The Truth About Priestly Continence and Celibacy in the Early Church

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The discipline of priestly celibacy is one of those practices of the Catholic Church that are under intense attack in the modern age. However, it happens too frequently that the discussion about celibacy is framed incorrectly, which leads to conclusions that, while sometimes true, miss the point entirely and can lead unintentionally to further errors. For example, everyone agrees that priestly celibacy is a discipline, not a dogma. This is established by the fact that for many centuries the Church admitted married men to Holy Orders. This fact is not disputed, or at least it should not be. Anyone who denies there were married priests in the first six or seven centuries of the Church has simply not read enough of the Fathers.

But there is a danger in over-stressing the disciplinary nature of celibacy. It must be remembered that ecclesiastical disciplines exist for the sake of safe-guarding the truth of Catholic dogma. The Eucharistic fast (discipline) exists to bear witness to and affirm the truth of our Lord's Real Presence in the transubstantiated elements (dogma). The practice of not admitting the divorced and remarried to Holy Communion (discipline) reflects the Church's perennial teaching on the indissolubility of sacramental marriage (dogma). The necessity of attending Mass on Sundays and Holy Days (discipline) flows from the universal nature of Christ's redemption and the nature of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass (dogma). Every discipline has its foundation in one of the Church's unchanging teachings. To treat a certain discipline as a "mere discipline" can create a dangerous disconnect between the practice and the dogma upon which it is based. One need only look at the way in which relaxing the discipline of communion on the tongue led to a disastrous abandonment of belief in the Real Presence.

Furthermore, in over-stressing celibacy as a discipline, it soon becomes a "mere discipline", and a mere discipline is only one step removed from a dispensable discipline. Therefore, discussions which begin by always emphasizing the disciplinary nature of celibacy do so from a prejudiced starting point and will always tend toward a diminution in the importance of celibacy.

What, then, is a balanced way of approaching this subject? We mentioned above that every discipline exists for the purpose of bearing witness to, buttressing, or exemplifying some teaching of the Faith. Any discussion of the discipline of celibacy must be balanced by a reference to the more fundamental Catholic teaching the practice exists to safeguard.

In this case, what teaching does the discipline of celibacy exist to guard? The fact that many of us do not know shows how much we have lost sight of the purpose of this discipline. Too often, attempts to defend celibacy devolve down to three arguments - that it is not practical for a priest to have a family, that Christ Himself was not married, and that there is a strong tradition of celibacy in the Latin rite. In Benedict XVI's 2007 post-synodal exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis, Benedict links the discipline of celibacy to the fact of Christ's own virginity:
"The fact that Christ himself, the eternal priest, lived his mission even to the sacrifice of the Cross in the state of virginity constitutes the sure point of reference for understanding the meaning of the tradition of the Latin Church. It is not sufficient to understand priestly celibacy in purely functional terms. Celibacy is really a special way of conforming oneself to Christ's own way of life. This choice has first and foremost a nuptial meaning; it is a profound identification with the heart of Christ the Bridegroom who gives his life for his Bride. (Sacramentum Caritatis, 24).

Benedict's statement that Christ's own virginity must be the fundamental point of reference for understanding the tradition is true if we are looking at it from the standpoint of celibacy as an ascetical practice - a manner of living in imitatio christi that signifies the priest's nuptial union to the Church. However, this is not the rationale the early Church used when discussing the discipline; in fact, Benedict's assertion - that Christ's virginity is the point of reference for clerical celibacy - does not appear a single time in any patristic source. There is simply no Church Father or synod that argues that priests should be celibate because Christ was.

Not that this and other arguments do not have their place in the overall discussion; clearly they all have their own value. Yet none of them constitute the prime reason for the discipline, at least according to the Fathers.

And what is that reason? What is the teaching that the discipline of celibacy was meant to buttress? The clear and consistent teaching of the Fathers is that it is impure and impious for a man to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice to God if he is sexually active.

This will be demonstrated further in this article as we examine the plethora of patristic canons and commentary on this question. But for now it is noteworthy that this principle explains several problems very conveniently. First, it introduces a distinction between celibacy and continence, which is too often lacking in our modern discussions. It usually happens that the discussion devolves down to whether or not the Church can or cannot have married priests - or what a married priesthood has looked like historically - rather than questioning to what extent continence was enjoined upon the priesthood, married or otherwise, which is the real question.

In other words, to ask whether a priest could or could not be married is not the same as to ask whether he is expected to be continent. Celibacy is a very narrow concept; it means both the inability of a priest to contract marriage as well as the exclusive selection of priests from among bachelors. Clearly, the Church has not always mandated celibacy. There have been married priests and married bishops and married deacons, and anyone who denies this is in simple ignorance of history. Continence, on the other hand, is a much broader concept. It means the absence of any sexual activity on the part of the ordained, whether they are married or not. We do not dispute that there were married clerics; this point is settled historically. What needs to be examined and settled is whether these married clerics were sexually active - whether they made use of their conjugal rights - or whether they practiced continence. And, if they practiced continence, whether they did so by pious custom or because of positive legislation compelling them to be continent.
As we shall see, the unanimous teaching of the Church throughout the first seven centuries is those of Major Orders (bishop, priest, deacon, and in some cases, sub-deacon) were expected to observe perfect continence. Obviously this would be true for bachelors, but as we shall see, it was enjoined and commanded of the married clerics as well. When a married man received Major Orders, he was henceforth to cease all conjugal relations with his wife and live with her as brother and sister. This was frequently called being "converted" to continence. This handily explains the how the Church once allowed then prohibited married clerics while simultaneously claiming her teaching on this matter has never changed; this is because the teaching was never about whether a cleric could be married, but whether it was fitting for clerics to have sexual intercourse. Understood this way, the teaching (until modern times) has been unanimous.

It also puts the question of marriage in the Eastern Rites into perspective. When we understand the ancient discipline, we see that it is not, as so often asserted, that the Western Church imposed a new discipline onto its clerics while the East, which allows married priests, is preserving a more ancient practice. On the contrary, East and West both insisted on continence from their clerics. In the West, this insistence remained so strong that eventually it became clear that the only way to ensure it was to prohibit the ordination of married men (the discipline of celibacy); in the East, the observance of the ancient canons began to grow lax until after the Quinisext Council of 692 married clerics were finally allowed to use the marital rights. Thus it was the East that changed the discipline, not the West.

This distinction between celibacy and continence also puts modern discussions of admitting married men to the priesthood into context. Like the problem with communion in the hand, those who appeal to patristic practice may have the facts right but miss the point entirely. Yes, the Church once had married priests; however, those married priests were expected to live in perfect continence. Thus, the modern push for a married - and sexually active - priesthood has little in common with ancient practice.

Realizing the ancient commitment to continence also makes sense of the historical development of celibacy. Many who are opposed to celibacy, or who at least stress its disciplinary nature, claim that celibacy was "only" made mandatory in the 10th-11th centuries during the Gregorian Reforms. This is partially true, but misses the point. While the law of priestly continence might date from this era, the law of priestly continence goes back to the earliest days of Christianity. Thus it is misleading to suggest that priests were happily having sex with wives prior to the 10th century. Did they have wives? Many did. Were they sexually active? According to the ancient canons, this was always strictly prohibited. We know that continence was more than just a pious custom; it was canon law. Were it custom, it would simply be praised and commended, but this is not what we see. What we see is continence expected of clerics, and clerics who refuse to practice it are punished. No one can be punished for refusing to practice a pious custom, only for breaking a law.

Furthermore, this law is shown to be of utmost antiquity, as many of the authorities of the third century and even earlier speak of this as an apostolic custom handed on from the earliest days of the Church. This is clearly divergent from those who speak of a continent clergy as "only" arising in the 10th century.
Finally, understanding the discipline of continence helps us to better understand the theology behind the discipline of celibacy. As we shall see, the commitment to continence is based on the principle that a priest of God must be pure when he offers sacrifice. Two biblical texts are cited repeatedly in confirmation of this principle. The first are the general passages from the Old Testament which stipulate temporary continence for priests and Levites during their Temple ministry (cf. Ex. 19:15, Lev. 15:16-18, 20:7, 22:4). The second commonly cited passage is taken from 1 Cor. 7:3-5:

"The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."

The Levitical law and the recommendation of St. Paul that lay Christians practice temporary continence in order to devote themselves to prayer form the background of the patristic insistence on priestly continence. In both cases, the Fathers use an *a minori ad maius* ("from the lesser to the greater") approach. If the priests of the Old Law had to observe temporary continence when it was their turn to serve in the Temple, how much more the priest of the New Law whose ministry is unceasing? Similarly, if St. Paul recommends periodic continence for married lay people when they seek God in prayer, how much more an ordained man who must pray without ceasing? In both cases, the argument centers on the New Testament priest's role as a permanent mediator on behalf of the Church.

Why do sexual relations disturb this role? To return to the principle upon which all worship is based, "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2). While sexual relations within marriage are not wrong or "dirty", they are purely earthbound, just as marriage itself is a purely worldly institution (cf. Matt. 22:30). Conjugal intercourse, no matter how good, is ultimately *profane* in the proper sense - it is not ordered towards our eternal, supernatural ends but merely our temporal good. There are many things that are good but, because they are ordered only to this world, are not fitting for use in the divine worship of God. Going to the bathroom is natural and good. But if done in the sanctuary, it becomes an act of profanation and sacrilege, because something that is merely earthbound is introduced into sacred space consecrated for the divine worship. Similarly, sexual relations occurring proximate to one's participation in the divine mysteries constitutes a profanation, at least according to the Church Fathers, as we shall see.

Thus, just as the role and importance of the priest expands in the New Testament, so the Levitical requirement of continence during the period of ministry is expanded. We will see the Fathers and the holy canons cite this sort of reasoning again and again.

Without further ado, then, let us examine the uniform teachings of the fathers and councils on the question of priestly continence. These excerpts are, more or less, taken from the book *The
Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy by Fr. Christian Cochini, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981). I encourage anybody interested in this question to read this work, which is the definitive scholarly study on priestly continence in the Early Church. Indeed, this book provides far more evidence than I could hope to present here; what I have provided below are only some of the most compelling pieces of evidence in favor of a discipline of priestly continence in the Early Church.

Most citations are self-explanatory. The primary text is in *italics*. When necessary, I have included brief elaborations below each citation.

**Tertullian, Ad Uxorem, 1:6-7 (c. 200)**

"These precepts [of pagan religion] has the devil given to his servants, and he is heard! He challenges, forsooth, God's servants, by the continence of his own, as if on equal terms! Continent are even the priests of hell!...That whole halo which encircles the Church is represented (as consisting) of holiness. Priesthood is (a function) of widowhood and of celibacies among the nations. Of course (this is) in conformity with the devil's principle of rivalry. For the king of heathendom, the chief pontiff, to marry a second time is unlawful. How pleasing must holiness be to God, when even His enemy affects it!— not, of course, as having any affinity with anything good, but as contumeliously affecting what is pleasing to God the Lord."

Tertullian at length comments on the continence expected of pagan priests, mentioning the cult of Vesta in Rome and that of Ceres in Africa, both of which expected continence of their priesthoods. He sees here, as in other treatments of paganism, a kind of diabolical mockery of the true faith of God. In other words, the true God demands continent worship, and this is mimicked by Satan, "the devil's principle of rivalry." This is why Tertullian says the continent priesthood of Satan challenges that of God "on equal terms"; also his phrase "Continent are even the priests of hell!" makes sense grammatically only if he is inferring that the priests of God, also, practice continence. Likewise, how could he refer to continent pagan priests as "affecting" the ways of God if the priesthood of God was not continent?

**Tertullian, Exhortation to Chastity, 8 (c. 207)**

"Thus it comes to pass that all things are lawful, but not all are expedient, so long as it remains true that whoever has a permission granted is (thereby) tried, and is consequently judged during the process of trial in the case of the particular permission. Apostles, withal, had a licence to marry, and lead wives about (with them). They had a licence, too, to live by the Gospel. But he who, when occasion required, did not use this right, provokes us to imitate his own example; teaching us that our probation consists in that wherein licence has laid the groundwork for the experimental proof of abstinence."

Commenting on 1 Cor. 10:23, Tertullian notes that while the Apostles had a "license" to take
wives, they chose not to exercise their marital rights, and that this laid the groundwork for the perpetual abstinence of Christian priests, as the Apostolic practices "provokes us to imitate" them in abstinence. Historically, this and other texts of Tertullian bear witness to a practice of clerical continence in the early 2nd century as well as the understanding that it was based on apostolic precedent.

**Tertullian, Exhortation to Chastity, 10**

"For continence will be a mean whereby you will traffic in a mighty substance of sanctity; by parsimony of the flesh you will gain the Spirit. For let us ponder over our conscience itself, to see how different a man feels himself when he chances to be deprived of his wife. He savours spiritually. If he is making prayer to the Lord, he is near heaven. If he is bending over the Scriptures, he is wholly in them. If he is singing a psalm, he satisfies himself. If he is adjuring a demon, he is confident in himself. Accordingly, the apostle added the recommendation of a temporary abstinence for the sake of adding an efficacy to prayers, that we might know that what is profitable for a time should be always practiced by us, that it may be always profitable. Daily, every moment, prayer is necessary to men; of course continence is so too, since prayer is necessary. Prayer proceeds from conscience. If the conscience blush, prayer blushes. It is the spirit which conducts prayer to God. If the spirit be self-accused of a blushing conscience, how will it have the hardihood to conduct prayer to the altar; seeing that, if prayer blush, the holy minister (of prayer) itself is suffused too?"

Tertullian is the first father, and certainly not the last, to connect the perpetual abstinence of clerics with St. Paul's admonition in 1 Cor. 7 that continence makes prayer more efficacious. Since a priest must pray and offer sacrifice always, he must always remain continent. This interpretation will be repeated again and again by fathers, councils and popes. It is in fact the fundamental point of reference the fathers cite when discussing continence.

**Origen, 23rd Homily on Numbers (185-253)**

"I will express what the words of the Apostle mean, but I am afraid that some will be saddened. Do not refuse yourselves to each other, unless through a mutual agreement for a given occasion, so as to free yourselves for prayer, and then come together again; it is therefore certain that perpetual sacrifice is impossible for those who are subject to the obligations of marriage...I therefore conclude that only the one vowed to perpetual chastity can offer the perpetual sacrifice."

Origen follows Tertullian in his connection of continence to Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 7:5. St. Paul states that married lay people should abstain from sexual relations when they need to pray. For those who are ordained, who must offer "perpetual sacrifice", it is impossible to discharge the "obligations of marriage", infers Origen. Offering the sacrifice and conjugal intercourse are mutually exclusive in Origen's thought, and thus his conclusion that "only the one vowed to perpetual chastity can offer the perpetual sacrifice." Notice the matter-of-fact way in which he states this, as if he presumes his audience already knows what he is referring to and understands it.
Origen, 6th Homily on Leviticus (c. 250)

"There was yet another task for Moses. He did not go to the battlefield and did not fight [personally] with the enemy. What did he do? He prayed, and while he prayed, his people won the victory. When he let go his hands fell down, his people was vanquished and put to flight...Therefore, let the priests of the Church also pray without cease, so that the people he leads can win the victory over these invisible Amalekites, the demons hot in pursuit of those who want to live piously in Christ."

In the previous excerpt, Origen has stated that those who must pray and sacrifice continually ought to be perpetually chaste. In this letter, he identifies the priests of the New Covenant as those who "pray without cease." Therefore, the priests of the New Covenant ought to be perpetually chaste. He makes no distinction between priests who are married and priests who are bachelors.

Ecclesiastical Canons of the Holy Apostles (c. 300)

"Peter said: It would be better for the bishop not to be married; or else let him be the husband of one wife...

John said: There must therefore...be priests, who would have lived a long time in the world and would abstain in a certain way from relations with their wives."

Canon 33 of the Council of Elvira (305)

"It has seemed good to absolutely forbid the bishops, the priests, and the deacons, i.e., all the clerics in the service of the sacred ministry, to have relations with their wives and procreate children; should anyone do so, let him be excluded from the honor of the clergy."

The Spanish Synod of Elvira, occurring eight years before the Edict of Milan and twenty-years before Nicaea, represents the first time we see the law of continence specifically spelled out canonically. Continence is mandated for all Major Orders - deacon, priest, bishop - and it is made explicitly clear that this applies to married clerics in a particular way. Neither this synod nor any subsequent council suggests they are promulgating novelty. Elvira and succeeding synods state that they are simply reaffirming existing tradition.

Canon 29 of the First Council of Arles (314)

"Moreover, concerned with what is worthy, pure, and honest, we exhort our brothers in the episcopate to make sure that priests and deacons have no [sexual] relations with their wives, since they are serving the ministry everyday. Whoever will act against this decision will be deposed from the honor of the clergy."
Notice how continence is linked to the permanent ministerial activity of the cleric, as was seen in Tertullian and Origen.

**Eusebius of Caesarea, Demonstratio Evangelicam I, 9 (c. 320)**

"It is fitting, according to the Scripture, that a bishop be the husband of an only wife. But this being understood, it behooves consecrated men, and those who are at the service of God's cult, to abstain thereafter from conjugal intercourse with their wives. As to those who were not judged worthy of such a holy ministry, Scripture grants them [conjugal intercourse] while saying quite clearly to all that marriage is honorable and the nuptial bed is without stain, and that God judges profligates and adulterers."

Eusebius here makes it clear that just because Scripture allows a bishop or cleric to have a wife, it does not follow that he is free to exercise his conjugal rights. Notice that Eusebius is an Eastern Father and that presumably this was the discipline in the East in the early 4th century.

**Canon 3 of the Council of Nicaea (325)**

"The great Council has absolutely forbidden bishops, priests, and deacons - in other words, all members of the clergy - to have with them a sister-companion with the exception of a mother, a sister, an aunt, or, lastly, only those persons who are beyond any suspicion."

This canon concerning "outsider women" would be repeated and cited in many subsequent councils. The question is whether a cleric's wife, since she is not mentioned in the list of acceptable companions, would be considered "beyond suspicion" or not. Fr. Cochini has a fascinating digression on this question, but it is irrelevant to our discussion. The fact is the Council did not want to facilitate any situation where the faithful might be led to think that a cleric was having sexual intercourse. This is why all women in the company of a cleric must be "beyond suspicion"; i.e., it must be evident that there is no possibility of sexual relations with them. If a wife is one of those “beyond suspicion”, it is because it is presumed she is not having sexual relations with her husband; if she is not included in the class of those “beyond suspicion”, it means that wives at this time were not permitted to live with their husbands. We find the former explanation more likely and more consonant with other texts, but either way the result is the same: clerics are not permitted to have conjugal relations with their wives.

**St. Cyril of Jerusalem, The 12th Catechesis, 25 (c. 350)**

"To the most Pure and the Master of Purity it was fitting to be born from a pure bed. For if the one who is a good priest for the sake of Jesus abstains from relations with women, how could Jesus Himself be born of [the union] between a man and a woman?"

The argument presumes a continent priesthood. Taking as a starting point the fact that priests, at
least those that are "good", "abstain from relations with women", St. Cyril points out how fitting this is given that Jesus Himself was not born as the result of conjugal intercourse. How could Jesus expect the priesthood called by His name to practice continence if He Himself was not born without conjugal relations? But since Jesus was not the result of conjugal relations, He can likewise insist on a similar sort of purity from His priests. The argument assumes that the reader already understands that continence is a discipline and reasons back from that to argue for the Virgin Birth of Christ.

St. Ephrem the Syrian, Carmina Nisibena, (c. 363)

"It is not enough for the priest and his dignity - for it is the living body that he offers - to purify his soul, his tongue, and his hands and to make his whole body clear; he must at all times be absolutely pure, because he takes the places of mediator between God and mankind. Blessed be he who has purified his servants!"

Though he does not mention it, presumably the "absolute" purity demanded by St. Ephrem includes purity from sexual relations. This would at least be in keeping with how other Fathers understand the concept of purity (for example, Cyril’s 12th Catechesis, mentioned above).

The Case and Ordeal of Simplicius of Autun (c. 364)

According to Gregory of Tours, Simplicius, Bishop of Autun had married before his promotion to the episcopate and his wife was unwilling to quit him. Thus, after his promotion, she continued to live with him and scandalized the faithful. The sanctity of Simplicius suffered by the constancy his wife's affection, and it was rumored that the Bishop persisted opposition to the ecclesiastical canons to taste of the sweets of matrimony; upon which his wife, in the of a great concourse of people, took a considerable quantity of coals which she held in her clothes, and applied to her breasts without the least hurt to her person or her garments, as the legend says, and her example being followed by her husband with the like success, the multitude admired the miracle and proclaimed the innocence of the loving pair. [1]

The So-Called Canons of Gregory the Illuminator (Armenia, c. 365)

"The priest who has taken a wife will have to do penance for seven years outside and then for two years inside the Church. He will not have the right to receive communion for an additional two years, and only then will he be admitted to communion."

Ambrosiaster, Commentary on 1st Epistle to Timothy (c. 380)

"Now there should be seven deacons, several priests (two per church), and only one bishop for each city, which is why they must abstain from any conjugal relations; they have to be present in church every day, and they do not have the necessary time to purify themselves properly after conjugal unions, as the priests of old used to do. They have to offer the sacrifice every week, and
even if the liturgy is not offered every day in rural areas or in territories outside the empire, it is at least twice a week for the local people. And, moreover, there is no lack of sick people to baptize every day. Indeed, it was because they were not expected to go frequently to the temple and had a private life that the concession to use their marital rights was granted to the ancients [i.e., the Jewish priests of the Old Testament]. If the Apostle directs laymen to abstain temporarily in order to attend to prayer, how much more for deacons and priests, who must pray day and night for the people entrusted to them? Therefore, they must be purer than others because they are God's representatives."

Ambrosiaster offers what was, by his day, the classic argument for continence, citing both the Levitical example and St. Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 7:5.

**Ambrosiaster, Quastiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti (c. 380)**

"But people might say: If it is permitted and good to marry, why should priests not be authorized to take wives? In other words, in other words, why should ordained men not be permitted to be united [to wives]? There are indeed things that are not permitted to anyone, without exception; on the other hand, there are some things that are permitted at certain times but not at others. Fornication is never permitted to anyone; to do business is at times licit and at times illicit. Indeed, before becoming a priest, one may do business; once he is a cleric, he is not permitted to do so. And for a Christian it is at times permitted, and at times not, for him to unite himself with a wife.

...Is everything that is permitted in the presence of other people also permitted in the presence of the emperor? All the more so is it then in God's matters. **This is why the priest must be more pure than others;** indeed, he is seen as God's representative and is actually His vicar; so that what is permitted to others is not permitted to him; he must take every day the place of Christ, either by praying for the people or by offering [the sacrifice], or by administering baptism. **It is not only to him that conjugal relations are forbidden,** but also to his minister: he too must be all the more pure as the matters of his ministry are holy."

Ambrosiaster here cites the permanent nature of priestly ministry in favor of continence, and says that this is why priests cannot have conjugal relations with their wives. Note he does not say that a priest cannot be married, only that a priest cannot have conjugal relations. He does note, however, that an already ordained priest cannot enter into marriage, which has always been true in the East and the West. He also uses the term “purity” to denote abstention from sexual relations, as do Cyril of Jerusalem and St. Ephrem.

**Letter of Pope Siricius to Bishop Himerius of Tarragona (385)**

"We bear the burdens of all who are oppressed, or rather the blessed apostle Peter, who in all things protects and preserves us, the heirs, as we trust, of his administration, bears them in us...Let us come now to the most sacred orders of clerics, which we learn from your report,
beloved, are thus so scorned and disordered throughout your provinces, to the injury of religion which should be venerated, that we should be speaking with the voice of Jeremiah, "Who will give water to my head, or a fountain of tears to my eyes? And I shall weep for this people day and night." (Jer. 8:23) If, therefore, the blessed prophet says that tears are insufficient for him in lamenting the sins of the people, by how much grief can we be smitten when compelled to deplore the iniquities of those who are in our body, [we] to whom especially, according to blessed Paul, ceaselessly falls the daily concern and solicitude of all churches? "For who is weak and I am not weak? Who is offended and I do not burn?" (2 Cor. 11:29) For we learned that many priests and deacons of Christ, long after their ordination, have produced offspring both from their own wives and even through filthy liaisons, and defend their sin with this excuse, that it is read in the Old Testament that the opportunity to procreate was given to priests and ministers.

Let him speak to me now, whoever is an addict of obscenities and a teacher of vices. If he thinks that here and there in the law of Moses the restraints of indulgence are relaxed by the Lord for sacred orders, why does He admonish those to whom the Holy of Holies was committed saying: "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy"? (Lev. 20:7) Why indeed were priests ordered to live in the temple, far from their homes, in the year of their service? Just for this reason: so that they could not engage in physical contact even with wives, and that shining in integrity of conscience they might offer acceptable service to God. The period of service having been completed, use of wives was permitted to them for reason of succession alone, because no one from a tribe other than of Levi was directed to be admitted to the ministry of God.

Whence the Lord Jesus, when he enlightened us by his advent, testified in the Gospel that he had come to fulfill the law not to destroy it. And he wished thus that the figure of the Church, whose bridegroom he is, radiate with the splendor of chastity, so that on the day of judgment when he comes again he can find her without stain and blemish, just as he taught through his Apostle. All we priests and deacons are bound by the unbreakable law of those sanctions, so that from the day of our ordination we subject our hearts and bodies to moderation and modesty in order that in every respect we might please our God in these sacrifices which daily we offer. "They who are in the flesh," says the chosen vessel, "are unable to please God. But you are not now in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you." (Rom. 8:8-9). And where can the Spirit of God dwell except, as we read, in holy bodies?

And because a considerable number of those of whom we speak, as your holiness reported, lament that they lapsed in ignorance, we declare that mercy should not be denied to them, with this condition: if henceforth they strive to conduct themselves continently, they should continue as long as they live in that office which they held when they were caught, without any advancement in rank. But those who lean on the excuse of an illicit privilege by asserting that this was conceded to them in the old law, let them know that they have been expelled by the authority of the apostolic see from every ecclesiastical office, which they used unworthily, nor can they ever touch the mysteries which ought to be venerated, of which they deprived themselves when they were obsessed with obscene desires. And because present examples forewarn us to be vigilant in the future, any bishop, priest, and deacon henceforth found in this situation--which we hope will not happen--should understand right now that every avenue of
This is the first word we have from a Roman Pontiff on the question, and how lengthy it is! Pope Siricius again cites the same arguments we have already seen, but note also that he attaches penal sanctions to those who continue to insist on conjugal relations with their wives. This decree of Siricius would be cited frequently in later legislation. The Pope also declares that the practice of continence under the old law has been expanded in the New Covenant.

St. Ambrose of Milan, De officiis ministrorum Book I: 258 (c. 385)

"But ye know that the ministerial office must be kept pure and unspotted, and must not be defiled by conjugal intercourse; ye know this, I say, who have received the gifts of the sacred ministry, with pure bodies, and unspoil'd modesty, and without ever having enjoyed conjugal intercourse. I am mentioning this, because in some out-of-the-way places, when they enter on the ministry, or even when they become priests, they have begotten children. They defend this on the ground of old custom, when, as it happened, the sacrifice was offer'd up at long intervals. However, even the people had to be purifi'd two or three days beforehand, so as to come clean to the sacrifice, as we read in the Old Testament. They even used to wash their clothes. If such regard was paid in what was only the figure, how much ought it to be shown in the reality! Learn then, Priest and Levite, what it means to wash your clothes. You must have a pure body wherewith to offer up the sacraments. If the people were forbidden to approach their victim unless they washed their clothes, do you, while foul in heart and body, dare to make supplication for others? Do you dare to make an offering for them?"

Pope Siricius, Cum in Utum Decretal (386)

"Moreover, as it is worthy, chaste, and honest to do so, this is what we advise: let the priests and Levites have no intercourse with their wives, inasmuch as they are absorbed in the daily duties of their ministries. Paul, when writing to the Corinthians, said, "Leave yourselves free for prayer" (1 Cor. 7:5). If lay people are asked to be continent so that their prayers are granted, all the more so a priest who should be ready at any moment, thanks to an immaculate purity, and not fearing the obligation of offering the sacrifice or baptizing. Were he soiled by carnal concupiscence, what could he do? Would he excuse himself? With what shame, in what state of mind would he carry out his functions?...Which is why I am exhorting, warning, supplicating; let us do away with this opprobrium that even the pagans can rightly hold against us. Perhaps one does believe that this [is permitted] because it is written, "He must have not been married more than once" (1 Tim. 3:2). But Paul was not talking about a man persisting in his desire to beget; he spoke about a continence that one should observe. He did not accept those who were not beyond reproach [in this matter], and he said, "I should like everyone to be like me" (1 Cor. 7:7). And he stated even more clearly, "People who are interested only in unspiritual things can never be pleasing to God. Your interests, however, are not in the unspiritual but in the spiritual." (Rom. 8:8-9)
...The question is not one of ordering new precepts, but we wish through this letter to have people observe those that either through apathy or laziness on the part of some have been neglected. They are, however, matters that have been established by an apostolic constitution and by a constitution of the Fathers, as it is written, "Stand firm, then, brothers and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter". (2 Thess. 2:15)

By now, we should have noticed the remarkable continuity in the rationale for priestly continence. Besides citing Levitical custom and St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7, Pope Siricius goes out of his way to note that this practice is "not one of ordering new precepts" but that priestly continence has been "established by an apostolic constitution and by a constitution of the fathers" and then cites St. Paul's famous exhortation to hold fast to tradition from 2 Thessalonians. Siricius also includes an exegesis on 1 Timothy 3:2, explaining that simply because a bishop is allowed a wife does not mean he is permitted to enjoy conjugal relations with her. We see in this decretal a beautiful summation of the Church's practice, citing the traditional rationale and offering an authoritative interpretation of 1 Timothy 3.

St. Jerome, Commentary on the Epistle to Titus (c. 389)

"But if laymen are asked to abstain from relations with their wives for the sake of prayer, what should one then think of the bishop, of him who must be able to present spotless offerings to God every day, for his own sins and for those of the people? This is why, together with meekness, patience, sobriety, temperance, unselfishness, hospitality, and good will, the bishop especially - in a more pronounced way than lay people - must practice the chastity proper to his state, and, so to speak, priestly purity, so that not only will he abstain from impure acts, but his spirit, meant to consecrate the Body of Christ, will be freed from whims of eye and wanderings of mind...

Let the bishop also practice abstinence: not only, as some think, with respect to carnal desires and the embraces with his wife, but also with respect to all that troubles the soul..."

Canon 3 of the Council of Carthage (390)

"Bishop Genthelius says: As was previously said, it is fitting that the holy bishops and priests of God as well as the Levites; i.e., those who are in the service of the divine sacraments, observe perfect continence, so that they may obtain in all simplicity what they are asking from God; what the apostles taught and what antiquity itself observed, let us also endeavor to keep.

The bishops declared unanimously: It pleases us all that bishop, priest and deacon, guardians of purity, abstain from conjugal intercourse with their wives, so that those who serve the altar may keep a perfect chastity."

Again, the need to devote themselves to constant prayer is cited as the reason for priestly continence. This commitment to absolute continence is said to be "what the apostles taught and what antiquity itself observed."
"For [Paul] does not say: Let a bishop be chosen who marries one wife and begets children; but who marries one wife, and has his children in subjection and well disciplined. You surely admit that he is no bishop who during his episcopate begets children. The reverse is the case— if he be discovered, he will not be bound by the ordinary obligations of a husband, but will be condemned as an adulterer. Either permit priests to perform the work of marriage with the result that virginity and marriage are on a par: or if it is unlawful for priests to touch their wives, they are so far holy in that they imitate virgin chastity.

But something more follows. A layman, or any believer, cannot pray unless he abstain from sexual intercourse. Now a priest must always offer sacrifices for the people: he must therefore always pray. And if he must always pray, he must always be released from the duties of marriage. For even under the old law they who used to offer sacrifices for the people not only remained in their houses, but purified themselves for the occasion by separating from their wives, nor would they drink wine or strong drink which are wont to stimulate lust. That married men are elected to the priesthood, I do not deny: the number of virgins is not so great as that of the priests required. Does it follow that because all the strongest men are chosen for the army, weaker men should not be taken as well? All cannot be strong."

Besides restating the arguments we have already heard, St. Jerome adds an interesting historical insight - in his time at least, bishops who were caught begetting children during were treated as adulterers. The understanding of the ordained man as spouse of the Church was taken so seriously that continued conjugal relations with one’s natural wife was considered a sort of adultery.

"Marriage is allowed in the Gospel, yet that those who are married cannot receive the rewards of chastity so long as they render their due one to another. If married men feel indignant at this statement, let them vent their anger not on me but on the Holy Scriptures; nay, more, upon all bishops, presbyters, and deacons, and the whole company of priests and Levites, who know that they cannot offer sacrifices if they fulfill the conjugal act...

...Therefore, as I was going to say, the virgin Christ and the virgin Mary have dedicated in themselves the first fruits of virginity for both sexes. The apostles have either been virgins or, though married, have lived celibate lives. Those persons who are chosen to be bishops, priests, and deacons are either virgins or widowers; or at least when once they have received the priesthood, are vowed to perpetual chastity. Why do we delude ourselves and feel vexed if while we are continually straining after sexual indulgence, we find the palm of chastity denied to us? We wish to fare sumptuously, and to enjoy the embraces of our wives, yet at the same time we desire to reign with Christ among virgins and widows. Shall there be but one reward, then, for hunger and for excess, for filth and for finery, for sackcloth and for silk?"
**Epiphanius of Salamis, Panarion, Heresy 48 (c. 395)**

"And indeed, through a certain balance, the Word of God, who said in the Gospel "if you want to be perfect", condescending to the manner in which men were fashioned and to their frailty, assuredly rejoices when those who can manifest their piety by choosing to practice virginity, chastity and continence, but also honors monogamy; and as if he prefigured precisely the charisms of the priesthood [by choice] of former monogamists practicing continence or of men living continually in virginity, it is in the same way that his apostles regulated, with wisdom and sanctity, the ecclesiastical canon of the priesthood."

Epiphanius states that priests are recruited from two classes of people: "men living continually in virginity"; i.e., bachelors, or "former monogamists practicing continence", which could either mean widowers or once-married men committed to continence. Since he mentions those "practicing continence", we must assume he includes married men. A widower would simply be expected to practice continence so long as he was not remarried; it would not be necessary to specify that he was expected to be "practicing continence", just like it is not necessary to mention that a virgin is also practicing chastity. This is clarified in another citation from Epiphanius in *Panarion* 59, below. Epiphanius also ascribes this practice to the Apostles.

**Epiphanius, Panarion, Heresy 59 (c. 395)**

"Since the Incarnation of Christ, the holy Word of God does not admit to the priesthood the monogamists who, after the death of their wives, have contracted a second marriage, because of the exceptional honor of the priesthood. And it is observed by the Holy Church of God without fail. But the man who continues to live with his wife and sire children is not admitted by the Church as a deacon, priest or bishop, even if he is the husband of an only wife; [only] he who, having been monogamous, observes continence or is a widower; [this is observed] especially where the ecclesiastical canons are exact."

**Epiphanius of Salamis, Expositio Fidei**

"Lacking virgins, [priests are recruited] among the monks; if there are not enough monks for the ministry, [they are recruited] from among men who observe continence with their wives or among the exmonogamists who are widowers; but in her [the Church] admitting a remarried man to the priesthood is not permitted; even if he observes continence or is a widower, he is rejected from the order of bishops, priests, deacons and subdeacons."

This passage is important because it demonstrates that, even while the Early Church was willing to ordain married men pledged to continence, virgin, celibate men were always the ideal right from the very beginning. It also mentions that the discipline had been extended to include subdeacons as well.
Dominus Inter Decretal, attributed to Siricius (384-399) or Innocent I (401-417)

"We know, very dear brothers, many bishops [have let themselves be led] by a most human presumption and hastened to alter the tradition of the Fathers with great prejudice to the reputation attached to their dignity; they thus fell into the darkness of heresy while taking pleasure in the plaudits of men instead of endeavoring to receive their reward from God...If you want to know, with the integrity of faith, what the true observances are, kindly give a welcoming attention to what I am going to say.

...Here is what has been decided, first of all, with regard to bishops, priests and deacons: those who have the responsibility of the divine sacrifice, and whose hands give the grace of baptism and consecrate the Body of Christ, are ordered, by divine Scripture, and not only ourselves, to be very chaste; the Fathers themselves had ordered them to observe bodily continence. Let us not omit this point but explain the reason for it: How would a bishop or a priest dare to preach continence and integrity to a widow or virgin, or exhort spouses to the chastity of the conjugal bed, if he himself is more concerned about begetting children for the world than begetting them for God? This is why we read in Scripture regarding these three ranks that the ministers of God are under the obligation to observe purity; it is obvious that this is always a necessity for them; they must either give baptism or offer the sacrifice. Would an impure man dare to soil what is holy when holy things are for holy people?

...There must be only one profession of faith for the Catholic bishops; this was decreed by apostolic rule. Therefore, if there is one faith, there should also be one tradition. If there is one tradition, there must be one discipline observed by all the churches. Indeed, the churches were established in very diverse regions, but throughout the whole world the Church is called "one" thanks to the unity of the Catholic faith."

Like Siricius, the author of the Dominus Inter decretal asserts that priestly continence is an apostolic tradition, "decreed by apostolic rule." He also notes its universality, stating that it is "observed by all the churches", which would presumably include the East, even though they later abandoned the discipline. He also states multiple times that the command is found "in the divine Scriptures" themselves, presumably in the interpretation we have already seen of the expansion of the Levitical law and the practical application of St. Paul's principles on abstention from intercourse for prayer in 1 Cor. 7.

St. John Chrysostom, Commentary on 1 Timothy, Cap. III, Homily X (c. 397)

"If then the married man has worldly concerns, and if, on the other hand, a bishop should not have them, how can the Apostle say, "the husband of an only wife"? Some say that we are dealing here with the case of a man who has been freed from his wife [i.e., a widower]; if such is not the case, it is permissible that he be a man having a wife and living as if he did not have one. At that time this was indeed rightly permitted because of the prevailing situation. For it was possible to lead such a life honorably if one wished to do so. Indeed, though it is difficult for a
Chrysostom affirms the tradition of priestly continence and interprets Paul's cryptic statement in 1 Cor. 7:29 ("From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none") to refer to the practice of married clerics living as brother and sister with their spouses.

**Canon 8 of the Council of Turin (398)**

Can 8: "As to those who have been ordained in spite of this prohibition, or who, during their ministry, have sired children, the synod decreed with authority that they should not be permitted to reach the higher ranks of the orders."

**The Case of Antoninus (c. 400)**

The chronicler Palladius, in his *Dialogue on the Life of Saint John Chrysostom*, tells of an episode in which Chrysostom presided over a synod around the year 400 to deal with the crimes of a certain Antoninus, Bishop of Ephesus. Among the seven charges made against Antoninus, the sixth charge read: "After having been separated from his wife, he went back to common life with her and had children." This was described as being "the epitome of impiety and forbidden in any case by the holy laws." For this and his other transgressions he was deposed.

This demonstrates that not only was conjugal intercourse among married clerics looked down upon, but was actually considered a crime subject to canonical penalties. This is in keeping with what we have seen in the decrees of Pope Siricius and the canons of Carthage and Elvira. There is a great continuity in East and West in the early centuries on this matter.

**1st Council of Toledo, Canon 1 (400)**

"It seems good that the deacons be men who have kept their integrity by leading chaste and continent lives; even if they have wives, let such men be established in the ministry; however, if there are some who, even before the Lusitanian bishops had pronounced the interdict, did not observe continence with their wives, let them not be granted the honor of the priesthood; if a priest, before the said interdict, had children, let him not be admitted to the episcopate."

**Pope Innocent I, Letter to Victricius of Rouen (404)**

"Moreover, the Church must absolutely maintain what is worthy, pure, and honest, to wit: the priest and deacon must have no relations with their wives, because they are very busy every day with the necessities of their ministry; in fact it is written, 'Be holy, for I am the Lord your God.'...Indeed, if Paul writes to the Corinthians, 'Abstain for a while so as to free yourselves for prayer', and recommends this to lay people, how much more then must priests, whose function is to pray and offer ceaseless sacrifice, always abstain from a relation of that nature? If anyone
has been soiled with carnal concupiscence, with what audacity would he dare to offer the sacrifice?

...But this one believes, perhaps, that this thing is permitted because it is written, 'The husband of an only wife'. [The Apostle] did not talk about a man Persisting in his desire to beget, but with regard to the continence to be observed in the future. In effect, he did not admit those who lacked perfect bodily integrity, he who said, "I should like everybody to be like me"; and he speaks even more openly, "But those who are unspiritual cannot please God; as to you, you are not anymore unspiritual but spiritual."

Pope Innocent I, Letter to Exupery of Toulouse (405)

"You have asked what behavior one must have with regard to the men who exercise the functions of deacon or priest and do not keep or have not kept continence, begetting children. The teaching of the divine laws with regard to them is very clear, and Bishop Siricius, of blessed memory, has set forth obvious instructions: those who do not observe continence, while they are established in such functions, must be deprived of all ecclesiastical dignity and must not be admitted to the ministry; the exercise of this ministry is, indeed, reserved only to the continent."

St. Jerome, Against Vigilantius, 2 (406)

"Shameful to relate, there are bishops who are said to be associated with him in his wickedness—if at least they are to be called bishops—who ordain no deacons but such as have been previously married; who credit no celibate with chastity—nay, rather, who show clearly what measure of holiness of life they can claim by indulging in evil suspicions of all men, and, unless the candidates for ordination appear before them with pregnant wives, and infants wailing in the arms of their mothers, will not administer to them Christ's ordinance. What are the Churches of the East to do? What is to become of the Egyptian Churches and those belonging to the Apostolic See, which accept for the ministry only men who are virgins, or those who practice continence, or, if married, abandon their conjugal rights?"

This passage is telling because, in referring to the heretics who insist on married priests, Jerome cites the tradition, not only of Rome, but of "the Egyptian Churches" and "the Churches of the East", all of whom accept married men only if they "abandon their conjugal rights." Passages like this demonstrate the falsity of the claim that the current Eastern practice of allowing priests to exercise their conjugal rights is the ancient discipline of those churches. Clearly, as Jerome as well as Eusebius, Ephrem and others point out, the Eastern Churches at one time expected continence from their married priests. It is the East, not the West, that has departed from Tradition.

Council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410)

Can. 3: "On the fact that outsider women must not live anymore with clerics, as was the prior custom - with respect to the outsider women we will do all that is stipulated in the synod
[reference to Canon 3 of Nicaea on "outsider women"]; now any bishop, deacon, subdeacon or cleric living among women, and not alone, chastely, and in a holy way, as befits the ministry of the Church, men and women being separated, will not be admitted to the ministry of the Church."

Referring back to Nicaea's canon on "outsider women", this Syrian council stipulates that men and women - presumably their continent wives - need to live in physically separate chambers.

**De septem ordinibus (Anonymous, c. 417)**

"Because of the ancient custom and the damage to the priesthood that can result from it, do not give your wife power over your soul...Of course, you must love your wife, but as you love the Church or the temple of God; pray with her, read with her, abstain from conjugal relations, commune at the altar and not in the acts of the flesh. As to her, she must also venerate you, because of the law that unites you, not desire you because of the customary ending [of the common life]: you know indeed quite well that the use of marriage is forbidden you as soon as you learn that you will become a bishop."

This anonymous tract of the early 5th century shows that, far from denigrating the bonds of matrimony, the discipline of the Church enjoined the cleric to continue to love and care for the spiritual and material needs of his spouse despite his commitment to chastity. Thus, a married cleric did not repudiate his wife - indeed, sending a wife away after ordination was strictly forbidden by several councils as well as the decrees of Pope Leo - rather, he was expected to find a new sort of relationship with her within the context of continence. It was not marriage as such, but the use of conjugal rights that was forbidden to the cleric. See Pope Leo's letter to Rusticus of Narbonne below.

**Canons 3, 4 and 25 of the Seventeenth Council of Carthage (419)**

Can. 3: "Aurelius the bishop said: When at the past council the matter on continence and chastity was considered, those three grades, which by a sort of bond are joined to chastity by their consecration, to wit bishops, presbyters, and deacons, so it seemed that it was becoming that the sacred rulers and priests of God as well as the Levites, or those who served at the divine sacraments, should be continent altogether, by which they would be able with singleness of heart to ask what they sought from the Lord: so that what the apostles taught and antiquity kept, that we might also keep."

Can. 4: "Faustinus, the bishop of the Potentine Church, in the province of Picenum, a legate of the Roman Church, said: It seems good that a bishop, a presbyter, and a deacon, or whoever perform the sacraments, should be keepers of modesty and should abstain from their wives."

By all the bishops it was said: It is right that all who serve the altar should keep pudicity from all women."
Can. 25: "Bishop Aurelius said: As we have dealt with certain clerics, especially lectors, as regards continence with their wives, I would add, very dear brothers, what was confirmed in many synods, that the subdeacons who touch the sacred mysteries, and also the deacons, priests and bishops, in conformity with the ordinances concerning them, will abstain from their wives "as if they did not have one"; if they do not do so, they will be rejected from any ecclesiastical function. As to the other clerics [i.e., other than the major orders], they will be compelled to do so only at an advanced age. The whole synod said: What your holiness has regulated in justice, we confirm because it is worthy of the priesthood and pleasing to God."

Note that the commitment of the ordained to continence is said to be a tradition derived directly from the apostles.

**Canons 21 and 22, Council of Orange (441)**

"Can. 21: It pleases us that married men are not ordained anymore to the diaconate unless, with the firm intention of changing their lives, they have first made a profession of chastity.

Can. 22: But if someone is found who, after having received the Levitical blessing, does not observe continence with his wife, let him be forbidden to exercise his ministry."

This "firm intention of changing their lives" is referred to in subsequent canonical legislation as "conversion", meaning a conversion to remaining continent in their marriage. The “Levitical blessing” is an archaic manner of referring to the diaconate, the “Levites” of the New Testament hierarchy.

**Pope St. Leo the Great, Letter to Anastasius of Thessalonika (446)**

"Indeed, if those who do not belong to the Order of clerics are free to enjoy carnal relations and beget children, we must, in order to manifest what is the purity of a perfect continence, not permit carnal relations even to the subdeacons, "so that those who have a wife be as if they did not have one" and those who do not have one remain single. If it befits this order - the fourth starting from the top - to observe [continence], how much more so the first, second and third must observe it; let no one be deemed apt for the Levitical or priestly dignity or for the supreme dignity of the episcopate if it is found that he has not yet put an end to conjugal pleasure."

Note how Pope Leo, as well as the Council of Carthage of 419, both interpret 1 Corinthians 7:29 ("From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none") to refer to the discipline of the married-ordained observing continence. He also, in writing to a Bishop of the East, presumes the Eastern Churches keep the discipline as well.
2nd Council of Arles, Canons 2,3,43 and 44 (c. 452)

Can. 2: "One cannot elevate to the priesthood a man bound by marriage unless he has first converted [i.e., to continence]."

Can. 3: "If a cleric, starting from the order of the diaconate, dares to take with him a woman to 'console himself', let him be rejected from communion. An exception is to be made for his grandmother, mother, sister, niece, or a wife who has converted [to continence]. If she refuses to separate from the cleric, the woman will also be punished in the same way."

Can. 43: "It has seemed good, moreover, according to the decisions of this synod, not to ordain to the diaconate married men unless, in the firm intention of changing their lives, they first make a profession of chastity."

Can. 44: "But if someone is discovered, after having received the Levitical blessing, not to observe continence with his wife, let him be forbidden from exercising his ministry."

Pope St. Leo the Great to Rusticus of Narbonne (459)

"Inquis. III: About those who serve at the altar and are married, is it permitted for them to have conjugal relations?

Ans: The law of continence is the same for the ministers of the altar, for the bishops, and for the priests; when they were still lay people or lector, they could freely take a wife and sire children. But once they have reached the ranks mentioned above, what had been permitted is no longer so. This is why, in order for their union to change from carnal to spiritual, they must, without sending away their wives, live with them as if they did not have them, so that conjugal love be safeguarded and nuptial activity be ended."

Again, we see that out of respect for the marital bond, the wife is not to be dismissed or sent away. The married cleric remains a married man with all the duties to care for his spouse. Only the conjugal rights of marriage are not prohibited; the sexual relationship of the man and his wife is now elevated "from carnal to spiritual". This balanced approach allows "conjugal love to the safeguarded" even while "nuptial activity be ended."

1st Council of Tours, Canons 1 and 2 (461)

Can. 1: "In the first place, let the priests and ministers of the Church, of whom it is said, 'You are the light of the world', therefore lead a very holy life, inspired by the fear of God; let them direct their actions so as to be pleasing to divine clemency and to offer a good example to the faithful...If the faithful are advised to observe chastity, according to the doctrine of the Apostle, "so that those who have a wife be as though they did not have one", how much more the
priests of God and deacons, attached to the service of the divine altar, must practice it; thus they will deserve, thanks to purity of heart as well as body, that their prayers reach God's ears when they devote themselves to supplicate on behalf of the people...consequently, if a layman is admonished to practice abstinence so as to be answered when he frees himself for prayer and presents his supplications to God, how much more priests and deacons; they must be ready at any moment to present themselves before God with assurance, in all purity and cleanliness, in case they would have to offer the sacrifice or baptize should the circumstances call for it. If they defiled themselves through carnal concupiscence, what excuse could they find; with what audacity would they dare to fulfill it; with what conscience, what merit, do they believe that they will be answered?"

Can. 2: "Though it had been decided by the authority of our Fathers that the priest or deacon convicted of having accomplished the act of procreation be rejected from the Eucharistic communion, we have nevertheless decided, for our part, to temper the rigor of that law and to mitigate a decision that is otherwise legitimate; let the priest and deacon who remain attached with concupiscence to the conjugal life and continue to devote themselves to procreation not be promoted to a higher rank and not have the presumption of offering the sacrifice, nor take upon themselves ministry on behalf of the people. Let it be enough for them not to be rejected from communion."

2nd Council of Arles (c. 480)

"If a cleric, starting from the order of the diaconate, dares to take with him a woman for his consolation, let him be rejected from communion; an exception is made for a grandmother, a mother, sister, a daughter, niece, or a 'converted' wife."

Observe the use of the word "converted" to denote a wife who agrees to live in continence with her husband.

Canon 6 of the Council of Girona, Spain (517)

This regional Spanish council allows the wife of a subdeacon, deacon, priest or bishop to remain near her husband on the condition that she live with him "as a sister to a brother." Ordination could not proceed unless the wife had first agreed to this arrangement. [2]

Canon 1 of the 2nd Council of Toledo (531)

Can 1: "[Candidates for the priesthood] upon reaching the age of eighteen, they will be questioned by the bishop in the presence of the people and of all the clergy, to ascertain whether or not they want to marry...As to those whose free will, at the time of questioning, inspired them to marry, we cannot deny them the concession granted by the Apostles; married and having reached a later age, they will be able to aspire to Holy Orders, if they promise in common agreement [with their wives] to give up the works of the flesh."
Council of Orleans, Canon 17 (541)

Can. 17: "Let the priests and deacons not share the same bed or same room with their wives, lest they be suspected of having carnal relations and their reputation in religious life be therefore stained. Should some do so, let them be demoted from their functions in conformity with the old canons."

As time progresses, the discipline of continence will be hedged around with further disciplines requiring the physical separation of the spouses in different rooms and later in different quarters. The continuation of the apostolic allowance of married clergy would become so prone to abuse - especially in rural areas - that the reformers of the 10th century would insist on ending the apostolic allowance and mandating a clergy among only the celibate. See Canon 20 of the Council of Tours (567) for the problem of observing continence in rural districts.

Council of Orleans, Canon 4 (549)

Can 4: "If a cleric who has received the [Levitical] blessing - in whatever area and at whatever rank - dares to return to the conjugal bed that is now forbidden him, he will be deposed from his function and from the honor of the Order he received until the end of his life, as stipulated by the canons of the ancient fathers; he will simply be conceded communion."

The Decrees of the Breviatio Ferrandi, North Africa (c. 546)

Decree 16: "Let the bishops, priests and deacons abstain from relations with their wives."
Decree 129: "When they reach the age of puberty, let the lectors be compelled either to marry or to make a profession of continence."

Council of Tours, Canons 13 & 20 (567)

Can. 13: "Let the bishop treat his wife as a sister, and let him rule all his house, the church as well as his home, in such a holy way that no motive of suspicion should arise..."

Can. 20: "Many archpriests, deacons and subdeacons of the countryside - although not all, to be sure - are held in suspicion by the people because they have a common life with their wives. This is why it has seemed good to observe the following: Each time an archpriest will reside in a village or will go to a country home, one of his appointed lectors, or at least another clergy member, will go with him and serve as his witness by sleeping in the same cell where he rests...Let the other priests, deacons and subdeacons of the countryside see to it that their servants reside with their respective wives; as to them, let them live separately, alone in their cells, to pray and sleep there...As to the archpriests who neglect to manifest such prudence with regard to their subordinates and do not guide them while themselves being careful to live separately, let them be urgently recalled to town by their bishop and confined in their cells for a
full month on bread and water; thus they will do penance for the clergy entrusted to them, because no cleric is permitted, in conformity with the canons' decisions, to live in common with his wife."

Notice that there is no hint of novelty in the Council's canons. The bishops do not labor to prove that no cleric can have conjugal relations; rather, they assume the premise that no cleric can have conjugal relations and reason from this to their particular legislative conclusion about the living arrangements of the archpriests.

**Council of Macon, Canon 11 (c. 582)**

**Can. 11:** "When men are elevated to the sublime dignity of the episcopate, the priesthood, or any degree of the honorary clergy, let them totally repudiate the works of the world; chosen for the sacred mysteries, let them renounce carnal intercourse and transform into fraternal affection the sexual intimacy they had until then [i.e., with their wives]. And let any man, after having, by God's grace, received the Levitical blessing, become immediately the brother of his former wife."

**Council of Lyon, Canon 1 (583)**

**Can. 1:** "The venerable fathers of past times made several decisions with authority; now that divine favor has permitted a progress of the faith, it is necessary that the salutary prudence of the bishops renew these decisions with improvements, in the interest of the clergy and the entire Catholic people [Here Lyon restates the famous Canon 3 of Nicaea concerning "outsider women"]...It has also seemed good to us that if men bound to wives in some way attain the Order of the diaconate or the priesthood, they should not only stay away from the beds of their wives, but abstain from seeing them every day. If, God forbid, after having received the blessing, they were to have children on account of familiar cohabitation with them, let them be deprived of the rank [corresponding to] their function."

**Council of Auxerre, Canons 20 & 21 (late 6th century)**

**Can. 20:** "If a priest, as we are ashamed to say, a deacon or a subdeacon has begotten children after having received the blessing [of Holy Orders] or committed adultery, without the archpriest informing the bishop or archdeacon, he will not take part in communion for a full year."

**Can. 21:** "It is not permitted for a priest, after having received the blessing, to sleep in the same bed as his wife, so as to get involved in sins of the flesh. The same is true for the deacon and the subdeacon."
**Pope St. Gregory the Great to Peter, Subdeacon of Sicily (May, 591)**

"Three years ago it was absolutely forbidden to subdeacons of the Churches of Sicily, according to the customs of the Roman Church, to have relations with their wives...This is why it seems good to me to request that all the bishops from now on should not allow themselves to ordain as subdeacon someone who would not have [first] promised to live in chastity...as to those who, on their part, [still] refused to abstain from relations with their wives after interdiction, we oppose their admission to the sacred Order, since no one can have access to the altar if his chastity has not been tested and recognized before receiving the ministry."

**Pope St. Gregory the Great, To Symmachus, Defender (Book I, Letter 52 - June, 591)**

"Moreover we desire that the priests who abide in Corsica shall be forbidden to live with women, except it may be a mother, or a sister, or a wife, the last being guided with chastity."

**Pope St. Gregory the Great, to Leo, Bishop of Catania (July, 594)**

"Many reports have informed us that there was a custom in the past, among you, permitting subdeacons to have relations with their wives. So that no one will again have the audacity to act in such a way, an interdiction was brought by Servus-Dei, deacon of our See, on the authority of our predecessor: those who were already united to wives had to choose between two things: either to abstain from conjugal relations or not to have the presumption to exercise their ministry under any pretext."

**St. Isidore of Seville, De Ecclesiasticus Officiis (c. 615)**

"Because they touch the sacred mysteries, it has seemed good to the Fathers that these men [subdeacons] be chaste and keep continence with their wives and be free of any carnal impurity, according to what had been commanded to them by the prophet" "Purify yourselves you who carry the vessels of the Lord."

**4th Council of Toledo, Canons 21 (633)**

Can. 21: "All those who have a rank in God's priesthood must be irreproachable as attested by St. Paul: the bishop must be irreproachable. It is therefore fitting that the priests of God be protected against the encroachments of sin, without stain, without defilement by acts of fornication; but let them live chastely and present themselves with purity to the celebration of the mysteries. Let us therefore abstain from every evil deed and remain free from carnal defilement so that, pure in body and purified in spirit, we can worthily reach the sacrifice of Christ and supplicate God for everyone's sins."
CONCLUSION

What conclusions can we draw from this lengthy essay?

1) It is undeniable that absolute continence was expected of all clerics in the early Church, both married and unmarried. Married men were expected to "convert" to continence and abstain permanently from conjugal relations with their wives. However, the wives were not "divorced" or "put away"; they were expected to still retain a common life with their husband, although as a sister to a brother. The married cleric still had an obligation to care for and love his wife with the exception of conjugal relations.

2) This discipline was based on the universality of the priest's intercession: because he was praying and offering sacrifice or administering sacraments continually, he was expected to observe perpetual continence. Scriptural support was offered from an extrapolation of Paul's comments about abstention from intercourse in 1 Cor. 7:5, as well as an extension of the duty of Levites and priests of the Old Covenant to remain celibate during their periods of ministry. The fundamental reason behind both of these assumptions is the superiority of the New Testament priesthood of Christ over the Mosaic priesthood of the Old Testament. Conversely, no authority suggested that priests should be celibate "because Christ was." Continence was mandated, but not for the reason Pope Benedict XVI and contemporary defenders of priestly celibacy suppose.

3) While the Scriptures offered support for the practice, the most important authority behind it was the precedent of the apostles, which is affirmed in the very earliest references to clerical continence (Tertullian) and affirmed by subsequent Fathers, popes and Councils, east and west. The Early Church taught and assumed clerical continence was an apostolic discipline.

4) Speaking of East and West, this discipline of clerical continence was observed in the West as well as the East before and for centuries after the Council of Nicaea. Thus it is incorrect to assert that the current Byzantine practice of allowing married priests to use their conjugal rights is the more ancient discipline. It was in fact the East, not the West, which altered the ancient custom. The date the East abandoned clerical celibacy was in 692 at the Quinisext Council, which allowed married priests free use of their conjugal rights. Lord willing, we will examine the Quinisext Council (also called the Council in Trullo) in greater detail in a future essay.

5) Clerical continence was not just a pious custom, but an actual positive law of the Church, as evidenced by the penalties imposed on clerics who were not continent, as well as by the repeated addressing of the issues by the Church's ecumenical and regional councils, which would not have legislated so extensively on the issue if it were a mere custom.

6) Therefore, the question was never about whether or not priests could be married, the answer to which has varied in different times and places; rather, the question is whether clerics are expected to be continent, and when framed this way, we see a striking uniformity upon this issue throughout the Church Universal in the first seven centuries. Understanding the question in terms of continence rather than celibacy is why the Church claims its teaching here as never changed.
even while the practice of celibacy has not been uniform. Priests have been allowed to marry, but the tradition was that it was never acceptable to have a sexually active cleric. This was acknowledged in the East and West.

There are several aspects of this topic we cannot go into here. In a future article we hope to address the particulars of how the East changed the custom and what happened at the Quinisext Council in Trullo in 692. We also are unable at this time to explore the historical and pastoral reasons for why the Latin Church eventually abandoned the practice of allowing married continent priests and opted for a mandatory priesthood composed entirely of bachelors. For much more research, I recommend The Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy by Fr. Christian Cochini, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), which contains all of the information presented in this study, as well as (1) lengthy discussions on the problem of "outsider women" posed by Canon 3 of Nicaea (2) extensive commentary on imperial legislation of the 4th-7th centuries, which all assumes and supports a continent priesthood (3) a lot of testimonies from the Nestorian Churches of the East, which do bear historical witness to the development of the practice but which we chose to omit here. Fr. Cochini's book can be purchased here.

Thus, as we move forward in these uncertain times and here more discussion about the discipline of celibacy, let us be firmly grounded in the truths of history and theology, exemplified in what is undoubtedly the uniform tradition of the Church on the question of clerical continence.

NOTES
