

was not indulging in extravagant language when he reminded us that we were 'temples of the Holy Ghost'. To see God in all things is to denude things of their material and limited nature and clothe them in the infinity of God. 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings.'



A VIRGIN PREFACE

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In treating of the origin of the religious state for women in his Apostolic Constitution, *Sponsa Christi*,¹ the Holy Father refers to the ancient consecration of virgins as '... that solemn rite which is advisedly reckoned among the more lovely of the records of ancient liturgy'. Doubtless this is a reference to the prayers for the *Velatio Virginum* in the Sacramentaries. At least one of these prayers is found in the present rite for the blessing and consecration of virgins in the *Pontificale Romanum*. It is in the form of a preface expressing in singular beauty of language the Church's mind on the sublimity of the state of virginity. As it appears in the Pontifical its wording agrees substantially with that of the so-called Leonine Sacramentary which takes us back to the fourth century. The following translation has been attempted in the hope that it may induce others to study the rite as a whole in the Pontifical. This will reveal an ingenious interweaving of the act of oblation with Christ's sacrifice in the Mass and a wealth of spiritual teaching.

PRAYER OF CONSECRATION

IT is truly meet and just, right and availing unto salvation that we should at all time and in all places, give thanks unto thee, Holy Lord, Father Almighty, everlasting God, gracious dweller in chaste bodies and divine lover of undefiled souls.

For in that Word of thine by whom all things were made, thou dost renew man's nature corrupted in the first of our race by the malice of the devil. And this in such wise as not only to recall it to the innocence of its first beginnings, but even to bring it to a knowledge of those everlasting good

¹ Cf. LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, December, 1951, and January, 1952.

things attainable in the life to come. Indeed, thou dost even now uplift unto the likeness of angels those who are still bound by the condition of this mortal life

Look, O Lord, upon these thy handmaids who commit to thy hand their purpose of chastity and make an oblation of themselves unto thee, who didst inspire this desire. For how could the spirit clad as it is in mortal flesh overcome nature's urge, freedom without restraints, force of habit, the incitements of youth, unless thou, O God, hadst freely of thy mercy inflamed them with the love of virginity? Who but thee could nourish this desire in their hearts and furnish them with needful strength?

For in the pouring forth of thy grace upon all nations, thou hast made from every people under heaven adopted heirs of the New Testament countless in number as the stars. These thy children, not by blood nor according to the flesh, but begotten of the Holy Spirit, thou hast enriched with virtues. Indeed, even this gift has sprung from the fount of thy liberality; that while no prohibition forbids the dignity of matrimony and the nuptial blessing remains ever on holy wedlock; even so, there should arise some more exalted souls who while they eschew the marriage bond of man and woman, desire its inner mystery. These, without imitating the way of life of married people, should nevertheless love what marriage betokens.

Holy virginity has acknowledged its author, and vying with angelic purity, has consecrated itself to the nuptials of him who is the bridegroom of perpetual virginity, even as he himself is the ever-virgin's son.

Grant then, O Lord, to these women who implore thy help and desire to be strengthened by the hallowing of thy benediction, the defence of thy protection and governance. Let not that old enemy who besets more excellent undertakings with still more subtle snares creep in through some carelessness of mind to darken the lustre of perfect chastity. Let him not steal away from their resolve of virginity that which becomes also the conduct of married women.

May there be in them, O Lord, by the gift of thy Spirit, a prudent modesty, a wise generosity, a gentleness full of

gravity, a liberty ever chaste. May they be fervent in charity, loving nothing out of thee. May they live praise-worthily, not seeking to be praised. May they glorify thee in holiness of body and purity of soul. In love may they fear thee, in love may they serve thee.

Be thou their honour, thou their joy, thou their desire; in sorrow their comfort, in doubt their counsel, in attack their defence; in trial their patience, in poverty their riches; in fasting their food, in sickness their medicine.

May they possess all things in thee whom they seek to love above all things. Through thee may they keep that which they have professed. Not serving to the eye, but inwardly seeking to please thee who art the searcher of hearts, may they pass into the company of the wise virgins. Thus may they stand in readiness for their heavenly bridegroom, with lamps of virtue lighted and well-provided with oil.

And undisturbed by the unforeseen coming of the King, tranquil, lamps in hand, united with the choir of virgins leading the way, may they run joyfully to meet him. May they not be shut out with the foolish virgins, but with the wise enter the royal gate as of right.

There may they remain in perpetual chastity, ever acceptable in the everlasting companionship of thy Lamb. There, through thy bounty, may they be deemed worthy of adornment with the hundredfold fruit, the reward of their virginity. Through Jesus Christ thy Son, our Lord, who with thee liveth and reigneth in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God for ever and ever. Amen.