There have been some significant changes in consecrated life in the Roman Catholic Church in the last sixty years. Religious life, once a term synonymous with consecrated life, is now but one form of consecrated life in the church. The 1983 revised Code of Canon Law describes two individual forms of consecrated life: consecrated virgins and diocesan consecrated hermits, and two corporate forms: religious institutes and secular institutes. In addition, the code has a section on Societies of Apostolic Life. Consecrated laity do not have a section in canon law as their vows are private.

This article briefly describes these newer forms of consecrated life that exist alongside religious life today.

Consecrated Virgins

Virgins were a distinct group in the early church, but over the centuries the practice of consecrating women living in the world disappeared. The rite became used in monasteries of nuns with solemn vows. Requests in the early twentieth century to consecrate as virgins women remaining in the secular state were turned down by the Vatican. The door, however, was opened again by the Vatican II document Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which called for a revision of the rite. The revised rite for the consecration of virgins for women living in the world was promulgated May 31, 1970.

In the rite the consecrated virgin images the church as Bride of Christ. Three questions are posed to her:

1. Are you resolved to persevere to the end of your days in the holy state of virginity and in the service of God and his church?

2. Are you resolved to follow Christ in the spirit of the Gospel that your whole life may be a faithful witness to God’s love and a convincing sign of the Kingdom of Heaven?

3. Are you resolved to accept solemn consecration as a bride of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

The candidate renews her resolution, “Father, receive my resolution to follow Christ in a life of perfect chastity which, with God’s help, I here profess before you and God’s people.” A solemn prayer of consecration is then sung or recited over the
candidate by the bishop while extending his hands.

Consecrated virgins remain in the secular state. They are not religious; they do not take religious vows. The material needs of their lives are their own responsibility. Consecrated virgins have a bond with their bishop and a particular church through their consecration. At least annually they have a conversation about their life of consecration and their service in the church with their bishop. Unlike diocesan priests, they have no obligation of obedience to the bishop.

The United States Association of Consecrated Virgins (USACV) is a volunteer association of consecrated virgins that both provides support to consecrated virgins and promotes the vocation.

**Diocesan Consecrated Hermits**

Eremitic life is an ancient form of consecrated life. Several religious institutes provide for this life within their proper law. Some religious, with permission of their superiors, and some consecrated virgins choose this lifestyle. The 1983 Code of Canon Law provides for a new option for living the hermetic life as an individual under the direction of a bishop.

Diocesan hermits publicly profess poverty, chastity, and obedience before the diocesan bishop and devote themselves to prayer, penance, and solitude while earning their own living. They are not part of a religious institute. They follow a plan of life under the bishop. This is an uncommon vocation. A 2005 survey found only nineteen consecrated hermits living in ten U.S. dioceses.

**Consecrated Seculars**

In 1947 Pius XII recognized secular institutes, some of which date back to the sixteenth century, as a form of consecrated life. Each institute has its own charism, spirituality, constitutions, admission policy, formation program, administrative structure, and apostolate. They are distinct from third orders and personal prelatures.

Members of secular institutes are single laypeople or diocesan priests who profess evangelical counsels by vow or some form of sacred bond according to the constitutions of their particular institutes, including celibate chastity. They spread Gospel values in the world and are meant to contribute to the sanctification of the world from within. Lay members usually live alone and wear no special attire. In their daily lives and in their own occupations, members live out the mission of their institutes.

The United States Conference of Secular Institutes (USCSI) was begun in 1972 to make the vocation known, to exchange ideas, to assist groups wanting to become secular institutes and to do research.

A new expression of consecrated secularity is seen in the secular branch of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit, a religious institute. In the 1990s some of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit observed that some members had moved over time out of religious life into a secular model of consecrated life. They looked to establishing a secular branch as a new path to live their charism, a path to which some laywomen might also feel called.

The secular branch of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit was established in 2003. It is not a distinct institute; it is under the leadership of the superior general of the religious institute. She names the general moderator of the secular branch and ratifies all decisions for perpetual vows in the secular branch. However, members of the secular branch live consecrated secularity rather religious life. The vow of chastity is essentially the same as for the religious but the content of the vows of poverty and obedience differ. There is no common life. Poverty includes simplicity of life, voluntary sharing, and
donating a portion of income to the group for administration and solidarity expenses. Obedience is lived out in dialogue with family, friends, and small affinity groups. Major decisions are discerned with the regional moderator.

**Members of Societies of Apostolic Life**

Societies of Apostolic Life pursue specific apostolic or missionary ends. They are distinct from both religious and secular institutes. Their members do not take religious vows. Rather, a commitment to the evangelical counsels is made through some other form of bond. They have a common life but their lifestyle and spirituality support their primary focus, which is their apostolate.

The majority of societies of apostolic life are for men. Many began as missionary societies of secular priests. The history of women’s societies has different roots. For instance, the Daughters of Charity struggled in their foundation to remain not cloistered so they could serve the poor. They did this by becoming a society of apostolic life rather than a religious institute. They do not make perpetual vows.

Though distinct, societies of apostolic life are typically grouped with religious institutes. They are listed together in the *Kennedy Directory*. In 1975 fifteen societies of men whose apostolic goal is mission *ad gentes* (to the nations) petitioned to come under the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples rather than the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes (now called Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life). This group includes the Maryknoll Missionaries and the Missionary Society of St. Columban. Other examples of societies of apostolic life are the Paulists, the Society of the Precious Blood, and the Sisters of Social Service.

**Consecrated Laity**

Men and women embracing the evangelical counsels in the form of private vows are known as consecrated laity. (A vow is public if it is accepted in the name of the church by a legitimate authority; otherwise, it is private.)

Several lay movements, for instance, Focolare and *Regnum Christi*, have core groups of consecrated lay members. Consecrated members live in gender-specific communities; make private vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity; and place their income into the community of goods.

The Marian Community of Reconciliation, founded in 1991, is an example of an association of the faithful whose members are all consecrated laywomen. Members promise celibacy and obedience to the statutes of the community. They live in community and are “fully available” for their apostolate of evangelization.

**Diversity within Religious Life**

Within religious life itself there is great diversity. New forms have evolved in response to different historical and cultural settings but they have not replaced older forms. Today we have eremitic, monastic, contemplative, mendicant, evangelical, and apostolic consecrated religious responding to their particular calls around the world.

Consecrated life in the Roman Catholic Church is alive and well and on the move. If history plays itself out, these new forms will not replace but rather take their place alongside older forms, adding to the richness of possible consecrated responses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.