctrine which moreover, has been formally defined by the Council of Trent.<sup>2</sup> Yet there are some who, especially in recent times, have proclaimed the sexual instinct as the deepest and most important of human tendencies and who conclude from this that a man cannot restrain this instinct for his whole life without danger to his vital nervous system and injury to the harmony of his personality. This simply is not true. It is against common sense. Firstly, the deepest natural instinct is that of self-conservation and not the sexual instinct. Moreover, all natural instincts of human beings must be regulated by and subjected to the law of reason.<sup>3</sup> It is true that, as a result of the sin of Adam, we have no longer a despotic control over our passions. Our intellects have been darkened and our wills weakened. The virtue of chastity does not mean that we are insensible to the urge of concupiscence

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *supra*.

<sup>2</sup> Sess. XXIV, can. 10. "Si quis dixerit statum conjugalem anteponeendum esse statui virginitatis vel coelibatus, et non esse melius ac beatius manere in virginitate aut coelibatu quam jungi matrimonio, A.S." (Denz. Bannwart, *Enchirid. Symb.* n. 981).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *S. Theol.*, 1-2, 94, 2.

but that we subject it to the law of reason and grace. In the struggle to achieve this subjection we have the Grace of Christ, especially in the sacraments, to strengthen us. To attain mastery over our sexual passions we must not merely refrain from acts directly contrary to chastity, but we must forego anything that even remotely or indirectly offends this virtue. Thus will the soul gain control over the body and win spiritual peace and liberty. Consequently the practice of perfect chastity and virginity, far from inhibiting the normal unfolding of the human personality, really lead it to moral development, maturity and nobility.

In an earlier address<sup>1</sup> the Holy Father censured the opinion of those who contend that marriage is the only means of ensuring the natural development and perfection of the human personality. It was argued in favour of this opinion that the use of marriage, in virtue of the sacrament, is a more powerful means than virginity (which is not a sacrament) of uniting souls with God. This is again denounced as a dangerously erroneous doctrine. It is based upon a misunderstanding of the ends of marriage.<sup>2</sup> It is true, of course, that marriage is a sacrament and that it gives the parties the grace holily to accomplish the duties of their state and that it strengthens the bond which unites them one to another. But the primary purpose of marriage and of its use is not to unite souls to God in charity. If this were its primary purpose St. Paul would not have counselled temporary abstinence so that the parties might be more free for prayer.<sup>3</sup> Nor is the mutual help, which is a secondary purpose of marriage, a more effective means than the solitude of virginity and chastity towards the attainment of personal sanctity. The foregoing of the expression of mutual love permitted in marriage does not imply any diminution of personality in the dedicated virgin or celibate. They receive from God spiritual helps which far surpass the mutual help which husband and wife confer on each other. Their dedication enables them to share more closely in the divine life and this means an immense impetus and gain in the development of their personality. Each of them can echo the words of St. Paul: "I live, now not I: but Christ liveth in me."<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the Church has prescribed celibacy for her priests because she knows that it can be for them, among other helps, a means of grace and union with God.

The Holy Father passes on to refer to the error of those who try to deter boys and girls from entering seminaries or religious institutes by impressing on them that the Church needs good Christian marriages more than priests and religious. This is described as a harmful error. Of course, it is true that good Catholic spouses are, by the example of their lives, of immense value to the Church. And it is vitally important that those who have contracted, or who contemplate, marriage should be fully instructed regarding their serious obligations properly to educate

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *AAS*, XLIV (1952) p. 824.

<sup>2</sup> In 1944 the Holy Office issued a Decree which rejected the views of some modern writers who either denied that *procreatio et educatio proles* was the primary purpose of marriage or who asserted that the secondary ends (*mutuum adiutorium* and *remedium concupiscentiæ*) were not essentially subordinate to the primary purpose but were equally principal and independent. Cf. *AAS*, XXXVI (1944) p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> I Cor. 7: 5.

<sup>4</sup> Gal. 2: 20.

their children and to help others by the testimony of their faith and virtue. But it does not at all follow from this that the married state is of a higher value than a life of dedicated virginity and perfect chastity. And it is completely wrong to turn young people away from this dedicated life on the specious plea that they can, as parents of families, pursue a higher spiritual good. The Church needs a good laity but it needs, even more, vocations to the clerical and religious life.<sup>1</sup> Those who desire to give themselves entirely to the service of God should be zealously encouraged and helped to follow their vocation. This is particularly a duty of priests. The Holy Father recalls the statement of St. Ambrose which runs: "To sow the seeds of perfect purity and to arouse a desire for virginity has always belonged to the function of the priesthood."<sup>2</sup> It is false to assert that those who are dedicated to virginity and perfect chastity are practically outside the community of men. In fact they play a most valuable rôle in that community. The various religious who devote their lives to the service of the sick and poor, without distinction of race or rank or religion, are most intimately associated with and confer incalculable benefits upon the community in which they work. Likewise the priest who knows and moves amongst his people is a vital part of the community: he is the shepherd of the flock. Indeed, it is because of the dedication of their lives to celibacy and perfect chastity that priests and religious can give themselves wholeheartedly to the service and love of all, that they can be all things to all men. Even those who live the contemplative life are not cut off from service to the community. These contemplatives offer their prayers and sacrifices—and in many cases today their works of charity<sup>3</sup>—for the salvation and welfare of mankind. Their constant prayer which ascends to God in reparation and supplication and brings down blessings upon all is a valuable contribution to the welfare of the Church and mankind.

Having set out the teaching of the Church on the excellence of virginity and perfect chastity the Pope, in the third part of the Encyclical, deals with some practical points. Consecrated virginity or perfect chastity are not essential to Christian perfection. Great holiness of life can be attained in other states. There are among the Saints many married men and women. All Christians are not called to a life of virginity or perfect chastity. This life is a counsel of perfection.<sup>4</sup> It is proposed not imposed. It must be freely chosen under the supernatural help and grace of God. Virginity and perfect chastity are difficult virtues. Their practice demands a strong and firm determination, a constant vigilance and struggle, a sacrificial spirit. St. John Chrysostom says that "the root and flower of virginity is a crucified life."<sup>5</sup> For many the burden of this dedicated life would be too heavy. Consequently, before it is undertaken the capacity of the aspirant to live it must be

<sup>1</sup> The Holy Father notes here that vocations are "too few to-day" and at the end of the Encyclical he speaks of "his sorrow in learning that in not a few countries the number of vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life is constantly decreasing."

<sup>2</sup> *P.L.* 16, 272.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Apostolic Letter, *Sponsa Christi*, *AAS*, XLIII (1951), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 7: 25.

<sup>5</sup> *P.G.* 48, 592.

most carefully considered. Those who feel drawn to and desire to enter the clerical or religious state must be exhorted to ponder the matter closely and prayerfully beforehand. The priest adviser should examine the fitness of the candidate. Sometimes it may be necessary and proper to obtain the opinion of experts. And then, after due examination, "if serious doubt remains, especially if it is based on past experience the priest adviser should make use of his authority to get candidates to desist from seeking a state of perfect chastity. These candidates should not be admitted to Holy Orders or to religious profession."

The case of those who, after serious consideration, have freely and generously embraced the dedicated life of virginity and perfect chastity may present a different sort of problem. Though the way of life which these men and women have undertaken is very difficult they can remain faithful. They can be confident that they will receive from God the graces and helps which they need to fulfil the promises they have made. The Pope recalls the anathema directed by the Council of Trent<sup>1</sup> against those who teach that all who do not feel that they have the gift of chastity (though they have vowed it) can contract marriage. God does not command the impossible, He will not refuse these dedicated souls the graces necessary to persevere in their vocation—if He is asked for them. This truth is recalled firstly to encourage those—and their number seems to be increasing in these days—whose wills may have been weakened by nervous illness, and secondly to enter a *caveat* against a too facile judgement and advice by medical men regarding the treatment and the future of these patients. Sometimes doctors, even Catholic doctors, too hastily persuade such patients that they must be freed from their obligations on the specious grounds that they cannot, without danger to their mental life, persevere in a life of perfect chastity. These weakened patients should rather be helped encouraged and advised that, under the grace of God, they can still persevere. God will not suffer them to be tempted beyond their strength.

Christ Himself has recommended the means which men and women can efficaciously use to guard their virtue and to help them to persevere in a life of perfect chastity. The means are summed up in the solemn words of Our Lord to the Apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak."<sup>2</sup> It must be recognised that human nature is fragile, that helps, both natural and supernatural, are needed in order that life may be lived according to the spirit. There is a constant warfare between the flesh and the spirit. Unceasing vigilance must be observed over every moment and circumstance of life—over internal thoughts and desires as well as over external conditions. In particular, vigilance must be exercised in regard to the movements of the passions. They must be controlled and subjected to the will by voluntary mortification and discipline. Ill health or other reasons may make severe corporal austerities impossible, but vigilance and in-

<sup>1</sup> Sess. XXIV, Can. 9: "Si quis dixerit . . . posse omnes contrahere matrimonium qui non sentiunt se castitatis (etiamsi eam voverint) habere donum, A.S." (Denz.-Bannwart, op. cit., n. 980).

<sup>2</sup> St. Matt. 26: 41.

ternal control must never be omitted.

According to the traditional teaching of theology the best way to overcome temptations against chastity is by flight—that is by the diligent avoidance and setting aside of occasions of sin and by raising the mind and heart to God. But there are some modern writers who claim that this traditional method of flight is not the correct procedure today; that all Christians, and the clergy in particular, should be brought into direct contact with the world and should, by the deliberate encounter of temptation, test their virtue to see if they have the strength to resist. These writers accordingly recommend that young clerics should be given an opportunity of seeing the allurements of life so that they may become accustomed to them and may develop an immunity in their regard; that they should be allowed to ignore the demands of modesty; that they should see even objectionable films, peruse obscene periodicals and read books forbidden even by the natural law. All this is recommended as necessary also in order that clerics may understand the thoughts, feelings and difficulties of the masses who are fed on such amusements and publications. The Pope describes these recommendations as pernicious. They are based upon a serious confusion of thought. Christ said that His Apostles were not of the world and He prayed that they should be preserved from evil.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the spirit of this prayer the Church has formulated laws to safeguard her clergy from the pleasures and contagion of the world. Young clerics who are being formed in the spiritual life must be separated from the tumult of the world as a preparation for subsequent battle; they must spend a number of years in a seminary or scholasticate where they receive a careful education and a gradual and prudent knowledge of the modern problems of life. Seminarians and scholastics are like young and tender plants which should not be exposed suddenly to violent storms but should be protected and developed until they have the strength to resist.

The educators of the clergy should inculcate into their youthful minds the precepts of Christian modesty which is of such great help in the preservation of virginity. Modesty safeguards chastity by foreseeing dangers, forbidding risks, demanding the avoidance of dangerous occasions—such as unchaste conversation, suspect familiarity with persons of the opposite sex. Modesty teaches one reverence for the human body as the temple of the Holy Ghost. This virtue will also suggest to parents and teachers suitable words whereby the conscience of youth may be formed in matters of chastity. Some such formation is necessary. The Holy Father recalls what he said in a recent address:<sup>2</sup> “This modesty is not to be understood as equivalent to perpetual silence on this matter (of chastity) or as excluding, from moral instruction, sober and cautious discussion in its regard.” It is wrong, to use means which offend their sense of shame to initiate innocent youth into the secrets of human generation. This is another modern error.<sup>3</sup> Modesty is nourished by

<sup>1</sup> Cf. St. John 17: 15.

<sup>2</sup> *AAS*, XLIII (1951) p. 736.

<sup>3</sup> This error has been frequently condemned. In the Encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri*, 31 Dec. 1929, Pope Pius XI wrote: “Far too common is the error of those who with dangerous assurance and under an ugly term propagate a so-called sex education, falsely imagining that they can forearm youths against the dangers

a filial fear of God which in turn, is based on Christian humility. All these virtues help to protect virginity.

But strictly supernatural aids are also necessary to preserve virginity and perfect chastity. These are great gifts from God. They must be sought for and sustained by fervent prayer to God, by frequent recourse to the Sacraments of Penance and the Blessed Eucharist and by fervent devotion to the Virgin Mother of God. She is the model of all virgins and has in fullest measure the richness of virginity, as the Patristic writers so beautifully testify. Contemplation of the richness of Mary's virginity will greatly help priests and religious to observe faithfully the chastity of their state. But they should do more than contemplate the greatness of Mary's virtues. They should have constant recourse to her intercession. She is a most powerful mother of all mankind and in a special way, of those who have consecrated their lives to the service of God. Devotion and recourse to Mary have always been regarded in Christian tradition, as the most excellent means of preserving chastity. The Pope exhorts us, in this Marian Year, to entrust and dedicate our spiritual lives, in a special way, to Our Lady.

In the final part—a short section—of the Encyclical the Holy Father refers firstly to the comfort which it gives him to see virginity flourishing throughout the world and being held in traditionally high honour—despite the errors and attacks to which reference has been made and which, it is hoped, will soon pass away. Yet the Holy Father is saddened by the decrease, in many lands, of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. He expresses the hope that educators of youth, some of whom may in the past have been in error on this point, will encourage and help to follow their vocation, boys and girls who feel called to the priesthood or to the religious life. Fathers and mothers are urged to give willingly to the service of God any of their children who are called to this service. Parents should not deny their children the right to choose God: they should consider what an honour it is to see their sons or daughters elevated to the priesthood or consecrated to the religious life.

The Holy Father concludes the Encyclical with a message of sympathy and encouragement, and a prayer for strength and consolation for those priests and religious who are suffering bitter persecution in many countries and who are bravely professing their faith even to the extent of martyrdom. He prays also that God may sustain, strengthen and console all those throughout the world who are consecrated to the service of God.

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of sensuality by means purely natural, such as a foolhardy initiation and precautionary instruction for all indiscriminately, even in public and worse still by exposing them at an early age in order to accustom them, so it is argued, and as it were to harden them against such dangers. Such persons grievously err in refusing to recognize the inborn weakness of human nature . . . .” C.T.S. translation.

Cf. Decree of Holy Office 21 Mar. 1931, on the methods known as “Sex education” and “sex initiation”—*AAS*, XXIII (1931), p. 118.