A HISTORY OF CELIBACY

Origen
Late in the 2nd century, a 17-year-old son wrote to his father, Leonides, who was awaiting martyrdom. The son’s letter urged his father to go to his death bravely, with no anxiety for his family of 7 children. The young man himself yearned to die as a martyr. His mother barely kept him steady, hiding his clothes to prevent him from begging the Romans to kill him. This young man was brilliant, but volatile and erratic. He defined himself as the “son of a martyr,” a title he treasured. He grew despondent, however, as the opportunity for martyrdom receded and as his sexual temptations intensified.

Three years after his father’s death, the young man, now 20, found a physician and asked to be castrated. In the blood of that mutilation, the young man believed his humanity was redeemed. We are speaking of Origen, sometimes cited, with good reason, as one of the most brilliant thinkers who ever lived. But Origen was a troubled man living in a troubled century.

We cannot imagine Jesus acting as Origen did. Origen considered celibacy the defining event in his life; Jesus did not. Jesus was not primarily a celibate; he was a prophet whose celibacy made sense in the context of prophecy and his own personal life. Jesus was a prophet, not the celibate. It was almost a century after Jesus before any of his disciples based their celibacy on his example.

By Origen’s time, celibacy had become more important than prophecy: celibacy is the prophetic witness. Jesus believed that the Spirit came to everyone and might lead a disciple in any marital direction. For Origen, the Spirit prefers celibacy. A hierarchical order had gained ground in the Christian community based on authority and the renunciation of sexual experience. This alliance between authority and celibacy continued in the subsequent history of the Church.

Origen’s castration derived from an unhealthy mixture of arrogance and despair. The arrogance was the assumption that he could control the Holy Spirit by destroying his body, thereby becoming a part of an elite celibate corps of distinguished Christians. The despair was that the Holy Spirit did not love us unless we renounced ourselves and mutilated ourselves physically or emotionally. Origen’s castration generated a sad and savage spirituality and, in the next generation, a Church of force and power.

Origen’s celibacy was based on two themes that the New Testament Church would have found bizarre:
- Origen used his celibacy as a power base to support prophetic or apostolic leadership in the Church. Until Origen, pastoral care of the Church was given by married heads of households who functioned as the priests and bishops of the first two centuries. From Origen forward, by and large, the Church was governed by celibates, a lifestyle deemed superior and more spiritual. Origen’s castration eventually cut off married pastors from the life of the community.
- Origen changed the tradition. Origen taught the supremacy of life-long virginity. Until Origen, celibacy was a choice people made after the death of a spouse. Celibacy and marriage complemented each other, and both might serve the pastoral office or the spiritual life equally well.

Why did Origen’s thinking have such an impact? There was a convergence of culture and politics in the next two centuries. Greek asceticism became the fashionable way to redeem or develop one’s humanity. This asceticism preferred martyrdom to life, the desert to the community, virginity to family, men to women. Ambrose declared that celibacy is the one experience that distinguishes us from the beasts of the field. Politics also played a role. With Constantine, Christianity and the Roman Empire joined forces. The Church then used law and power to enforce its ideals and to proclaim the Gospel.
Augustine

Augustine had what we might call today a common-law wife since he was 18. A year after they began living together, she had a son. After 13 years of this common-law marriage, Augustine told her that she must go away, at a time when Augustine and their son needed her. Augustine never got over her, the wound of her leaving never fully healed. It bled in different ways throughout his life, as guilt and loss, as anger and longing, as envy and insecurity.

Augustine dismissed her not for celibacy, but for a psychological need to excel and to become perfect. Augustine's age found the body loathsome. He had been a Manichean for 9 years and had learned that the body was “blood and bile and flatulence and excrement… a mold of defilement. Ambrose, Augustine's mentor, saw sex as a body function and could not link it with love or grace or relationship. Augustine, with his insatiable sexual appetites, saw women as co-conspirators in lust. He cut off his sexual life with his common-law spouse as sharply as Origen had once castrated himself.

Augustine may have believed he had won a mighty victory over himself, but there were victims. The institutional Church and clerical celibacy may have gained a mighty champion, but a nameless woman, her son, Adeodatus, and even Augustine himself and the future Church may have all been wounded by the ordeal and achievement. Augustine believed that sex was always wrong. “I had no part in that boy,” he writes, “except in sin.” The sadness of Augustine lies in the fact that the Church had created a climate of necessity about celibacy, and Augustine became a driven man. The problem was not celibacy, but that Augustine saw no meaningful alternative to it.

By the end of the 4th century, as a result of Origen and Augustine, respect for marriage had vanished; the value Jesus gave women in his preaching had gone. “How sordid, filthy and horrible a woman's embraces,” Augustine wrote of wives. During the day, Augustine tells us, he was sure sex is evil, but at night, as he laid awake and reviewed what he had preached, he wondered if he is right and if things are so one-sided.

Near the end of his life, Augustine engaged in a bitter debate with Julian, a bishop who espoused Pleagianism. Pleagianism asserted that people are basically good even without baptism. Augustine vigorously disagreed. The following is a summary of their debate:

- **Julian.** If you are right, Augustine, that original sin is in our very nature, it seem the devil is as much a maker of human beings as God. Do I hear in this the Manicheanism you once accepted? When you declare without equivocation that all newborn children are evil until baptized, I shudder. When you add that you have found the source of evil and it is in your genitals, I am disgusted, affronted by this insult to God, our creator.
- **Augustine.** All human beings, infants included, are lost without baptism. God does not redeem humanity, only the elect. The proof that evil is in our genitals is our shame and, especially, those sexual feelings which stir us as against our better judgment, reflecting the disobedience of a higher law which Adam initiated.
- **Julian.** Sexual feeling is not evil. It is a sense in our body, like seeing or hearing, put there by God to make us aware of who we are.
- **Augustine.** If people listen to you, Julian, they will “jump into bed whenever they like…tickled by desire” unable to wait until dark. Is this what you want for God’s people? I hear not the voice of truth, but he sort of sexual life you and your wife lead. Keep your sexual experiences out of this debate.
- **Julian.** We’re not arguing about sex but about God. Your God punishes infants in eternal fire. Where is your compassion, your common sense? And God who tortures infants commits a crime disgusting to barbarians, let alone Christians.
- **Augustine.** If unbaptized infants are saved, then God is not sovereign. If human nature is good, why did Christ redeem us? If salvation is easy, what is the worth of our sacrifices, the women we send away, the children we do not generate, the sexual pleasure we reject?
Augustine’s view prevailed with Rome and the papacy. By the end of the 4th century, celibacy became the prestigious and spiritually superior life choice for a priest. Origen and Augustine had shown how successful men of social position can live in cities and become spiritually exalted through celibacy and substantial personal sacrifices. Both men were also talented publicists of their own lives and theologies.

**Why Did This Occur?**

A cast of characters, including hermits and desert ascetics, bishops such as John Chrysostom and scholars such as Jerome, brought fear of the body, sex and women into the Church. They gave this fear respectability and status. Christianity’s powerful influence in the Roman Empire allowed it the resources and the legal potential to institutionalize celibacy as the preferred alternative for a cleric. Since Christianity controlled Western and Eastern Europe, celibacy brought enormous career and economic advantages. Marriage was considered holy only insofar as it approximated the celibate ideal. The best marriages for all Christians were those that were sexless; in the marriage of clerics, this sexlessness became obligatory. The Council of Elvira, meeting in Spain in 305, decreed that all clerics “are ordered to abstain completely from their wives and are not to have children.” This council did not deal with clerical celibacy, but with celibate clerical marriages.

**When Did This Occur?**

The process took two centuries and was completed by the 4th century. The married head of household leadership on the Church of the 1st century vanished. “I have found where evil lives,” Augustine said. “It lives in the genitals. See the place. Ecce unde. Ecce unde. See where evil lives, in your body, in your sex organs, in your pleasure.”

**The Twelfth Century**

The psychological pressure to choose celibacy was enormous during the centuries that followed the 4th century. By the 12th century the married priesthood had continued, even though priests and their wives were often defamed, sometimes forcibly separated, always under suspicion. There are, nonetheless, married popes late into the 9th century, e.g., Adrian II. Even after Lateran II in 1139 and the prohibition of marriage to all priests, there were married bishops throughout Europe. The major diocese of England persisted in choosing married bishops: Ely, London, Salisbury, Durham, Winchester. Law was viewed very differently in the 12th century. Papal and conciliar prohibitions were considered position papers rather than legal regulations. The contention that the Church never sanctioned marriage after ordination for priests is simply not true.

Bishop Rather of Verona, Italy, observed in the 10th century that priests arranged marriages for their daughters to other priests and that if he expelled all priests who lived with women or who married after ordination, there would be no one left. Bishop Otto of Constance, Germany, gave permission for unmarried priests to marry. In 1076 Archbishop Lanfranc of Canterbury, England, forbid clerics to marry after ordination, but he allowed all priests already married to keep their wives, without distinguishing whether they married before or after their ordination. The situation was fluid and bishops, in great numbers, accepted marriage after ordination. Rome did not have the resources to stop the practice.

In 1007 there is a baby born to an impoverished mother of a large family, and the baby was starving to death. The mother ignored the baby’s cries because the family did not have the means to raise him. A neighboring woman, the wife of a married priest, saved the infant’s life by begging the mother to nurse him. The child grew up and became a vicious adversary of married priests and their wives. This man was Peter Damian. A century after he began to preach, Second Lateran terminated the married priesthood and the Church ordered the break-up of married priest’s families.

In the final century of optional celibacy, Peter Damian brought to bear the psychological warfare begun by Origen and developed by Augustine. Peter Damian’s intent was different. He sought a law, a conciliar decree and papal support to end priest’s marriages. Since all other measures had failed, force had to be used.
Peter Damian presented the classic argument on sex and ritual purity. He warned priests and their wives, or whores as he called them: “The hands that touch the body and blood of Christ must not touch the genitals of a whore.” He saw women as “flesh of the devil,” cause of our ruin, “the very stuff of sin,” “pigs.” Peter Damian was canonized a saint of the Church.

In 1105 a young man, Serio of Beyeux, France, the son of a priest, was discharged from his inheritance because of a recent ruling of Pope Urban II. Priest’s sons were denied the right to be ordained. The law sought to deprive them of any inheritance they might have received from their fathers. Serio defended himself from these observations. The new law, he argued, denied the equality of all Christians conferred by baptism. Ordination and law, he argued, were utilized to make Christians unequal. To deny ordination to someone only because he was the son of a priest was punitive rather than pastoral, economic in its intent rather than pastoral. He observed that the popes of the 11th and 12th centuries were obsessively committed to controlling the Church. Gregory VII, one of the most absolutist popes in Church history, declared in 1075 that a pope could dispose all princes, since the pope alone rules both the temporal and the religious world. Church history has shown that the more autocratic the pope, the more rigid he is on obligatory celibacy.

Serio also charged that homosexual clergy were dominant and that they influenced the movement to terminate the married priesthood. The century from 1050-1150, the century of Peter Damian, Gregory VII and Second Lateran, was a century in which homosexuality flourished in the clergy. Numerous commentators of the day complained about monasteries as homosexual centers. They questioned why severe laws were passed forbidding heterosexual relations in clerical marriages while no regulations were promulgated prohibiting homosexual relations in monasteries. If the preponderance of homosexuals was true, the motive for driving the Second Lateran Council is all the more suspect. Monks had achieved great power and controlled the legislative centers of the Church during this period. Gregory VII was a monk as were 6 other popes in this period.

As the 12th century ended, a different Church emerged. The papacy was seen as absolute and human sexuality considered evil. Church law became normative for Christian behavior and the world was judged deficient and decadent.

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