

Thomas O'Loughlin

The Catholic Church and Celibacy: An Approach from Historical Theology

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One of the most carefully fostered aspects of the image of the Catholic priest is that he is without a wife. Indeed, this image has been built-up by the church administration as an essential part of its own *esprit de corps*. In recent centuries, certainly since clerical problems in mid-eighteenth century France, the authorities have perceived in celibacy a badge of identity for its officers and presented it as representing a willingness to pay any price for the survival of their religious system. Popes have spoken of it as 'the jewel in the crown of the priesthood.' And some, notably Pope Gregory XVI in 1832 and Pius IX in 1846, have suspected that there was a vast conspiracy to undermine Catholicism by attacking celibacy. Gregory was quite certain that 'their' strategy was to promote the abolition of celibacy, for once priests were married they would no longer have the energy to resist the larger conspiracy of those wanting to destroy the Church.

Clerics on recruitment drives in schools used more robust language and presented celibacy as leaving the priest without ties and attachments: ready for world-wide deployment at a moment's notice. The celibate priest was a hybrid between a spiritual Red Adair (the famed oil-well fire-fighter) and the Marine Corps of the army of Christ. If this B-movie romanticism ('I've no family at home, I'll get the message back through the lines!') seems far-fetched, then study the old seminary anthems such as this from All Hallows, Dublin: 'In lands afar for Christ our King/Our comrades bravely fight... To teach the nations to bear/The banner of the Lord.' Meanwhile, nineteenth-century defenders of celibacy, realizing that the local clergy had neither the energy of a Red Adair nor the mobility of the marines, presented a different image of one who was always ready to go 'on a sick-call,' the ally of the outcast, the friend of children. This image, fostered by nineteenth-century French religious writers such as Lacordaire, or by popular writers like Canon Patrick Sheehan whose

novels were best-sellers in the early years of the 20th century in Ireland, while not ignoble, was certainly fanciful as the repeated episcopal legislation from Maynooth makes clear. The bishops' concern was that priests stay in their parishes to be available when needed. And, as transport and the possibilities of travel improved, so did the complexity of the attempts of the *Maynooth Statutes* to keep them on the job. Parallel to this official promotion of celibacy, there was always a grim realization that it caused serious and widespread problems: not just the drunken priest problem, but a range of situations which, if public, would be scandalous; other problems such as men leaving the priesthood; or the knowledge that the further a priest was geographically from the administration, the greater the likelihood that celibacy would be forgotten. The best evidence for his awareness can be found by examining what was covered by law. For instance, there were detailed regulations on the age of housekeepers, a prohibition on a priest absolving his sexual partner of her sin, prohibitions on priests dancing, going to certain entertainments, having a woman sitting beside them in the front of a car, and the list goes on and on. The origins of such a phenomenon as celibacy, provoking so much public defense by the church authorities who privately were aware of how problematic the policy was in practice, make it a fascinating study for the historian. And, given current public interest in clerical celibacy, a sketch of its history in the Roman Catholic Church is not out of place.

First References to Celibacy

From what can be gleaned from the scanty references to ministers in the earliest Christian documents, it is clear that there was no notion of celibacy. The first Christian ministers were married and took this for granted (cf. 1 Cor 9:5 and Mt 8:14). From the early second century we have a collection of texts (included in the New Testament under the name of Paul) which specify some qualities of bishops and priests: they should have shown skill in running their own families and be monogamous (1 Tim 3:2 and 3:12; and Tit 1:6); and indeed, there is a general warning against those who forbid marriage on religious grounds (1 Tim 4:3). Yet, by the fourth century something had changed. Then we see the first signs of disquiet about the compatibility of marriage and priesthood. For example at a local synod in Spain (c. 306) it was decreed that any cleric who would not undertake absolute continence should be deposed. But when a Spanish bishop tried to get a similar law given general acceptance at the Council of Nicea (325), which intended its law for the whole empire, he was rejected. An Egyptian bishop Paphnutius, who felt he could speak with authority as he was unmarried, thought the idea imprudent, difficult in practice, and objectionable as it reduced a personal choice of celibacy to a regulation. But elsewhere new developments were afoot.

First, there was the growth in monasticism and the notion that this was, with its implicit celibacy, the ideal of a Christian and holy life. Second, a group

of influential writers, notable Jerome (c. 347-419) and Ambrose (c. 339-397) held that celibacy was a higher spiritual condition than marriage and that the cultic purity of the priest required abstinence from sexuality. For these writers, marriage was an earthbound reality, but celibacy was angelic, and if the priest was to be involved with the holy he could not be involved with a wife. This notion that sexuality was incompatible with holiness, destroyed cultic purity, was somehow lower in the scale of things, dirty, and connected with Original Sin, has complex origins. But, what is interesting is that it appears repeatedly in different guises until today—although since the Reformation, official praise of celibacy has usually attached a warning-phrase like: 'but no one should understand this as a denigration of marriage.' Third, during the fourth-fifth centuries the clergy emerged as a distinctive group (the notion of forming 'the holy order'—the '*ordo*' was the administrator class in the empire) within with the Church, with a developing theological identity—the notion of tiers of 'orders' and of a divide between clergy and laity emerge at this time. Likewise, within civil society, the Church (first as a legal and then as the official religion) and the clergy had a new public profile (distinctive dress is mentioned for the first time) and a corporate identity that was defined in law. We see these strands coming together in a series of legal documents. Pope Damasus, a patron of Jerome, writing to some Gallic bishops (c. 380), his successor Siricius writing to a Spanish and some African bishops (c. 385), Innocent (early fifth-century) to several bishops, and Leo I, some fifty years later to several bishops, said priests should be continent, even if married, or at least periodically continent (i.e. before saying Mass). Similar laws can be found in a series of local councils (mainly southern Gaul) from the fifth-early sixth centuries. They envisage that only celibates be ordained, and those ordained should cease having sexual relations with their wives either permanently or for the night before they say Mass. Needless to say, given that almost all clergy were married in the areas affected by these decrees, legislation on matters like sleeping accommodation, maids, women (other than mothers) living in the same house, begins to appear at this time also. One other feature of this legislation should be noted, it recognized the dangers of church property being alienated by passing to a wife on the death of a priest.

This early body of legislation is often appealed to as evidence for the antiquity of the practice of celibacy. But it is nothing of the sort: all it shows is that one small, influential, group believed it *should* be mandatory. The decrees were all local in intent, and had little or no effect for they are often repeated verbatim from one council to the next. All they indicate is that among some administrators the idea of celibacy was in the air. In reality, the clergy (monks apart) were married, and in most places there was no hint of disapproval. The best evidence that these early laws were not considered universal, and had little impact, is that when in the eighth century the first great systematization of church law took shape, this legislation was not included. While these law-books praise monasticism and virginity using

Jerome and others, celibacy is not mentioned in their laws on clergy, and their marriage law does not exclude clerics. For example, one of the most complex of these books, from Ireland, the *Collectio canonum hibernensis* (early eighth century), assumes that clerics marry, quotes 1 Tim 3:2 on monogamy and well-regulated households, and is concerned about church property. But while those early decrees had no effect in reality, the idea that the ideal priest was a celibate had been born.

Conflict and Reform

The next phase in the development of the practice of celibacy comes in the eleventh century as part and parcel of what medievalists call 'the investiture struggle' and church historians call 'the Gregorian reform'. Again several factors come together. The first issue is power. Whose law, imperial or papal, has primacy in church administration, and to whom do clergy owe their first loyalty? To us even the question seems bizarre. Was the cleric (the only person in the village who formed a link with the wider society) there as the local representative of the organization headed by the pope using canon law, or did he belong to the local society and so take part in supporting local law: the answer affected money, property, and local cohesion. With this went the question of which law, canon or civil, was primary, and who had the power, and patronage, to make lucrative appointments. The issues are usually discussed in terms of the precedence of pope or emperor: is the pope the imperial chaplain, or the emperor the pope's secular administrator? But the dispute was also fought at parish level. Celibacy first entered the conflict in 1018 when Benedict VIII issued a series of decrees, all primarily aimed at avoiding the shift of property from church control. This continued with Leo IX (1049) and Nicholas II (1059) who sought to reduce priests' wives to servitude and held that people should not attend Mass from inferior married priests (*sotto voce*: do not support them with your contributions). It was clearly seen that in a conflict about the church's rights and property, a celibate clergy would be far more tied into the canonical administration and so be far more likely to look to the papacy than to local rulers for their maintenance and advancement.

Second, in this period there was a general movement for a new style of organized religious life, which was presented (using a ninth-century notion) as a 'reform' (i.e. there was once a 'perfect age' of the church; so anything thought of as an improvement on the present situation was, therefore, a 'going-back' (*reformare*) to that perfect age). And, a 'reform' of the church meant a 'reform' of the clergy: but what was the ideal? This ideal was not constructed historically; there and then they had ideal Christians and ideal priests: the monks. Therefore, the monk-priest was the model for every priest. And, as the new 'reformed' monasteries founded from Cluny, and later Cîteaux, began to spread across Europe, and became a source of 'reforming' pro-papal bishops,

they presented a new ideal of the priest—formed not on an analysis of the priest's role in the ordinary community, but on the pattern of a monk. For example, when St Laurence O'Toole, a monk, became archbishop of Dublin, in 1162, one of his first acts was to 'reform' the canons of his cathedral by insisting on celibacy.

Third, linked to this 'reform' movement, a new theoretical understanding of the priesthood, marriage, and sexuality began to emerge in which celibacy became a value and a virtue of outstanding worth in itself. Many, such as Peter Damian, now argued along lines like this: if the Church is Christ's bride, and the priest is devoted to Christ and represents him, for him to be married is to be an adulterer to Christ. Those who opposed his extremism, or suggested he was getting mixed up in his metaphors were condemned (e.g. Bishop Ulric of Imola by decree of Gregory VII, 1079). These theological developments have been well-named by Christopher Brooke as 'the cult of celibacy.'

Fourth, this period saw a massive growth in the scope and detail of canon law; the age of the lawyer-popes had arrived. The men involved in supporting the papal position, those interested in reform, and many who were particularly interested in celibacy, such as Peter Damian, had all one thing in common: they believed the way forward to success on all fronts was that of law. A comprehensive legal structure, drawing on every ancient precedent that could be found, coupled with an efficient legal system in the service of the pope would make him the appeal court of Christendom, enhance his prestige and influence, and create a highly structured clergy that looked towards Rome. Celibacy was part of this as it would help create this new clergy and administration, and would prove that at the heart of 'reform' was the papacy. One should not forget that for all its political expediency, the attempts to impose celibacy sprung also from a genuine desire for the good: what could be more noble in 'reform' of the church than to want ideal priests, and—in their eyes—any priest who engaged in any sexual activity *had to be* less holy than one who was celibate; so, if spiritual 'reform' can be effected through law, then make it law. And this is exactly what they did.

In a series of synods leading up to two councils held in Rome—Lateran I (1123) and Lateran II (1139)—the marriages of clergy were declared not only unlawful, but null and void. The law stated that anyone in Orders *could not* marry, and someone married *could only* become a priest if the marriage were set aside (i.e. they no longer lived as husband and wife, but the wife could not re-marry). However, on the ground little changed. While we think of councils having effects rapidly around the world, this was not so in the twelfth century, even the notion of an 'ecumenical council' did not yet exist. These decrees were from an important council, were agreed by the bishops there, but no more than that. They would only take effect where individual bishops decided to enforce them, and even then any change would be slow and random. As ever, if such a law was applied to cathedral canons and the important clergy in towns, it was a very different matter in rural areas far from episcopal interest.

Gratian and the Law Schools

The upsurge in interest in celibacy might have petered out, were it not that it occurred in a stream of developments in canon law. Canon law's importance as an instrument of power and doctrine had been steadily increasing since the eleventh century. It reached a new height with a lawyer named Gratian (died before 1159). He brought together over 4000 legal decisions, from the earliest times until the Second Lateran council, in a new organized format that presented the Church's law in a systematic and coherent body in one book. Now, the laws on celibacy were not just a jumble of decisions, some *pro* and some *anti*, but a structured position: the papacy had legislated, so other laws and precedents should be understood in conformity with this. Gratian presented canon law as systematic, coherent, internally consistent, and in perfect continuity from the earliest times to the most recent. His book, the *Decretum*, was an immediate success. It became a standard reference and textbook in universities, was a model for other subjects such as theology and philosophy, and formed the base of the Church's legal system until 1918. Since Gratian included Lateran II's decrees, these were guaranteed an influence and publicity their framers could not have hoped for. And, from then until the Reformation, they would be commented on, added to, and gradually given effect among the clergy.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation

By the sixteenth century a situation had emerged where everyone knew the law. In many places (perhaps most—we do not know) it was adhered to, while in many places it was ignored or by-passed. We know this from bishops who arrived in their dioceses with new brooms. Usually their first complaint (and the proof of the uselessness of the former regime) was the 'awful morals of their priests' which means that 'housekeepers' were in fact—and all knew it as they had children—the priests' wives. This is also seen in cases presented to Rome by priests asking that their sons be legitimated, so that they could inherit or so that these sons could themselves be ordained. Incidentally, not only were these requests very common, but they were looked on most favorably by the Roman Curia as they were among the most expensive dispensations to be had, costing 12 Gros Tournois. Finally, in sixteenth-century tax-returns from Germany we find that a sure guide for assessing the spread of the Reformation is to look at how clergy describe those who share their living quarters. In many cases, while he considers himself in union with Rome, we find beside a woman's name: '*ancilla*' (house-keeper); when the actual break comes and he considers himself 'a protestant,' beside the same woman's name is '*uxor*' (wife). Little, but the formalities, seems to have changed.

Luther marks the next stage in the story. He argued that something one

does, for instance making a vow or being celibate, could not add to one's holiness (1522). Later, he condemned celibacy as the creation of canon law, itself the work of the devil (1530) and held that for fallen men, burning with passion, marriage was a necessity if they were to avoid sin (his understanding of 1 Cor 7:9). Luther himself married in June 1525 and died the father of a large family. His position on celibacy was, in broad outline, that of the other reformers as well. For example, Calvin held that some are called by God to celibacy, but that it should not be prescribed by law nor be considered a more spiritual, higher, vocation than marriage. Significantly, his is the best historical scholarship of the period. Commenting on references to marriage in Scripture, he recognized that Jerome's position could not be sustained with its extremely corrupt view of sexuality, and indeed was not one shared by the New Testament. He further recognized that it was Jerome's hang-ups about sex and virginity, rather than Scripture, that influenced law and ordinary theology text-books. Jerome was to be used with caution, and this comes from Calvin who on other matters of interpretation and linguistics had Jerome as his hero.

The opposition of the Reformers sealed the fate of celibacy for the Roman Church. The Council of Trent declared that celibacy was possible, founded on Scripture, and that it was heresy to say that virginity and celibacy were not objectively superior to marriage (1563). If the Protestant ministers were married, the new men of the Counter-reformation would be celibates, trained and organized with a precision and uniformity unimaginable to medieval clerics. Moreover, the continuing Protestant-Catholic divide gave Trent an impetus to enforce its law unlike any previous council. Celibacy was to be a badge of the priesthood, and every priest was to be trained in a special way and in a special place, the seminary. The distinction between the priest in the parish and the priest-member of a religious order further diminished. A good priest was a member of a spiritual elite formed on a pattern designed for monks and friars. It took many decades for Trent's vision to inform practice; but where Catholicism remained the religion, it gradually replaced older forms and attitudes. Variations certainly continued in reality, but they were increasingly seen as 'irregularities' and 'occasional lapses.' However, while it became commonplace to note 'the great reforms' of Trent, careful studies of the consequences of its approach to the priesthood are far less common.

By insisting in an age when few were even literate that the priest had to be, *de facto*, a graduate and a celibate, the number of priests declined, the priesthood was professionalized, and a gulf established between the people and this new small group of specialists that would have been unthinkable during the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages, every little village had its church (look at all the place names beginning with 'kil' in Ireland, 'llan' in Wales, or 'St' in France) with a priest who was one of the community as was his father before him and his son after him (look at names like McTaggart—*mac an tsagairt*, son of the priest—or De Clercq); after Trent priests were far less common—just recall the scale of resources needed to train them—and were

both socially and religiously distinct from those among whom they worked: and the price of such specialist professionalism is still being paid today.

Celibacy is a classic example of how an idea from one period, if it gets lodged in law, can become self-perpetuating and eventually be seen as an ideal. When a law is repeated over a long enough period it justifies itself even if it does not accord with reality or the larger values it claims to serve. Once the law provides the norm, it is reality that is judged defective, and any attempt to change the law is seen as prejudicial to the authority of the law in general and reflecting badly on those who administer it. To say the law erred regarding celibacy was to suggest that the law was not the will of God, or that the papacy had been making erroneous decisions for years. Such prospects were abhorrent to those who had spent their lives in administration, and (as another lawyer, Lord Hailsham, said of another clash of law and reality) opened 'an appalling vista,' namely, that a whole system could be wrong on something like celibacy—on which it had expended so much effort. In this situation anyone who questioned celibacy had to be marginalized as in error or disloyal, or, as Gregory XVI believed, part of a vast conspiracy against God and his Church.

Further Reading

The volume of writing on the topic of celibacy, in English alone, is staggering. But the quantity of writing that explores the topic historically is far more restricted—despite the fact that there was an historical critique of the notion that celibacy was of apostolic origin written as long ago as 1867 by Henry C. Lea: *An Historical Sketch of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church* (Philadelphia 1867), available as a free download online. Lea was an opponent of all things Catholic and his comments can be rather bitter at times, but his book is the most convenient 'quarry' in which to find the basic evidence, and all subsequent historians are in his debt. A convenient recent book length study is William E. Phipps: *Clerical Celibacy: The Heritage* (New York: Continuum, 2004). For a quick introduction see P. Delhaye, 'Celibacy, History of' *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* 3 (1967), 369-74; 2nd ed. (2003), 3:322-8; this article gives the facts, but is written as an historical defense of the institution. For a very lively introduction to the problems of sexuality that Catholicism has tended to ignore, see Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991); this is wide-ranging and provocatively written, but lacks proper footnotes such as would allow one to follow up its arguments.

On the earliest period—upon which most has been written—three books stand out: Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); D. G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007); Samuel Laeuchli, *Power and Sexuality: The Emergence of*

Canon Law at the Synod of Elvira (Philadelphia 1972)—a fundamental study, though hard to get hold of.

On the medieval period when celibacy became a matter of practical concern to presbyters in pastoral ministry, see: Christopher N. L. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford University Press, 1989), ch. 3: 'The Cult of Celibacy'—the best account of the crucial 11-12th century period; Michael Frassetto, ed. *Medieval Purity and Piety: Essays on Medieval Clerical Celibacy and Religious Reform* (New York and London: Garland, 1998); Helen J. Parish, *Clerical Celibacy in the West, c. 1100-1700* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010).

On the relationship between the actual experience of the Latin Church and the claims it makes about its own past, see my 'Celibate clergy: the need for historical debate,' *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004):583-597; reprinted in: Enda McDonagh and Vincent MacNamara ed, *An Irish Reader in Moral Theology: The Legacy of the Last Fifty Years. Volume 2: Sex, Marriage and the Family* (Dublin: Columba, 2011), 447-60. I have tried to explore the background to some of the issues mentioned in this piece in the following articles: 'Marriage and Sexuality in the *Hibernensis*,' *Peritia* 11 (1997):188-206; 'Priestly Celibacy and "Arguments from History,"' *Doctrine and Life* 49 (1999):411-22; 'Giraldus Cambrensis and the Sexual Agenda of the Twelfth-Century Reformers,' *Journal of Welsh Religious History* 8 (2000):1-15; 'How many priests do we need?' *New Blackfriars* 86 (2005):642-57.

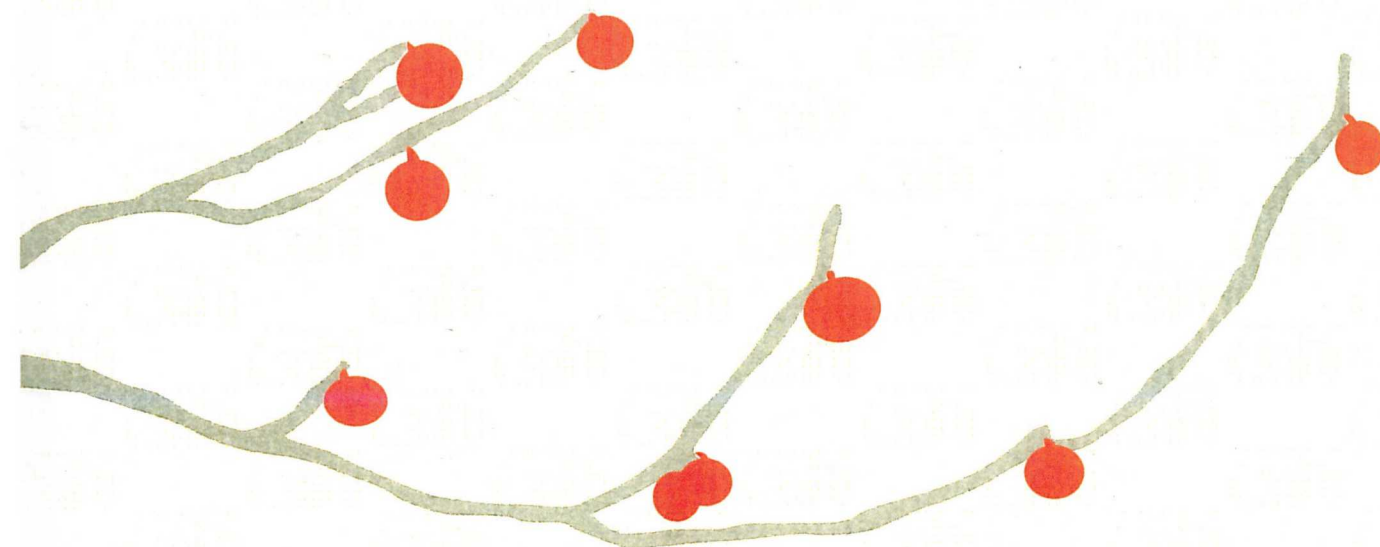
Lastly, one of the more significant works looking at the effects of celibacy on priestly ministry but making critical use of historians' methods is: Heinz-Jürgen Vogels, *Celibacy: Gift or Law?: A Critical Investigation* (Tunbridge Wells, 1992), originally published in German as *Pflichtzölibat* (1978; rev. ed. 1992). This book, which has attracted little attention in English, is perhaps the most important study of celibacy within church praxis written in recent decades.

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