News
Religious Life



Miriam Marston, a consecrated virgin of the Archdiocese of Portland in Oregon, is consecrated in 2020, by Archbishop Alexander Sample. (Courtesy of Miriam Marston)



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The vocation of consecrated virginity, formally known as consecrated virginity lived in the world, is both an ancient calling and a relatively new one. The consecration of a virgin is one of the Catholic Church's oldest sacramentals, but became less common with the rise of religious communities. It became a restored way of life, or vocation, with the revision of the rite on May 31, 1970.

Judith Stegman, president of the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins, explained that the vocation is similar to serving as a sister in that they are both vocations for women who choose to remain celibate in order to follow Christ more closely.

Some ways that the vocations differ are that consecrated virgins must be virgins, while most religious orders welcome widows, for example. The vocations also differ in how the women live out their consecrated lives. Sisters live in community and follow the rule of life of their religious order, in light of the charism of the founder. Consecrated virgins live on their own and serve in accord with their own particular gifts and talents, under the guidance of the diocesan bishop.

Stegman noted that the number of consecrated virgins has increased significantly over the years. It was almost unknown when the rite was first re-opened in 1970. The association, initially formed in 1996, tracked 10 consecrations in the U.S. before 1980. That rose to 16 consecrations in the 1980s, 56 in the 1990s, 110 from 2000-2009, 85 from 2010-2019 and 62 since 2020.



Judith Stegman, president of the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins, is pictured in this undated photo. (Courtesy of Judith Stegman)

"The greatest increase occurred after a 1995 gathering of consecrated virgins in Rome with Pope John Paul II, when consecrated virgins in the United States first met one another and decided to begin to associate," she said. "The inspiration is universally a personal deep love for Jesus Christ and sense that he is inviting the woman to a spousal relationship with him."

Association supports consecrated virgins across the US

The United States Association of Consecrated Virgins supports consecrated virgins across the country in many ways, including providing resources for discernment and formation in the vocation, such as books, and an annual three-day virtual information conference on the vocation. It sponsors an annual in-person convocation of consecrated virgins to provide an opportunity to get to know one another, pray

together and discuss key aspects of life in the Ordo Virginum, the Order of Virgins.

The association's quarterly newsletter, The Lamp, includes consecration announcements, personal anniversary reflections from consecrated virgins, a note from its episcopal moderator, and articles about the history and meaning of the vocation. Its biweekly e-newsletter announces upcoming events and offers consecrated virgin members the opportunity to share personally with one another updates in their own lives and announcements.

Stegman said she sought the vocation after reading personal testimonies of women who were consecrated. They described how they loved the church as the bride of Christ and desired to give themselves entirely to Jesus and follow wherever he would lead, yet not within the structure of religious life.

"This resonated with me and I asked in my diocese to be consecrated in 1993. I went to Rome in 1995 for the first international gathering of consecrated virgins and was in that early group of U.S. virgins who met one another there," she said.

A CPA by training, Stegman volunteered to be the treasurer for the association as its members began to meet informally, and then began assisting in writing its organizational documents. She worked closely with the United States Association of Consecrated Virgins' first president, Loretta Matulich of the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, and was elected president after Matulich's terms of service ended. Stegman and the organization are based in Miami, Florida.

When asked what she enjoys most about her work on behalf of the association and her vocation overall, Stegman said, "I most enjoy seeing firsthand the mighty work of God in the lives of the consecrated virgins, and especially witnessing how each of us matures in relating to Jesus Christ as bridegroom and in offering him as bridegroom to a world so in need of his love."



Miriam Marston, a consecrated virgin of the Archdiocese of Portland in Oregon, is consecrated in 2020, by Archbishop Alexander Sample. (Courtesy of Miriam Marston)

Vocation signifies openness to God's calling

Miriam Marston, a consecrated virgin of the Archdiocese of Portland in Oregon, said she was introduced to the vocation in 2007 when a friend of hers was preparing to become consecrated and Marston grew curious.

"I remember her sharing about her own journey and more about the notion of consecrated virginity, and something changed in my heart and it felt like a spiritual homecoming," she said, adding that she had considered joining the Daughters of St. Paul before learning more about life as a consecrated virgin living in the world.

The process of her formation took several years as she studied church documents to develop a better understanding of the call for holiness for every Christian and the vocation of consecrated life.

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"There is a common misperception that this is a life of saying 'no to marriage, children and sex,' but it actually signifies an openness to do whatever the Lord has asked me to do," she said. "It's the life that God was calling me to, so there was never a pros-and-cons list. It was only the question of where am I going to live out the fullest expression of my love for God, and how am I responding to this God who loves me so profoundly?"

Marston, who was consecrated in 2020, said many women become consecrated virgins later in life because preparation for the vocation involves living in accordance with the lifestyle for several years to show independence, stability, permanence and living well in the world. Though consecrated virgins have the option of living in their own community, many prefer to live alone or with family members.

"I live across the street from my own family, so I have the best of both worlds. I live a consecrated life independently very close to my family, but I'm also living in the community," she said, noting her work as director of faith formation at St. Anthony Parish in Tigard, Oregon, further complements her calling.

"I would say the thing I enjoy most is introducing people to the possibility that a relationship with Jesus is real and truly possible, and that to be a Christian is not to have a relationship with an idea that is abstract but with an actual person," Marston said. "This is something I can give a joyful witness to because my whole vocation is having that relationship with the person who is Jesus. I hope that in my joyful witness of what a relationship with God can look like, I can perhaps inspire others to look at a relationship with God in their own life."