# THE CECILIAN

A NEWSLETTER TO HONOR ST. CECILIA, VIRGIN AND MARTYR
AND A CHRONICLE OF MICHAELA SASSE'S DISCERNMENT AS A CONSECRATED VIRGIN LIVING IN THE WORLD

ISSUE NO. 11 | NOVEMBER 22, 2026 | THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE

Today we honor St. Cecilia, a consecrated virgin who was martyred in Rome in the third century. What an icon! I often find myself reflecting on martyrdom, then the next day it seems I am hitting "snooze" on my alarm clock and struggling to leave my bed. Despite my inadequacies, or probably because of them, I am inspired by the saints' example of what it means to truly give one's life to Christ. We hear in a prayer attributed to St. Francis, "It is in dying we are born to eternal life."

I am certain of St. Cecilia's intercession for me; I first had the inclination I was called to the vocation of consecrated virginity at 22 years old. It was not until I attended St. Cecilia Catholic Church in Hastings, Nebraska, that I began to experience an openness to the call. For those doing the math, let's just say it took a while. Although different from what I envisioned for my life while growing up — I often imagined myself married with children — in surrendering to the Father's will I discovered true happiness and peace in giving my life to the Eternal Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. As an optometrist, I can be certain of St. Lucy's intercession for me, too. With two martyred consecrated virgins praying for me, I might want to wear a bulletproof vest.



Simon Vouet. *Saint Cecilia*, c. 1626. Oil on canvas, 134.1 × 98.2 cm. Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin

In all seriousness, it is humbling to think about how many of our Christian brothers and sisters generously intercede for us, most of whom we will only know about once we reach Heaven, and how many of these individuals willingly defended the faith to the point of death. While on pilgrimage in Rome this past summer, I had the privilege of visiting the crypt of St. Cecilia in the Catacombs of St. Callixtus. As Roman law prohibited burials within city limits, hundreds of thousands of individuals were buried outside the city walls. St. Cecilia was venerated in this crypt for at least five centuries before her relics were transferred to Trastevere in 821, where a basilica was built on the location of her family home. There also lies the famous white marble statue of St. Cecilia by Stefano Maderno (see next page). It was truly beautiful to see so many people gather before St. Cecilia's tomb, pleading for her intercession and giving thanks for her witness to the faith through her martyrdom.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states the following: "Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity. He bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine. He endures death through an act of fortitude" (CCC 2473).

If you would like a sobering read, I would suggest *Edith Stein and Companions on the Way to Auschwitz* by Fr. Paul Hamans. Dr. Lisamaria Meirowsky, a medical doctor and convert from Judaism to Catholicism, wrote in the last letter to her confessor from the Westerbork concentration camp, "I want to send you a last greeting and to tell you that I am full of confidence and wholly surrendered to God's holy will. Even more, I consider it a grace and election to have to leave under these circumstances and in this way to give witness to the words of our fathers and shepherds in Christ... I go with courage, confidence, and joy, as do the religious who go with me. We are permitted to bear witness to Jesus, and with our bishops we are allowed to bear witness to the truth. We go as children of our Mother, the Church, and want to unite our suffering with that of our King, Redeemer, and Bridegroom. We want to offer our suffering for the conversion of many, for the Jews, for those who persecute us: thereby we want to contribute to peace in the Kingdom of Christ. Join with me in thanking God for this great favor by singing an exultant Magnificat."[1] All you martyrs, pray that we keep our eyes fixed on ultimate matters.

# PRAYER INTENTIONS

- World Day of Cloistered Life occurred on November 21st. Please say a prayer in thanksgiving for the men and women who serve the Church by a life of contemplative witness.
- Pray for the men and women discerning a call to religious life; that their trust in the Lord's providence grows.
- Consider praying, fasting, or giving alms for the renewal of religious life. Visit renewreligious.org for more info.

# ST. CECILIA

*Virgin and Martyr*

Cecilia was born into an aristocratic Roman family in the 2nd century, AD. She vowed to be a perpetual virgin for Christ, but her parents forced her into marriage with a nobleman. Adorned in her wedding dress, Cecilia approached her future husband, but in her heart, she implored God to guard her vow of perpetual virginity. Her prayer has been likened to song in this Vespers antiphon reserved for her feast day: "While the organs were singing, Cecilia sang in her heart to the Lord alone, saying, 'Let my heart and my body be undefiled, O Lord, that I may not be confounded.'"

God answered Cecilia's prayer by providing a way for her to be married yet celibate. Empowered by grace, Cecilia persuaded her husband Valerian and his brother Tibertius to be baptized. The men wholeheartedly followed her example of virtue, and together the trio stealthily provided burials for martyred Christians and shared their wealth with the poor. Christian persecution was a daily terror under pagan authorities in Rome, and soon Valerian and Tibertius were caught, interrogated, and condemned to death.

Like Valerian and Tibertius who were martyred before her, Cecilia refused to deny Christ and burn incense to pagan idols. Placed before a judge who asked for her name, Cecilia replied, "Men call me Cecilia, but my most beautiful name is that of Christian."

The judge condemned Cecilia to be suffocated in her palace's heated baths. Legend holds that instead of suffocating, she sang! Bewildered by her survival, her executor attempted to behead her. After three failed attempts, Cecilia was left alone to bleed to death from the wounds in her neck.

Cecilia lay on the floor dying for three days. "To die for Christ," Cecilia said, "is not to sacrifice one's youth, but to renew it. It is relinquishing a perishable thing and receiving in turn an immortal gift." In her final moments, she asked Pope St. Urban to consecrate her palace as a church, so that her home would always be the Temple of God.

Fittingly, St. Cecilia's incorrupt body has been entombed below the altar of the church that bears her name. In Catholic tradition, the altar of a church signifies both the table of the last supper and the wood of the cross. It is a place of offering, sacrifice, and communion. Seen this way, St. Cecilia's earthly life was a continual approach to the altar, reaching its ultimate crescendo in her martyrdom.[2]





Gustave Moreau, *Saint Cecilia*, ca. 1890–1895, gouache and watercolor over graphite on wove paper mounted to wood panel, 33.8 × 16.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

## ST. CECILIA

Patron saint of singers, musicians, and poets

## OFFICE OF CONSECRATED VOCATIONS UPDATES

- The Heart of the Bridegroom Retreat took place on November 7th. Eight discerning women attended, a great consolation to me! See the following page for a reflection.
- On November 14th, I attended Feast for Fiat to support Fiat Ministries, which exists to cultivate an authentic culture of discernment for young women by inspiring them to say yes to God's call.
- Fiat Ministries is hosting a discernment retreat for women aged 18-30 in Wichita from December 18th-20th.

## REFLECTION

"Arise, soldiers of Christ, throw away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." — St. Cecilia

St. Cecilia's life was completely oriented to the Lord; she encouraged those around her to profess their faith in Christ in the face of martyrdom. Even on her wedding day, she implored the Lord in song to be consecrated to Him alone. Do we trust that the Lord's light is so marvelous it is worth casting all else aside?

## CHARISM CORNER

### *The Spiritual Gift of Music*

The charism of music goes beyond musical talent, although someone with a charism of music may of course possess talent. Jill Simons of Many Parts Ministries notes that "every charism makes some aspect of God present in the world. Music makes His beauty present — beauty you don't just observe but get drawn into. The Church has always known music can do this; it's why she has sung her prayer from the beginning, from the Psalms to plainchant to the hymn your parish sang last Sunday."[3] The key of this charism is that through music, one is invited into a deeper relationship with God.

There are many examples of the charism of music in Scripture. Consider the following text from 1 Samuel. Saul's servants remarked, "Look! An evil spirit from God is tormenting you. If your lordship will order it, we, your servants here attending to you, will look for a man skilled in playing the harp. When the evil spirit from God comes upon you, he will play and you will feel better." Saul then told his servants, "Find me a good harpist and bring him to me." One of the servants spoke up: "I have observed that a son of Jesse of Bethlehem is a skillful harpist. He is also a brave warrior, an able speaker, and a handsome young man. The Lord is certainly with him."

Accordingly, Saul dispatched messengers to ask Jesse to send him his son David, who was with the flock. Then Jesse took five loaves of bread, a skin of wine, and a young goat, and sent them to Saul with his son David. Thus David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul became very fond of him and made him his armor-bearer. Saul sent Jesse the message, "Let David stay in my service, for he meets with my approval." Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take the harp and play, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, for the evil spirit would leave him. (1 Samuel 16:16-23).

David was not only a talented harpist, but when he played the harp, peace immediately descended upon Saul. David's music revealed truth about the nature of God. How might God be calling you, like David and St. Cecilia, to glorify Him through music?

# PONDERING THE HEART OF THE BRIDEGROOM RETREAT

The Heart of the Bridegroom Retreat took place on Saturday, November 7th at Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Hays, Kansas. During the first week of September, I was struck by the thought in prayer that a retreat should be held for women discerning religious life within the Salina Diocese. Over time, this retreat evolved into one for single women discerning the Lord's will for their lives.

As someone who feels called to consecrated virginity, a vocation where my life would be dedicated to Jesus Christ, the Eternal Bridegroom, I often contemplate our heavenly home, the Eternal Wedding Feast. To be frank, as a Church our familiarity and ease with this reality is not what it should be. The purpose of this retreat was two-fold: 1) to bring together discerning women as I often hear from those I accompany that they do not know others in a similar state of discernment, and 2) to reflect on Jesus Christ, the Eternal Bridegroom.

As I looked at the diocesan calendar for potential dates, I saw the Holy Fire youth conference scheduled for November 7th in Hays. I knew that it was likely Bishop Vincke would be in Hays for the conference, and I asked him if there was a possibility of saying Mass for the retreatants. He said that he would be delighted to help in any way, and he gave me several other ideas for the retreat. This happened within a day of my initial thoughts for the retreat. And, as it just so happened, November 7th was the anniversary of my baptism, a day of utmost importance in my life.

There was a slight detour regarding the location of the retreat, but ultimately it was arranged to be held at IHM in Hays. I cannot say enough positive things about how accommodating Fr. Nick Parker and the IHM parish staff were of me. I requested the help of *Vocatio,* an organization that supports vocations, to provide meals, and they were also quite generous and even donated some funds to offset the retreat cost.

Everything came together extremely well with one slight, but significant exception — when late October arrived, I had zero retreatants registered. I questioned how the retreat could be inspired by Jesus yet proceed without retreatants. I asked for St. Jude's intercession on his feast day, October 28th, and that day I touched base with the President of Fiat Ministries to discuss bringing a discernment retreat to the Salina Diocese in the future. I realized in planning my retreat, there was simply too much I tried to carry on my own, and the Lord was asking for my full surrender. With newfound hope, it was clear that the Lord would take care of the outcome. That weekend, I attended a silent retreat with the Cor Jesu Apostolate where I completed the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Upon my return, I was stunned (and slightly nauseated) to see eight retreatants registered. I guess the retreat was something the Lord wanted after all!

In the week leading up to the retreat, it dawned on me that it would be the first Saturday of the month, an opportunity to use Mass readings to honor our Blessed Mother and reflect on her fiat. Only the Lord could orchestrate the date of this retreat so beautifully.

The weather on the day of the retreat was incredible. Two women attended from Hays, four from Manhattan, one from Beloit, and another from Hastings, Nebraska. I was quite edified by the intentionality of each retreatant. The day progressed better than I could have imagined. We began with breakfast and introductions, and the laughter we shared was certainly not planned, but it was my favorite part of the day. I held three conferences throughout the day, and each was followed by a time of prayer. During the first conference, I shared my personal testimony and the role of *Lectio Divina* in transforming my own prayer life. In the second conference, I spoke of St. Mary Magdalene and how she is the model of contemplation and complete repentance. Finally, I discussed each person's call to sainthood and how a vocation is a not an endpoint, but a continuous process of maturation in intimacy with the Lord.

We were tremendously blessed to have Bishop Vincke, Fr. Nick Parker, and Fr. Mike Leiker concelebrate Mass. During Bishop Vincke's homily, he spoke of three marriages: 1) the union of Adam and Eve, 2) Christ's wedding to the Church through His crucifixion and giving completely of His body, and 3) the Eternal Wedding Feast where one day we all hope to be united with Jesus Christ forever. The homily was exceptional.

After Mass, Bishop Vincke, Fr. Mike, Sr. Mary Agnes, and Sr. Rose Marie joined us for lunch. Some retreatants had submitted questions ahead of time for the sisters to respond to, and we were so blessed by the sisters' insights. Following lunch, I sent the retreatants out two-by-two for an Emmaus Walk, where they shared with one another their discernment journeys. In the afternoon Fr. Nick exposed the Blessed Sacrament, and each retreatant had time for adoration and confession. We closed the day with Evening Prayer, and Sr. Mary Agnes gave an overview of the Liturgy of the Hours, the universal prayer of the Church.

On Sunday, November 8th, the Gospel reading spoke of the Parable of the Ten Virgins, an opportunity to reflect upon how we are preparing in this life to encounter Jesus. It brought me great joy to think about how the ten women (eight retreatants and two religious sisters) that were at the retreat all have their torches lit as they await the arrival of the Eternal Bridegroom, Redeemer, and King of the Universe.

1 P. F. W. Hamans, *Edith Stein and Companions: On the Way to Auschwitz* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 181.
2 Punzalan, C. (2022, October 25). *St. Cecilia*. The GIVEN Institute. https://giveninstitute.com/saint_stories/st-cecilia/
3 Simons, J. (n.d.). *The Spiritual Gift of Music*. Many Parts Ministries. https://www.manypartsministries.com/spiritual-gift-of-music