

I Am Happily Married to God — As a Consecrated Virgin

Yes, I'm celibate. No, I'm not a nun.

as told by Carmen Briceno



One August morning, I walked to the front of the church in my white gown, nervous and excited. Family and friends stood in the pews of Queen of Apostles in Alexandria,

Virginia. They smiled and wiped tears. The bishop began the ceremony. I was getting married — not to a man, but to Jesus.

It's been seven years since I became a consecrated virgin. Since I was a young girl, I assumed I'd marry and probably have children. And in a way, I was right: I'm one of the estimated 3,500 women in the world [who are wed to God](#). I'm not a nun, nor do I live in a convent, contrary to what people may think. But I am, and have always been, celibate.

But that's not the only thing that defines me: My name is Carmen Briceno, but everyone calls me China (sounds like "cheenuh"). I'm 35 years old, the daughter of a diplomat, and I was born in Venezuela but have lived in United States for most of my life.

Growing up, I was what you might call a "cradle Catholic" — my family went to mass every Sunday, but we weren't incredibly religious, more culturally Catholic. I didn't have a deeply personal relationship with God in any sense. It wasn't until later, as a young adult, when my faith became my own and I allowed God to change my life.

Falling in Love With God

When I moved to Virginia as a young adult, I got into volleyball — which, in a way, paved my way toward God. While playing, I met a Christian girl. She was my first non-Catholic friend. She wasn't pushy and never tried to get me to convert. Instead, she was instrumental in demonstrating to me what a relationship with God could really be like, because in her I saw a deep, tangible love and a personal connection to Jesus Christ. Watching Jesus alive in her, I thought, *That. I want that.*

She brought to light some of the answers to questions I never knew I had. When she asked me about my relationship with God, I truly had no idea how to answer. When you're not questioned about your faith, you may not know the depth of what you're missing. Around that time, I also met a priest, Father Juan, who met with me regularly and explained so many things about faith and the Bible to me. So through these two blossoming friendships, my faith was deepened, or, in many ways, awakened.

In 2005, I got the opportunity to go to Cologne, Germany, with 20 other young adults, led by Father Juan, for International World Youth Day. It was a powerful week of prayer, service and fellowship with the Pope. I'd never seen anything like it; people were on fire for God and were not afraid to express it.

There, I felt the first inkling of what would become my vocation. I felt the Lord speak to me in prayer about my relationship with Him — and no, it's not a dramatic audible voice or anything like that! He simply said to me: *You've given time to other boyfriends, but have you ever thought about me? How about you give me a chance?* I had to listen. I had to give him the chance.

After World Youth Day, my faith was set ablaze and I was thirsting to know more about what the Lord was asking of me. During this time I was given a book that changed my life. The book was [*Theology of the Body for Beginners*](#), by Christopher West on Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body. In short, it explains the gift and purpose of human sexuality.

Sex and virginity are gifts of yourself you *give* — not something you lose. This wasn't at all about religious jargon; it was about the beauty of being human. I connected in a major way to the idea that expressing love isn't all about sex. It's about wanting the best for the other person.

Because virginity is a great gift, I had always been upfront with my past boyfriends. I wanted to wait until marriage because I understood the purpose of sex, and when this became an issue in the relationship I would inevitably have to break it off. If they couldn't respect and understand my decision, then I didn't want to waste my time.

A Difficult Decision

After my time in Germany, I was so eager to learn more about my faith. I asked countless questions of my priest, and I studied the Bible closely, really encountering God in a new way.

This journey wasn't always easy, though. At the time, I was also learning about consecrated virgins, which lined up with what I understood of God's gift of sexuality. Though I hadn't made the decision yet, I felt a great attraction to it and my family were slightly concerned.

Turbulence between my family and I followed. They wondered why I had so many questions. I got the sense that they were wondering if they'd taught me well or let me down in some way. To the Venezuelan people, who are very religious, my questions were almost insulting in that they suggested I hadn't learned something or hadn't been taught enough.

On top of that, my father would ask, "But who is going to care for you!?" while my mother asked about future grandchildren. (Fortunately, between my two siblings, I have five nieces and one on the way, so there's no lack of kids!) After talking it out, these issues didn't last. Despite the initial worry, my parents stood by me. They saw the changes occurring in me and the joy I had from experiencing God. They watched me fall deeply in love with my faith, and it began a process of conversion for them as well.



Her family, Bishop Diego Padron and Fr. Juan Puigbo (left) and her father (right) on August 22, 2009.

Courtesy of Carmen Briceno

I was attracted to becoming a consecrated virgin because of its beautiful, ancient roots — in the early church women made private vows to belong fully to Christ and not marry. These were the early virgin martyrs like Agatha and Lucy, who were executed for not wanting to marry Roman citizens because they were already vowed to God. They lived in their families and dedicated themselves to works of mercy in their community. They loved the Lord so much they wanted to give all of themselves to Him.

Living as a consecrated virgin came from love, and it was that which so appealed to me. "Ordo Virginum" — which is the technically correct term — are just that. They have ordinary citizens; they have jobs and are responsible for their own keep. I've even known some who are doctor and lawyers.

My decision did not come lightly. I like to tell people, "I did not give up romantic relationships for an *idea*. I fell in love with a *person*, Jesus Christ." I understood

the lifelong commitment this would mean, so I made sure that I was confident that this was God's will for me.

Father Juan had opened a house where myself and other women who were considering consecrated life could have the space to pray and discern whether this vocation was for us. We lived in the house and prayed together while still keeping our regular jobs. It was an old convent, so it had a chapel where we could pray and was right across the street from the local parish church.

In the Catholic Church, there are many forms of consecrated life. Not everyone is called to be a nun. There are many vocations and paths. At this time, I also had a spiritual director, who helped me walk through figuring out what God's will is for me. After two years of prayer, reading, spiritual direction and discernment, I realized that God was calling me to be fully His as a consecrated virgin.

While the discernment process is key, the truth is that God picks you, makes you his and then puts you back into the world. You don't just *get* to become a consecrated virgin. God chose me as much as I chose God. It was a courtship, in a sense. I said to God, "If you want me to be with you, you have to really make me fall in love with you." If I'd given other men in my life a chance, why not God? That may sound odd, but it was a logical rationale.

Choosing My New Path

In August 2009, at the age of 28, I decided this was, in fact, the path God was asking of me and also what I greatly desired. I needed the Diocese and the Bishop to accept my petition to become a consecrated virgin. The Diocese has its own requirements and process — including that one has to be a virgin.

I have had boyfriends but was never physical with them. I have always made it very clear that sexual intimacy is for marriage and for the purpose of union of the spouses as well as procreation. A woman who has freely engaged in sexual union is not eligible for this form of consecrated life, but any other form of consecrated life *is* open to them.

In the end, they want to make sure that it is an authentic call and that a woman is mature enough to understand the lifelong commitment. It is an irrevocable consecration. And luckily, my petition was accepted. I was consecrated, not in a wedding but a consecration. I wore a white dress and I had a wedding ring. It was a beautiful day.

People have asked if I can be as dedicated to my faith without having to marry Christ. The answer is yes, I absolutely could — but I can't be married to another man while also fully giving myself to God in the way that God wants for me. Because in that case, my

main vocation would be a wife. In consecrated virginity, though, I give God the freedom to use me whenever and however He wants. All of me is His.

There are people who may think marrying Christ is somehow less *real*. But in many ways, I have the same struggles as a wife would. I just communicate with my husband through prayer, since He is not in the room with me physically. If I struggle with anything, I have places to turn. When I think about fidelity, I'm not concerned. That's what my intense prayer life and my strong community are for. They help me restore my balance.



Prostrate during the Litany of the Saints

People also wonder about the permanency of such a vocation — but they forget that marriage is permanent as well! But perhaps the single most important thing is that even if I am tempted, I won't change the course of my life. My vocation is so much bigger than a momentary feeling.

Loneliness and *desire* are not bad words; they're not forbidden thoughts. It's not a secret that I have wondered what it would have been like to be married and

have children, but it's important that people know I chose my life. It was not imposed upon me, even though it may be hard to understand. I don't doubt my vocation, and I see my saying "yes" to God as a gift. It's sacrificial, and I'm aware of that. I am completely filled with joy and happiness.

I understand that people are incredibly curious about the way a consecrated virgin goes about living her life. Like anyone else, I do normal things. I go to Starbucks, and I have a job — if I didn't I wouldn't eat because I'm responsible for my own income and sustenance.

My days are structured a little bit like this: I wake up around 6 a.m. and I do [The Liturgy of the Hours](#), a daily prayer that occurs at different times, first thing. I do have a dedicated prayer space, and my house is pretty normal in that sense. But I prefer to pray in a church, where the sacrament is and I can pray more intentionally without distractions. I have a lot of art and drawing supplies everywhere in my house, but I don't have a TV. That's because I really love when people come over and actually talk to one another.

Around 7:30 a.m. I get ready for the day. I pray for an hour before mass, go to mass, and then I do some spiritual readings. I also spend my nights and weekends updating [my website](#) and creating goods, like journals, for my Etsy shop, [Sacred Print](#). It's fun and fulfilling for me to create these journals — they're each hand-drawn and painted. I love the arts, and I truly believe in the power of beauty as a means to evangelize! Each journal takes me about an hour and a half to complete, and I pray for everyone I make one for. When someone receives it, I hope it'll provide them the opportunity to talk about faith. The main reason I do these journals is so that I can still go to different groups that may not be able to give me a stipend.



Carmen on a recent mission trip in Banica, Dominican Republic .

For the past few years since becoming a consecrated virgin, I've done a lot of things in the way of work: I have worked at a parish for many years and taken teens on international missions. I've taught in Catholic schools. I have traveled around the world giving talks to teens and young adults on matters of faith. I don't try to doctrinize them; I just try to explain the logic in the church's teachings, to show them that Catholicism isn't just about fire and brimstone and condemnation. It's about love. When it comes to human sexuality, they think that they know what the church teaches and why — and they make up their mind against it. But when you explain the meaning of the human body and sex and the beauty of the church's teaching, they often understand and fall in love with how God made them.

I explain that God has designed everything for a specific purpose, and when we go outside of that purpose, we find confusion and brokenness. Just a phone that is designed for communication breaks if you use it as a hammer or to play

baseball, so do our bodies and relationships suffer brokenness when we use the great gift of human sexuality and its purpose for union and procreation outside of marriage. I explain that many people think that you will die if you don't have sex, but I am happy and fully alive and joyful and never have — nor never will have — sex!

Like anyone else, people do flirt with me. For anyone who might approach me but doesn't know me, I simply say that I am married and not interested. It might not be the right context to go into my consecration, so I just keep it at that. I know that, in our over-sexualized culture, it might seem that sexual intimacy is my greatest challenge, but it's not. For me, I find it a challenge to ensure my life is balanced between prayer, work, friendships and family. I have learned how to foster deep, personal, intimate and non-sexual friendships — and this has been a key factor for me and in maintaining my vow and vocation.

I hope that through my faith and my vow I can bring love into this world. I have consciously and freely chosen to forego marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of God, which is a sacrifice. I hope there can be a positive lesson learned from my experience.

I hope that others understand I am *not* a masochist. I am a woman in love.