

Bonus Episode: “Bride of Christ”

ERIKA LANTZ: From Rococo Punch and iHeartRadio, this is “The Turning.” I’m Erika Lantz.

Today we have a bonus episode. Maybe you remember Sister Kathleen Hughes. She was the former MC sister who became a consecrated virgin after she left. And I wanted to learn more about that.

If your ears also perked up when you first heard that Sister Kathleen was a consecrated virgin, then this is an episode for you.

JENNA COOPER: We are called to live a simple life. We don't marry. We're chaste. We don't, you know, have intimate relations with a man. I'm sorry for sounding like a Victorian there. (laughs)

ERIKA: This is Jenna Cooper, and she knows a lot about consecrated virgins, because she is one. Jenna is 36 years old and lives in Minnesota.

JENNA: I explain it to people in a practical kind of way is all the love I would have given to a -- I say a mortal husband, that's the only way I can really describe it -- all the love I would have given to a mortal spouse and natural children, I offer that to Jesus and to his children, which is really everyone in the church or all humanity.

ERIKA: So this episode of “The Turning” is a little different than most. I’m just going to have a conversation with one person -- Jenna Cooper -- to hear about her experience as a consecrated virgin: what it is, and what it means to her personally.

Jenna became a consecrated virgin 13 years ago. She’s a Canon lawyer in Winona, Minnesota. She also writes a blog called Sponsa Christi, where she talks about her life as a consecrated virgin.

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ERIKA: So Jenna, could you just explain, first of all, what is consecrated virginity?

JENNA: So, there are kinds of vocations in the church -- we call them consecrated life collectively -- and that's in the same category as, like, nuns and sisters. The spirituality of being a consecrated virgin, it's all centered around being a bride of Christ and that sometimes people say that sounds antiquated or it might sound a little weird, but it actually there's a lot of very profound theology, and it's being available for others, but being available to the Lord in a more, much more radical way, and it is hard to explain, but that spousal dimension, it is really real. I mean, you really do open your heart to the Lord, and he he makes himself present to you. So, you know, again, it's not like, “OK, well, Jesus is my husband, and I'm washing your socks like I would for a normal husband,” but, you know, there really is a presence there and a sense, you know, that you are walking through life with another person.

ERIKA: Now, consecrated virginity actually existed in the early church. So what was it like back then or what was the role back then?

JENNA: So their main role seems to have been prayer, and we talk today about prayer and witness, and it seems like they would have had a very similar role that way. So, you know that witness also, it extended beyond just the household of the family of the church, too. You know, there is some evidence they would have done active works of charity, like taking care of the sick and the poor. So they probably would have had a role very, very similar to nuns and sisters today.

ERIKA: Do you feel connected to some of these women, you know, from early, early Christianity? It's it's crazy to me to think about this ancient tradition that is continuing today.

JENNA: Actually, I really do, and that's part of what made me follow this path instead of becoming a sister is I remember when I was younger, I used to love reading stories of the Saints and the ones who really spoke to me the most were these early virgin martyr saints like St. Agnes or St. Lucie. But I really admired their courage and just their singleness of purpose and, you know, those were the women who were most inspiring to me, and when you join a religious community, like if you become a nun or a sister, you know, part of joining a community is you're following the footsteps of a founder or foundress and a lot of times that's a saint. And I remember, you know, thinking like, "OK, St. Francis is a great, wonderful saint, I don't really see myself as a Franciscan. St. Dominic's great, wonderful saint. Just really don't see myself as a daughter of St. Dominic." And this was actually when I first started thinking about my vocation when I was a teenager, and this was before I knew that being a consecrated virgin was still a thing. But I remember thinking, like, "Wow, you know, those early virgin martyr saints, those are the ones I really feel like I want as my sisters. But it's too bad you can't do that anymore." So that connection to the early church is very important to me in my own life and spirituality.

ERIKA: Jenna says consecrated virginity started to become less popular in the Middle Ages. Women who wanted to dedicate their lives to God started entering monasteries, and being a single woman *not* living in a cloistered convent became less common.

Some religious communities continued to consecrate virgins, so the ritual was preserved. But it wasn't until the late 20th century that the vocation really had a resurgence. Today, there are an estimated 5,000 consecrated virgins.

This boom came after an update to Canon law -- Canon 604. It officially included consecrated virginity in the same category of religious life as religious sisters and nuns.

But there are some distinct differences. For one, consecrated virgins aren't in an order or community based around a founder -- they're associated with a diocese, which is basically a religious district. And although Jenna says she's called to live a simple life, she doesn't take the same vows of poverty and obedience that nuns and religious sisters do.

JENNA: So for religious, they don't own anything personally. I can own my own property. You know, their way of living out obedience is different, and it's different for every community, but it's much more an emphasis on, "OK, you see the will of God and the superior's will for you and." Whereas, you know, for us, it's a little more open-ended, so that's one difference as well.

ERIKA: What was your path to choosing this vocation?

JENNA: So for me, I knew, well, I grew up in a Catholic family and. You know, we we went to Mass every Sunday. We weren't unusually devout, but I always really loved God and really loved prayer, even when I was very, very young. I remember I used to draw like pictures of angels, and I put them in the collection basket at church, because I thought that went straight to God, and I thought he'd like my drawings. (laughs) So I was really very pious as a very little girl. And when I was 12, I just started having experiences in prayer where I really felt like the Lord was asking me to, you know, to give him more or be closer to him or give my life to him in a more radical way.

ERIKA: Wow. That's really young.

JENNA: Yeah. Well, you know, young vocations actually aren't that uncommon, but, you know, and when you're 12, that's, you know, you're starting to get older. You're seeing the world in a different way. There's a lot of, you know, identity, developmental things that are happening. And even even at that age, though, I really did see myself relating to God in very spousal terms. That's obviously deepened as I've gotten older and it's, you know, I live this out in a much more mature way than I did when I was 12, but I really did feel a call to that. And I was in sixth grade, and when you're in sixth grade, you're not going to do anything about that kind of call. So --

ERIKA: Did you tell anyone?

JENNA: Well, I think I well, at that point, I assumed, "Oh, this means I'm called to be a nun." And that's what I knew was out there. And I think I told my parents and ... they are good Catholics, so they probably would be a little embarrassed about this, but they -- I don't think they were thrilled with that idea, and but, you know, I was 12, so I think they might have assumed, "OK, well, she might grow out of it." (Yeah.) And I was in Catholic school 'till I was in eighth grade, and then I went to a public high school, and, you know, obviously nobody is going to talk to you about being a nun in a public high school. So this was really just this deeply personal thing for ... you know, I did try telling people about it, but nobody's really going to engage a teenager seriously about that kind of thing, so it was really just between me and the Lord and for, yeah, all my teen years. Then when I was 18, I went to college and most dioceses have, like, a vocation office or priest you can call and get put in touch with different communities. So as soon as I got to college, I did that, and I got put in touch with a few different groups of sisters, and I went to visit -- what you do when you think you might have this kind of call -- and I remember it feeling like it was a very weird cross between dating and looking at colleges to go to, so. (laughs)

ERIKA: Oh my gosh, interesting! Yeah.

JENNA: Yeah.

ERIKA: You would go and stay overnight at these different convents?

JENNA: Oh sometimes. Sometimes they have like little retreats, you know, for like a weekend for women who are discerning. Sometimes you just call and visit and go for lunch or pray with the sisters. So I did, you know, a few different things like that. And some communities, you know, were really great, and some, you know, maybe I didn't feel as interested in right away.

ERIKA: In what way?

JENNA: I was with these sisters and it just kind of, you know, this one group in particular, you know, they seemed like a healthy community, and they they seemed like they love Jesus. And, you know, they were very nice, but ... and I felt like I could have lived their life, but it just really wasn't matching the way I felt called in my heart.

[MIDROLL]

ERIKA: How did you end up deciding to become a consecrated virgin?

JENNA: Well I was 19, actually, and I'd visited several communities, and I just realized it wasn't clicking, and I wasn't sure have I just not found the right community yet? Is this something else? And then, um, I met a priest who was a younger priest, and he was really excited to give me literature on vocations and stuff. And I was really excited to get it, because this was actually -- I'm only 36, so I'm not that old, but this was actually kind of pre the Internet getting really, really big. And at one point he said, "Oh, well, would you be interested in the part of Canon Law on consecrated life to read just for your own edification?" And and -- OK you can see how cool I was when I was a teenager. So.

ERIKA: (laughs) You're reading about consecrated life?

JENNA: Oh, yeah. Yeah. So I was very excited to read Canon Law when I was 19. (laughs) So and that's when I stumbled across Canon 604, and I remember thinking, "Huh, that's interesting. You can still -- it sounds like you can still do what St. Agnes did back in ancient Rome." (Mmm) But I didn't know any consecrated virgins. I'd never really heard of this. So then I told the priest that, "Oh, this is interesting." And he gave me a copy of the ritual, so the rite of consecration to a life of virginity, which is the prayer for actually consecrating somebody. And I read it and instantly -- I even remember the day: it was November 1st, 2004. And I read it and I just knew. I'm like, "OK, this is it." It just was so clear to me in that moment. It just everything in the prayers, it just ... it was like a key in a lock. Just it fit perfectly for the way I felt called, like every little aspect. So I was 19, and we went to the archdiocese at the time, and we were basically, I was told, "You're 19, you're way too young, so no way." And there was a thought going around

that there was a minimum age limit. It was 35. And it wasn't really the law. It was one bishop had an opinion that it should be 35, the minimum age limit, and that kind of just, you know, got around and people sort of assumed it was law, but it actually wasn't. But I was told, "OK, well, you know, come back when you're 35," and when you're 19, that is absolutely not what you want to hear. (laughs)

ERIKA: (laughs) Yeah, that's a long time!

JENNA: So I assumed when I was 19, "OK, well it sounds like the church has said no." So I assumed OK, I didn't discern this correctly. Let me see what God actually wants. So I spent two more years visiting more communities. And actually this second round, I was much more focused and really like not just going where a priest told me to check out, but, like, really reading their materials, seeing, "OK, is this something I can see myself being called to?" And so I was more focused that way. And being more focused, I encountered a few more communities that I could have really seen myself joining, but there was always this sense that I ... it wasn't quite it -- that God wanted something different. And it's hard to explain, but it was just very clear. So when I was 22, I was thinking, "OK, well, if this is really going to be a no, I need this to be a very, very, very clear no, so I can set this sense that I'm called to this aside and then and maybe join one of these communities with a clear conscience" or not conscience, but with a more a greater sense of peace in my heart and not constantly having this other thing in the back of my mind nagging at me. So when I was 22, I had a meeting with the Vicar for Religious in the archdiocese at the time. And I remember starting the meeting with him saying -- he was a priest -- "Oh, well, you know, you are kind of young," but at the end of the conversation, he's like, "You know what, I think you have a vocation. If we need a dispensation, we can talk about that." And of course, we didn't need a dispensation.

ERIKA: So Jenna started the process to become a consecrated virgin. She says it was a surprise to her parents, but eventually they were supportive.

JENNA: The day I was consecrated was January 3rd and my parents' wedding anniversary is January 7th. And my mom was 21 when she got married. I was 23 when I got consecrated. So it wound up working out that I could wear my mother's wedding dress, and (Wow) that was really just just a special detail, you know, an unimportant detail in the big picture, but that was kind of a nice symbol to have that day. And they've, yeah, they've just, I think, gotten more and more supportive as the years go on. So at one point -- I think he still does this -- my dad had, like, little business cards, like, printed up with Canon 604 on it, and on one side, on the back, it says "Pray for consecrated virgins," and he keeps them on him when he travels. And every time he sees a priest, like if he's traveling and goes to a different, like, traveling for work and he goes to a different parish, he, like, hands the priest a card. (laughs) And it's, like, really embarrassing. But I can't really be upset.

ERIKA: Yeah.

JENNA: So I tell people my parents are, like, embarrassingly supportive now (laughs.)

ERIKA: Jenna was consecrated in 2009, at a church near where she grew up -- just north of New York City.

JENNA: You know, a lot of people were very just warm and supportive on that day, and, of course, it was a big day for me, but I was very touched by that.

ERIKA: The ceremony feels like this interesting combination of a Catholic wedding and the way religious sisters profess their vows. At one point in the ceremony, consecrated virgins often lie on the floor, belly down, at the front of the church. Sometimes they wear a white wedding dress. They even wear a wedding ring.

JENNA: You know, you procession kind of with the priests, you know, they come in, and it's really one really beautiful thing about the ceremony of a consecration of virgins -- and actually the ceremony is very different from a nun making vows. And actually you have two women with you. Among consecrated virgins, we kind of informally call them bridesmaids, but they're attendants. So they're -- I think they're kind of there to make sure you're standing in the right place because, like, it's kind of an overwhelming day and, yeah, so you're sitting with them in the main part of the church until a certain point in the Mass when you're called forward, and then you enter into the sanctuary -- like the part closer to the altar -- so that's a really neat -- well, neat isn't the right word. It's really it's a really neat symbol of, you know ... you're being called to belong to God exclusively, and you're demonstrating that by your moving to this more sacred part of the church.

ERIKA: Do you remember what you were feeling when that happened?

JENNA: You know, when that happened, I, I remember -- in the whole ceremony around right before you're entering into the sanctuary, you know, the bishop in the ceremony asks you, basically asking you to state your resolve and do you promise to do these things? And I remember saying, "I do." And the church had good acoustics, so I remember hearing it, and I remember I had wanted to give my life to God since I was 12. So this had been almost half my life at this point. And there was a sense of, like, I can't there's no going back from this now and knowing that I was closing this door, but feeling very happy to do it. So I -- knowing that I couldn't go back and choose a different path, but doing that very joyfully. And, you know, I even though I wanted to do this, not marrying was a sacrifice. I did experience it that way. (Hm.) But I was really very happy to give this gift to God. It was just a joy to be able to give it, and they always say God can't be outdone in generosity, so it wasn't as one-sided as I'm making it sound, but that was what was going through my mind at that moment.

ERIKA: Hmm. That's interesting, you know, that it did feel. You felt it it sounds like you felt so clearly called to this, but it was still a decision to make to give something up, like a part of life.

JENNA: Oh, absolutely, it was. And I ... and I talk to a lot of women who are considering this vocation -- a lot of times, even just through informal channels, like a priest I know knows somebody -- and again, everyone has their own walk with the Lord, and that can look different for different people. You know, God speaks in the circumstances of our lives. But if a woman

doesn't feel that this is a sacrifice, I would really discourage her from doing this. You know, obviously, if it's a really gut-wrenching sacrifice that you absolutely can't get over or be at peace with then OK, God's probably not calling you to this, but if you don't have a sense that you're giving anything up -- you know, the joy of this vocation and the sacrifice, they're not two different things; they're two sides of the same coin. So if that's not something ... that really a woman feels like applies to her, like if she can't, if it's all sacrifice and no joy or even all joy and no sacrifice, then I -- either she doesn't have a call to this, which is which is fine, because not everybody is called to this, this is relatively unusual call. But, you know, I even wonder, "OK, is she even -- does she maybe just need to come to a better understanding of this?" So, yeah, it was a very deliberate choice, and it was a sacrifice. But again, no regrets.

ERIKA: What are some of the challenges of being a consecrated virgin?

JENNA: You know, there's a lot of challenges that are, I think, Jenna-specific -- just for my life circumstances -- and there are challenges in general. And one challenge, I think, as a church, as consecrated virgins were collectively discerning this is how do you live a life that's healthy and balanced, but sufficiently radical that your sacrifices make sense? Because it doesn't make sense to sacrifice a husband and children and family life, which is a tremendous sacrifice, and then when you sacrifice this, you have this empty space in your heart, which the idea is you fill it with God, but if you're not filling it with God, you're going to fill it with stupid things. (laughs) So.

ERIKA: Like what?

JENNA: Oh, I well, kind of a joke. I have a cat, kind of a rescue cat I recently adopted, and I was a little worried that I'd become like a lady with 50 cats and that would be unhealthy. (laughs) My mom said, "Well if you have only one cat, and you don't put her in your Christmas card, you should be OK." (laughs)

ERIKA: That's the that's the borderline?

JENNA: I mean, there's a lot of different things. I mean, you can fill it with really stupid things like -- not that hobbies are bad, but hobbies or even like ... you know, pettiness or you get just too into your job or something.

ERIKA: I feel like my version of that would be bingeing television.

JENNA: Yes. Perfect example. That's what I was looking for without looking for it.

ERIKA: Are you -- do you ever binge TV? Is that ...

JENNA: Yeah, sometimes. (laughs) I mean, not um. I mean I, I used to -- when I was in Rome, I couldn't watch "Downton Abbey," and I used to binge watch that when I'd come home for the summer. So yeah, I'm familiar with that concept. I'm human. (laughs)

[MIDROLL]

ERIKA: Jenna Cooper's day-to-day life is pretty similar to any other professional's: She works a 9-to-5 as a Canon lawyer at the marriage tribunal of her local diocese. Part of her job is to talk to couples. She examines marriages to determine if a marriage can -- or should -- be annulled. She also answers any Canon law questions that come from the parish or from local schools.

So that's her job. But one of the things that really sets her life apart as a consecrated virgin is prayer -- and how often she does it.

JENNA: We are obligated to pray a certain amount and then, you know, even have extra times for private prayer, and that's. You know, that's to me the most important thing I do all day, so that's an absolute priority. So for me, that looks like I go to Mass every day, unless there's some extraordinary circumstance. I book my flights when I travel around, "OK, can I get to Mass on either end?" That's a very, very big priority for me.

ERIKA: Jenna also prays the Liturgy of the Hours. There are prayers for morning, daytime, evening and night.

JENNA: And so that's a series of psalms, different ones that are set at different times of the day, on, like, a rotating four-week schedule. So you wind up praying all 150 psalms every month.

ERIKA: Jenna says that as she gets older, she's experiencing a type of joy she didn't expect when she was younger in her consecrated life.

JENNA: I mean, part of this vocation, even if you're not, you know, obviously we don't have natural children -- we don't give birth physically -- but spiritual motherhood is a big component. I don't know, maybe it sounds like a hokey concept, but the idea is, even if you're still nurturing people, you know, on a level their soul, you're being a real mother even if you're not, you know, somebody who's given birth. And now that I'm I'm not old, but older, not in my 20s anymore, there's been a couple of times when, like, one of our local seminarians asked me for prayer or just wanted to talk to me about something, and, you know, almost feel like they were approaching me in this motherly role. And it's just very, very small little moments and not something I sought out, but, you know ... it's a gift to be able to relate to people that way.

ERIKA: Hmm. What is it about the concept of virginity that is worth preserving in this way?

JENNA: So for consecrated virgins, it's your resolving to persevere in this virtuous state that you've already been persevering in. For Catholics virginity, it's not just like, "Oh, I'm spotless. I've, you know, I haven't made any mistakes." Virginity, it's a much more profound concept. It's a much richer concept. It's full of ... deep theological meaning.

On a more practical level, I mean, there's healthy and unhealthy ways to understand virginity. I cringe, like, with everyone else when there's high school chastity talks, and they compare losing your virginity to becoming used gum or something. Like nobody likes that. That's not healthy. That certainly wouldn't be the church's presentation of virginity.

You know, on a theological level, virginity reflects the nature of the church and the church is Christ's bride. So Jesus died on the cross for the sake of his bride, the church. So, again, it's all this mutual love. But we talk about the church as being a virgin in the Old Testament and scriptures, the people of God were talked about as a virgin bride to God, her spouse. So there's a lot of imagery with that.

But what I think is especially relevant today is one of my biggest pet peeves ever in life is when people talk about early virgin martyrs like, "Oh, it's the patriarchy." So this is the exact opposite of patriarchy. (Hm) In the ancient world, women were only valued by their relationship to a man, so you were really only valued as as, like, if you could be a wife to somebody or you know, or, God forbid, like a slave. Being a virgin and relating to God directly not -- I mean, married women relate to God directly, but, you know, you could relate to God directly. You had this human dignity where you could make choices about your destiny. You could respond to a call freely, and no man had the right to tell you otherwise. When you grow up in a society where women have dignity, that might not be the first thing on your mind when you're choosing virginity as a spirituality. But that is, you know, a very important and relevant point, I think.

One thing that is really interesting to me too these days is in the Catholic Church, the priesthood is male only, and it's always been that way. And it's not going to change. I'm actually fine with that on a theological level, because the priesthood, it's really supposed to be about service, not about power. And even when there is authority, true authority is, you know, always about service, not just self-aggrandizement or something. You know, but the priesthood is all male. And then when I was growing up, it was always, "Oh, but but girls can become nuns and sisters." But, you know, that's not exactly the same thing, because there were male religious, too, like men could become monks. That's basically the equivalent of a nun. But consecrated virginity, this vocation, this is actually the only state of life in the church that's reserved to women. So men categorically can't do this. So I think it speaks a lot to, you know, the unique dignity of women that that we have this role as being an icon or an image of the church, a reflection of the church, and relating to Christ in this very privileged way that's that's unique to us. So I do find that very meaningful for me in my own life.

CREDITS

ERIKA: Thanks to Jenna Cooper for sharing her story with us. You can learn more about her on her blog: [Sponsa Christi](#).

What do you think? Drop us a note at theturning@rococopunch.com. That's R-O-C-O-C-O Punch.

This episode was written and produced by Andrea Asuaje. Our executive producers are Jessica Alpert and John Perotti at Rococo Punch and Katrina Norvell at iHeartRadio.

To see a photo from Jenna Cooper's consecration ceremony and for more details on the series, follow us on Instagram: [@RococoPunch](#)

I'm Erika Lantz. Thanks for listening.