

THE UNFINISHED AGENDA OF THE CHURCH:

A Critical Look at the History of Celibacy

By MARY MALONE

UNTIL RECENT YEARS ROMAN CATHOLICS have been so accustomed to priestly celibacy as authorized and beyond debate that almost two thousand years of argumentation on the subject have been forgotten. On reviewing the major outbreaks of resistance to imposed celibacy – which, of necessity, escalate with renewed efforts for its imposition – one is struck with the essential continuity of the arguments. Attempts to remove celibacy from the agenda as was the case at the Second Vatican Council only serve to keep the topic on everyone's mind and the argumentation goes on behind closed doors. This essay will look only briefly at the years since the Synod of 1971 and concentrate on the three major turning points in the history of celibacy prior to this century.

As recent authors indicate,¹ there has been remarkably little theological exploration of clerical celibacy. The cumulative history is composed more of an increasingly burdensome canonical tradition and even recent defence of celibacy are often content to repeat centuries-old arguments centring mainly on the need for cultic purity and the dangers of entanglement with the profane. Surprisingly, the first use of the biblical exhortation to continence (Matthew 19:11–12) in official documentation is at Vatican II. Since then, official writing on celibacy has increased in volume, though not necessarily in enlightenment, because much of the old argumentation has been wiped away by contemporary biblical exegesis, the human sciences and the theological re-evaluation of marriage.

Underlying the whole history of celibacy lie two opposing views of the Church, priesthood, the laity and the sacraments. Is priesthood defined essentially as role or status? Does ordination take precedence over baptism? Is the priest someone set apart from the community or someone serving at its heart? Are women fundamentally inimical to cultic service? Does the cult take precedence over pastoral ministry? Is

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the priest entitled to any privacy? Is marriage a distraction from God, of necessity creating a divided heart? All of these questions – and more – were raised over and over in the fourth and twelfth centuries by married clergy and their supporters and in the sixteenth century by the Reformers. While the last mentioned pointed most clearly to the inherent difficulties, especially the normative relationship between the wife and husband within marriage at that time, the solution seemed no nearer to hand. Nor, indeed, does it today.

This essay will, first of all, outline the four main historical stages, then the main elements of the historical argumentation for and against clerical celibacy and finally will engage in a Christian feminist historical critique of the tradition. The voluminous literature and the brief length of this essay allow for no more than a cursory examination, but an attempt will be made to attend to the essential elements and essential contexts of the debate.

No basis for mandatory celibacy is to be found in the New Testament but there are several scriptural elements which together form the basis to which all pro-celibacy advocates eventually appeal. These include the apparent preference of both Jesus and Paul for celibacy, Paul's admonition to celibacy 'in these present times of stress' (1 Cor 7:26), the implication in the Levitical regulations that priesthood and sex have nothing in common and the tradition of dedicated virgins from the earliest times. Nevertheless the household offered the preferred model for ministry for at least the first two hundred years. Wherever the marital status is known to us for the first four hundred years, marriage is the norm for ministry. The picture we get is of married and celibate ministers working side by side. Even as late as the last decades of the fourth century we find the great theologian-bishops of the Council of Constantinople as married men with families.

A remarkable change in attitude occurs with the spread of first, desert and then, urban asceticism throughout the Christian world from the beginning of the fourth century. Rooted in a desire to embrace the evangelical life in opposition to the growing imperial influence on Christianity, a veritable epidemic of virginity seems to sweep the Christian world. The main patristic writers of the period – Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom and dozens of others – write glowingly of the effects of this Christian witness on the pagan world and on the contemporary Church. It is not surprising that this asceticism is tinged with anti-body and anti-world attitudes. Nor is it surprising, under the circumstances, that admonitions to eucharistic continence begin to appear for clergy and laity alike.

There is an escalating emotional intensity to these admonitions over the next decades that becomes particularly urgent as the daily celebration of the eucharist becomes normative at the end of the fourth century. There is no doubt whatever that Popes Damasus, Siricius and their successors prefer celibate candidates. We must not forget that what is in question here is married priests abstaining from sex with their wives as an expression of cultic purity, not yet the abolition of clerical marriage. It was becoming clearer to those who supported the new ascetic tendencies that 'those who served at the altar' should abstain from sex and further that this abstention placed these men on a different level from the ordinary married believer. The distinction between celibate and non-celibate, those living Christianity 'perfectly' and those who chose the less holy path, was beginning to be made.

Much appeal was made to the Levitical texts, altered in the process to make sex and impurity practically synonymous, especially Exod 19:15; 1 Sam 21:5-7; Lev 8:33-35, 15:16ff, 22:4. The inflammatory writings of Jerome and the saner but no less insistent writings of Augustine and Ambrose served to create an attitude of contempt for marriage, even as they insisted that that was not their intent. Within a hundred years marriage after ordination is forbidden and over the next centuries the law of eucharistic abstinence is repeated endlessly. As we shall see, there was strong opposition to these ascetic tendencies in the fourth century though we hear the voices only through the impassioned words of the defenders of virginity. Little is heard by way of opposition from the fifth to the tenth centuries but it seems clear that clerical marriage continued at all levels in all areas of Christianity. In the mid-eighth century clerics are forbidden to have more than one wife and the widening gap between Eastern and Western attitudes is becoming institutionalized in this area of ministry.

Nothing less than an onslaught on clerical marriage takes place at the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth centuries. This movement is usually placed under the heading of the Gregorian reform, but it predates Pope Gregory VII (1075-1085) and continues after his death in exile. The context of the struggle is no longer the feverish world of fourth-century asceticism but the much more pragmatic struggle of the reform popes to free the Church of lay control. The effort to make the law of abstinence effective is part of the struggle for papal power and, one might add, has to some extent remained so.

The reformers took the drastic step of making clerical marriage not only invalid but also illicit. The popes took over the crusade from the provincial synods and eventually at the Second Lateran Council in 1139

the first universal law of celibacy was passed. What was the effect of this? It meant that all contact between priests and women was now fornication, all children of such unions were illegitimate and that clerical marriage was impossible.

This was accomplished in three stages, canonically speaking. First came the enormous canonical zeal of Pope Leo IX who reached Rome in 1049. He was backed, for the first time, by a stable College of Cardinals, many of whom were deeply influenced by the monastic reforms of Cluny and were committed to cleansing the Church. Next came the all-out attack of Pope Gregory VII backed by the formidable preaching of Peter Damian and the thunderous commitment of Cardinal Humbert. Pope Gregory made more impact on the institution of clerical marriage than any previous pope.² At his very first Synod in 1074 he decreed that no one could be admitted to orders without a vow of celibacy and, astonishingly, forbade the laity to assist at any religious service celebrated by a married cleric, whether sub-deacon, deacon, priest or bishop.

Eventually, married clergy are considered to be heretics and efforts are even made to impose the same discipline on the Eastern Church. Cardinal Humbert compared the Greek Church to Jezebel's brothel.³ Such inflammatory language in both East and West caused an uproar, from riots in the streets to an outpouring of dissent and even attacks on reform-minded bishops. Gregory persisted that all in major orders should live in a clerical household, support each other in 'moral purity' and even report on any backsliders.

One can only imagine the enormous social disruption. No consideration whatever is given to the wives and families of priests. They are addressed as whores or worse and it is suggested – and put into practice – that they become serfs either in the papal household or in the courts of compliant princes.

Gregory was relentless in his insistence that since Christ was born of a virgin he should be served (i.e. in the eucharist) only by virginal hands. In language that begins to forecast the semi-erotic devotional language of the Middle Ages, Peter Damian's *De celibatu sacerdotum*, written in 1059, urges total chastity on priests so that 'the hands that touch the body and blood of Christ must not have touched the genitals of a whore'.⁴

Finally at the second Lateran Council in 1139, the first universal law of celibacy is passed in the Latin Church. By this it was established that the vow of celibacy took precedence over the marriage vow and that ordination was an impediment to marriage. The immediate result was a

huge increase in concubinage and those who persisted in resisting were excommunicated. Canonists now went to work to produce, in the succeeding centuries, mountainous legislation against clerical concubinage.

What was accomplished? After this period, with the exception of the Reformation, the law of clerical celibacy became normative for the Latin Church. The question was not raised again publicly until our own era. This does not mean however that the law of celibacy accomplished what the law of abstinence did not, namely clerical chastity, but a new climate was created. The laity now expected their clergy to be celibate. New attitudes toward the eucharist, penance and the other sacraments prevail as the priest becomes a cultic figure, spoken of in sacral language. The division between clergy and laity is widened as sex becomes an impediment not only to a deep spiritual life, but also to the intellectual life. There is not space here to explore the growing devotion to Mary, the Queen of Virgins, but the outpouring of this devotion marches hand in hand with the elevation of ritual purity as an essential element for contact with God.

By the fourteenth century, non-observance of the law of celibacy is again widespread – as is, incidentally, a much deficient devotion to Mary. Cries for reform are heard from all sides and eventually culminate in the reform movements which ultimately divide the Church. In the context of the Reformers' reaffirmation of the priesthood of all the faithful, the Council of Trent (1545–1562) solemnly reaffirmed the sacred character of the celibate priesthood, the minor status of the laity and the superiority of virginity to the married state (Can 9). It was Trent which created the prevailing view of the priest which still predominates today. Sexual purity is necessary for sacred service. Sexual freedom is necessary for sacred service. The priest occupies a special state where he wields sacred power and he serves as mediator between the disempowered laity and the court of heaven.

Officially, celibacy was not on the agenda of the Second Vatican Council, but this served only to keep the topic alive and make it one of the main subjects of conversation behind closed doors. Nevertheless, the Council did have to tackle the issue, as did the Synod of 1971. Both gatherings found themselves in a great dilemma. Since the Council of Trent, the traditional arguments for the celibacy of the clergy had been repeated right up to *Sacra virginitas* in 1954. But now it was apparent that they no longer served the purpose. *Sacerdotalis coelibatus*, published by Pope Paul VI in 1967, had first tackled the new state of affairs. The most 'received' teaching of the Council on the People of God, the renewed

liturgy, the renewal of biblical study in the Roman Catholic Church and the broadly pastoral approaches to marriage and 'the world' in *Gaudium et spes* and elsewhere made simple repetition of the old explanations and implications impossible.

During and after the Council a new ground swell of theological exploration and public opinion challenged the traditional linkage of celibacy and priesthood for the first time since 1139 within the Roman Catholic communion. For the first time, the new official approaches homed in on what has come to be called 'religious celibacy' or celibacy 'for the sake of the kingdom'. In general, however, the most creative revisiting of the law of celibacy was not to be found in the official documents. What can only be called a stubborn insistence on traditional formulations has reappeared during the current papacy and once again the links between a centralization of power around the papacy and the discipline of celibacy are reminiscent of the reform programme of Gregory VII and Innocent II.

More recent official writing suggests that celibacy is not the problem, but since it is an ever-recurring topic of conversation in Roman Catholic circles, perhaps we have to conclude that indeed it is.

It remains to look briefly at the arguments used to challenge, first, the imposition of the law of abstinence with its implications about marriage and sexuality and access to the sacraments and, second, the challenges to the law of celibacy in the twelfth century. The main foundation of imposed clerical celibacy in the Latin West is the necessity of ritual purity. This requirement is specifically rooted in the Levitical regulations for the Hebrew priesthood, though, as mentioned earlier, the Christian adaptation of these laws persisted in reducing sex to the level of moral impurity which had not at all been the import of the original.

Other reasons had some influence during the Gregorian attempts to free the Church of clerical control, for example the insistence on the maintenance of church property within church hands and the effort to prevent dynasties of married clergy. The passing of the feudal era, and indeed the success of the Gregorian reform, made this a particularly time-bound case. On the other hand, the question of finances attends most current discussions of the celibacy question.

Here, the main arguments will be lumped together. A persistent report that one Paphnutius rose to defend married clergy at the venerable Council of Nicea was repeated with gratitude for hundreds of years until the pope forbade the repetition of the story in the eleventh century. But Paphnutius' point – 'we are not angels but men' – lingers in every challenge to imposed celibacy.

At the end of the fourth century, a few voices were raised to try to quell the ascetic enthusiasm that was sweeping the Church. The names of Helvidius, Jovinian and Vigilantius are remembered, but only in the denunciations of their opponents. Baptism was the main point of their argument – it matters little whether one is married, widowed or celibate so long as one is living one's baptismal commitment. Helvidius offered the life of Mary as virgin, spouse and widow as the Christian model. It was, however, neither the time nor the place for such a debate and the claim of apostolic support for the argument helped him not one whit. In the process of making their arguments around the same cluster of opinion, the perpetual virginity of Mary came into question and with the opposition of all the patristic teachers of the West on this issue, this particular line of argument died.

The Gregorian clerical reforms and the eventual imposition of the law of celibacy in 1139 was not taken lightly or quietly by contemporaries.⁵ The main question was: why try to make a norm out of an ideal? The supporters of clerical marriage are on good scriptural grounds – they can quote Jesus, Paul and the letter to Timothy in their defence as well as almost a thousand years of canonical legislation. In this regard, Gregory is certainly the innovator, and those supporting clerical marriage are the traditionalists. It is noteworthy that both parties are in agreement about the gift of celibacy and even about its superiority to marriage. That is not the argument. The argument is about imposed celibacy and the rendering of the marriages of priests null and void.

It is violent to impose a non-evangelical custom, it is asserted. Priests will desire to please those in authority by a false continence, or they will turn to homosexuality. Ulric, one of the main supporters of clerical marriage, says that one of the main effects of enforced celibacy will be to drive priests into homosexual relationships. Besides, celibacy is a gift. All the canonical legislation in the world will not give a man this gift. The imposition of celibacy is contrary to nature.

Since therefore the good of continence, indeed every good, is the gift of divine grace alone, capable of being embraced neither through mandate, nor through one's own free will, they not only err but indeed they labour in vain, who attempt to force chastity on these men.⁶

This is not moral reform but only an attempt at control. The reformers, it is alleged, care more about power than about serving. The two opposing views of the Church are pointed out – those leaders who set a moral example, live among the laity and are compassionate towards all, and those leaders who are obsessed with their own superiority and only wish to compel obedience.

The law of celibacy is becoming injurious to everyone, it is asserted. There is increasing contempt for marriage and for women. Those priests who are unable to observe celibacy are becoming a scandal to the Church and even incest is not unknown. Besides, what about the children of priests? All baptized persons are holy, no matter who their parents – even the genealogy of Jesus points out that his ancestor Tamar was a sinner. Respect for the priesthood is diminishing. The laity are invited to turn against their priests – they are turning against the priesthood and acting for themselves. There is even mention of lay people using the wax from their ears as chrism to anoint their own children. Other lay people have trampled hosts consecrated by married priests underfoot – to whose advantage is this? All respect for authority is disappearing.

Just as the laity are beginning to search for their own place in the Church, this legislation is increasing their restlessness. The authority of the *paterfamilias* now counts for nothing. This new law is arbitrary, it is being imposed by men who are not themselves moral and it is driving honest men into deviant forms of sexual practice. It is a man-made law and cannot produce what is essentially the work of the Holy Spirit.

Despite this, the law of celibacy took hold. The opponents could not enact legislation: its proponents could and did. The growing power of the papacy had celibacy as its keystone. One of the main reasons for its success was that eventually the laity came to expect celibacy from their priests. At this period, lay movements are just beginning to emerge. There is no lay voice. The spirituality recommended to them is monastic spirituality, with a strong emphasis on ascetic practice, not at all unlike that recommended to monks and clergy. Besides, by the twelfth century, fourth-century ascetic practices are being read back into the New Testament. Preachers saw in the scriptures their own evangelical way of life.

Further, by this time, the 'special state' of the clergy is obvious. Their way of life was seen to be superior. Only they had power to enact the miracle of the eucharist and to forgive sin and grant absolution. They lived in the state of perfection, a state unobtainable by the laity. A vast transformation of consciousness was taking place and the legislation of Gregory and Innocent found fertile soil, despite some immediate opposition. It could be stated that a similar transformation of consciousness is under way today, one that is more alert to the voices of the former opposition, perhaps, than the voices of the former reformers.

It is undeniable that both the fourth-century imposition of the law of eucharistic abstinence and the twelfth-century imposition of the law of

celibacy are rooted in misogyny. Women were envisaged as more rooted in bodiliness, as being perpetual minors, not having their own moral agency. The one exception to this – an extremely important one – was the choice for virginity and against patriarchal marriage. The stories of women being recovered and rewritten today illustrate the courage of women as they exercised this choice.

But wives and mothers were not given the same protection. The absolute insensitivity to and hatred of wives in this celibacy debate is chilling. Peter Damian sums up centuries of misogyny and forecasts centuries more:

I speak to you, O charmers of the clergy, appetizing flesh of the devil, that castaway from paradise, poison of the minds, death of souls, companions of the very stuff of sin, the cause of our ruin. You, I say, I exhort you women of the ancient enemy, you bitches, sows, screech-owls, night-owls, blood-suckers, she-wolves, . . . come now, hear me, harlots, prostitutes, with your lascivious kisses, you wallowing places for fat pigs, couches for unclean spirits . . .⁷

And so it goes for pages more. Who would ever imagine that he was speaking to wives?

The notion of womanhood, as opposed to motherhood, was discovered at the Reformation. In fact the whole re-evaluation of ministry, baptism, the male–female relationship and the acknowledgement of the moral agency of women – all follow from the rejection of clerical celibacy and the affirmation of the priesthood of all the faithful. This does not mean that the sixteenth-century Reformers solved the problems, but they brought clarity to the issues involved.

As reports of clerical scandals begin to proliferate in the media, we are often assured that ‘celibacy is not the problem’. Perhaps not, but today that position needs once again to be proven. No matter which approach is taken, a cluster of ancient images and concepts clings to the practice of imposed celibacy, to such an extent that today the practice is almost impossible to explain to the next generation, other than as an imposition. It needs to be proven that this practice does not denigrate women, sexuality and marriage. It needs to be proven that the practice of imposed celibacy does not constitute an injustice where an ideal is imposed as a norm. It needs to be proven that the dualism that underlies imposed celibacy is not also the essential reason against the ordination of women, whatever the official reasons. It needs to be proven that there is not something more divine about maleness than femaleness, about virginity than marriage.

The tradition of imposed celibacy has never rested easily in the Church. It has always had an underside of quickly hidden scandals as well as examples of heroic dedication known to us in the priests we have come to know and respect. The principle of cultic purity remained the main supporting argumentation for celibacy in the past. This was enacted out of respect for the eucharist. Today the questions also centre on eucharist. Is cultic purity a more important value than the making available of the eucharistic celebration for millions of Christians? This question awaits an official answer.

NOTES

¹ No full-length treatment of celibacy has replaced Henry D. Lea's *History of sacerdotal celibacy in the Western Church* (4th edn, revised, London, 1932). I have used this sparingly. Instead, I have relied extensively on the following works. My debt to them is acknowledged and perceptible throughout: Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Married priests and the reforming papacy: the eleventh-century debates*, Texts and Studies in Religion, volume 12 (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982); R. Bunnik, 'The question of married priests', *Cross Currents*, 15 (1965), pp 407-431; 16 (1966), pp 683-705; Eric Fuchs, 'Sex and power in the Church' in *Power in the Church*, *Concilium* vol 197, pp 23-28 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd, 1988); E. Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: leadership in the community of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

² Barstow, *op. cit.* p 67.

³ Barstow, p 54.

⁴ Barstow, pp 59-60.

⁵ The whole of Barstow's Chapter III, 'The defence of clerical marriage', is a mine of information on this topic.

⁶ Quoted in Barstow, p 119.

⁷ Barstow, p 60.