

A Brief History of Celibacy



Introduction

Fifty years ago in Vatican II, Christianity, especially Roman Catholic Christianity, held its collective breath in the hope and anticipation that opening the Church to the fresh air of the Spirit might bring a re-examination of some traditions. Many of those practices found little, if any, basis in Scripture. Among such practices was mandatory celibacy for the ordained ministry.

At Vatican II, to the chagrin of many bishops who had hoped to open a discussion, Pope Paul VI and the Curia rejected mandatory celibacy as a topic for consideration—despite the plight of many Catholics without priests or only occasional access to them, despite the pleas of those ordinaries watching their local ministries losing priests.

This brief history summarizes the factors that led to the Church's insistence on mandatory celibacy for its priests.

Overview

Mandatory celibacy was never part of the message of Jesus of Nazareth, nor was it a practice of the Twelve. Many of the early disciples were married and even traveled with their wives. Although an early Scripture message from Paul advises some to refrain from marriage, he is clearly in an eschatological mind frame, expecting the imminent demise of the Roman society. Yet even Paul states that the admonition is only his advice, not a requirement from the Lord.

From such beginnings, why did the Christian community do such an about-face?

The reasons for imposing celibacy as a spiritual goal are complex. In addition, the religious “reasoning” about celibacy over the centuries became intertwined with both political and financial motives. Despite such complexity, we can identify three cultural pressures that channeled the Christian communities toward a diminishing of respect for marital unions and a related elevation of celibacy after the 1st century:

- ⑥ Jewish purification rituals
- ⑥ Gentile cultural experiences that had little in common with Jewish rituals
- ⑥ The philosophical problem of evil

Ritual Purity in Jewish Tradition

In the heartland of the Apostolic church, most of the new Christians were Jews. They continued to worship and pray in the local synagogues alongside their Jewish brethren.

This parallel worship ended when the Romans destroyed the Temple (70 CE) and then the entire city of Jerusalem (132 CE). In the aftermath, the Jewish Christians were excluded from the synagogues and were compelled to find their own places and rituals of worship.

At this point, Jewish Christians looked to the Torah, the sacred books of their history, and adopted the practices of the cultic leadership with which they were most familiar. Cultic practices entailed a high degree of *ritual purity*.

The demand for ritual purity led to conflicting requirements. Every Israelite who came in contact with human bodily excretions, menstrual cycles, diseases, or sex became ritually defiled. To be ritually pure, the Temple priests and Levites, therefore, refrained from sex while assigned Temple duties. But the Torah asserted, in the form of a *divine command*, that a husband owed his wife her conjugal rights. To resolve this dilemma, a Jewish priest or Levite who was occupied with religious matters was permitted to have an interlude from intercourse *with his wife's consent* for one or two weeks.

Gentile Culture

A second pressure on cultural attitudes began to develop in the western Roman Empire in the 2nd century. As the influence of the Jewish Christian communities began to wane and as the membership became increasingly Greek and Roman, the local leadership drew upon a different experience to base its worship: the Greek and Roman culture around them.

The Jewish Christians had looked to the Torah for guidance, but the new Gentile Christians sought to ground the new faith in its own philosophic traditions. Thus, when challenged by the pagan priests that belief in Jesus was not a religion because it did not have priests, altars, and temples, the leading Christian spokesmen sought to find solutions by building on both the Torah and the Greek and Roman practices.

But here the Gentile culture harbored a serpent. Whereas the *Jewish ritual purity respected marriage*, pagan philosophers saw human intercourse as *carnal corruption*.

Second-century Christians, the majority of them Gentiles, had little historical knowledge of the Hebrew tradition or appreciation of the Jewish way of life. The pagan Gentile culture drew instead upon the views of Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, and the Stoics. Unfortunately, “contempt for the human condition and hatred of the body was a disease endemic in the entire culture of the period.”¹

Plotinus, for example, believed that virginity was the essence of purity. Greco-Roman priests abhorred the body, denigrated women, and avoided marriage. Many even castrated themselves to flee from the “temptations of the flesh.” Pagan asceticism became a competitor to Christian spirituality.

¹ E. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety*.

Christian thinkers of this period—Athenagoras, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Tertullian, and Origen—drew heavily on this pagan philosophical heritage, and then passed it onward into Christian social and religious thinking.

Would our present-day hierarchy be embarrassed to learn that its adulation of celibacy stems originally from a competition to be as holy as the pagan priesthood?

- ⑥ Athenagoras taught that the very thought of sexual pleasure was evil. “Among us are many men and women who have grown to old age without marrying, in the hope of being closer to God.”
- ⑥ Justin Martyr was against all conjugal sexuality apart from “reproductive intentionality” and pointed with pride to some Christians who renounced marriage and lived in perfect continence.
- ⑥ Tatian founded the Encratites, who prohibited sexual intercourse, intoxicants, and meat. He taught that woman is entirely a creation of the devil, but man is only halfway so (below the waist). He first claimed that Jesus was a celibate, and he altered the New Testament to back up his claims.
- ⑥ Tertullian did not condemn sexual intercourse but he wondered why God had invented the sordid act!
- ⑥ Origen believed that celibacy was more befitting of Christians, and accepted ideas that were more pagan than Christian. He argued that since pagans abstained from sexual intercourse in order to worship idols, how much more should worshipers of the supreme God abstain.

In contrast, Clement of Alexandria, Origen’s teacher, was disturbed by Christians who did not recognize that a couple cooperates in the holy work of creation. He viewed celibacy as an unmanly evasion of responsibility. “Is it not possible to live in harmony with God? Is it not permitted also for both the married person and his partner to care for things of the Lord?” he asked.

By the time the Council of Elvira in Spain (circa 310 CE) ended, almost half of the 81 canons promulgated pertained to sexual requirements, demonstrating the main method by which the Spanish church sought leadership control of the faithful. The canons also expressed the evolution towards a celibate priesthood, where the married priest was by definition always in the wrong:

- ⑥ Canon 18: “Any cleric found guilty of engaging in sex will not be allowed to receive communion even before dying.”
- ⑥ Canon 33: “Bishops, presbyters, deacons and all other clerics having a position in the ministry are ordered to abstain completely from their wives and not to have children. Whoever, in fact, does this, shall be expelled from the dignity of the clerical state.”

Pope Siricius (circa 380 CE) wanted to make the clerical celibacy decree of the Elvira Council authoritative for the entire Western church. He judged that priests who had sex with their wives were engaging in “crimes.” He was the first pope to attempt to establish the idea that hands “fouled” by spousal intercourse were unfit for handling the sacraments. Later he declared that God accepts worship only when led by sexually abstinent priests: “Were he soiled by carnal concupiscence [horniness]... with what shame, in what state of mind would he carry out his functions?”

In 386 CE, Siricius’s views on sexual abstinence for priests were reinforced by the Council of Rome, which declared, “intercourse is defilement.” And Ambrose of Milan (339-397) demanded that priests not be “violated” by any intercourse with their wives. Popes and bishops thus tightened the strings of celibacy, and an elite caste began to take shape.

Jerome, an early primary source for Bible commentaries, also warrants careful study. He was one of the most virulent champions of the idea that virginity is superior to marriage. Presuming that virginity was a prerequisite to the saintly life, he injected his bias into his translation of the Vulgate (Cf. especially 1 Cor 9:5). Jerome also attacked a monk, Jovinian, who supported marriage for priests.

The Problem of Evil

The third cultural pressure that drove Western Christianity into the embrace of celibacy was the problem of evil.

As mentioned previously, the leading philosophers of the time equated *good* with the spirit and *evil* with matter/flesh. The most influential mind in Latin Christianity was Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. In his early life, he was a Manichean, a believer in the dualistic reality: God=spirit=good; creation=matter=bad.

When Augustine converted to Christianity, he never seemed to move away fully from his Manichean roots. For the Hebrews the basic sin of man was disobedience to God’s will, but for Augustine it was sexual expression.

“That judgment has pretty well penetrated all of church teaching on human sexuality even to the present day, even when it is explicitly denied,” says Richard Sipe, who has examined celibacy and its effects.²

The dynamics of celibacy lie in this Augustinian equation: sexual pleasure=women=evil. We could delineate in greater depth Augustine’s equation of evil with the act of conception and birth and its tainting of human nature. However, what is more important to our review

² Richard Sipe, *Sex, Priests and Power*, p.164.

is that Augustine’s understanding of sex and celibacy was a decisive factor for the insinuation into our culture that Christianity regards sexuality as tainted with evil.

According to Augustine, only the celibate could hope to achieve the state of grace that existed in the Garden of Eden. What we today call “Christian attitudes toward sex” are really Augustinian attitudes. These anti-sexuality and anti-women attitudes became inbred in clerical education until finally, in the 12th century, the Latin Church legislated mandatory celibacy.

- ⑥ In 1123, at the First Lateran Council, the bishops issued a severe edict concerning clerical celibacy. As Peter De Rosa describes it, “A thousand prelates decreed that clerical marriages should be broken up and the spouses made to do penance because these marriages were invalid. ... This teaching was new; it went against centuries of tradition.”³
- ⑥ Sixteen years later, bishops gathered again at the Lateran II Council to deal with clerical sexual conduct. Innocent II declared, “Since priests are supposed to be ... vessels of the Lord ... it offends their dignity to lie in the conjugal bed and live in impurity.”⁴

Both councils were more concerned about taking away the marriage liberty rather than the sexual liberty of priests. As a result, from that point on, women who cohabited with priests (even in a committed relationship) had no rights, and any children from such unions were labeled bastards.

Additional Information

The bibliography includes several reference texts on celibacy and its history for those who wish to investigate further. This brief history aims to provide a frame of reference for the tradition of celibacy—a tradition that has sorely wounded our Church:

“The Catholic Church has nearly always been in crisis over clerical celibacy. ... The fact is that priestly celibacy has hardly ever worked. In the view of some historians, it has probably done more harm to morals than any other institution in the West, including prostitution. For everyone is on his guard against women of the street, whereas ministers of the Gospel, even when unfaithful, are given respect and personal confidences.” – Peter De Rosa, *Vicars of Christ*, p. 395

³ Peter De Rosa, *Vicars of Christ*, p. 408.

⁴ Ranke-Heineman, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, p. 110.

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