

CESARE BONIVENTO

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PRIESTLY CELIBACY

**Ecclesiastical Institution
or
Apostolic Tradition?**

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or
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**THEOLOGICAL-SPIRITUAL STUDY
DEDICATED
TO THE PRIESTS AND SEMINARIANS
OF THE DIOCESE OF VANIMO
TO HELP THEM LIVE THE GIFT OF CELIBACY
FULLY AND JOYFULLY**

Vanimo (Papua New Guinea) 2006

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DEDICATION

I dedicate these modest reflections on priestly celibacy to the future Deacons of the diocese of Vanimo. They are the first fruits of our diocesan seminary. By embracing the Diaconate, they will be taking a fundamental decision: to continue in their own being the Priesthood of Christ. Answering Christ's call is always a source of grace and joy in the one who responds. However, in order to do that, Christ's call must be welcomed generously and in its entirety, in the awareness that Christ the High Priest, in order to exercise his priesthood and gather all the scattered children into the one family of God, freely renounced the right to have an earthly family of his own. In order to continue his priesthood, we must learn to embrace celibacy and live it fully and joyfully as he did.

+ Cesare Bonivento PIME
Bishop of Vanimo
8-12-2005
Feast of the Immaculate Conception

INTRODUCTION

Our Diocese will soon achieve a historic goal: the ordination of the first deacons from our diocesan seminary. On that day, after long years of solid spiritual preparation, our candidates to the Diaconate will take a fundamental life decision: to continue in their own being the Priesthood of Christ. The response to Christ's call is always a source of grace and joy for the one who embraces it but, in order to be so, it must be welcomed generously, in a radical manner and in the full knowledge that the Catholic Priesthood is nothing other than the continuation of the salvific action of Christ the Priest. Christ fully and freely chose to be celibate in order to gather all God's scattered children into His one family with an undivided heart, and in order to be the brother, without distinction, of all those who join this family. To live celibacy in all its fullness and radicalism is the *conditio sine qua non* for continuing joyfully the priesthood of Christ throughout time.

However, this is not an easy task in our times because priestly celibacy is the object of constant dissent from all sides. It is still widely challenged in spite of the fact that it has been confirmed by Church teaching in, for example: Vatican II, the Encyclical "Sacerdotalis Coelibatus" by Pope Paul VI, the Magisterium of Pope John Paul II and the Synod of Bishops and, especially, the Apostolic Exhortation "Pastores Dabo vobis". Many people still hope that the discipline of the Latin Church will be softened and perhaps changed. This creates constant uncertainty and the impression that ecclesiastical celibacy may collapse under such permanent attack. It is said that priestly celibacy is merely an ecclesiastical institution and, therefore, subject to reform; it is also said that it only appeared in the 12th century at the Second Lateran Council (1139); still others speak of the inhuman aspects of this ecclesiastical law and, obviously, of the scandals which are currently before the eyes of everyone and skillfully manipulated by the media. Some people maintain that the Church is unjust in her desire to unite in the same person two charismas which are so different from each other, such as the call to celibacy and the call to the priesthood; this opinion holds the Church responsible for the present world-wide shortage of priests and accuses her of insensitivity towards the centrality of the Eucharist in the Christian Community. All of these ideas are obviously confirmed by the different discipline of the Eastern Church, which is looked upon as preserving the authentic apostolic discipline.

It is understandable that many authentic and generous vocations are negatively influenced by an unending debate and abandon the desire to dedicate themselves to the Lord. It is also understandable that priests who experience times of difficulty or spiritual coldness can feel tempted to abandon the priestly ministry once and for all. Far from solving the numerical crisis of priestly vocations, this debate only makes things worse.

One fact, however, is not open to dispute: the Universal Church, especially the Latin Church, has always strenuously defended, and continues to defend, the discipline of celibacy from global attack. One only has to remember: the abuses that have always existed in the field of ecclesiastical celibacy; the weakening of the ecclesiastical discipline in the 4th century; the feudal times of Gregory VII; the Protestant reformation; the French revolution, etc. Yet the Latin Church and, in many ways the Eastern Church too, have never given in to any pressure against celibacy. The question therefore arises: why has the Church always firmly defended this ecclesial reality?

One must admit that the Church's inexplicable defense of celibacy has not been helped by the historic vagueness that has characterized the debate until now, especially in the press. Until a few decades ago, the historical picture was not always respected even at a specialized level, and this has often led to the hasty conclusion that priestly celibacy is, in the last analysis, a historical-ecclesiastical choice.¹ This has more or less resulted in the following conclusion: the Eastern Church preserved the apostolic tradition of optional celibacy, while the Latin Church preferred to impose it through canonical documents that began to appear only in the fourth century.

Is this truly the case? I believe that the historical approach is the best method for finding an explanation. Biblical data and the history of the first seven centuries of the Church are fundamental in the study of the evolution of the discipline of ecclesiastical celibacy. Thanks to recent historical studies, which are increasingly recognized by scholars, the situation is much more positive than it was some decades ago.

These studies can be placed within the framework of a renewed historical interest in ecclesiastical celibacy that has been growing in the last 130 years. We can say that this process began thanks to the problems raised towards the end of the 19th century by Bickell and Funk on the origin of ecclesiastical celibacy. Gustav Bickell began the debate when he suggested that the origin of ecclesiastical celibacy could be identified in apostolic instructions.² In response, Franz X. Funk maintained instead that the origin of ecclesiastical celibacy was purely ecclesiastical and never appeared before the fourth century.³ Funk gained the support of other eminent scholars, such as E. F. Vacandard and H. Leclercq, with the result that a great deal of the scientific work of the early 20th century supported the theory that celibacy was of ecclesiastic origin.

According to Stickler, who was followed by many patristic scholars, Funk and his supporters relied a great deal on the belated report of an episode at the Council of Nicea, namely how Paphnutius of Egypt, bishop and monk, pleaded the case for optional celibacy at the Council of Nicea. According to this legend, Paphnutius tried

¹ A typical example of this kind of literature is the book by Qaranta Francesco, "Preti sposati nel medioevo", Torino, 2000.

² cf. Bickell Gustav, *Der Colibat eine apostolische Anordnung*, in *Zeitschrift f. katholische Theologie* 2, 1878, 26-64; Id., *Der Colibat dennoch eine apostolische Anordnung*, *Zeitschrift f. kath. Theologie* 3, 1879, 792-799.

³ cf. Funk Franz Xaver, *Der Colibat keine apostolische Anordnung*, in *Tubinger Theologische Quartalschrift* 61, 1879, 208-247; Id., *Der Colibat noch lange keine apostolische Anordnung*, in *Tubinger Theologische Quartalschrift* 62, 1880, 220-221; Id., *Colibat und Priesterehe im Christlichen Altertum*, in *Kichengeschichtliche Abhandlungen und Untersuchungen I*, 1987, 121-155.

to dissuade the Fathers of the Council from ratifying a general obligation of continence, asking them to leave this decision to the local Churches and his suggestion was accepted by the Council of Nicea. In actual fact, this story has no historical foundation and is self-contradictory: this is borne out by the analysis of the testimony, which immediately appears spurious and without any historical basis.⁴ It is invalidated by the fact that it was never applied by the Eastern Church, despite the fact that it ought to have been of greater interest there. According to Stickler “the most intelligent argument against the authenticity of this episode seems to be the fact that the Eastern Church itself, which should have had the greatest interest in it, either did not know of it or, because Eastern church leaders were convinced that it was false, did not have a record of it in any official document they used...”⁵ In other words Funk, by appealing to the legend of bishop Paphnutius, showed a lack of sensitivity to source criticism, which is of primary importance for a historian.⁶

At present, one of the greatest advocates of this idea is Roger Gryson.⁷ He defends the idea that the majority of clerics in the first three centuries of the Church was married and could freely exercise their conjugal rights. Gryson maintains that a movement opposed to matrimony (the so called encratism movement) arose in the second century and, together with the growing sacralization of ecclesiastic office, which was typical of the third century, led little by little to the ecclesiastical legislation of compulsory celibacy. This supposedly happened at the Council of Elvira (Spain) in 306 and proves that celibacy is an ecclesiastical institution.

This approach and historical interpretation is strongly disputed by some recent historical studies carried out by Cocchini, Choliy, Stickler and Heid, whose work is gaining a growing consensus also because they emphasize completely new data that had not been considered previously, for example: the historical criticism of the decisions taken by the Second Council of Trullo, upon which Eastern legislation is based.⁸

This modest theological/pastoral contribution merely aims at divulging these historical rediscoveries and conclusions for the benefit, above all, of our Deacons and anyone who wishes to embrace the grace, responsibility and immense dignity of the priesthood. This new historical-theological data is not only backed up by historical data, it is also more than justified by the position that the Catholic Church has always held with regard to celibacy, declaring it to be inalienable in its essentiality. This essentiality derives from the fact that, since apostolic times, all candidates for the priesthood have been required to observe priestly chastity, even those who received Sacred Orders (Deacon, Priest, Bishop) whilst in the married state: they too had to commit themselves to live chastely with their wives or, more explicitly, to forgo

⁴ cf Stickler M. Alfonso, op. cit. pp. 62-64.

⁵ Ibidem, pp. 64-65.

⁶ Stickler M. Alfons, The case for clerical celibacy, pp. 62-65, Ignatius, San Francisco, 1995.

⁷ Gryson Roger, “Dix ans de recherches sur les origines du celibate ecclesiastique: Reflections sur les publications des 1970-79”, RTL 11 (1980); Origines, following the argument of J.P. Audet, Mariage et celibate dans le service pastoral de l’Eglise: Histoire et orientation, Paris, 1967.

⁸ Cholij Roman: Clerical Celibacy in East and West, Herefordshire, 1989; Cocchini Christian: Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy, San Francisco, 1990; Stickler card. Alfons Maria: The case for clerical celibacy, San Francisco, 1995; Heid Stefan: Celibacy in the Early Church, San Francisco, 2000; Thomas McGovern: Priestly Celibacy Today, Princeton, 1998; AA.VV.: Priesthood and Celibacy, Milano, 1972.

conjugal life once they were ordained to one of the three ranks of the priesthood. Therefore priestly celibacy, which fully expresses this ecclesiastical discipline of apostolic origin, will never be abolished by the Church, despite all the false expectations and the opposition over recent decades. The data brings joy and serenity to the celibate commitment because it exhorts us to embrace it totally, radically and with profound joy, without the false illusion that one day the Church can change this discipline and, therefore, with the temptation to live it in any old way, falling into the trap of a dangerous double life and a permanent spiritual-apostolic weakness. If our new deacons' participation in the priesthood of Christ faithfully mirrors the celibate priesthood of Christ, it will be a source of life for them and all those who will benefit from their ministry.

I therefore entrust these pages to the Deacons and Priests of the Diocese of Vanimo, for meditation and study. One will encounter some wonderful witnesses to ecclesiastical celibacy, but also painful events and contradictions that have made of priestly celibacy the *punctum dolens* of priestly life. However, in spite of everything, the Latin Church and, to a good extent, the Eastern Church too, has never hesitated to say that priestly chastity is an inalienable element of the Catholic priesthood. It has been thus since the beginning, since the so-often misinterpreted invitation of St. Paul to ordain deacons, priests and bishops those who had been married "only once": a recommendation that was given only to guarantee the priestly chastity of those who were ordained as married men. It is this desire of the Church to have priests who are totally oriented to the things of God and not to the things of the world that must be reflected upon, welcomed and loved. The Church, which is the bride of Christ, to whom Christ entrusted everything he has in order that it might be given to us, cannot err in interpreting the will of her Spouse. To her Jesus has given his Spirit: the same Spirit that led Jesus through the streets of Palestine to Calvary, now guides the Church through the streets and the centuries of the world, and she wishes to proclaim Christ with the same modalities that Christ chose.

However, before embarking on this study, two very important distinctions must be made in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

We must first of all make a distinction between priestly celibacy and priestly continence. The former refers to the demand/promise to abstain from marrying by a celibate who has received a Major Order (Diaconate, Priesthood, Episcopacy). Since this promise of celibacy as the condition for admission to Sacred Orders appeared only in the advanced stages of the second millennium, many have fallen foul to the mistaken belief that priestly celibacy is of ecclesiastical and not apostolic institution. "Priestly continence" refers to the demand/promise to forego conjugal life by a married man who has received a Major Order (Diaconate, Priesthood and Episcopacy). These two forms have lived alongside each other for a long time in the Church since apostolic times, in mutual acceptance, because both of them insist on the bodily continence required of all those who serve at the altar after receiving Major Orders. Failure to take into account this distinction leads to a great historical confusion and to misunderstanding Church discipline in this matter. Indeed, if one goes back to apostolic times, or the early centuries of the Church, and searches for the current legislation on celibacy, he will never find it; what he will find are all the elements necessary for concluding that anyone (celibate or married) who accepted ordination was required by the Church to observe priestly continence. Therefore the

aim of our research is to demonstrate that the Church came to prefer in an exclusive way a form of priestly continence, namely celibacy, that was already present and recommended by the Apostles, within the framework of the general discipline they had established, as the case of Titus and Timothy shows. Therefore in the course of this historical résumé, we will refer to the discipline established by the Apostles with the name of priestly continence/celibacy because, throughout history, these two forms walked hand in hand almost until the Council of Trent.⁹

The second distinction is between Law and disciplinary custom. History shows that a law never appears out of nowhere: it needs a previous commonly accepted behavior that some, perhaps, have disobeyed. In order to reinforce this behavior or common discipline, it becomes law and a compulsory nature is bestowed upon it against the doubts raised by those whose offences have violated it. This holds true also in the ecclesiastical field, especially when we bear in mind that apostolic teaching was given to the Church in written and oral forms. Indeed, St Paul says: “Stand firm, then, brothers, and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2Ts 2:15). This type of teaching is recalled in the second century by Irenaeus, when in his work “Against heresies” he reminds everyone that the apostolic tradition has been preserved by the Church of Rome. He was undoubtedly referring to something more than Sacred Scripture. There is nothing to rule out this “tradition” being applied also to the problem of continence/celibacy. Therefore, the allegation that there were no instructions in the Church about this matter before the law on priestly continence, which appeared in the fourth century at the Council of Elvira (306), is either arbitrary or a historical imprudence.¹⁰ On the contrary, a law written in the fourth century presupposes that there was an already existing tradition and discipline.

Let us now consider the various historical phases in which the problem of priestly continence/celibacy appeared, beginning from its biblical foundations and from the first seven centuries of the Church until Vatican II. After the theological conclusions, we will make some historical forecasts on the future of ecclesial celibacy.

In the course of this paper it will be necessary to make lengthy quotes. We ask the reader’s indulgence because they are necessary in order to fully understand the historical importance and evolution of the discipline of ecclesiastical continence/celibacy.

⁹ Stickler M Alfons, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 17-19.

Chapter 1

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF PRIESTLY CONTINENCE

In order to examine the extent to which priestly continence, upon which priestly celibacy is based, is founded on Scripture, I believe that one of the best methods consists in emphasizing the undisputed biblical sources that deal with the issue. The following conclusions from the New Testament seem to be beyond all dispute:

1. **Jesus was celibate.** This is a fact that cannot be disputed by any passage of the New Testament.
2. **Jesus voluntarily chose a celibate life.** In other words, Jesus did not just happen to be unmarried at the time of his death. He was celibate when he died as the result of a specific personal choice. It seems disrespectful to the Lord to say that he lived a celibate life as a freely chosen option. Nevertheless, not only is it true and undisputable, it must be re-asserted because it is only by defending his freedom that we can understand the importance of his choice and, perhaps, grasp its meaning, at least partially.¹¹ Jesus never intended to marry and was even accused of being a eunuch: Mt 19:12. Three passages confirm his will in this regard⁷:
 - *Mt: 19: 10-12: “His disciples said to him: ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry’. But he said to them: ‘Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can’”.* Jesus understands very well the indirect reproach of the Pharisees: they believe he has not married because it is more convenient not to marry rather than endure the obligation of not divorcing. Jesus rejects this interpretation, but he re-asserts his celibate state and gives it a superior motivation: he defines himself as a eunuch for the Kingdom of Heaven.

¹¹ cf. Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Coelibatus*, n. 21: “Christ, the only Son of the Father, by the power of the Incarnation itself was made Mediator between heaven and earth, between the Father and the human race. Wholly in accord with this mission, Christ remained throughout His whole life in the state of celibacy, which signified His total dedication to the service of God and men. This deep concern between celibacy and the priesthood of Christ is reflected in those whose fortune it is to share in the dignity and mission of the Mediator and eternal Priest; this sharing will be more perfect the freer the sacred minister is from the bonds of flesh and blood. (28)

- *Mt: 8: 19-20: "A scribe then approached and said: 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go'. And Jesus said to him: 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'"* Jesus says he has nowhere to lay his head. This cannot be explained only by the poverty of Jesus. Instead, it defines one who has no reference point on earth and who has placed his entire trust in his Heavenly Father, even more than the birds that have their nest and the foxes that have their holes. Jesus does not even have these. Though the reference to the family context is not explicit, it is more than legitimate. Jesus therefore defines himself as one without a family and states that anyone who wishes to follow him must do so in perfect and perpetual continence.
- *Mt: 12: 47-50: " Someone told him: 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you'. But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied: 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?'. And pointing to his disciples, he said: 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, is my brother and sister and mother'".* Jesus declares that his family embraces all men: "Anyone who does the will of my Father in Heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother". This explanation is more than sufficient to explain the celibate option of Jesus: he chose celibacy in order to embrace the whole of humanity as his one sole family.

3. **Jesus demanded perpetual continence/celibacy of all his apostles.** This can be deduced both indirectly and directly.

The indirect manner is the most eloquent and derives from the fact that when Jesus invited his apostles to follow him, he was calling them to follow and imitate someone (Jesus himself) who had to live a celibate life. Thus, Jesus asked his apostles to abandon everything: this abandonment included both perpetual continence and celibacy, on an equal footing, since Jesus called both Peter and John, the two disciples who had a precise family identity: one was married and the other celibate (virgin).¹² These two kinds of priestly discipleship have walked hand in hand since the very beginning of Christ's Church.¹³ That the Apostles well understood the kind of discipleship to which they were being called is demonstrated by the fact that the continent/celibate option lived and proposed by

¹² cf. Cochini Christian, op. cit. p. 82: "With the exception of Peter, whose matrimonial status is confirmed by the Synoptics, nothing certain can be said about the apostles. The variety of Patristic testimonies confirms that there was no oral tradition of a sufficiently general and constant nature to support that one had had a wife and children, while another had been single. There are two exceptions, though: the case of the Apostle John, whom a quasi-unanimous majority recognized as having been a virgin; and that of Paul, of whom a majority of Fathers say that he had never been married or in any case was a widower".

¹³ cf. Paul VI " Sacerdotalis Coelibatus" N 21: "Jesus, who selected the first ministers of salvation, wished them to be introduced to the understanding of the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven", (29) but He also wished them to be coworkers with God under a very special title, and His ambassadors.(30) He called them friends and brethren, (31) for whom He consecrated Himself so that they might be consecrated in truth; (32) He promised a more than abundant recompense to anyone who should leave home, family, wife and children for the sake of the kingdom of God.(33) More than this, in words filled with mystery and hope, He also commended an even more perfect consecration (34) to the kingdom of heaven by means of celibacy, as a special gift.(35)"

Jesus was the teaching they absorbed most easily during the three years of apostolic formation.

The direct manner can be deduced first and foremost by the Apostles' ready and total response to the Lord's call, to such an extent that their families are no longer remembered; another example is Peter's question to Jesus on the reward the Apostles would receive for leaving everything to follow him'. Jesus replied: "Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life" (Lk 18: 28-30). There is no further need for an exegetical analysis. Suffice it to say that writers, and the common sense of ordinary readers, generally agree that, if it is true that Jesus put forward perpetual continence as a free choice, it is equally true that he did not hesitate to ask the total adherence of those who wished to follow him in proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven. We can therefore legitimately conclude that Jesus asked all of his Apostles to embrace celibacy like Him, or perpetual continence if, like Peter, they were married. In "Priesthood and celibacy" we read: "All things considered, it seems most likely that Jesus did in fact have in mind a free choice of perpetual continence. But the significance of this becomes clear and is understood if it is placed in the context of the absolute renunciations which Jesus did not hesitate to ask of those who committed themselves to follow him for the sake of preaching and founding the kingdom, for the spreading and complete realization of the gospel".¹⁴

4. **The Apostles were faithful to the Lord's wishes during his apostolic journeys in Palestine.**

It is feasible, though not certain, to assume that all the Apostles, except John, were married, as we saw previously in footnote no. 12. Nevertheless, even if this supposition were true, far from damaging the certainty of the Apostles' continence, it would actually confirm it. No one can cast doubt on the fact that they left everything to follow the Lord, who asked them to leave also their wives and families. Jesus had accepted them as disciples, and then as apostles, precisely because of their decision to follow him in a radical manner. The Lord says that 'once the hand is laid on the plough, no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.' (Lk 9, 62). If the apostles had not persevered in their decision, the Lord would no longer have considered them as apostles and friends¹⁵ as instead he did with the eleven until the very end. Others had turned back for various reasons and,

¹⁴ cf. E.C. "Christ's call to virginity", in "Priesthood and celibacy, Milano, 1972, pp. 415-424: "It appears that the status of the twelve is based on three main elements. The first consists in being called to follow the Lord, to be and to remain with him. The second involves the desire to commit oneself to work with him for the establishing of the kingdom of God, which will bring about the salvation of the world. The third implies that following the Lord in a radical way means giving up one's family ties, more precisely giving up the desire to found a family, in order to give oneself entirely to the kingdom of God, i.e. to preaching and establishing the work that the master came to initiate. This last element, which has to do with commitment to consecrated celibacy, is based on three particular logia in the gospels: the first belongs to Matthew, 19, 12, the other two are found in Luke, 14, 26, and 18, 29.....All things considered, it seems most likely that Jesus did in fact have in mind a free choice of perpetual continence. But the significance of this becomes clear and is understood if it is placed in the context of the absolute renunciations which Jesus did not hesitate to ask of those who committed themselves to follow him for the sake of preaching and founding the kingdom, for the spreading and complete realization of the gospel".

¹⁵ cf. Jn 15, 13-15.

logically, they had to leave him and he no longer recognized them as his disciples.¹⁶

5. **There is no indication that the Apostles abandoned perpetual continence after the Death and Resurrection of the Lord.** The old saying remains true: once someone becomes a eunuch, he remains a eunuch for his entire life. There is no doubt that many Apostles availed themselves of the help of women during their journeys. Perhaps they were their wives but it is not certain. St. Paul himself reminds us of this custom of some ‘apostles’: “And the right to take a Christian woman round with us, like all the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas” (1 Cor. 9, 5). But this does not mean that they lived as married people. First of all, we must remember that the Lord himself had said that a man must not repudiate his wife except in the case of ‘porneia’. The Lord had strongly insisted on this point precisely because he wanted to fight against divorce. It is more than understandable that the married apostles wished to avoid giving anyone the idea that they had divorced or that they no longer took care of their wives. In the second place, we must remember that St. Paul, referring to the case of the Apostles, uses the word “sisters” in the Greek text, a terminology that rules out the word wife.¹⁷

Furthermore, we must remember that St. Paul strongly emphasizes his right to do the same. It is this “right” that confirms the continence of the other Apostles. In chapter 7 of the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks in an unequivocal and stirring manner of his celibate state, or at the least of perfect chastity¹⁸, to the extent that he wishes it for all in order to serve Christ with an undivided heart. In 1Cor. 9, 5 St. Paul speaks of a celibate’s right, or of one who lives in perfect chastity, but this certainly cannot mean the right to have sexual relationships. St. Paul is speaking of a different right, which does not compromise the fact that his heart is totally at the service of the Lord. Therefore when he speaks of this right, of which the apostles availed themselves, he cannot be referring to their matrimonial rights towards their wives. The context in which this statement is made refers to not being a burden on the community, and certainly not to the right to have matrimonial relationships with those women. We cannot possibly think that the Apostles had sexual relationships with their wives, and thus abandoned their initial decision in favor of celibacy or perfect continence. They knew only too well that being called by the Lord meant living like Jesus, abandoning their own homes, or living with their wives in continence if these preferred to stay with their husbands. The words of the Lord applied also to them: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Lk 9,620).

Finally, we must remember that Jesus himself was accompanied by some women without this being a reason for anyone to think that he was not celibate.

¹⁶ cf. Jn 6, 66.

¹⁷cf: Lc 8, 2-3: “With him went the Twelve, as well as certain women who had been cured of evil spirits and ailments; Mary surnamed the Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, Susanna, and several others who provided for them out of their own resources”.

¹⁸ As far as St. Paul’s personal life condition is concerned, there are three interpretations of the Fathers. The first states that St. Paul was married. According to the second interpretation, Paul was a widower. The third, upheld by the majority of the Fathers, very firmly declares that he was celibate. Furthermore, all three groups state that Paul lived in perfect chastity: cf: Cocchini Christian, *The Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy*, pp. 74-79, San Francisco, 1981.

6. **There is no biblical proof for saying that the demand of continence was not transmitted by the apostles to their successors.** The move from the apostolic Church to the sub-apostolic Church came about very rapidly with a structure that gave the sacrament of Orders three Major Ministries: Bishops, Priests, Deacons. St. Paul's pastoral letters bear witness to this, as do the letters of St. Ignatius some decades later. These clearly define the structure of the priestly order. This testimony informs us that there were bishops, priests and deacons who were celibate and some who were married. Did the latter have to observe the law of priestly continence or not? It is a great question, to which many today still give a negative answer, especially for the instructions St. Paul gave to both Timothy and Titus not to ordain anyone who had married twice: "each elder must be a man of irreproachable character; he must not have been married more than once" (I Tim. 3:2-12; Tito 1:6). From a biblical point of view, however, the opposite answer is more satisfactory. Paul actually gave this answer because according to him anyone who had been married twice would be unable to observe continence. He advised a second marriage to anyone who was unable to control himself. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul says: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7: 8f). For Paul, the different types of candidate: celibates, widowers and married men had to follow the same style of life. Anyone who could not offer guarantees in this area, such as those who had remarried, was excluded from candidature to Sacred Orders.

It must be said that the recommendation made to Titus and Timothy, to ordain only those who had been married once, is the foundation of the arguments supporting the abolition of celibacy in the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, it must also be said that the confusion over this Pauline passage derives from the fact that an adequate distinction between celibacy and perpetual continence has not been made; in other words, some see in these words of St. Paul a denial of priestly celibacy, whilst the real point emphasized by St. Paul is the necessity of perpetual continence for those who are admitted to the Order of Deacon or Bishop.

7. **In order to understand St. Paul's thoughts** we must remember first and foremost his esteem for:
- celibacy, as chosen by some and the gift of God to some: I Cor. 7: 7; and as a condition of perfect service to God
 - abstinence, as at least a partial proposal made to all: he advises married people (I Cor. 7: 5) to practice it occasionally by mutual agreement, and he recommends it to all married people as a permanent Christian attitude (I Cor. 7: 29);
 - perpetual continence practiced by the other apostles: cfr. the above comment to I Cor. 9:5.

Placed in this context, St. Paul's recommendation to Titus and Timothy does not mean that the presbyter must be married, but that he should not have been married more than once: in other words, he does not intend to recommend marriage, as if marriage were necessary for the exercise of the priestly ministry; instead, he is saying that anyone who wishes to be admitted to Sacred Orders must not have

been married more than once. Why? Probably because, as we have just seen (cf. I Cor. 7: 8f), he believes that a man who has been married twice cannot give a sufficient guarantee that he would practice perfect continence. St. Paul wrote to Timothy and then to Titus, both of whom have been considered celibates by the Christian tradition. He could not therefore have recommended that Bishops be obliged to marry once, if he approved the behavior of Titus and Timothy who were celibates. St. Paul makes this recommendation so that married candidates for the priesthood would follow the example of the married apostles. The latter had been married only once, then they had abandoned everything to follow Jesus in chastity for their whole lives, as we said above. According to St. Paul, persons who had not given proof of sexual moderation in the past could not give any assurance of perfect continence in the future. Hence St. Paul's request: do not ordain Bishops, Priests, or Deacons, unless they have shown self-control in the past.

This interpretation is backed up by the entire context of Paul's First Letter to Timothy. After giving instructions on how to choose the candidate to the Episcopate or Diaconate, and after indicating that the candidate had to have been "vir unius mulieris", Paul makes the same recommendation and uses the same terminology for the widows who were to be included in the list of those who promised perfect chastity. Paul was disappointed by the behavior of many widows who had promised, and then betrayed, their 'fides'. He therefore recommended to Timothy that he inscribe in the register of widows only the names of those who qualified as "unius viri mulier". Widows undoubtedly could not have any right to sexual relationships. Why therefore did Paul recommend the inscription of widows "unius viri mulier"? Because Paul's concern was to ensure that they kept the promise they made to the Lord to serve him in perfect continence. According to Paul, those who had been married twice were unable to guarantee fidelity to the 'fides', in other words, the vow they had made. For this reason, he advised Timothy to accept only widows who had been the wife of only one man and who were older than sixty. Paul's concern for candidates to the Episcopate is along the same lines: they must be detached from everything (to dedicate themselves to prayer) and they must "live as though they had no wife" (I Cor. 7: 29), because they must dedicate themselves to the Lord's service with an undivided heart, as Paul does. The guarantee of this perpetual continence was given only by their previous temperance, that is, by having married only once.

It seems to me that this interpretation links the biblical statements together very well; it seems also that this interpretation fits in best with the constant attitude of the entire Church (both Latin and Greek) in asking that all married people practice perfect continence in the exercise of the ministry of bishop, priest and deacon, and not to admit to the priesthood any man who had married twice.

8. **The conclusion** is that to maintain the existence of a biblical foundation in support of the optional nature of the discipline of continence/celibacy is at best imprudent, if not incorrect. The opposite must be said, namely that everything supports those who maintain that the Apostles were called by the Lord to continence/celibacy, that they were faithful to this call and that they handed this teaching on to their successors. In connection with this, Heid says: "...Already in

the time of the apostles, or at the very least since the late New Testament period, a kind of obligation existed – in short, a kind of celibacy law. Mere good intentions could not have provided the foundation for an institution, nor would they account for the unanimity that can be observed in the following centuries. The prevailing opinion – that the New Testament is devoid of any evidence for a discipline of celibacy and even argues against it – can therefore scarcely withstand in-depth and meticulous scrutiny”.¹⁹

Chapter 2

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRIESTLY CONTINENCE IN THE EAST UP TO THE VII CENTURY

In order to study the reason and the manner in which the universal Church acknowledged and lived priestly continence and celibacy, we must examine the history of the first seven centuries, namely the period before the Second Council of Trullo (692), which officially gave rise to the different discipline between the Eastern and Western Churches.

We shall therefore present chronologically, first the testimony of the Eastern Church and, secondly, the testimony of the Western Church, in order to see to what extent they agreed before the Council of Trullo.

It should be noted that many consider the period from the post-apostolic times until the third century as a time of great silence in both Churches. The issue of clerical continence/celibacy did not arise as a topic of debate, in the sense that someone was either challenging it or refusing to accept it. The impression is that the ecclesiastical discipline continued silently along the lines of Jesus’ invitation to complete detachment and according to the instructions given by the Apostles. Worthy of note, first and foremost, is the complete absence of statements contrary to the apostolic policy of continence/celibacy. This silence is even more meaningful in the light of the fact that the Church was then fighting against encratism, a spiritual movement that, thanks to a distorted interpretation of Jesus’ ideas concerning the body, invited people to despise not only the body, but also matrimony. This often led to baptism being given only to those married people who promised to suspend all sexual activity within their marriage. In that period, therefore, the Church spoke out in favor of the body and marriage. If the Lord had not demanded continence of his ministers, it would have been very easy and timely to emphasize marriage and its use by Sacred Ministers. Instead nothing is said about it.

On the contrary, it must be emphasized that there is a great deal of evidence in support of priestly continence, though we must also admit that this is something of a crescendo, not without question marks and dark areas, which cannot always be explained clearly. Nevertheless, they are more clearly explained by the general context in which they occur.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE II-III-IV CENTURIES

¹⁹ cf. Heid Stefan, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

In an orderly sequence, we will look first of all at the **Eastern Church** and the testimony of its Fathers and Councils.

1. The first Eastern Church sources can be linked to **the pastoral letters of St. Paul**. We know that the two letters to Timothy and Titus are always looked upon as being inspired and belonging to the Church's biblical canon and, moreover, they have always been attributed to St. Paul. Their dating is quite another problem. For various reasons of structure and style, many biblical scholars believe it improbable that these two letters were personally written by St. Paul. Instead, they believe that either one of his disciples, or another writer, faithfully handed on Paul's thoughts on the issue, dating them probably around the year 100. Following this interpretation, which seems plausible, Paul's thought was very clear in the minds of the Christians of the sub-apostolic era, which coincided with the apostolate of St. Ignatius. St. Ignatius taught everyone to respect and follow the Bishop as they would Christ himself, and the presbyters as they would the Apostles, and this leads one to think that both the Bishop and the priests must imitate Christ and the Apostles in their detachment from all human realities: including, therefore, in their continence/celebracy. There is certainly nothing in **St. Ignatius** (+ 116 ca.) to suggest the contrary. This appears above all in his exhortation to the celibate life in his letter to Polycarp:

*“If anyone can remain chaste for the Lord's glory, let him do so with humility. If he boasts about it he is lost, if he believes himself superior to the bishop he will bring about his own ruin”*²⁰.

In this passage, we can already sense the “competition” between the two forms of bodily purity required by Christ of his Apostles: matrimonial continence and celibacy. Evidently, some of the members of the Christian communities who felt called to follow Christ in the path of priestly celibacy were also tempted to consider themselves superior to the other priests, and even the Bishop, who had perhaps been chosen from among the ranks of the married. St. Ignatius appreciates their desire, but he invites them not to despise the married bishops. This is one of the earliest signs of the conflict between the two ways of living priestly continence: in the married life or in the celibate state, with the preference falling on the latter.

2. As far as St. **Polycarp** (+ 155 ca.) is concerned, some people draw attention to one of his statement in order to assert the freedom granted to the bishops of the early Church to have a conjugal life. The statement in question is taken from a letter written by Polycarp to Pope Victor, in which he says:

*“And I myself, the least among you, Polycratus, (live) according to the tradition of my family, some of whom I followed. Seven of my kin were bishops, and I am the eight; and my parents always kept the day when people abstain from leavened bread. As to me, brothers, I am sixty-five years old in the Lord....”*²¹

This sentence led some to conclude that Polycarp had several brother bishops and that he himself was the son of a bishop. In actual fact, the Greek terminology used by Polycarp leads us to the conclusion that he was referring to the brothers and

²⁰ cf. I Padri Apostolici, Citta' Nuova Editrice, Roma, 1981, p. 141.

²¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, Hist. Eccl., V, XXIV, 6. SCh 41, 68.

the parents in the collateral line.²² Therefore his testimony cannot be used to prove that married men in Major Orders were free to exercise their marital rights.

3. **Clement of Alexandria (150-211/216)** was one of the first to speak openly about continence/celebrity. He wrote the first treatise on continence, which was, unfortunately, lost. Nevertheless, we can draw some conclusions from the remaining fragments of some of his writings, especially from Book III of his “Stromata”. We can deduce from the surviving texts that Clement speaks in favor of matrimony in opposition to the Gnostics who despised it. At the same time, however, he also speaks of priestly continence along the lines of the pastoral letters, which admit married men to Sacred Orders, whilst asking them to live in continence with their wives. In order to strengthen his position, Clement expresses his conviction that, on the one hand, the majority of the Apostles (including Paul) were married and, on the other hand, that the Apostles had always lived in continence. This was the only way to justify an already existing discipline, which perhaps was facing some opposition and which needed an authoritative justification: this was found in the behavior of the Apostles who, even though they were married, lived in continence.

*“Peter and Philip had children, and Philip married his daughters off to men. And Paul is not afraid in one of his letters to call a woman his ‘wife’ whom he did not take with him on his journeys, because she was not of use to his great ministry. Does he not say in the same letter: ‘Don’t we have the power to take with us a sister wife, as the other apostles do?’ For these apostles, giving themselves without respite to the work of preaching as befitted their ministry, took with them women, not as wives but as sisters, to share in their ministry to women living at home: by their help the teaching of the Lord reached the women’s quarters without arousing suspicion’.*²³

One difficulty, however, could arise from the “Stromata”. In this book, Clement speaks so well of matrimony in opposition to the Gnostic and encratic mentality of those times, that some believed he could not be in favor of priestly continence, especially in the light of the following declaration:

*“Indeed, he (Paul) does admit the ‘husband of one wife’, whether he be a priest, deacon, or layman, using his marital rights in an irreproachable way; because he ‘will be saved’ by begetting children”*²⁴

At first sight, this statement leads to a conclusion against priestly continence. Yet, if read in its proper context, it confirms the discipline of priestly continence. We only have to look at the conclusion reached by Cocchini at the end of his critical examination of this statement: “...we would be ready to understand Clement’s passage in the following way: The Apostle also admits precisely (to the episcopate) the husbands of single wives, be they priests, deacons, or laymen using marriage in an irreproachable way: “for they will be saved by procreating children”. Nothing prevents us from thinking that in this hierarchy of candidates admissible to the episcopate priests and deacons are contrasted with laymen because they have given up the use, even the irreproachable use, of their marital

²² cf: Cocchini Christian, *Apostolic origins of Priestly Celibacy*, pp.142-143, San Francisco, 1981; Gryson R., *Les origines du celibate ecclesiastique*, p. 5, Gembloux, 1970

²³ Clement Alex. *Stromata* 3, 6, 53 1-3 (GCS Clem. Alex 2-4, 220, 16-24).

²⁴ cf. *Stromata*, III, 12, 90. GCS, 15, 237.

rights. What we know from other sources inclines us strongly to believe that such was indeed the meaning of the sentence of the master of the School of Alexandria”.²⁵ If it were not so, indeed, Clement would be in clear contradiction with himself.

4. Then there is the testimony of **Origen (184-284)**, a celibate priest who was more than convinced that a priest must be continent, especially because he must be available for prayer. Origen says:

*“(Paul recommends temporary continence for married people) so it is certain that unceasing sacrifice is impossible for those who are subject to the obligations of marriage. I therefore conclude that only the one vowed to unceasing and perpetual chastity can offer unceasing sacrifice. There are other feasts for those who cannot offer unceasingly the sacrifice of chastity”*²⁶.

Origen also confirms his belief in priestly continence in another way. We know, from the previously mentioned sources, that the Church of Origen’s times was also ordaining married men, on the condition, however that they had been married only once: anyone who had married more than once was not allowed to be a deacon, priest or bishop. This ban also applied to anyone who promised chastity after becoming a widower for the second time. Origen saw no reason for this severity and wondered why it was impossible to ordain a man left a widower for the second time when it was precisely this state of being a widower that guaranteed he would live in continence. Origen thus indirectly confirms that the ban on ordaining men who have been married more than once stems from the observance of continence, a discipline he never disputes.²⁷

5. The testimony in favor of continence/celibacy increases more and more, both with regard to the positive and negative aspects. One of the first documents comes from the **Syrian Constitution the ‘Didascalia’ (210-250 c.)**, which takes up the teaching of St. Paul. It reasserts what the Apostle says in I Tim, namely, the absolute ban on admitting a man married more than once to Sacred Orders; it then specifies this ban with a further ban on married men fathering children after Ordination to Major Orders.

“But it is required that the bishop shall be ‘a man that has been taken one wife and who has managed his house well’ (I Tim 3:2, 4). And thus let him be proved when he receives the imposition of hands to sit in the position of the episcopacy: whether he is chaste, and whether his wife also is a believer and chaste; and whether he has brought up his children in the fear of God”.²⁸

6. Around the year 300, Canon 16 of the **Canons of the Holy Apostles** states:
“It is good for him (the candidate for bishop) to be without a wife, but if not, that he be of his only wife”.

The canon indicates that candidates for the priesthood were preferably chosen from among celibates. Nevertheless, married men were not excluded, provided

²⁵ cf. Cocchini Christian, op. cit., pp. 147-151; cf: Heid Stephan reaches the same conclusion although by another avenue: cf: Heid Stephan, op. cit. pp. 67-72.

²⁶ cf. Origen, Hom. 23, 3 in Num. (GCS Orig. 7, 215, 11-16).

²⁷ cf. Origen, comm.. in Mt. 14: 22 (GCS Orig. 10, 337, 19- 338, 7)

²⁸ cf. Didascalia apostolorum 4 (CSCO.S 176, 45, 15-46, 4).

they observed perfect continence. It is difficult, if not impossible, to interpret this text in a different manner.²⁹ Even more so since the “Canons of the Holy Apostles” put into the Apostles’ mouths the rules to be observed in the election of bishops, priests and deacons. With regard to the chastity of these, the Canons say:

*“Peter said: It would be better (for the Bishop) not to be married; or else let him be the husband of only one wife...; John said: There must therefore...the priests, who would have lived a long time in the world and would abstain from relations with their wives... Matthew said: Let there be deacons... Let them be people experienced in all kinds of ministries and let them have a good testimony on the part of the whole people; let them be monogamous, raise their children...”*³⁰

This text is of value not because its contents can be directly attributed to the Apostles, but because these statements on continence/celibacy are clear and rooted in the conscience of the Christian community, even though they are dated at 300 circa, that is before any local or universal conciliar statements on the subject.

7. A series of precautions can be observed in the previously mentioned documents; they are surprising and can only stem from a particular attention to priestly continence/celibacy. For example:
- a. There was an absolute ban on the ordination of a man guilty of public bad conduct, even if he subsequently repented.³¹
 - b. The obligation of continence was imposed on the wives of married candidates.³² For this reason, there was a ban on the ordination of men married to a woman who had been married more than once, a divorced woman, an adulteress or a prostitute: the reason was that such women would not be capable of living in chastity’.³³(ST 128-132) Articles XVII-XXI and XXVI of **The canons of the Holy Apostles** thus state:
 - *“CANON XVII. He who has been twice married after baptism, or who has had a concubine, cannot become a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or any other of the sacerdotal list.*
 - *CANON XVIII. He who married a widow, or a divorced woman, or a harlot, or a servant-maid, or an actress, cannot be a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or any other of the sacerdotal list.*
 - *CANON XIX. He who has married two sisters, or a niece, cannot become a clergyman.*
 - *CANON XX. If a clergyman becomes surety for any one, let him be deposed.*
 - *CANON XXI. An eunuch, if he has been made so by the violence of men or [if his virilia have been amputated (1)] in times of persecution, or if he has been born so, if in other respects he is worthy, may be made a bishop.*
 - *CANON XXVI. (XXVII.) Of those who have been admitted to the clergy unmarried, we ordain, that the readers and singers only may, if they*

²⁹ cf. *Constitutio ecclesiastica apostolorum* 16, 2.

³⁰ cf. *Juris ecclesiastici Graecorum historia et monumenta*, I (Rome, 1864), pp. 82-86

³¹ Origen is very clear about this: (St p. 127); see also the declarations of the Didascalia apostolorum 4 (CSCO.S 176, 43, 24f, 46, 9-11).

³² Didascalia Apostolorum 4 (CSCO.S 176, 46, 2f.

³³ cf.: Stephan Heid, *op. cit.* pp. 128-132.

will, marry.” This canon, which refers to the necessity of priestly celibacy, throws light on all the other canons that lay down the conditions regarding the eligibility of married candidates to Sacred Orders.

- c. There was a ban on the so-called ‘spiritual marriages’, a type of cohabitation established for mutual help, including the practice of continence. This phenomenon, which appeared in the second century, was still present in the fourth century, as the case of Bishop Paul of Samosata demonstrates. Nevertheless, the Synod of Antiochia in 268 invited him to change his conduct. This means that the Church was very suspicious of a form of continence that aimed at giving spiritual guarantees, but which actually represented a great danger for continence and a contradiction with the clerical state.³⁴
8. The practice of ordaining celibates is always accompanied by a ban on them getting married after they have received Sacred Orders: this prohibition, namely the promise of priestly celibacy, refers to the compulsory nature of priestly continence for those who have been promoted to Sacred Orders whilst in the married state. In actual fact, celibacy, which appeared in the early times of Christianity, is a logical consequence of the obligatory continence to which married candidates bind themselves. If married candidates have to forgo conjugal life, those who have received Major Orders as celibates can no longer marry. One of the best sources of testimony is the **Council of Neocesarea, which was celebrated in 315** in Asia Minor; this Council ordered the expulsion of any priest who married after receiving ordination. The same Council also ordered that anyone who did not guarantee the observance of priestly continence should also be stripped of his ecclesiastical ministry.
- a. Canon I orders the expulsion of a priest who marries after ordination:

“If a presbyter has married a wife, let him be removed from the ranks. But if he has fornicated or has committed adultery, let him be thrust out completely and let him subject himself to penance”.
 - b. Canon 8 forbids the husband of an adulteress from becoming a priest; it also forbids the exercise of the priestly ministry by a priest who has remained with a wife guilty of adultery:

‘If the wife of a layman has committed adultery, and the fact has been clearly established, the man cannot join the ministry. If she committed adultery after the ordination of her husband, he must send her away. If he continues to live with her, he cannot exercise the ministry entrusted to him’
- The only reason for this legislation is to uphold the promise of priestly continence. This obliges us to conclude that Canons I and 8 are related to each other. The relationship stems from the fact that a celibate cannot have access to what is forbidden to married men in the exercise of the priestly ministry. Therefore celibacy and continence have the same root: the exercise of the priestly ministry.
9. **The ecclesiastical canons of the Holy Apostles** prefer the bishop who has no wife. We also have the testimony of **Epiphanius** and **John Chrysostom**, which

³⁴ Ibidem, pp. 132-135.

reminds us of the order of precedence in admission to Sacred Orders: celibates, widowers and married men, laying down the premise of clerical prestige.³⁵ The phrase of St. **Gregory Nazianzen (+ 389/390 ca.)** is significant because it reacts against the increasing tendency of the people to scorn married priests. It says:

“Do not say: “Let a bishop baptize me, and let him be a metropolitan or the bishop of Jerusalem, and let him be of good birth. For I do not wish to risk an offense to my noble birth by the one who confers baptism.” Or, “If he is a priest, then let him be unmarried or among those who are continent and lead an angelic life.”

It should be noted that while these patristic texts reveal several transgressions and offences against priestly continence by married sacred ministers, not one of them sanctions any of them as legitimate. Nor is there any testimony about children born legitimately after Ordination. Finally, we should remember that the age for the Ordination of married men was laid down to coincide with the end their offspring’s childhood.³⁶

THE ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF NICEA

The conclusion of this common discipline, which was already visible in the third century, was summed up and codified in canons 2 and 3 of the great **Council of Nicea in 325**. The second canon of the Council states that a married man who is promoted to the priesthood must be suspended from this Order if he is found guilty of sensual sin:

“Canon 2. Forasmuch as, either from necessity, or through the urgency of individuals, many things have been done contrary to the Ecclesiastical canon, so that man just converted from heathenism to the faith, and who have been instructed but a little while, are straightway brought to the spiritual layer, and as soon as they have been baptized, are advanced to the episcopate or the presbyterate, it has seemed right to us that for the time to come no such thing shall be done. For to the catechumen himself there is need of time and of a longer trial after baptism. For the apostolical saying is clear, “Not a novice; lest, being lifted up with pride, he fall into condemnation and the snare of the devil.” But if, as time goes on, any sensual sin should be found out about the person, and he should be convicted by two or three witnesses, let him cease from the clerical office. And who so shall transgress these [enactments] will imperil his own clerical position, as a person who presumes to disobey the great Synod.

It must be said that this canon contains no clear instruction about the continence of married men who receive Major Orders. Nevertheless, the decisions taken are in harmony with it. It is surprising that the ‘sensual sin’ mentioned in this canon is not defined as adultery, which would be the obvious case of a married man who betrays his wife. In all probability, it hints at the non-observance of priestly continence. The interpretation is, however, in complete harmony with the canon that immediately follows. In order to assure the Church of her ministers’ continence, Canon 3 totally

³⁵ Cf. Heid Stephan, op. cit., pp. 177-178

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 323.

forbids the bishop, priest and deacon from having any woman whatsoever with them, unless she is above all suspicion, such as a mother, sister, aunt. The exclusion of the wife is very clear:

“Canon 3. The great Synod has stringently forbidden any bishop, presbyter, deacon, or any one of the clergy whatever, to have a subintroducta dwelling with him, except only a mother, or sister, or aunt, or such persons only as are beyond all suspicion.”

It seems that the third canon of the Council of Nicea clearly points to the discipline of priestly continence/celebrity, considering also that the bishop figures at the top of the list of those who are subject to the ban on cohabitation. According to the common teaching of the Eastern and Western Churches, the Bishop was always bound to observe continence concerning the use of marriage. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that some hold the opposite opinion and, in support of their position, they refer to the already mentioned ‘episode’ of Paphnutius. However, as we have seen, this legend is not backed up by any solid historical criticism.

Nevertheless, we must point out that the **Council of Ancyra (314)** and the **Council of Gangres (340)** made some declarations that can cause us some perplexity. For example, canon 10 of the Council of Ancyra says:

“Those who are promoted to deacons, if at the time of their promotion, they protested and said that they had to marry and could not live in this way and then married later, can remain in the ministry because the bishop permitted them to do so. But those who have kept silence and were admitted to ordination (on the condition) that they persevere in this state (of celibacy), if they marry subsequently, they will be deprived of (the functions of) the diaconate”.

At first sight, this canon seems to grant deacons the possibility of declaring themselves incapable of observing the law of celibacy and obtaining admission to the diaconate nonetheless. A more attentive reading leads to the more logical conclusion that this canon refers to candidates to the diaconate who declare their inability to observe celibacy at the last minute and who are, therefore, confined to inferior levels of the ecclesiastical state, such as the cantors and lectors. This is really the only possible interpretation, if for no other reason than the fact that canon 10 would otherwise be in contradiction with itself³⁷ Therefore the Council of Ancyra is by no means in contradiction with the almost contemporary Council of Elvira (306).

The Council of Gangres also presents some difficulties of interpretation because of its fourth canon, which states:

“If anyone affirms that one should not receive communion during the holy sacrifice celebrated by a married priest, let him be anathema”.

The difficulty is immediately overcome when we consider that the canon was written in the context of the heresy of Eustathius of Sebaste. Eustathius was a heretic inspired by a powerful gnosis that condemned matrimony. The followers of this heresy were obliged to separate from their spouses, they refused to pray and receive the Eucharist in the houses of married people. Married priests were therefore considered to be

³⁷ cf. Cocchini Christian, *The apostolic Origins of Priestly celibacy*, pp. 169-177, San Francisco, 1981.

totally unworthy. This explains why canon 4 was written. The difficulties cease once the origin of this canon has been clarified. This canon really only intends to reassert priestly dignity and the respect owed to one who received Sacred Orders in the married state.³⁸

THE FATHERS OF THE IV-V CENTURIES

At the same time and after this series of Councils (Neocesarea, Nicea, Ancyra, Gangres) the Fathers of the Church provide us with a flourishing testimony on the matter.

1. We begin with **Eusebius (265-340)**. His testimony is particularly important because it is almost contemporaneous with all of these Councils. Eusebius was a distinguished bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, who took part in the Council of Nicea in 325. The already mentioned legend of Paphnutius (p. 2) led some to believe that the Council of Nicea had rejected the legitimacy of the continence of married priests. Eusebius was a historian by profession and a very credible one in the eyes of many. However his writings make no mention of any fact that could be connected to the legend of Paphnutius. He therefore strips that legend of any credibility.

He is remembered for his “*Demonstratio Evangelica*”, in which he very clearly states St. Paul’s teaching in I Tim 3:2 indicates that the married Bishop had to abstain from conjugal life:

*“...even according to the laws of the New Covenant, begetting children is not entirely prohibited. For ‘it is fitting’, according to Scripture, ‘that a bishop be the husband of an only wife’ (I Tim 3:2). 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 are 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’ (Heb 13:4)’.*³⁹

2. **St. Basil the Great (329-379)**, was deservedly called the legislator of the eastern world by his contemporaries because of his extensive doctrine and the great influence he exerted over all. In his letters, Basil deals also with the case of the married man who becomes a priest without knowing that his marriage was ‘illicit’:

“As to the priest who was bound unknowingly in an illicit marriage, I have already decided what was to be done, i.e., he would keep his place in the sanctuary but would abstain from any other function; a simple pardon would suffice for him. It would not be reasonable to let a man who has to bind his own wounds bless others; for blessing is a communication of grace, and he does not have it because of the fault he committed unknowingly. How then could he communicate it to another? Let him not bless therefore, neither publicly nor privately, nor distribute the Body of the Lord to others, nor fulfill any other ecclesiastical function; but let him

³⁸ cf. ibidem pp. 201-202.

³⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *De Demonstratione evangelica*, I, 9. GCS 23. 43.

*be content with precedence and implore the Lord's pardon for the iniquity he committed in his ignorance"*⁴⁰

The fact that an unconsciously illicit marriage is mentioned indicates that this is not a simple case of adultery; it was therefore, very probably, caused by ignorance of the canonical norms in the Didaskalia Apostolorum and in the Canons of the Holy Apostles, which banned the Ordination of anyone who had married a widow, a mentally ill woman or an actress, etc. It is also the result of St. Basil's mercy and understanding because he did not want to expel from the choir one guilty of such a transgression. If it had been a true case of adultery, or a lack of priestly continence, he would have dealt with it through the irrevocable expulsion from the priesthood and reduction to the lay state, as he states elsewhere:

*"A deacon who commits fornication after his appointment to the diaconate is to be deposed. But, after he has been rejected and ranked among the laity, he is not to be excluded from communion. For there is an ancient canon that those who have fallen from their degree are to be subjected to this kind of punishment alone."*⁴¹

Nevertheless, in spite of St. Basil's great understanding, he does not allow anyone ordained with the canonical impediment of a previous marriage to continue to exercise the priestly ministry.

3. **St. Ephraem Syrus (ca. 306-373)** is the deacon honored by the Syrians as "the Doctor of the Universe", "The pillar of the Church", and "the harp of the Holy Spirit". In his *Carmina Nisibena* he thus exalts the figure of the priest:

"It is not enough for the priest and the name of the priesthood, it is not enough, I say, for him who offers up the living body, to cleanse his soul and tongue and hand and make spotless his whole body; but he must at all times be absolutely and preeminently pure, because he is established as a mediator between God and the human race. May He be praised who made His servants clean!"

We can thoroughly grasp the meaning of these words if we bear in mind what Ephraem says in his "*Adversus Heaereses*", where he applies the discipline of continence/ceibacy also to subdeacons:

"The Church does not on any account admit a man living in the wedded state and having children, even though he has only one wife, to the orders of deacon, priest, bishop or subdeacon; but only him whose wife be dead or who should abstain from the use of marriage; this is done in those places especially where the ecclesiastical canons are accurately followed."

4. **St. Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386)** did not write very much about priestly continence, but in his 12th catechesis, in which he speaks about the Incarnate Word, there is a sentence that is particularly important to our topic. It says: "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?".⁴² Beyond any interpretation of the adjective "good priests", the fact

⁴⁰ cf: Joannou, II, pp. 127-28.

⁴¹ St. Basil, Epistulae 188, 3.

⁴² St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechesis 12, 25, PG 33, 757a

remains that St. Cyril states that priestly continence is a feature of the Christian priesthood.

This is a very interesting period because it provides us with a great deal of evidence that the law of celibacy/continence is the common heritage of the entire Church. From Cyprus we have the testimony of Epiphanius of Salamina (315-402),⁴³ from Palestine and Egypt the testimony of Jerome, from Syria and Asia Minor the testimony of John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret of Cyrus.

5. Especially important is the testimony of **Epiphanius of Salamina (315-402)**, who explicitly states that the discipline of continence/celibacy is a valid and universally binding norm. His testimony is even more certain because he is not afraid to acknowledge the violations that were being enacted against this discipline:

*“In point of fact a call to the holy priesthood of God, since the coming of Christ and because of the exceeding greatness of the honor of the priesthood, is not approved for those who, after the first marriage, and their wife having died, enter upon a second marriage. And this the Holy Church of God has kept watch over unfailingly and strictly. But even one who is husband of one wife, if she is still living and still bearing children, is not approved; but after one marriage, if a husband keep continent or, if his wife has died, he remain a widower, he may be approved as both deacon and presbyter and bishop and subdeacon, especially where the ecclesiastical canons are precise”*⁴⁴

Although Epiphanius declares that major clerics are chosen first and foremost from among celibates and monks, he also reminds us that married men may be admitted to the priesthood, provided they observe continence, as the apostles themselves taught:

*“ 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 with 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”.*⁴⁵

Nevertheless, even if Epiphanius has a great esteem for those who choose the priesthood after living a monogamous marriage and promise perpetual continence,⁴⁶ he declares that the practice of choosing celibate candidates first and foremost for Sacred Orders is ever more evident. It is also confirmed by the order of precedence indicated by **St. John Chrysostom**: celibates, widowers, married men.⁴⁷

⁴³ cf. PG 41, 868, 1024.

⁴⁴ cf: Epiphanius of Salamina, Panacea against all heresies, 59, 4.

⁴⁵ cf: Epiphanius of Salamina, Adversus Haereses, Haer. 48, 9. GCS 31, 231.

⁴⁶ Epiphanius of Salamina, De fide 21, 7f. (GCS Epiph. 3, 522, 8-11).

⁴⁷ John Chrysostom, De non iterando coniugio 2 (SC 138, 166, 75f.).

6. The testimony of **Jerome (347-419)** is also very explicit. His contacts and travels could justify his being considered as a witness of both the Eastern Church and the Western Church. Jerome thus writes in his letter to Pammachius:

*“Let my critics explain to me how Jesus can have entered in through closed doors when He allowed His hands and His side to be handled, and showed that He had bones and flesh,” thus proving that His was a true body and no mere phantom of one, and I will explain how the holy Mary can be at once a mother and a virgin. A mother before she was wedded, she remained a virgin after bearing her son. 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.(1) 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”.*⁴⁸

Commenting on the letter of St. Paul to Titus, Jerome says:

*“ 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 the eye and wanderings of the mind.....Let the bishop practice abstinence not only, as some think, with respect to carnal desires and embraces with his wife, but also with respect to all the troubles (that can agitate) the soul: let him not be inclined to anger or crushed by sadness; let him not be tortured by fear, and let him not be exalted by an immoderate joy...”.*⁴⁹

7. **The practice of ordaining celibates is always accompanied by the ban on them marrying after receiving Sacred Orders:** this prohibition is the second constant sign that emphasizes the obligatory nature of priestly continence/celibacy. In actual fact, celibacy, which appeared at the very origins of Christianity, is a logical consequence of the continence to which married candidates are bound. As we said before mentioning the Council of Neocesarea (p. 20), if married men who are ordained must forgo conjugal life, those who have received Sacred Orders in the celibate state can no longer contract marriage since they would be in no position to live the conjugal life. Evidence of this can be traced back to Hippolytus, the already quoted canon 26 of the “Canons of the Holy Apostles” and the Council of Neocesarea in Asia Minor in 314-325, which, as we said previously, orders the expulsion from the priesthood of those who have contracted marriage after ordination and that they be stripped of their ecclesiastical ministry.

⁴⁸ Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, 48, 21.

⁴⁹ St. Jerome: Commentarium in epistola ad Titum I (vv. 8-9). PL 26, 603b-42.

The tradition of promoting celibates to Major Orders actually goes back to the times of Ignatius, as we have already seen in the letter written by Ignatius to Polycarp:

“If anyone can remain chaste for the Lord’s glory, let him do so with humility. If he boasts about it he is lost, if he believes himself superior to the bishop he will bring about his own ruin”

This means that there were already celibate priests towards the end of the first century, even though some of them considered themselves to be superior to the Bishop who had received Ordination in the married state.

The ecclesiastical canons of the Holy Apostles prefer the Bishop who has no wife. We then have the testimony of Epiphanius and John Chrysostom that refers to the order of precedence when accepting candidates for Sacred Orders: celibates, widowers and married men, laying down the premises for clerical prestige ⁵⁰(ST p. 177-178). We also have a significant phrase of St. **Gregory Nazianzen** (+ **389/390 ca.**) in reaction to the growing mentality of the people who scorn married priests:

“Do not say: “Let a bishop baptize me, and let him be a metropolitan or the bishop of Jerusalem, and let him be of good birth. For I do not wish to risk an offense to my noble birth by the one who confers baptism.” Or, “If he is a priest, then let him be unmarried or among those who are continent and lead an angelic life.”

8. **A very important observation must be made on the tradition of the daily Eucharistic celebration.** There is clear evidence of this practice not only in the West but, above all, in the East. In the mind of the Church Fathers, this called for perpetual continence because a man could not serve at the altar in a state of impurity, as the Book of Leviticus teaches, demanding continence of the priests and Levites every time they served at the altar. Consequently, if service at the altar was to be carried out daily, this meant that continence had to be perpetual. Heid has this to say: “For one thing, all attempts to find documentary evidence for a merely periodic continence of married clerics and their wives in the first centuries have failed. Rather, it is very likely, both for the East and the West, with greater certainty in the East, that there was a duty to observe perpetual continence and that it existed even before the fourth century, thus at a time before anyone had thought of celebrating daily. Furthermore, the practice of celebrating Mass daily is indeed attested to in the East, namely, by Eusebius of Caesarea, Cyril of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom. That is the same group of bishops who were also acquainted with clerical continence discipline. Thus the argument about daily Eucharist confirms, instead, for the east the existence of a celibacy discipline long before the initiatives of the popes” ⁵¹

9. It is also interesting to observe how **John Chrysostom** (344/354-407) rejects the interpretation of I Tim. 3, 1-4, in the sense that the presbyter must have a wife. Chrysostom writes:

⁵⁰ cf. Heid Stephan, op. cit., pp. 177-178

⁵¹ cf. Heid Stephan, op. cit. pp. 233-234

"If then "he who is married cares for the things of the world" (1 Cor. vii. 33), and a Bishop ought not to care for the things of the world, why does he say the husband of one wife? Some indeed think that he says this with reference to one who remains free(5) from a wife. But if otherwise, he that hath a wife may be as though he had none. (1 Cor. vii. 29.) For that liberty was then properly granted, as suited to the nature of the circumstances then existing. And it is very possible, if a man will, so to regulate his conduct. For as riches make it difficult to enter into the kingdom of Heaven, yet rich men have often entered in, so it is with marriage." ⁵²

In this period, everyone reasserts the ban on men who marry more than once. In this period everyone, except **Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428)**, dissociates himself from Origen who suggested that widowed men who had married twice could be admitted to Major Orders. The only concession made to Origen was for those who had received baptism after their first marriage. Jerome expressed the following opinion: he only counts the number of marriages after baptism because any marriage before baptism was cancelled by the baptism itself. Nevertheless, this partial diversity of opinions concerning men who married more than once represents the most obvious confirmation of the requirement of continence that was made to married couples. The mitigation of more than one marriage did not by any means imply the mitigation of continence: this remained in force in all its absoluteness. ⁵³ Theodore of Mopsuestia is the most radical in proposing the abolition of the impediment of having married more than once to receiving Major Orders, but he is more than convinced of the necessity of priestly continence for married men who accede to Major Orders. Theodore is in favor of abolishing the impediment of marrying more than once because, in certain cases, such a man gives a greater guarantee of observing priestly continence than a monogamist. ⁵⁴

On this point we also have the testimony of the Apostolic Canons of 300 c. and the Apostolic Constitutions of the second half of the fourth century.⁵⁵

There is also quite a widespread discussion among the Fathers as to whether Paul's statement in his First Letter to Timothy, '*vir unius mulieris*', was written in order to forbid more than one marriage. However everyone, even those who do

⁵² cf. St. John Chrysostom, Hom. 10, 1 in 1Tim, 3A:1-4 (PG 62, 584f.)

⁵³ cf. Heid Stefan, op. cit, pp. 163-166.

⁵⁴ Theodore of Mopsuestia, Comm. In Tim. 3:2 (99, 13-106, 24 Swete 2).

⁵⁵ WHAT OUGHT TO BE THE CHARACTERS OF A BISHOP AND OF THE REST OF THE CLERGY. II. Let him therefore be sober, prudent, decent, firm, stable, not given to wine; no striker, but gentle; not a brawler, not covetous; "not a novice, test, being puffed up with pride, be fall into condemnation, and the snare of the devil: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abused."(13) Such a one a bishop ought to be, who has been the "husband of one wife,"(14) who also has herself had no other husband, "ruling well his own house."(15) In this manner let examination be made when he is to receive ordination, and to be placed in his bishopric, whether he be grave, faithful, decent; whether he hath a grave and faithful-wife, or has formerly had such a one; whether he hath educated his children piously, and has "brought them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord;"(16) whether his domestics do fear and reverence him, and are all obedient to him: for if those who are immediately about him for worldly concerns are seditious and disobedient, how will others not of his family, when they are under his management, become obedient to him?

not exclude such an interpretation, reassert St. Paul's intention to ensure that married candidates would practice continence.⁵⁶

We also have some traditionally disputed cases, which, if studied properly however, only confirm the traditional ecclesiastical discipline of celibacy/continence (Gregory Nazianzen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius of Alexandria, Synesius of Cyrene)⁵⁷.

It is interesting to observe that the tradition of priestly continence is very strong in the East, even in the absence of a compelling legislation, along the lines of the legislation of the Council of Elvira. This means that the tradition does not merely stem from conciliar canons, but that it has more profound roots: in short, it is of apostolic origin.

THE CODES OF THEODOSIUS AND JUSTINIAN

1. In the V and VI centuries, the Code of Theodosius (438) and the Code of Justinian (535) are of primary importance and bear witness to just how much the discipline of continence/celibacy had penetrated both ecclesiastical and civil conscience. The importance of these Codes increases when we consider that they come from the Greek Church, which has always claimed apostolic origins for its discipline of priestly continence. In actual fact, until the sixth century this common practice existed in the East and in the West and was codified in the Codes of Theodosius and Justinian.
2. The traditional request for priestly continence is clearly evident in the **Theodosius Code (438)**. Theodosius was the Emperor of the East and reigned from 408 until 450. His Code says:

“One who occupies a position of importance in the world should not be discredited by the company of a so-called “sister”. Therefore, all those who are vested with the priesthood, at any rank whatsoever, or who are regarded as having the dignity of a cleric, must know that common life with “outsides” women is forbidden to them. We concede only the option of sheltering their mothers, their daughters, and their sisters within their house; for with these there is a natural bond that does not permit any evil suspicion.

*A chaste love further suggests that those women not be abandoned who, before the ordination of their husband, were worthy (of being united with him) by legitimate marriage; it is not without reason that they are associated with clerics, they who by their conduct rendered their husbands worthy of priesthood”.*⁵⁸
3. **The Code of Justinian**, dated 16 March 535, is even clearer:

“Neither a man living in a second marriage nor one who has been married to two wives may be ordained a deacon or a priest, nor one who is living with a wife who has divorced and left her husband, nor one who

⁵⁶ cf. St. John Chrysostom Hom. 10, I, in I Tim. 3:1-4; St. Jerome, Epistula 69, 5, *If ad Oceanum* CSEL 54, 685, 18-687, 5; Theodoret of Cyrhus, *Interpretatio* in I Tim. 3:2 (PG 82, 804D-805B).

⁵⁷ Heid Stefan, *op. cit.*, pp.184-198.

⁵⁸ *Codex Theodosianus* 16, 2, 44 (851 Mommsen 1, 2)

has a concubine, either. Instead, only those men should be ordained who practice continence or who are not living together with a wife, or else who were once or still are the husband of one wife – and she should be continent and virginal prior to her marriage. For nothing is so much sought after with respect to holy orders as continence, the source and the foundation of the divine canons and of all other virtues. If it happens, though, that some priest, deacon, or subdeacon should take a wife or concubine, whether openly or in secret, let him be immediately removed from his sacred ministry and treated thereafter as a layman”

Commenting on the Code of Justinian, Heid says: “An explicit permission to beget children, as might be expected on the basis of the Paphnutius legend, was out of the question. Marriages contracted by priests, deacons and subdeacons after ordination were illegitimate. Should such clerics beget children, even though “according to the priestly rule” they were not allowed to have relations with their wives, they had to resign from the ministry they exercised in major orders (law of October 18, 530). This law seems to presuppose that even higher clerics were lawfully wedded before their ordination were not allowed to beget children and that the “priestly rule” consisted precisely in that prohibition. However that may be: Justinian recommends continence as extraordinarily desirable, as the core of the entire celibacy legislation, and as the prerequisite for career advancement. All in all, his legislation assumes that the higher clergy practice continence”.⁵⁹ Finally, it should be noted that this legislation was totally in harmony with the legislation of the Latin Church, towards which there was not the slightest sign of intolerance.

We must draw two conclusions from the testimony of this period:

- a. The first is that the evidence in favor celibacy/continence is so great that the discipline appears to be an undisputed fact.
- b. The second conclusion is that, contrary to those who claim that the discipline of priestly continence was unknown in the Eastern Church, the evidence in its favor is greater in the East than in the West.

⁵⁹ cf. Heid Stefan, op. cit., p. 310.

Chapter 3

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRIESTLY CONTINENCE IN THE LATIN CHURCH UP TO VII CENTURY

Also in the Western Church there is no lack of testimony in favor of celibacy/continence. Indeed, there is abundant and ancient evidence going back as far as the second century with Tertullian, Cyprian, and Hippolytus. This is no small thing, considering what was said at the beginning of the chapter dedicated to the Eastern Church, concerning the great general silence during apostolic times in reference to priestly continence. The testimony of Tertullian, Cyprian, and Hippolytus and the latter's disputes with Pope Callistus indicate that an ancient tradition existed and that it demanded, on the one hand, continence of married clerics and, on the other hand, the observance of celibacy by unmarried clerics. However, what we said about the Eastern Church holds true also for the Latin Church: evidence about priestly continence/celibacy appears in a growing crescendo, taking as its starting point the indirect testimony of the II-III century and passes through the unequivocal declarations of Popes, Councils and Synods of the Latin Church until the present day.

THE FATHERS OF THE II AND III CENTURY

1. We begin with **Tertullian (ca. 150/160-after 220)** who asserts the existence of both celibate priests and priests who were ordained as either widowers or married men. Nevertheless, Tertullian maintains that all priests without distinction were bound by the duty of continence. This emerges especially from his opposition to those men who wished to receive the priesthood after being married for the second time. In the passage quoted below, Tertullian declares both the existence of celibate clergy and married clergy, and the impossibility of ordaining men who were married more than once. In this passage he ridicules such a man who came forward as a candidate for the priesthood:

“If this dulling (of the spiritual faculties), even when the carnal nature is allowed room for exercise in first marriage, averts the Holy Spirit; how much more when it is brought into play in second marriage! For (in that

case) the shame is double; inasmuch as, in second marriage, two wives beset the same husband--one in spirit, one in flesh. For the first wife you cannot hate, for whom you retain an even more religious affection, as being already received into the Lord's presence; for whose spirit you make request; for whom you render annual oblations. Will you stand, then, before the Lord with as many wives as you commemorate in prayer; and will you offer for two; and will you commend those two (to God) by the ministry of a priest ordained (to his sacred office) on the score of monogamy, or else consecrated (thereto) on the score even of virginity, surrounded by widows married but to one husband? And will your sacrifice ascend with unabashed front, and--among all the other (graces) of a good mind--will you request for yourself and for your wife chastity? ⁶⁰

Tertullian too gives as a reason that the apostles who were married, were monogamists and continent:

*"Peter alone do I find--through (the mention of) his "mother-in-law"(2),-- to have been married. Monogamist I am led to presume him by consideration of the Church, which, built upon him,(3) was destined to appoint every grade of her Order from monogamists. The rest, while I do not find them married, I must of necessity understand to have been either eunuchs or continent. "*⁶¹

It should be noted that, in the pre-montanist period, Tertullian had no difficulty in granting a second marriage to lay people. This means that his opposition to men who had married more than once was motivated by their inability to observe continence and this conviction was based on St. Paul's teaching (I Cor. 7-8 ff.), which considered such men to be incapable of observing continence. His conviction that the priest cannot be married more than once, because he is called to continence, is confirmed even more when, in the montanist period, he even banned lay people from marrying a second time. The reason for this was that lay people too are "priests" by virtue of their baptism and priests are chosen from among them: therefore St. Paul's edict to Titus and Timothy is applied also to them:

*"Vain shall we be if we think that what is not lawful for priests (8) is lawful for laics. Are not even we laics priests? So truly is this the case, that unless the laics as well observe the rules which are to guide the choice of presbyters, how will there be presbyters at all, who are chosen to that office from among the laics? Hence we are bound to contend that the command to abstain from second marriage relates first to the laic; so long as no other can be a presbyter than a laic, provided he have been once far all a husband. "*⁶²

Tertullian demanded that clerics who remarried be expelled from the clerical state ⁶³. Hippolytus of Rome held the same opinion. ⁶⁴

⁶⁰ cf. Tertullian, De exhortatione castitatis 11, 2 (CCL 2, 1031, 8-14)

⁶¹ cf. Tertullian, Monogamy, 8, 4.

⁶² cf. Tertullian, An exhortation to Chastity, 7, 2.

⁶³ cf. Heid Stefan, op. cit, pp. 81.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, pp. 136-137.

2. The diatribe between **Hippolytus (170/75-235)** and **Pope Callistus** is also important: the Pope had allowed the ordination to the priesthood of men who had married more than once. In some way, both approaches confirm the Roman tradition of forbidding ordination to men married more than once. Hippolytus believed it was wrong because of St. Paul's teaching in his letter to Timothy, in which the apostles says that a candidate for the Episcopacy must have been married only once. Nevertheless, Pope Callistus was not denying the statements of Hippolytus, but was only counting the number of marriages celebrated after the reception of baptism.

If read in its proper historical context, the diatribe between Hippolytus and Pope Callistus about the prohibition of the second marriage of major clerics also leads to the conclusion that the ban on marriage for those who had received Major Orders (diaconate, priesthood, episcopacy) while in the celibate state already existed at the beginning of the third century. This conclusion stems from the obligation of continence imposed on all who had received Major Orders while married: if continence was binding on ordained men who were married, what significance would a marriage after ordination have if it could not be consummated? Hence the ban on the marriage of ordained celibates.⁶⁵ In some way, we could say that celibacy is not only a historical fact affirmed by the Apostles (John) and the early Church (cf. Tertullian); it is also a theological-ascetic-disciplinary reality that stems from the obligation of priestly continence imposed on married priests.

3. In this period the discipline of priestly continence is already clearly visible among the clergy of Rome. We certainly cannot forget what **Ireneus** states about Rome when, in his main work: "Against heresies" he says that the apostolic tradition is preserved in the Church of Rome, founded by the Apostles Peter and Paul. Is it possible that such an important and clear practice as priestly continence escaped his consideration and was not inserted in the great statement mentioned above?⁶⁶
4. Like Origen, **Cyprian (+ 258)** too maintained that the daily celebration of the Eucharist implied total sexual abstinence: this did not only apply to celibates, but also to the married men who acceded to Major Orders. In support of this, we quote from a letter of St. Cyprian, in which he speaks of the priest's total availability for divine service. This letter only contains an indirect, but clear, reference to priestly continence: if Cyprian denies a priest the possibility of being the executor of another person's will, since this would mean his involvement in secular affairs and being taken away from divine things, how much more would a married priest be distracted by conjugal duties. Cyprian writes: "For it is written:
"No man that warreth for God entangleth himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please Him to whom he has pledged himself."(2) *As this is said of all men, how much rather ought those not to be bound by worldly*

⁶⁵ Ibidem pp. 88-89: "If no real right to marry existed even for the apostles, then a right to marry cannot be deduced either for their successors, the bishops. Tertullian is, as one might well imagine, a poor authority to cite on the subject of marrying clerics. The situation remains: in North Africa and in Rome higher clerics were not allowed to marry. This confirms once more a possible discipline of obligatory continence for married clerics. For what was the sense of a marriage prohibition for clerics in this early period? What rationale caused it to be so generally accepted? A restriction of marriageability becomes plausible only against the background of a general requirement of continence for the higher clergy".

⁶⁶ cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 3, 3, 2.

*anxieties and involvements, who, being busied with divine and spiritual things, are not able to withdraw from the Church, and to have leisure for earthly and secular doings! The form of which ordination and engagement the Levites formerly observed under the law, so that when the eleven tribes divided the land and shared the possessions, the Levitical tribe, which was left free for the temple and the altar, and for the divine ministries, received nothing from that portion of the division; but while others cultivated the soil, that portion only cultivated the favour of God, and received the tithes from the eleven tribes, for their food and maintenance, from the fruits which grew. All which was done by divine authority and arrangement, so that they who waited on divine services might in no respect be called away, nor be compelled to consider or to transact secular business. Which plan and rule is now maintained in respect of the clergy, that they who are promoted by clerical ordination in the Church of the Lord may be called off in no respect from the divine administration, nor be tied down by worldly anxieties and matters; but in the honour of the brethren who contribute, receiving as it were tenths of the fruits, they may not withdraw from the altars and sacrifices, but may serve day and night in heavenly and spiritual things”.*⁶⁷

In connection with this, Bohmer thus comments: “Thus it should be viewed as a mere accident that, in the fragment of the third-century ecclesiastical literature that we still have, no direct statement about continence of those who serve at the altar has been preserved. All of the ideas from which that demand resulted by a logical necessity were, in any case, present already at that time, and the passages that seemed to authenticate and justify them were for people like Cyprian, already just as familiar and oft-cited as the well-known Messianic sayings”⁶⁸

THE CRISIS OF THE IV CENTURY AND THE REACTION OF THE COUNCIL OF ELVIRA

In the fourth century, the Latin Church faced quite a general crisis concerning continence/celebracy. Grave abuses took place in North Africa, Spain, Gallia and even in Rome, though not as serious as elsewhere. This was partly due to the rapid expansion of Christianity, which took it to the most distant rural areas, in which communication was more difficult and where perhaps the ecclesiastical discipline was less observed. In such circumstances, apostolic teaching about continence was perhaps not well known and it may have undergone some adaptations: hence the many abuses. This was also due to the fact that many bishops adhered to small or large groups of heretics and ended up abandoning the observance of priestly celibacy. Consequently, in many areas Catholic bishops lived side by side with heretical bishops. As a result, it is difficult to distinguish the accepted practice of the Catholic bishops from the practice of the heretical bishops. Suffice it to remember that in St. Augustine’s times, about 400 bishops of North Africa became Donatists and opposed the Catholic Church. The same is true of the Arian Bishops.

⁶⁷ cf. Cyprian, Epistulae 65, 3 (CSEL 3, 2, 724, 11).

⁶⁸ cf. H. Bohmer, “Die Entstehung des Zolibatates”, in *Geschichtliche Studien Albert Hauck zum 70. Geburtstag* (Leipzig, 1916), 17.

The Catholic Church therefore felt the need to clarify the matter also because, in the meantime, reforming movements were gaining ground and, instead of improving matters, they were making the situation worse.

On the one hand we have:

- The Donatists in North Africa, who wanted a pure Church, maintained that they were pure and dissatisfied with the accepted practice of the Catholic Church, which they accused of being too lenient towards sinners and ministers who did not observe continence. Consequently, they imposed priestly continence to the extent of total contempt for matrimony.
- The Manicheans, who stressed the two distinct principles of good and evil. All material reality and, therefore, the human body, belonged to the sphere of evil. They therefore supported continence and condemned marriage as evil.
- The Eutychians in Spain, who in their enthusiasm for reasserting continence/celibacy, risked provoking the opposite reaction of those who asserted the goodness of matrimony.

On the other hand we have:

- The Novatians, who despite considering themselves pure, found it difficult to observe continence and, therefore, proposed its abolition in various ways.
- The Aryians and other Heresiarchs, who progressively gave up the discipline of continence, especially the Aryan Goths of the sixth century and the Persian Nestorians of the fifth century.
- The followers of Jovinian, who gave the maximum importance to baptismal grace, and maintained that there was no difference between the married and the virginal states. Consequently, they accused the priests of Rome of contempt for matrimony. The Synod of Rome in 390 under Pope Siricius condemned Jovinian, followed immediately by a Synod of Milan under Ambrose.

Spain was the first to react to this situation with the **Council of Elvira 305/6**, universally remembered as a milestone in the history of continence/celibacy, especially in the Latin Church. This Council takes its name from the Spanish town known today as Granada. At that time Spain and the western part of the Empire enjoyed a fair degree of religious peace under the Emperor Constantine but, as in so many other parts of the empire, ecclesiastical discipline left a lot to be desired especially with regard to priestly continence. In 306 bishops, priests and deacons from almost all the Spanish provinces gathered in Elvira to put some order back into various sectors of ecclesiastical discipline. One of these was priestly continence. Canon 33 of this Council represents the first law governing continence:

*“We have decreed a general (in totum) prohibition for married bishops, priests, and deacons, or also for all clerics who have been appointed to ministry: they must not come together with their wives and they must not beget children. Whosoever shall do the same shall be expelled from the ranks of the clergy”*⁶⁹

⁶⁹ cf. Council of Elvira, can 33.

This canon is in perfect harmony with canon 27, which forbade the bishops and other clerics from keeping unrelated women in their house. They could only keep with them a sister or a daughter who was a consecrated virgin, but for no reason could they keep an unrelated woman.

Some consider this Council to be the one that imposed celibacy and continence on the Latin Church whereas, in actual fact, it is in perfect harmony with all the elements mentioned above. There is only one explicit sanction against those who violated priestly continence. Worthy of note is the fact that the Council of Elvira is almost contemporaneous with the Council of Neocesarea (315), which essentially made the same declarations as the Council of Elvira.

Shortly after the Council of Elvira, another Council gathered in another part of the Empire, at Arles in Gallia (today's France); this Council confirmed the declarations of the Council of Elvira. Canon 33 of the Council of Elvira was confirmed by canon 29 of the **Council of Arles in 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”.*⁷⁰

THE POLICY OF ROME

Rome was one of the centers most closely observed by the reformist movements, who were often in conflict among themselves. The presence of these groups in Rome was very strong and the Popes found themselves caught in the crossfire of opposing factions in the issue, especially with regard to continence/celibacy. In such circumstances, it was only logical that Rome should come under special scrutiny as well as being a reference point for everyone. It was also the place where various groups exerted maximum pressure.

1. In spite of this, Rome's position on continence/celibacy was very clear. It was expressed above all by the Roman Synod of 385, which dealt with the problem of continence in reference to the debate among the Donatists, Novatians, and Jovinians. This Roman Synod convened with the concern of verifying what was happening in Spain and in other Western Churches with regard to the discipline of continence/celibacy. This Synod was followed by another in 390, which was held under Pope Siricius who condemned Jovinian. Immediately after the Roman Synod of 390, the Synod of Milan was held under Ambrose. Rome's position was expressed especially in the letters of **Pope Siricius (384-399)** and **Pope Innocent I (401/2-417)**.

The thought of Pope Siricius is mainly contained in the letter “**Directa**”, which he sent in reply to a question asked of him by Himerius, bishop of Terracina (Spain) about the obligation of continence. The Pope replied that any priests and deacons who father children after Ordination offend an inalienable law that goes back to the Apostles. He also stated that any appeal to an Old Testament custom, by

⁷⁰ As for the authenticity of this canon cf. Cocchini Christian, *The apostolic Origins of Priestly celibacy*, pp. 161-169, San Francisco, 1981.

which priests only observed continence during the time of their temple service, had no value in the New Testament because the priests had to offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice daily.

*“...We have learned that very many priests and Levites of Christ, after long periods of their consecration, have begotten offspring from their wives as well as by shameful intercourse, and that they defend their crime by this excuse, that in the Old Testament it is read that the faculty of procreating was given to the priests and ministers. Whoever that follower of sensual desires is let him tell me now... Why does (the Lord) forewarn those to whom the holies of holies were to be entrusted saying: Be ye holy, because I your Lord am holy (Lev. 20: 7; I Pet. 1: 16)? Why also were the priests ordered to dwell in the temple at a distance from their homes in the year of their turn? Evidently for this reason that they might not be able to practice carnal intercourse with their wives, so that shining purity of conscience they might offer an acceptable gift to God.... Therefore also the Lord Jesus, when he had enlightened us by his coming, testifies in the Gospel, that ‘he came to fulfill the Law, not to destroy it’ (Mt. 5: 17). And so he has wished the beauty of the Church, whose spouse he is, to radiate with the splendor of chastity, so that on the day of judgment, when He will have come again, He may be able to find her without spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5: 27) as He instituted her through His Apostle. **All priests and Levites are bound by the indissoluble law of these sanctions, so that from the day of our ordination, we give up both our hearts and our bodies to continence and chastity, provided only that through all things we may please our God in these sacrifices, which we daily offer.** “But those who are in the flesh,” as the vessel of election, “cannot please God” (Rom. 8:8). But those, who contend with an excuse for the forbidden privilege, so as to assert that this has been granted to them by the Old law, should know that by the authority of the Apostolic see they have been cast out of every ecclesiastical office, which they have used unworthily, nor can they ever touch the sacred mysteries, of which they themselves have deprived themselves, so long as they give heed to impure desires. And because existing examples warn us to be on our own guard for the future should any bishop, priest, or deacon be found such, which henceforth we do not want, let him now understand that every approach to indulgence is barred through us, because it is necessary that the wounds which are not susceptible to the healing of warn lotions be cut out with knife.”⁷¹*

In the second letter “**Cum in unum**”, which he sent to the African Bishops in 386, Pope Siricius refers to the previous Roman Synod of 385, and declares that nothing new was said. The Roman Synod is in line with the Apostolic Fathers and the words of Sacred Scripture “Stand firm, brothers, and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Ts 2,15). The Pope then added that if these teachings were not given or received, this depended only on the apathy of some:

“For the special instruction of those who, for reasons of health or fatigue due to old age, were unable to take part in the present synod, it seemed

⁷¹ cf Denzinger: The source of Catholic Dogma, pp.38-39, London, 1954; cf: Siricius, PL 13, 11382a-39a.

appropriate to write this letter so as to preserve its acts definitively. 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 is written: Stand firm, then, brothers and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter (2 Th 2:15)”.⁷²

He then proceeded with 8 canons containing a lengthy exhortation in favor of ecclesiastical continence:

“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, told them: “Leave yourself free for prayer’ (I 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? What testimony of conscience, what merit would give the trust to have his prayers granted, when it is said: “To all who are pure themselves, everything is pure” (Titus 1:15). 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 does one believe that this (is permitted) because it is written: “He must not have been married more than once” (Ib Tim. 3:2) But (Paul) was not talking about (a man) persisting in his desire to beget; he spoke about continence that one should observe (propter continentiam futuram). He did not accept those who were not beyond reproach (in this matter) and he said: “I should like everyone to be like me” (I 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).⁷³

The decree letter **“Dominus Inter”**, sometimes attributed to Pope Siricius or Pope Innocent I, replied to the Bishops of Gallia, who had asked 16 questions. Their third question concerns the ‘chastity’ and purity of priests. Since the questions addressed issues concerning the knowledge of the laws of the Holy See and tradition, the Pope replied:

“ In the first place we should consider the bishops, priests and deacons, who must participate in the divine sacrifices, by whose hands both the grace of baptism is conferred and the Body of Christ is confectioned. Not only we, but the Sacred Scriptures also compel them to be perfectly chaste, and the fathers, too, commanded that they must observe bodily continence... How can a bishop or a priest dare to preach virginity or continence to a widow or a virgin, or advise (spouses) to keep their marriage bed chaste,

⁷² PL 13, 1156a. P. Coustant, *Epistolae*, p. 652.

⁷³ cf. PL 13, 1160a-61a; P. Coustant, *Epistolae*, pp. 655-57)

*if he himself is more intent on begetting children for this world than for God".*⁷⁴

2. Another three letters of Innocent I repeated these concepts, referring to Pope Siricius: the letter "Etsi sibi" to Bishop Vitricius of Rouen; the letter "Consulenti tibi" to Esuperius of Gaul, and the letter to Bishops Maximus and Severus of Calabria, of uncertain date.⁷⁵ It should be noted that this letter demanded that any priest who violated continence should be expelled without any mercy.

In the letter "**Etsi tibi**" Innocent I reasserts the tradition, which is based on Leviticus and St. Paul:

*"Moreover, the Church must by all means maintain what is worthy, chaste and honest: that the priests and Levites (=deacons) have no intercourse with their wives, for the clergy are occupied with the daily duties of their ministries. For it is written, 'Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy' (Lev 11: 44; 20: 7)"*⁷⁶

In the letter "**Consulenti tibi**", Innocent I recalls a "very sacred Law" based on Sacred Scripture:

*"You ask what is to be done about those who, while in the diaconal ministry or the priesthood, are proved to be or to have been incontinent, in that they have begotten children. About such clerics, the discipline of the divine law is quite clear, and the plain admonitions of Bishop Siricius of blessed memory have been handed down, that incontinent men holding such offices must be deprived of all ecclesiastical dignity and must not be allowed to carry on a ministry that is fittingly performed only by those who practice continence. There is indeed the old authority of a very sacred law, which therefore has been kept from the beginning, that the priests are commanded to live in the temple during their year of service, so that the divine mysteries might claim pure ministers, cleansed of every stain, for the holy sacrifices....how much more shall the priests, whose constant duty it is to pray and to offer sacrifice, be obliged to abstain from this sort of intercourse..."*⁷⁷

3. To the testimony of Popes Siricius and Innocent I, we wish to add the testimony of another two Popes who distinguished themselves in the problem of priestly continence/ce libacy. History remembers both of them with the title 'the Great'. The first is **Leo the Great (440-461)**, who wrote to Bishop Rusticus of Narbonne in 456:

"The law of continence is the same for the ministers of the altar, for the Bishops and for the priests; when they were (still) laymen or lectors, they could freely take a wife and have 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

⁷⁴ cf. (Epistula 10, 2-9 ad Gall. (PL 13, 1182-1188A); Bruns Herman Theod., *Canones Apostolorum et Conciliorum saec. IV-VII*, II, 274; can. 3, 276-277.

⁷⁵ cf. Stickler M. Alfons, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁷⁶ Siricius: Epistula 2, 1 ad Vitricium (PL 20, 469B-470A). Pietri, roma, 2: 978-91.

⁷⁷ Innocence I, Epistula 6, 1, 2-4 ad Exsuperium (PL 20, 496B-498A).

*have them, so that conjugal love be safeguarded and nuptial activity be ended”.*⁷⁸

This text is very important because Pope Leo was the one who forbade deacons, priests and bishops from abandoning their wives, out of respect for the Sacrament of matrimony that they had already received. This letter clearly indicates that in the mind of Pope Leo there was no question of dispensation from the law of priestly continence; quite the contrary: his letter confirms the law.

The thought of Leo the Great emerges even more clearly from what he had to say about the extension of the law of priestly continence to subdeacons:

*“Indeed, if those who do not belong to the Order of clerics are free to enjoy conjugal relations and to beget children, we must, in order to manifest (what is) the purity of 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, the second, and the third must observe it; let no one be deemed apt for 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”.*⁷⁹

4. **Gregory the Great (590-604)** is the other great Pope who devoted much attention to the discipline of priestly continence/celibacy. In his letters he often mentioned the problem of priestly continence. The following three texts are especially important for the clarity with which they refer to practical cases.

In the **first text**, St. Gregory spoke strongly of the discipline of celibacy, and invited the bishops to exercise great prudence and refuse to ordain subdeacon anyone who did not promise to live in chastity:

*“Three years ago the subdeacons of all the churches in Sicily, in accordance with the custom of the Roman Church, were forbidden all conjugal intercourse with their wives. But it appears to me hard and improper that one who has not been accustomed to such continence, and has not previously promised chastity, should be compelled to separate himself from his wife, and thereby (which God forbid) fall into what is worse. Hence it seems good to me that from the present day all bishops should be told not to presume to make any one a subdeacon who does not promise to live chastely; that so what was not of set purpose desired in the past may not be forcibly required, but that cautious provision may be made for the future. But those who since the prohibition of three years ago have lived continently with their wives are to be praised and rewarded, and exhorted to continue in their good way. But, as for those who since the prohibition have been unwilling to abstain from intercourse with their wives, we desire them not to be advanced to a sacred order; since no one ought to approach the ministry of the altar but one who has been of approved chastity before undertaking the ministry”.*⁸⁰

⁷⁸ (JA2 544 – PL 54, 1194).

⁷⁹ Epist. Ad Anastasium Thessalonicensem episcopum, IV PL 54, 672b-732 (JW 411).

⁸⁰ cf Register of the Epistles of S. Gregory the Great, Book 1, Ep. 44 in ‘Early Church Fathers vol. 37.....

In the **second text**, Gregory the Great strongly emphasized the ecclesiastical discipline, referring to the ‘most sacred canons’, namely, canon 3 of the Council of Nicea”:

“We have ascertained from the report of our fellow-bishop Felix and the abbot Cyriacus that in the island of Sardinia priests are oppressed by lay judges, and that thy ministers despise thy Fraternity; and that, so far as appears, while you aim only at simplicity, discipline is neglected. Wherefore I exhort thee that, putting aside all excuses, thou take pains to rule the Church of which thou hast received the charge, to keep up discipline among the clergy, and fear no one's words. But, as I hear, thou hast forbidden thy Archdeacon to live with women, and up to this time art set at naught with regard to this thy prohibition. Unless he obey thy command, our will is that he be deprived of his sacred order. There is another tiling also which is much to be deplored; namely, that the negligence of your Fraternity has allowed the peasants (rusticos) belonging to lily Church to remain up to the present time in infidelity. And what is the use of my admonishing you to bring such as do not belong to you to God, if you neglect to recover your own from infidelity? Hence you must needs be in all ways vigilant for their conversion. For, should I succeed in finding a pagan peasant belonging to any 153 bishop whatever in the island of Sardinia, I will visit it severely on that bishop. But now, if any peasant should be found so perfidious and obstinate as to refuse to come to the Lord God, he must be weighted with so great a burden of payment as to be compelled by the very pain of the exaction to hasten to the right way. It has also come to our knowledge that some in sacred orders who have lapsed, either after doing penance or before, are recalled to the office of their ministry; which is a thing that we have altogether forbidden; and the most sacred canons also declare against it. Whoso, then, after having received any sacred order, shall have lapsed into sin of the flesh, let him so forfeit his sacred order as not to approach any more the ministry of the altar. But, lest those who have been ordained should ever perish, previous care should be taken as to what kind of people are ordained, so that it be first seen to whether they have been continent in life for many years, and whether they have had a care for reading and a love of almsgiving. It should be enquired also whether a man has perchance been twice married.”⁸¹

In the **third text**, St. Gregory the Great reminded everyone that also married men who had access to the subdiaconate had to promise to abstain from sexual relationships with their wives; his letter proposes the example of a wife, whose subdeacon-husband resigned through inability to observe the law of continence:

“We have found from the report of many that a custom has of old obtained among you, for subdeacons to be allowed to have intercourse with their wives. That any one should any more presume to do this was prohibited by the servant of God, the deacon of our see, under the authority of our predecessor⁴⁵, in this way; that those who at that time had been coupled to wives should choose one of two things, that is, either to abstain from their wives, or on no account whatever presume to exercise their ministry.

⁸¹ cf Register of the Epistles of S. Gregory the Great, Book IV, Ep.26 in ‘Early Church Fathers vol. 37.....

And, according to report, Speciosus, then a subdeacon, did for this reason suspend himself from the office of administration, and up to the time of his death bore indeed the office of a notary, but ceased from the ministry which a subdeacon should have exercised. After his death we have learnt that his widow, Honorata, has been relegated to a monastery by thy Fraternity for having associated herself with a husband. And so if, as is said, her husband suspended himself from ministration, it ought not to be to the prejudice of the aforesaid woman that she has contracted a second marriage, especially if she had not been joined to the subdeacon with the intention of abstaining from the pleasures of the flesh.

If, then, you find the truth to be as we have been informed, it is right for you to release altogether the aforesaid woman from the monastery, that she may be at liberty to return without any fear to her husband.

But for the future let thy Fraternity be exceedingly careful, in the case of any who may be promoted to this office, to look to this with the utmost diligence, that, if they have wives, they shall enjoy no licence to have intercourse with them: but you must still strictly order them to observe all things after the pattern of the Apostolic See".⁸²

In conclusion, we can say that the Popes steadfastly upheld priestly continence in full harmony with the various Councils, and especially the ecumenical Council of Nicea: they therefore defended the decisions taken in the East. Among other things, it must be noted that the Popes spoke strongly in favor of the discipline of priestly continence/celibacy without anyone telling them that they were contradicting the Council of Nicea of 325. The Council of Nicea was in favor of continence/celibacy even though it did not draw up any canon directly related to the matter.

THE LOCAL COUNCILS

At the same time in which the Popes in Rome were solemnly referring to the discipline of priestly continence/celibacy, local Councils in the Latin Church made many interventions in defense of continence/celibacy. We shall now quote some of the most important sources, referring the reader to the footnotes for others.

1. The **Council of Carthage in 390** is one of the most significant and fundamental milestones in the history of priestly continence/celibacy. This Council drew attention, not only to the existence of the discipline in its Church, but also its apostolic origin. In those days, Carthage was something of a bridge between the Eastern Church and the Western Church because it was in constant contact with Rome, but under the influence of Constantinople. Its contribution is therefore particularly significant. Canon 2 states:

"Epigonius, bishop of Bulla Regia, said "As was established in a previous council with respect to continence and chastity, I demand that those three degrees which by ordination are strictly bound to chastity, that is, bishops, priests, and deacons, be instructed again in detail to maintain purity."

Bishop Genethlius said, "As was previously said, it is fitting that the holy bishops and priests of God, as well as the Levites (that is, deacons), that is, those who are in the service of the divine sacraments, observe perfect

⁸² cf Register of the Epistles of St. Gregory the Great, Book IV, Ep. 36 in 'Early Church Fathers vol. 37.

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 endeavor to keep”

*The bishops declared unanimously: “It pleases us all that bishops, priests, and deacons (that is, those who touch the sacraments), guardians of purity, abstain from conjugal intercourse with their wives, so that those who serve at the altar may keep a perfect chastity” (canon 2, cf. 112f. Jonkers.”*⁸³

Canon 3 of the **Council of Carthage in 401** declared:

*“Furthermore: even if it is reported of some clerics that they do not live continently with their wives, nevertheless the bishops, priests, and deacons, according to the earlier statutes, still must refrain from relations with their wives. If they do not, they are to be removed from ecclesiastical office. The other (that is, lower) clerics, though, are not compelled to do this, but each should observe the respective custom”.*⁸⁴

2. Almost in the same period, the **Council of Toledo in 400** stated:

*“We command that the deacons be either virginal or chaste and that those who practice continence, even if they have wives, be established in the ministry; provided, however, that those (that is, deacons who, before the interdict was pronounced by the Lusitanian bishops, lived with their wives incontinently, shall not be clothed with the honor of the priesthood. If in fact one of the priests begot children before the interdict, let him not be admitted to the episcopate”.*⁸⁵

⁸³ Cf. Council of Carthage a. 417 CANON III. Of Continence: . AURELIUS the bishop said: When at the past council the matter on continency 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.

CANON IV. Of the different orders that should abstain from their wives: . 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.

CANON XXV. (Greek xxviii.) Concerning bishops and the lower orders who wait upon the most holy mysteries. It has seemed good that these abstain from their wives. AURELIUS, the bishop, said: We add, most dear brethren, moreover, since we have heard of the incontinency of certain clerics, even of readers, towards their wives, it seemed good that what had been enacted in diverse councils should be confirmed, to wit, that subdeacons who wait upon the holy mysteries, and deacons, and presbyters, as well as bishops according to former statutes, should contain from their wives, so that they should be as though they had them not and unless they so act, let them be removed from office. But the rest of the clergy are not to be compelled to this, unless they be of mature age. And by the whole council it was said: What your holiness has said is just, holy, and pleasing to God, and we confirm it.

CANON LXX. (Greek lxxiii.) What clerics should abstain from their wives: .MOREOVER since incontinence has been charged against some clergymen with regard to their own wives it has seemed good that bishops, presbyters, and deacons should according to the statutes already made abstain even from their own wives; and unless they do so that they should be removed from the clerical office. But the rest of the clergy shall not be forced to this but the custom of each church in this matter shall be followed.

⁸⁴ Council of Carthage a. 401, canon 3 (CCL 149, 356, 21-26)

⁸⁵ I Council of Toledo, a. 400, canon 1.

In spite of the many abuses, this discipline remained during the entire fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, something that is confirmed by the numerous councils that dealt with the topic.⁸⁶ By way of example, we shall quote two of these councils.

3. **The Council of Girona (517)** stressed the problem of cohabitation of married priests and examined the issue in the light of the tradition, approved by Leo the Great, not to send the wife away. The Council said:

“Can. 6: Let the married clerics, from bishop to subdeacon, not live without a witness.

Here is how the clerics should behave, from bishop to subdeacon, after having received their honorific functions: should some of them have been married before their ordinations, they should not live with their wives –the latter now being sisters to them- if they have no access to brothers to serve as their witness. If they wish to live (with their wives), they must ask for the services of a brother, whose presence as a witness will compel them to live in all openness.”⁸⁷

4. The **IX Council of Toledo in 655** attested to the fact that the discipline of perfect continence was still intact before the II Council of Trullo, which would become the watershed between the East and the West in the approach to the discipline of priestly continence.

*“Can.10: Heretofore the Fathers have made numerous decisions concerning the incontinence of clerics: notwithstanding (those regulations), people have not yet managed to correct their morals to the extent that the offences they committed compelled judges to give greater scope to their decisions: it is not only against the perpetrators of unlawful acts, but also against the descendants of the (clerics) who were punished, that sanctions will be taken. This is why (this present decision has been made with respect to) anyone, established in dignity, from the bishop to the subdeacon who would have had children from guilty relations with a slave or a free woman. Those from whom we have the proof that they are truly the fathers of these children will be under canonical censorship. As to the children born from such an impure (relations), not only will they never inherit the goods of their parents, but they will remain, in virtue of an irrevocable right, at the service of the Church to whom belonged the priest or minister through whose shameful fault they were born”.*⁸⁸

⁸⁶ For example:

- The Council of Valence of 375 (p 223)
- The Council of Sardica, canon 3 a. 345 (Stickler p. 17)
- The African Conciliar Assembly, 25 May 419, Corpus Christianorum, 149, 133 ss. (Stickler p. 18)
- **The Council of Constantinople of 381**, against the Aryans
- the Council of Talepte a. 418 (Stickler p. 19)
- In addition the uninterrupted series of Councils in Spain and Gaul that repeatedly and without interruption insisted on the obligation of continence for married ministers (Stickler p. 27)
- The instructions of the insular Church concerning the discipline of celibacy in Europe should be kept in mind (Stickler p. 28)
- The Council of Toledo (569) and the Council of Zaragoza (592) for clerics coming from Aryanism.

⁸⁷ Brums, 2, 19 (Cocchini p. 326)

⁸⁸ IX Council of Toledo, a. 655, canon 10.

- a. Here we have a disciplinary decision not only about the guilty parents, but also the children themselves. The bishops of this Council are extremely severe, but firmly faithful to their numerous Councils, which already affirmed the discipline of priestly continence. About this Council, Cocchini says: "...we find that one thing seems certain: the Councils of Toledo were the severe, but efficient instrument through which the Church in Spain, in spite of thousands of obstacles, remain bound to the secular discipline of priestly continence."⁸⁹

THE FATHERS OF THE LATIN CHURCH IN THE IV-V-VI CENTURIES

The testimony of the Fathers is of fundamental importance because it shows us that the discipline of priestly continence/celibacy is not a norm imposed by the authority of Rome but, rather, a value which has deep roots in the conscience of the entire Church.

1. **Ambrosiaster**, an anonymous author who worked especially during the pontificate of Pope Damasus (366-384), was one of the first authors to speak clearly about the matter. Ambrosiaster justifies priestly continence on the grounds that the ministers of the New Testament must offer the Eucharistic sacrifice every day. If the Levites of the Old Testament were not allowed to have sexual relationships with their wives during the time of their service at the altar, the same must apply to the ministers of the New Testament. Since the latter serve at the altar each day, they would not have enough time to purify themselves after conjugal union, hence they must observe total continence. Worthy of note is the fact that the testimony of Ambrosiaster predates the letters of Popes Siricius and Innocent I. Ambrosiaster says:

*".....Let them know (the married man receiving the priesthood) that they will obtain what they ask if they abstain also from the use of marriage. In the past, it was indeed permitted to the Levites or other priests to have relationships with their wives because they did not devote much time to their ministries of Levites.....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 union, as the priests of old used to do".*⁹⁰

It should be noted that Ambrosiaster writes in such an apodictic fashion because the situation in Rome concerning continence is very serene and well established, and also because he is convinced that the same discipline is observed everywhere.

2. **St. Ambrose (333-397)**, almost a contemporary of Ambrosiaster, wrote the 'De officiis ministrorum' between 377 and 391. He was absolutely against the ordination of men who had been married more than once, even when their first marriage had taken place before baptism.⁹¹ He went on to defend priestly continence in a resolute manner:

⁸⁹ cf. Cocchini Christian, op. cit., p. 396.

⁹⁰ PL 17, 497a-d

⁹¹ Ambrose, On the duty of the Clergy, I, 50, 257f (PL 16/2, 104A-105A): But what shall I say about chastity, when only one and no second union is allowed? As regards marriage, the law is, not to marry

*“ 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 unspoilt 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 offered up at long intervals. However, even the people had to be purified two or three days beforehand, so as to come clean to the sacrifice, as we read in the Old Testament.(2) 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 thy clothes. Thou 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, dost thou, while foul in heart and body, dare to make supplication for others? Dost thou dare to make an offering for them?”*⁹²

3. In the context of the Latin Church’s testimony we cannot ignore **St. Jerome (347-419)** because he is one of the most important witnesses of the faith and Tradition by virtue of his great experience of Church life in the East and in the West. Jerome is one of the greatest defenders of ecclesiastical continence. In his controversy with Jovinian, he clearly states that the famous passage of St. Paul’s letter to Titus means that a married Bishop can no longer father children because Paul forbids this in his letter to Titus⁹³.
4. Another source worth quoting is the classic **Pseudo-Jerome (ca. 417)**, which bears the title: “*De Septem Ordinibus Ecclesiae*”. A passage from this book is especially important because it indicates the discipline in force in Arles, Marseilles, Gallia, at a time when violations of priestly continence were numerous. It says:

*“ Because of the ancient custom and the damage to the priesthood (that can result from it), do not give to 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 relationships), commune at the altar and not in the act (of the flesh). As to her, she also must 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 to you as soon as you learn that you will become a bishop.”*⁹⁴

again, nor to seek union with another wife. It seems strange to many why impediment should be caused by a second marriage entered on before baptism, so as to prevent election to the clerical office, and to the reception of the gift of ordination; seeing that even crimes are not wont to stand in the way, if they have been put away in the sacrament of baptism.(1) But we must learn, that in baptism sin can be forgiven, but law cannot be abolished. In the case of marriage there is no sin, but there is a law. Whatever sin there is can be put away, whatever law there is cannot be laid aside in marriage. How could he exhort to widowhood who himself had married more than once?”

⁹² Ambrose, *On the duty of the Clergy*, I, 50, 258 (PL 16/2, 104A-105A)

⁹³ Jerome *Against Jovinianus*, I, 34 – PL 23, 257.

⁹⁴ PL 30, 159c-d.

5. **St. Augustine (354-430)** is another great champion of priestly continence. In addition to the position he took against the Donatists and especially against the Jovinians, Augustine declared the obligation of priestly continence for those who had been forced to receive Sacred Orders. He holds them up as an example to those who cohabit illicitly or in an adulterous manner:

*“This is why when we inspire these men, for whom the superiority of their sex means the freedom to sin, with the fear of eternal death if they contract adulterous marriages, we are accustomed to give them as an example the continence of these clerics who were frequently forced against their wills to carry such a burden. Nevertheless, as soon as they have accepted it, they carry it, faithful to their duty, until death. Thus we tell these men: If the violence of a pious people were to compel you to observe it, what would you do? Would not chastely fulfill the duty imposed upon you? Would you not turn immediately to God to obtain from him a strength you never thought of asking him until that day? But, they say, honor is a handsome consolation for clerics! And you, we would retort, do you have the even more motivation of fear to moderate your concupiscence? If a great number of the Lord’s ministers accepted all of a sudden and without warning the yoke imposed on them, in the hope of receiving a more glorious place in Christ’s inheritance, how much more should you avoid adultery and embrace continence, for fear, not of shining less in the Kingdom of God, but of burning in the Gehenna of fire.”*⁹⁵

6. This brief look at the Latin Fathers concludes with a quote from the **‘Breviatio Ferrandi’ (pre-546), which gathers together some 232 Eastern and Western canons under the form of ‘breviary’**. Far from highlighting any contradiction among these texts, it bears witness to the profound harmony between East and West. The work was compiled by the deacon Ferrando, who belonged to the Church of Carthage. This Church was set in Byzantium, therefore the interpretation of these canons by a cleric of Carthage deserves consideration: it would have been difficult for a cleric of such a Church to write something that was not in harmony with Constantinople.

In this list of 232 canons there are some that refer directly to priestly continence. For example:

- “16. Let the Bishops, priests, and deacons abstain from (relations with) their wives (Council of Carthage, can. 1, Council Zelleus).
89. Let no one have the audacity not to receive communion from the oblation (celebrated) by a married priest (Council of Gangres, can 4).
98. If a priest gets married, let him be deposed; if he has committed (the sin of) fornication, let him also be constrained to do penance (Council of Neocaesarea, can. 1).
122. Let no clerics live with “outsider” women (Council of Nicaea, can 3; Council of Carthage, under Gratus, can. 3; general Council of Carthage).
129. When they reach the age of puberty, let the lectors be compelled either to marry or to make a profession of continence, can. 2).”*⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Augustine, *De coniugis adulterinis*, II, 20, 22 (CSEL 41, 409; trans., G. Combes, *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, 1st ser., II (Paris, 1937), pp. 225-27.

⁹⁶ PL 67, 950b-c, 954c, 954d-55a, 956a-b, 956c.

It should be noted that this “Breviatio Ferrandi” not only resolved the interpretation of the Council of Gangres in favor of the priestly continence of married men, since it unites in canon 16 the policies of the Council of Carthage and the Council of Gangres, but it also appears to be in perfect harmony with the Code of Justinian which belongs to the same period. Therefore, both of these can be held up as evidence of the common discipline observed by the East and the West before the Second Council of Trullo in 692.

HISTORICAL CONCLUSIONS ABOUT PRIESTLY CONTINENCE IN BOTH THE EAST AND THE WEST

So far, we have seen that the discipline of continence/celibacy was not the result of a legislation that was desired and imposed by the Latin Church from the IV century onwards, in opposition to the teachings and policy of the Eastern Church, which supposedly maintained the more liberal apostolic spirit. The discipline of priestly continence has ancient historical roots, it is grounded in Scripture and has always been upheld by the Greek Church even more than by the Latin Church. The Popes have always confirmed and reinforced it with their authority, though all they really did was acknowledge and reinforce a discipline that was already held in high esteem throughout the entire Church, especially in the East.

This panorama of priestly continence from its origins until almost the end of the VII century can be summed up thus:

- Mutual acceptance of priestly continence
- Mutual recognition of the biblical foundations of priestly continence/celibacy
- Ban on men who had married more than once, divorced men, or men married to divorced women, prostitutes or adulteresses
- Deacons, priests and bishops forbidden from marrying after Ordination
- Bishops, priests and deacons who father children after the reception of Sacred Orders are to be expelled from the ministry.
- It must be said that there were many transgressions against the law of continence/celibacy in the first seven centuries of the Church, but it is also true that everyone considered them to be violations, a bad action and, therefore, deserving of punishment.
- Those who propose the abolition of priestly continence know that they are opposing a very ancient discipline and, for this reason, they encounter the opposition of both the Latin and the Greek Churches.

Chapter 4

THE CHANGE OF DISCIPLINE IN THE EAST THE COUNCIL OF TRULLO (691)

The Second Council of Trullo is the ridge of separation between the Eastern Church and the Western Church in the question of priestly continence. We cannot deal here with all the historical motivations that favored the legislation of Trullo (691). Suffice it to say that the Latin Church's typical unity of doctrine and discipline, thanks to the vigilance of the Patriarch of Rome, had no equivalent in the Greek Church, especially with regard to discipline which was left to the responsibility of the local Church. Therefore it was only logical that the inevitable violations against the discipline of priestly continence should be dealt with more firmly in the West than in the East. As a result, given human weakness, the Eastern Church increasingly looked upon the abuse of priests' and deacons' marriage contracted before ordination as inevitable and opposition to them waned.

The Second Council of Trullo was convoked by the Emperor Justinian II, who expressed his concern at the contradictory state in which a good part of the clergy in the East was living; he wanted to establish a legal basis for this and other ecclesial realities. 102 canons were approved for this purpose and they were added to the Old Syntagma, which thereby became the Syntagma adauctum, the last Code of the Byzantine Church".⁹⁷ The discipline of celibacy and priestly continence was established in seven canons (3, 6, 12, 13, 26, 30, 48), as follows:

- Canon 3 declares that anyone who contracted a second marriage after baptism, or lived in concubinage, or married a widow, a divorced woman, a prostitute, a slave or an actress cannot be ordained bishop, priest or deacon.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Sctickler A.M., op. cit. pp.42-46.

⁹⁸ CANON III.

SINCE our pious and Christian Emperor has addressed this holy and ecumenical council, in order that it might provide for the purity of those who are in the list of the clergy, and who transmit divine things to others, and that they may be blameless ministrants, and worthy of the sacrifice of the great God, who is both Offering and High Priest, a sacrifice apprehended by the intelligence: and that it might cleanse away the pollutions wherewith these have been branded by unlawful marriages: now whereas they of the most holy Roman Church purpose to keep the rule of exact perfection, but those who are under the throne of this heaven-protected and royal city keep that of kindness and consideration, so blending both together as our fathers have done, and as the love of God requires, that neither gentleness fall into licence, nor severity into harshness; especially as the fault of ignorance has reached no small number of men, we decree, that those who are involved in a second marriage, and have been slaves to sin up to the fifteenth of the past month of January, in the past fourth Indiction, the 6109th year, and have not resolved to repent of it, be subjected to canonical deposition: but that they who are involved in this disorder of a second marriage, but before our decree have acknowledged what is fitting, and have cut off their sin, and have put far from them this strange and illegitimate connexion, or they whose wives by second marriage are already dead, or who have turned to repentance of their own accord, having learnt continence, and having quickly forgotten their former iniquities, whether they be presbyters or deacons, these we have determined should cease from all priestly ministrations or exercise, being under punishment for a certain time, but should retain the honour of their seat and station, being satisfied with their seat before the laity and begging with tears from the Lord that the transgression of their ignorance be pardoned them: for unfitting it were that he should bless another

- Canon 6 rules that it is unlawful for priests and deacons to contract marriage after ordination.⁹⁹
- Canon 12 states that bishops cannot cohabit with their wives after their ordination and, therefore, they must forgo conjugal life.¹⁰⁰
- Contrary to the Roman policy, which forbids conjugal life, canon 13 establishes that the priests, deacons and subdeacons of the Eastern Church can, by virtue of ancient apostolic instructions, cohabit with their wives and live a conjugal life with them, except when they serve at the altar and celebrate the sacred mysteries: during this time they must practice continence. The Council of Carthage is quoted in confirmation of this new rule, which demands the removal from priestly service of anyone who opposes this decision. In breaking with the past and the Church of Rome, it shows with extreme clarity that the discipline of priestly continence was held in high esteem until that time both in the West and in the East:

“SINCE we know it to be handed down as a rule of the Roman Church that those who are deemed worthy to be advanced to the diaconate or presbyterate should promise no longer to cohabit with their wives, we, preserving the ancient rule and apostolic perfection and order, will that the lawful marriages of men who are in holy orders be from this time forward firm, by no means dissolving their union with their wives nor depriving them of their mutual intercourse at a convenient time. Wherefore, if anyone shall have been found worthy to be ordained subdeacon, or deacon, or presbyter, he is by no means to be prohibited from admittance to such a rank, even if he shall live with a lawful wife. Nor shall it be demanded of him at the time of his ordination that he promise to abstain from lawful intercourse with his wife: lest we should affect injuriously marriage constituted by God and blessed by his

who has to tend his own wounds. But those who have been married to one wife, if she was a widow, and likewise those who after their ordination have unlawfully entered into one marriage that is, presbyters, and deacons, and subdeacons, being debarred for some short time from sacred ministration, and censured, shall be restored again to their proper rank, never advancing to any further rank, their unlawful marriage being openly dissolved. This we decree to hold good only in the case of those that are involved in the aforesaid

⁹⁹ CANON VI.

SINCE it is declared in the apostolic canons that of those who are advanced to the clergy unmarried, only lectors and cantors are able to marry; we also, maintaining this, determine that henceforth it is in nowise lawful for any subdeacon, deacon or presbyter after his ordination to contract matrimony but if he shall have dared to do so, let him be deposed. And if any of those who enter the clergy, wishes to be joined to a wife in lawful marriage before he is ordained subdeacon, deacon, or presbyter, let it be done.

¹⁰⁰ CANON XII.

MOREOVER this also has come to our knowledge, that in Africa and Libya and in other places the most God-beloved bishops in those parts do not refuse to live with their wives, even after consecration, thereby giving scandal and offence to the people. Since, therefore, it is our particular care that all filings tend to the good of file flock placed in our harris and committed to us,--it has seemed good that henceforth nothing of the kind shall in any way occur. And we say this, not to abolish and overthrow what things were established of old by Apostolic authority, but as caring for the health of the people and their advance to better things, and lest the ecclesiastical state should suffer any reproach. For the divine Apostle says: "Do all to the glory of God, give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Greeks, nor to the Church of God, even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit but the profit of many, that they may be saved. Be ye imitators of me even as I also am of Christ." But if any shall have been observed to do such a thing, let him be deposed.

*presence, as the Gospel saith: "What God hath joined together let no man put asunder;" and the Apostle saith, "Marriage is honourable and the bed undefiled;" and again, "Art thou bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed." But we know, as they who assembled at Carthage (with a care for the honest life of the clergy) said, that subdeacons, who handle the Holy Mysteries, and deacons, and presbyters should abstain from their consorts according to their own course [of ministration]. So that what has been handed down through the Apostles and preserved by ancient custom, we too likewise maintain, knowing that there is a time for all things and especially for fasting and prayer. For it is meet that they who assist at the divine altar should be absolutely continent when they are handling holy things, in order that they may be able to obtain from God what they ask in sincerity. If therefore anyone shall have dared, contrary to the Apostolic Canons, to deprive any of those who are in holy orders, presbyter, or deacon, or subdeacon of cohabitation and intercourse with his lawful wife, let him be deposed. In like manner also if any presbyter or deacon on pretence of piety has dismissed his wife, let him be excluded from communion; and if he persevere in this let him be deposed.*¹⁰¹

- Canon 26 decrees that a priest who has contracted an illicit marriage through ignorance must be content with his first situation, though he must also abstain from all priestly ministry. Such a marriage must be dissolved and all form of communion with the wife is forbidden.¹⁰²
- Canon 30 allows that those who mutually consent to live in continence need not live together; this also applies to priests living in barbarian countries (i.e. priests who live in the Western Church). This however is a dispensation granted to such priests on account of their pusillanimity and the customs of their surrounding milieu.¹⁰³
- Canon 48 orders that following their separation by mutual consent, the wife of a bishop must enter a monastery after her husband's ordination. The bishop must provide for her keep. She may be promoted to the dignity of a deaconess.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ II Council of Trullo, canon XIII.

¹⁰² CANON XXVI.

If a presbyter has through ignorance contracted an illegal marriage, while he still retains the right to his place, as we have defined in the sacred canons, yet he must abstain from all sacerdotal work. For it is sufficient if to such an one indulgence is granted. For he is until to bless another who needs to take care of his own wounds, for blessing is the imparting of sanctification. But how can he impart this to another who does not possess it himself through a sin of ignorance? Neither then in public nor in private can he bless nor distribute to others the body of Christ, [nor perform any other ministry]; but being content with his seat of honour let him lament to the Lord that his sin of ignorance may be remitted. For it is manifest that the nefarious marriage must be dissolved, neither can the man have any intercourse with her on account of whom he is deprived of the execution of his priesthood.

¹⁰³ CANON XXX.

Willing to do all things for the edification of the Church, we have determined to take care even of priests who are in barbarian churches. Wherefore if they think that they ought to exceed the Apostolic Canon concerning the not putting away of a wife on the pretext of piety and religion, and to do beyond that which is commanded, and therefore abstain by agreement with their wives from cohabitation, we decree they ought no longer to live with them in any way, so that hereby they may afford us a perfect demonstration of their promise. But we have conceded this to them on no other ground than their narrowness, and foreign and unsettled manners.

¹⁰⁴ CANON XLVIII.

As we can see, the majority of canons are in full harmony with the universal discipline that was unanimously accepted until that time. This means that the discipline then in force was well known by everyone also in the East and that nobody opposed it, except on one point, which for the first time was codified in an obvious break with the tradition of the early Church. In other words, on the one hand the requirement of priestly was accepted as a fundamental principle of Sacred Orders and, as a result, the following principles were also accepted:

- a. Marriage is forbidden to anyone who was ordained whilst in the celibate state;
- b. The ban on divorced men and those who have married twice; the ban on those who have married a divorced woman, a prostitute or an adulteress;
- c. No deacon, priest or bishop may marry after Ordination;
- d. Those who father children after Ordination are to be expelled.

On the other hand, those who received Sacred Orders whilst in the married state are allowed a conjugal life. This is the only difference between the discipline of the Eastern Church and the Western Church regarding priestly continence. It should be noted that this is granted in the full knowledge that it is not licit in the West, that it is against the policy of Rome and that this policy is accepted as legitimate within the confines of the Latin Church.

How was such a concession justified? The Council of Trullo cannot point to the legislation of any Council that is in favor of a conjugal life after Sacred Ordination. It simply refers to the “ancient rule of strict observation and apostolic discipline”, without providing any evidence from a Council in favor of it. The only Council to which it appeals is the Council of Carthage, which is wrongly quoted and assigned a meaning that is totally opposite to what its Fathers had in mind.

The Council of Trullo, putting together the various texts of the Council of Carthage, thus writes about the deacons and presbyters:

“.....we know, as they who assembled at Carthage (with a care for the honest life of the clergy) said, that subdeacons, who handle the Holy Mysteries, and deacons, and presbyters should abstain from their consorts according to their own course [of ministration]. So that what has been handed down through the Apostles and preserved by ancient custom, we too likewise maintain, knowing that there is a time for all things and especially for fasting and prayer. For it is meet that they who assist at the divine altar should be absolutely continent when they are handling holy things, in order that they may be able to obtain from God what they ask in sincerity. If therefore anyone shall have dared, contrary to the Apostolic Canons, to deprive any of those who are in holy orders, presbyter, or deacon, or subdeacon of cohabitation and intercourse with his lawful wife, let him be deposed. In like manner also if any presbyter or deacon on

The wife of him who is advanced to the Episcopal dignity, shall be separated from her husband by their mutual consent, and after his ordination and consecration to the episcopate she shall enter a monastery situated at a distance from the abode of the bishop, and there let her enjoy the bishop's provision. And if she is deemed worthy she may be advanced to the dignity of a deaconess.

pretence of piety has dismissed his wife, let him be excluded from communion; and if he persevere in this let him be deposed.”

The Council of Carthage, however, wrote something quite different: its canons 3 and 4 read as follows:

CANON III. Of Continence.

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.

CANON IV. Of the different orders that should abstain from their wives.

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.¹⁰⁵

As we can see the Council of Carthage had in mind an equal legislation for bishops, priests and deacons: the legislation of total continence. Whereas the Second Council of Trullo changed the original version of the text and reached the opposite conclusion about the priests and deacons and, what is more, attributed it to the Apostles, something that is totally contrary to what the Council Fathers of Carthage had in mind. The Council of Trullo made a legal praxis of a formulation which, until then, had been a deviation from apostolic teachings and Tradition. Over the centuries it became the official Eastern discipline regarding priestly continence. Though the current Eastern policy may be justified from a legal point of view, the same cannot be said from a historical and theological point of view because this position fails to explain how in the same Eastern Church there is a total ban on the Bishop having sexual relationships with his wife, and as with the Bishop, priests and deacons are absolutely forbidden from marrying after ordination.

The Council of Trullo is very important because, on the positive and negative sides, it confirms the previous discipline observed in both the Eastern and the Western Church. We could ask ourselves why the Council of Trullo allowed the already married priests and deacons to have a conjugal life? The answer is: because of its erroneous interpretation of the Council of Carthage. Was this deliberate and, if so, could the Eastern Church do this? The latter question is a very serious and much debated issue. The decision was taken and only later did the Western Church take cognizance of it, only approving the canons that were not contrary to the Roman policy and reluctantly taking cognizance of the contrary canons.

Although the procedure and the conclusions are questionable, we believe that the concern of the Council of Trullo was to safeguard priestly continence as far as

¹⁰⁵ cf. Nota 83.

possible. ¹⁰⁶One cannot explain otherwise the Bishops' tough legislation for maintaining priestly continence and the total ban on celibate priests and deacons marrying; the same may be said about the obligation of priests not to have contact with their wives during the time of their priestly service: the latter obligation, which drove priests to the sole Sunday celebration, is in direct conflict with the desire, present also in the Eastern Church, to promote the daily celebration of the Eucharist.

Our impression is that the desire to protect priestly continence, even though in a way that is not acceptable to the Western Church, unites the two Churches in the exaltation of the ministerial priesthood. The Lord, in ways that he alone knows, will point out the solution to this discrepancy between the Eastern and the Western Churches.

Chapter 5

THE LATIN CHURCH CHOOSES CELIBACY AS THE ONLY WAY OF LIVING PRIESTLY CONTINENCE

¹⁰⁶ About the canonical value of Canon 13 of Trullo, and the reaction of the Popes to it, see Roman Cholij, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-192.

After the Second Council of Trullo, history highlights a more evident separation between the disciplines of the two Churches. This does not mean that there were no violations in the Western Church: along with the wonderful witness offered by the great monastic orders and many saints of the local clergy, we must remember the violations during the Middle Ages, which reached their peak in the investitures period under Pope Gregory VII. However, this deplorable situation caused the Church to react and move more and more towards the choice of celibacy as the only form of access to the ministerial priesthood. This happened especially from the Second Lateran Council onwards.

The Second Lateran Council:

With the purpose of reinforcing the Gregorian reform, this Council took the decision to declare not only illicit, but also invalid, any attempt at marriage by clerics who had already received Major Orders. Canon 7 states:

*“Adhering to the path trod by our predecessors, the Roman pontiffs Gregory VII, Urban and Paschal, we prescribe that nobody is to hear the masses of those whom he knows to have wives or concubines. Indeed, that the law of continence and the purity pleasing to God might be propagated among ecclesiastical persons and those in holy orders, we decree that where bishops, priests, deacons, subdeacons, canons regular, monks and professed lay brothers have presumed to take wives and so transgress this holy precept, they are to be separated from their partners. For **we do not deem there to be a marriage which, it is agreed, has been contracted against ecclesiastical law.** Furthermore, when they have separated from each other, let them do a penance commensurate with such outrageous behaviour.”*¹⁰⁷

This Council was mistakenly considered as the one that instituted celibacy. In actual fact, it simply declared null any marriage attempted by major clerics. Until that time, such marriages had been considered illicit, but valid nonetheless. From then on, although not forbidden by the Second Lateran Council, the access to Major Orders of married men was made more and more difficult. Indeed, after this Council, married men still entered Major Orders, though in increasingly small numbers; they were, however, strongly invited to forgo conjugal life in deference to the tradition of the Church. Canon 14 of the Fourth Lateran Council decreed as follows:

“14. Clerical incontinence

In order that the morals and conduct of clerics may be reformed for the better, let all of them strive to live in a continent and chaste way, especially those in holy orders. Let them beware of every vice involving lust, especially that on account of which the wrath of God came down from heaven upon the sons of disobedience, so that they may be worthy to minister in the sight of almighty God with a pure heart and an unsullied body. Lest the ease of receiving pardon prove an incentive to sin, we decree that those who are caught giving way to the vice of incontinence are to be punished according to canonical sanctions, in proportion to the seriousness of their sins. We order such sanctions to be effectively and strictly observed, in order that those whom the fear of God does not hold back from evil may at least be restrained from sin by temporal punishment. Therefore anyone who has been suspended for this reason and presumes to celebrate divine services, shall not only be deprived of his ecclesiastical benefices but shall also, on account of his twofold fault, be deposed in perpetuity.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. can. 7 Conc. Lateranen. II, in: Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1962) 174.

Prelates who dare to support such persons in their wickedness, especially if they do it for money or for some other temporal advantage, are to be subject to like punishment. Those clerics who have not renounced the marriage bond, following the custom of their region, shall be punished even more severely if they fall into sin, since for them it is possible to make lawful use of matrimony”.

What the Fourth Lateran Council did was make a contribution to the reinforcement of priestly continence. The results were encouraging, though not definitive, and the problem of a greater protection of priestly continence remained on the agenda until the Council of Trent.

The Council of Trent

During the years of the reform, many emperors, kings, princes and authoritative men of the Church pleaded the cause for the abolition of celibacy, but they always met with resistance from within the Catholic Church. A commission set up by the Pope to deal with the issue reached the conclusion, on the basis of the entire Catholic tradition, that the commitment to celibacy could not be abandoned. The deliberations referred explicitly to the instructions of the Council of Carthage¹⁰⁸. In this context, the observations of Stickler are worthy of note: “...the Fathers of the Council of Trent not only reaffirmed the respective obligations,¹⁰⁹ they also refused to declare the law of celibacy of the Latin Church to be a purely ecclesiastical law, just as they had refused to include Our Blessed Lady within the universal law of original sin”.¹¹⁰ Canon 9 of the 24th session of this Council is the one that refers most directly to the law of celibacy:

“CANON IX.-If any one saith, that clerics constituted in sacred orders, or Regulars, who have solemnly professed chastity, are able to contract marriage, and that being contracted it is valid, notwithstanding the ecclesiastical law, or vow; and that the contrary is no thing else than to condemn marriage; and, that all who do not feel that they have the gift of chastity, even though they have made a vow thereof, may contract marriage; let him be anathema: seeing that God refuses not that gift to those who ask for it rightly, neither does He suffer us to be tempted above that which we are able.”

Nevertheless, the most important and radical decision in view of the defense of celibacy was the decision to establish seminaries for the training of celibate candidates to the priesthood.

“... the Holy Council decrees that all cathedral and metropolitan churches and churches greater than these shall be bound, each according to its means and the extent of its diocese, to provide for, to educate in religion, and to train in ecclesiastical discipline, a certain number of boys of their city and diocese. Or, if they are not found there, of their province, in a college located near the said churches, or in some other suitable place to be chosen by the bishop”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ cf. Concilium Tridentinum, ed. Goerresiana, T. IX, p. 6, 425-70

¹⁰⁹ cf Council of Trent, XXIII Session, I Chapter.

¹¹⁰ cf Stickler M. Alfons, *Il celibato Ecclesiastico*, pp. 34-35, Citta' del Vaticano, 1994.

¹¹¹ cf. Council of Trent, XXIII Session, Chapter XVIII.

The decision was providential and positive: it provided so many celibate candidates for Sacred Orders that it was practically no longer necessary to turn to married men as candidates for the Sacred Orders. It was the Council of Trent that confirmed celibacy as the most suitable and noble form of observing priestly continence, which the Church had always required of its sacred ministers. From then onwards, the concept of celibacy was definitively affirmed and it entails the access to Sacred Orders only of those men who are not bound by marriage and who promise never to marry.¹¹²

The Second Vatican Council

In its Decree on the ministry and life of Priests, the Second Vatican Council reasserted the law of priestly celibacy.

Paragraph 16 of “Presbyterorum Ordinis”¹¹³ speaks specifically of celibacy, (or “perfect continence for the Kingdom of Heaven”) to reassert its validity as law in the

¹¹² cf Council of Trent, XXIII Session, XIII Chapter : Who may be ordained subdeacon and deacon; their obligations; on no one shall two sacred orders be conferred the same day – Those shall be ordained subdeacons and deacons who have a good testimonial, have already been approved in minor orders, and are instructed in letters and in those things that pertain to the exercise of the orders. **They should hope, with the help of God, to be able to live continently**, should serve the churches to which they will be assigned, understand that it is very highly becoming, since they serve at the altar, to receive holy communion at least on the Lord’s day and on solemn festivals days.....”.

¹¹³ cf Presbyterorum Ordinis (PO) 16: “(Celibacy is to be embraced and esteemed as a gift). Perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, commended by Christ the Lord (33) and through the course of time as well as in our own days freely accepted and observed in a praiseworthy manner by many of the faithful, is held by the Church to be of great value in a special manner for the priestly life. It is at the same time a sign and a stimulus for pastoral charity and a special source of spiritual fecundity in the world.(34) Indeed it is not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood, as is apparent from the practice of the early church (35) and from the traditions of the Eastern Churches, where, besides those who with all the bishops, by a gift of grace, choose to observe celibacy, there are also married priests of highest merit. This holy synod, while it commends ecclesiastical celibacy, in no way intends to alter that different discipline which legitimately flourishes in the Eastern Churches. It permanently exhorts all those who have received the priesthood and marriage to persevere in their holy vocation so that they may fully and generously continue to expend themselves for the sake of the flock commended to them. (36)

Indeed, celibacy has a many-faceted suitability for the priesthood. For the whole priestly mission is dedicated to the service of a new humanity which Christ, the victor over death, has aroused through his Spirit in the world and which has its origin "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man but of God (Jn 1:13). Through virginity, then, or celibacy observed for the Kingdom of Heaven,(37) priests are consecrated to Christ by a new and exceptional reason. They adhere to him more easily with an undivided heart,(38) they dedicate themselves more freely in him and through him to the service of God and men, and they more expeditiously minister to his Kingdom and the work of heavenly regeneration, and thus they are apt to accept, in a broad sense, paternity in Christ. In this way they profess themselves before men as willing to be dedicated to the office committed to them-namely, to commit themselves faithfully to one man and to show themselves as a chaste virgin for Christ(39) and thus to evoke the mysterious marriage established by Christ, and fully to be manifested in the future, in which the Church has Christ as her only Spouse.(40) They give, moreover, a living sign of the world to come, by a faith and charity already made present, in which the children of the resurrection neither marry nor take wives.(41)

For these reasons, based on the mystery of Christ and his mission, celibacy, which first was recommended to priests, later in the Latin Church was imposed upon all who were to be promoted to sacred orders. This legislation, pertaining to those who are destined for the priesthood, this holy synod again approves and confirms, fully trusting this gift of the Spirit so fitting for the priesthood of the New Testament, freely

Latin Church and to invite all priests to observe it generously. In this context two very important statements are made which, contrary to the intentions of Vatican II, may give the impression that the law of celibacy could evolve in the future. These statements, therefore, need to be explained.

1. **The first statement** concerns the non-essential nature of celibacy with regard to the priesthood. Paragraph 16 says: “Perfect and perpetual continence..... is not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood, as is apparent from the practice of the early Church(35) and from the traditions of the Eastern Churches, where, besides those who with all the bishops, by a gift of grace, choose to observe celibacy, there are also married priests of highest merit....”.

Some people see in these words a great “hope” that a discipline, which they consider obsolete, will someday change. Such people believe that if celibacy is not essential for the priesthood, then maintaining a law that is imposed by the Church appears in all its historical precariousness. If historical experience shows that it has more disadvantages than advantages, it would be right to revise it.

For others instead, these words cause great anxiety because they seem to thwart the generosity of all those sacred ministers who lived the celibate priesthood in fidelity and a spirit of sacrifice throughout the two thousand years of Church history. The Council’s words for them might indicate the first steps towards the possible abolition of a way of living the priesthood that had inspired their entire lives.

In actual fact, when PO 16 says that perfect and perpetual continence, in other words, celibacy, is not required by the very nature of the priesthood, it does not mean to say that celibacy and the marriage of priests should be put on the same level and are, therefore, equally suitable for the exercise of the ministerial priesthood. The theory that a priest, once ordained, may marry has always been rejected by the entire ecclesiastical legislation of both the Eastern and the Latin Churches. The Council text, therefore, merely intends to refer to the two possibilities of access to the priesthood which are historically accepted by the Church, because both of them are grounded in Scripture: namely, the celibate way and priestly continence for those who have received Sacred Orders in the married state.

given by the Father, provided that those who participate in the priesthood of Christ through the sacrament of Orders-and also the whole Church-humbly and fervently pray for it. This sacred synod also exhorts all priests who, in following the example of Christ, freely receive sacred celibacy as a grace of God, that they magnanimously and wholeheartedly adhere to it, and that persevering faithfully in it, they may acknowledge this outstanding gift of the Father which is so openly praised and extolled by the Lord.(42) Let them keep before their eyes the great mysteries signified by it and fulfilled in it. Insofar as perfect continence is thought by many men to be impossible in our times, to that extent priests should all the more humbly and steadfastly pray with the Church for that grace of fidelity, which is never denied those who seek it, and use all the supernatural and natural aids available. They should especially seek, lest they omit them, the ascetical norms which have been proved by the experience of the Church and which are scarcely less necessary in the contemporary world. This holy synod asks not only priests but all the faithful that they might receive this precious gift of priestly celibacy in their hearts and ask of God that he will always bestow this gift upon his Church.

Instead we could ask: when Vatican II speaks of the tradition of the early Church and the Eastern Churches, is it only thinking of the fact that married men too could be lawfully ordained, or does it also contemplate the legitimacy of them having a conjugal life as well?

It seems to me that the intention of the Council is only to affirm that married men too could lawfully be ordained.

In fact, as far as the early Church is concerned, footnote No 35 of PO quotes I Tim. 3, 2-5, and Tit. 1, 6.¹¹⁴ This quotation can not be misunderstood because Vatican II knows only too well that the entire Patristic Tradition and, above all, the interventions of Popes Siricius and Innocent I clearly explained this demand of the Apostle as a guarantee of “propter futuram continentiam”, namely, a guarantee that married men admitted to Sacred Orders would practice continence: therefore, they saw in these words of the Apostles the demand of priestly continence for anyone, married or celibate, who came forward to receive the Sacred Orders.¹¹⁵

In connection with the tradition of the Eastern Churches, we may ask: to what tradition does Vatican II refer? Does it refer to the tradition sanctioned by the Council of Trullo which, dissenting from Rome, allowed married Priests and Deacons to have a conjugal life, or to the tradition before the Council of Trullo in 692, when the Eastern Church and the Latin Church were in full harmony?

I believe it refers to both traditions because the first one is mentioned by PO 16, which reminds us of a different discipline currently existing in the Eastern Churches. PO 16 states:

“Indeed it is not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood, as is apparent from the practice of the early church (35) and from the traditions of the Eastern Churches, where, besides those who with all the bishops, by a gift of grace, choose to observe celibacy, there are also married priests of highest merit. This holy synod, while it commends ecclesiastical celibacy, in no way intends to alter that different discipline which legitimately flourishes in the Eastern Churches. It permanently exhorts all those who have received the priesthood and marriage to persevere in their holy vocation so that they may fully and generously continue to expend themselves for the sake of the flock commended to them.(36)”

¹¹⁴ Cf: Presbyterorum Ordinis, nota 35.

¹¹⁵ cf. Nota 73: “Perhaps does one believe that this (is permitted) because it is written: “He must not have been married more than once” (Ib Tim. 3:2) But (Paul) was not talking about (a man) persisting in his desire to beget; he spoke about continence that one should observe (propter continentiam futuram). He did not accept those who were not beyond reproach (in this matter) and he said: “I should like everyone to be like me” (I 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); Cf Innocence I: Epist. Ad Vitricium episcopum Rothomagensem, IX, 12. PL 20, 475c-77a (JW 286); Innocence I: Epist. Ad Exuperium episcopum Tolosanum, I, 2. PL 20, 496b-98a (JW 293).

According to the Encyclical “Sacerdotalis Coelibatus” of Paul VI, in this text there is a clear reference to the discipline established by the Council of Trullo held in the year 692.¹¹⁶

The second one is mentioned by note 36 of PO 16 when it quotes the Encyclical “Ad Catholici Sacerdotii” of Pius XI. The reason of this quotation is that Pius XI is acknowledging in this Encyclical “the different discipline legitimately prevailing in the Oriental Church”.¹¹⁷ However PO knows too well that, prior to that, in the same Encyclical Pius XI exalts the perfect harmony that existed in the fourth century between the Latin Church and the Eastern Church with regard to the celibates and married men who were admitted to Sacred Orders: Both categories were bound to observe perfect continence. This Encyclical says:

“.....In the Oriental Church, too, most illustrious Fathers bear witness to the excellence of Catholic celibacy. In this matter as in others there was harmony between the Latin and Oriental Churches where accurate discipline flourished. St. Epiphanius at the end of the fourth century tells us that celibacy applied even to the subdiaconate: ‘The Church does not on any account admit a man living in the wedded state and having children, even though he have only one wife, to the orders of deacon, priest, bishop or subdeacon; but only him whose wife be dead or who should abstain from the use of marriage; this is done in those places especially where the ecclesiastical canons are accurately followed.’”¹¹⁸

The fact that “Presbyterorum Ordinis” put these two traditions together, and then joined them to the tradition of the early Church, means that Vatican II wanted to stress what they had in common and not what separated them, otherwise this cross-reference would contradict itself. These three traditions only had in common the fact that they admitted, and admit, married men to Sacred Orders. It therefore seems to discard the idea that Vatican II meant to say that celibacy is not required by the nature of the priesthood because the type of priesthood established by the Council of Trullo is equally accepted as the common heritage of the Universal Church. In all probability, it only had in mind to stress the idea that married men too had and still have, the possibility of entering the priesthood.

Such interpretation is in harmony with the “Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests” called “TOTA ECCLESIA” published by the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy in 1994. This Directory, which constantly refers to PO 16, in number 59 refers to a discipline of perpetual continence of the clergy going back to apostolic times. To justify that, TOTA ECCLESIA quotes the teaching of St. Paul and the legislation of the Councils and the Fathers of both Latin and Oriental

¹¹⁶ Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical “Sacerdotalis Coelibatus” No. 38: “If the legislation of the Eastern Church is different in the matter of discipline with regard to clerical celibacy, as was finally established by the Council in Trullo held in the year 692,(25) and which has been clearly recognized by the Second Vatican Council,(26) this is due to the different historical background of that most noble part of the Church, a situation which the Holy Spirit has providentially and supernaturally influenced. We ourselves take this opportunity to express our esteem and our respect for all the clergy of the Oriental Churches, and to recognize in them examples of fidelity and zeal which make them worthy of sincere veneration.”

¹¹⁷ Pius XI: Encyclical “Ad Catholici Sacerdotii”, AAS, vol. XXVIII, p. 28, 1936.

¹¹⁸ Pius XI: Encyclical “Ad Catholici Sacerdotii”, AAS, vol. XXVIII, p. 26, 1936.

Church up to the II Council of Trullo. In this way it eliminates the idea that the reference to the Eastern Churches made by PO 16, meant the acceptance of the discipline of the II Council of Trullo as the common ground of the priesthood of the Universal Church. TOTA ECCLESIA states as follows:

“The example is Christ, who in going against what could be considered the dominant culture of his time, freely chose to live celibacy. In following him the disciples left “everything” to fulfil the mission entrusted to them (Lk 18:28-30).

For this reason the Church, from apostolic times, has wished to conserve the gift of perpetual continence of the clergy and choose the candidates for Holy Orders from among the celibate faithful (cf 2 Thes 2:15; 1 Cor 7:5; 9:5; 1 Tim 3:2-12; 5:9; Tit 1:6-8).(188)

*(188) Cf COUNCIL OF ELVIRA (a. 300-305) cann. 27; 33; BRUNS HERM., *Canones Apostolorum et Conciliorum saec. IV-VII, II*, 5-6; COUNCIL OF NEOCESAREA (a. 314), can. 1; ECUM. COUNCIL OF NICEA I (a. 325), can. 3: *Conc. Oecum. Decree 6*; ROMAN SYNOD (a. 386): *Concilia Africae a. 345-525, CCl 149 (in Council of Telepte)*, 58-63; COUNCIL OF CARTHAGE (a. 390): *ibid 13. 133 ff.*; COUNCIL OF TRULLANO (a. 691), cann. 3, 6, 12, 13, 26, 30, 48: *Pont. Commissio ad redigendum CIC Orientalis IX I/1 125-186*; SIRICIO, *decretals Directa* (a. 386): *PL 13, 1131-1147*; INNOCENT I, *lett. Dominus inter* (a. 405): *BRUNS, cit. 274-277. S. LEO THE GREAT, lett. a Rusticus* (a. 456): *PL 54, 1191*; EUSEBIUS OF CESAREA, *Demonstratio Evangelica 1 9: PG 22, 82 (78-83)*; EPIPHANIO OF SALAMINA, *Panarion PG 41, 868, 1024; Expositio Fidei PG 42, 822-826.**

That the Council does not consider the discipline started by the II Council of Trullo as the common heritage of the Universal Church is demonstrated by the fact that, precisely where it shows the greatest respect for the current legislation of the Eastern Churches, which it defines as ‘legitimate’, it emphasizes the difference, which logically refers back to the split at the Second Council of Trullo, which was never accepted in the Latin Church.¹¹⁹ No. 16 of PO states: “.....This holy synod, while it commends ecclesiastical celibacy, in no way intends to alter that different discipline which legitimately¹²⁰ flourishes in the Eastern Churches”.¹²¹ In this way the discipline of the II Council of Trullo,

¹¹⁹ cf. Cholij, op. cit. pp. 179-192.

¹²⁰ The adverb “legitimately” used in PO 16 in connection with the discipline in force in the Eastern Churches calls for a brief reflection. Very probably the Council text refers to a canonical ‘legitimacy’, and not a theological or biblical legitimacy. No. 38 of *Sacerdotalis Coelibatus* justifies this discipline established by the Council of Trullo of 692 solely by ‘different historical motives’: cf. Cholij *Roman: Clerical Celibacy in East and West*, pp. 8-9, 179-192, Worcester, 1989. If this legitimacy were biblical, Paul VI could not reject the purely ecclesiastical origin of Catholic celibacy, something he seems to do at number 41 of the same encyclical, where he says: “ In any case, the Church of the West cannot weaken her faithful observance of her own tradition. And it is unthinkable that for centuries she has followed a path which, instead of favoring the spiritual richness of individual souls and of the People of God has in some way compromised it, or that she has with arbitrary juridical prescriptions stifled the free expansion of the most profound realities of nature and of grace”.

¹²¹ cf: Pius XI “*Ad catholici sacerdotii*” No. 47, which says: “Notwithstanding all this, We do not wish that what We said in commendation of clerical celibacy should be interpreted as though it were Our mind in any

which was qualified as “different” by “Ad Catholici Sacerdotii” before Vat. II, is still qualified as “different” by Vat. II e after Vat. II.¹²²

Therefore the reference to the “tradition of the Eastern Churches” cannot be used to assert the possibility of a conjugal life in the exercise of the Sacred Orders; all that can be said is that marriage is not an impediment to the reception of the Priesthood. It is only in this sense that P.O. 16 says that perfect and perpetual continence for the Kingdom of Heaven is not required by the very nature of the priesthood. These words do nothing more than sum up the entire history of priestly continence/celebracy, which for centuries has seen celibate and married men receive Sacred Orders on the basis of Sacred Scripture, but all of them bound by the observation of priestly continence, at least in the first seven centuries of the Church.

2. **The second statement** of PO 16 that needs to be explained concerns the intimate relationship between celibacy and the priesthood. PO 16 says:

“Indeed, celibacy has a many-faceted suitability for the priesthood.....For these reasons, based on the mystery of Christ and his mission, celibacy, which first was recommended to priests, later in the Latin Church was imposed upon all who were to be promoted to sacred orders”.

Obviously this second sentence is meant to complete the previous one and it also reflects the history of continence/celebracy, which ultimately saw the latter prevailing over the former. Nevertheless, at first sight it seems insufficient because suitability is never an absolute value upon which a person can bet his entire life. Moreover the use of a word as “recommended” may give the idea that celibacy has been optional in the past.

Still, according to the Council, this intimate suitability of celibacy for the priesthood founded upon Christ and his mission, is more than a merely external and purely accidental fact. By using this word, the Council did not intend to weaken the demand of priestly continence, which the Church has always demanded of those who received Sacred Orders. Very probably it simply intends to say that, between the two forms of priestly continence (celibate and matrimonial), the celibate form is the most suitable for priestly service. What else can the motive of this suitability be, if not the fact that it makes service at the altar even more perfect, since this service calls for total purity, in other words, perfect continence, following Christ’s example? Obviously, Vatican II is very familiar with the statements of the Fathers concerning the duty of married priests to observe priestly continence; it also knows the statements of the Popes who bind priestly continence to Sacred Scripture and the mandate of the Apostles, and it also knows the history which led the Church not to entrust any longer the priesthood to *virii probati* because of their many transgressions against priestly continence.

way to blame, or, as it were, disapprove the different discipline legitimately prevailing in the Oriental Church. What We have said has been meant solely to exalt in the Lord something We consider one of the purest glories of the Catholic priesthood; something which seems to us to correspond better to the desires of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to His purposes in regard to priestly souls.”

¹²² cf. PO 16; *Sacerdotalis Coelibatus* N. 38; indirectly also *Pastores Dabo Vobis* N. 29.

It is upon the basis of this theology/history that Vatican II repeats the Council of Trent's decision to admit to Sacred Orders only those men who commit themselves to celibacy. It seems to me that in this sense, and only in this sense, does Vatican II state that celibacy is "not required by the very nature of the priesthood" and that it has a relationship of intimate suitability for the priesthood" (PO 16a).

In other words this 'suitability does not mean that a man can be ordained priest whether he observes priestly continence or otherwise; it means that between the two ways of living priestly continence, the Church chooses what she judges as the best way, namely, celibacy. In the past the Church "recommended" celibacy more than the other way of living priestly continence. Now she shows it as the only way of access to Sacred Orders. We could say that the Church considers celibacy as the most sublime form of priestly continence, something which the Church has always demanded of her ministers since the time of the Apostles.¹²³ This is stated very clearly by PO 16 when it says:

"For these reasons, based on the mystery of Christ and his mission, celibacy, which first was recommended to priests, later in the Latin Church was imposed upon all who were to be promoted to sacred orders"

3. This is confirmed by the encyclical "**Sacerdotalis Coelibatus**" of Paul VI (1967). On the one hand, paragraph 17 of this document asserts the non-essential nature of celibacy for the exercise of the priesthood:

"Virginity undoubtedly, as the Second Vatican Council declared, "is not, of course, required by the nature of the priesthood itself. This is clear from the practice of the early Church and the traditions of the Eastern Churches".(11) But at the same time the Council did not hesitate to confirm solemnly the ancient, sacred and providential present law of priestly celibacy."

On the other hand, "Sacerdotalis Coelibatus" links celibacy to the example of Christ¹²⁴ and rejects the interpretation of the law of celibacy as a law which became more rigid and restrictive towards human nature and divine grace.

"Coelibatus Sacerdotalis" thus rejects the idea that the law of celibacy is to be considered merely as an ecclesiastical law. Paragraph 41 states:

¹²³ cf: Pio XI: "Ad catholici sacerdotii" N. 47: ".....What We have said has been meant solely to exalt in the Lord something We consider one of the purest glories of the Catholic priesthood; something which seems to us to correspond better to the desires of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to His purposes in regard to priestly souls."

¹²⁴ Cf. Coelibatus Sacerdotalis of Paul VI No. 21: "Christ, the only Son of the Father, by the power of the Incarnation itself was made Mediator between heaven and earth, between the Father and the human race. Wholly in accord with this mission, Christ remained throughout His whole life in the state of celibacy, which signified His total dedication to the service of God and men. This deep concern between celibacy and the priesthood of Christ is reflected in those whose fortune it is to share in the dignity and mission of the Mediator and eternal Priest; this sharing will be more perfect the freer the sacred minister is from the bonds of flesh and blood.(28)

“In any case, the Church of the West cannot weaken her faithful observance of her own tradition. Nor can she be regarded as having followed for centuries a path which instead of favoring the spiritual richness of individual souls and of the People of God, has in some way compromised it, or of having stifled, with arbitrary juridical prescriptions, the free expansion of the most profound realities of nature and of grace”.

These words of Paul VI reassert what Pius XI had previously said in the encyclical “Ad catholic sacerdotii” about the ecclesiastical law of celibacy. He reasserts the law, but he traces it back to a previous unwritten practice that links it to the apostles and Christ. In the chapter “The Priestly Virtues”, Pius XI says:

“The law of ecclesiastical celibacy, whose first written traces pre-suppose a still earlier unwritten practice, dates back to a canon of the Council of Elvira, at the beginning of the fourth century, when persecution still raged. This law only makes obligatory what might in any case almost be termed a moral exigency that springs from the Gospel and the Apostolic preaching. For the Divine Master showed such high esteem for chastity, and exalted it as something beyond the common power; He Himself was the Son of a Virgin Mother, Florem Matris Virginis, and was brought up in the virgin family of Joseph and Mary; He showed special love for pure souls such as the two Johns--the Baptist and the Evangelist. The great Apostle Paul, faithful interpreter of the New Law and of the mind of Christ, preached the inestimable value of virginity, in view of a more fervent service of God, and gave the reason when he said: "He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God." All this had almost inevitable consequences: the priests of the New Law felt the heavenly attraction of this chosen virtue; they sought to be of the number of those "to whom it is given to take this word," and they spontaneously bound themselves to its observance. Soon it came about that the practice, in the Latin Church, received the sanction of ecclesiastical law. The Second Council of Carthage at the end of the fourth century declared: "What the Apostles taught, and the early Church preserved, let us too, observe.”

Chapter 6

THE APOSTOLIC ORIGINS

OF PRIESTLY CONTINENCE

At the end of this historical overview which has shown us the determination of the Church in general, and of the Latin Church in particular, to protect priestly continence, it seems appropriate to return now to the title of this study and respond to the question: is ecclesiastical celibacy of ecclesiastical or apostolic origin? We shall do so by gathering together the motivations given by the Church Fathers, the Councils and, especially, the Popes in their defense of priestly continence/celibacy. On the basis of these motivations we shall reply to the previously mentioned question.

Two periods of time must be distinguished:

- The first period stretches from the early Church until the Council of Trent: the period in which the Sacred authors and the universal and local Councils spoke of priestly continence, including the continence of married priests and priestly celibacy in the same category, because these two ways of living priestly purity are interconnected.
 - The second period stretches from the Council of Trent until the present day: in this period, the Latin Church refers solely to celibacy because from the Council of Trent onwards she had chosen this as the only way of access to the priesthood.
1. **In connection with the first period**, the motivations given in the course of this study can be reduced to the following, which are obviously interconnected:
 - The apostolic origin of celibacy, which attributes the discipline of continence/celibacy directly to the apostles and to Sacred Scripture;
 - The Ancient Tradition, namely, the observance of continence/celibacy practiced in the Early Church and in the following centuries (Antiquitas).
 - The nature of the Sacred Orders and service at the altar, supported by biblical statements taken both from the Old and the New Testaments.
 2. By way of example, **Clement of Alexandria** refers to the example of the Apostles to justify the ancient practice of continence/celibacy.¹²⁵ Tertullian also appeals to the example of Peter and the apostles who, in his opinion, had to be either ‘eunuchs or continent’.¹²⁶
 3. The Fathers give special attention to the condition laid down by St. Paul for the ordination of priests and deacons: they had to be married only once. In their opinion, the Pauline condition of “vir unius mulieris”, meant that the married candidates had to practice continence once they entered the clerical state. Anyone who had been married more than once could not give any guarantee of fidelity to priestly continence and, consequently, he could not be ordained. This is also the opinion of **Clement, Tertullian, Hippolytus and Origen**¹²⁷

¹²⁵ cf. Nota 18.

¹²⁶ cf. Nota 20-21.

¹²⁷ cf. Nota 23-24

4. **Eusebius of Caesarea** interprets the Pauline teaching of ‘vir unius mulieris’ as Paul’s will that the Bishop be completely continent, even if he is married.¹²⁸ **Epiphanius** attributes the discipline of continence/celebracy ‘to the norm established by the Apostles in wisdom and holiness.’¹²⁹ **St. John Chrysostom** rejects the interpretation of the ‘vir unius mulieris’ as permission to have a conjugal life and asserts the necessity of episcopal continence by virtue of I Cor. 7, 29.¹³⁰ **Ambrosiaster** deduces the obligation of continence/celebracy from the nature of the priesthood with an argument “a fortiori” taken from the Old Testament: if continence was obligatory in the Old Testament during times of sacrifice, this implies that the requirement of absolute continence now that the eucharistic sacrifice is offered every day.¹³¹
5. **Ambrose** derives the obligation of celibacy from priestly spirituality, which is one of total consecration to the Lord, even more than in the Old Testament, which demanded continence during the times of temple service.¹³² **Jerome** derives the motivation for continence/celebracy from the behavior of the Apostles, the Pauline teaching and, in general, from Sacred Scripture.¹³³
6. The **Council of Carthage** explicitly bases its law in the discipline taught by the Apostles and observed since earliest times:
*“Bishop Genethlius said, “As was previously said, it is fitting that the holy bishops and priests of God, as well as the Levites (that is, deacons), that is, 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 endeavor to keep”.*¹³⁴
- This passage shows us how the apostolic teaching and the teaching of ancient times are interconnected and united. This means that the ecclesiastical discipline of priestly continence is not only based upon Sacred Scripture derived from the Apostles, but also on the oral teachings transmitted to us by the Apostles, in accordance with St. Paul’s words in 2 Ts. 2:15: “Stand firm, then, brothers, and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Ts 2,15).
7. **S. Ireneus** acknowledges this great tradition of the Roman Church when he says in “Against heresies” (his main work) that the apostolic tradition is observed in the Church of Rome, founded by the Apostles Peter and Paul and, consequently, all the other Churches must agree with it.¹³⁵ The teaching concerning continence/celebracy was undoubtedly part of this Tradition. If it is true that the apostolic tradition was observed in the Church of Rome, it must be said that the Church of Rome’s determination to observe and enforce priestly continence

¹²⁸ cf. Nota 36

¹²⁹ cf. Nota 43.

¹³⁰ cf. Nota 51

¹³¹ cf. Nota 90

¹³² cf. Nota 92

¹³³ cf. Nota 93.

¹³⁴ cf. Nota 83

¹³⁵ cf. S. Ireneo, Adversus Haereses 3, 3, 2.

derived from the conviction that it was part of the apostolic tradition. This was explicitly stated by the Popes of the fourth-fifth centuries.¹³⁶

8. **Pope Siricius** is one of the Popes who speak most clearly about continence/celebracy. In the fourth century he was faced with a very grave crisis of priestly continence. In the motivations he gives for continence/celebracy he goes back to a law given by Jesus Christ and explains it by saying that Christ came to complete the Old Testament, which demanded continence of the priests who officiated in the Temple. Pope Siricius declares that if the priests of the Old Testament were obliged to observe continence during the time of their service in the Temple, then the priests of the New Testament who must offer the eucharistic sacrifice every day are likewise obliged to continence/celebracy:

“Why also were the priests ordered to dwell in the temple at a distance from their homes in the year of their turn? Evidently for this reason that they might not be able to practice carnal intercourse with their wives, so that shining purity of conscience they might offer an acceptable gift to God.... Therefore also the Lord Jesus, when he had enlightened us by his coming, testifies in the Gospel, that ‘he came to fulfill the Law, not to destroy it’ (Mt. 5: 17). And so he has wished the beauty of the Church, whose spouse he is, to radiate with the splendor of chastity, so that on the day of judgement, when He will have come again, He may be able to find her without spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5: 27) as He instituted her through His Apostle. All priests and Levites are bound by the indissoluble law of these sanctions, so that from the day of our ordination, we give up both our hearts and our bodies to continence and chastity, provided only that through all things we may please our God in these sacrifices, which we daily offer.”¹³⁷

In the second letter to the African Bishops in 386, he refers to the previous Roman synods and declares that these are not new principles, that they go back to the Apostles, according to the words of Sacred Scripture “Stand firm, then, brothers, and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Ts 2,15).¹³⁸

In the decree letter ‘Dominus Inter’, which is sometimes attributed to Pope Siricius and sometimes to **Innocent I**, the obligation of priestly continence is attributed to Sacred Scripture:

“ In the first place we should consider the bishops, priests and deacons, who must participate in the divine sacrifices, by whose hands both the grace of baptism is conferred and the Body of Christ is confectioned. Not only we, but the Sacred Scriptures also compel them to be perfectly chaste, and the fathers, too, commanded that they must observe bodily continence... How can a bishop or a priest dare to preach virginity or continence to a widow or a virgin, or advise (spouses) to keep their marriage bed chaste, if he himself is more intent on begetting children for this world than for God? ”¹³⁹ ... (Epistula 10, 2-9 ad Gall. (PL 13, 1182-1188A)).

¹³⁶ cf. Stephan Heid, *Celibacy in the early Church*, pp. 288-292, San Francisco, 1997.

¹³⁷ cf. Nota 71.

¹³⁸ cf. Nota 72.

¹³⁹ Epistula 10, 2-9 ad Gall. (PL 13, 1182-1188A).

In their letter, Pope Siricius and Pope Innocent I continually refer to Sacred Scripture, especially to St. Paul. They always appeal to the authority of Sacred Scripture, Old and New Testament, to justify the discipline of continence/celebracy. They do not give any pretext whatsoever for thinking that the institution of this discipline had a merely ecclesiastical origin.¹⁴⁰

9. **Leo the Great** is the Pope who speaks very clearly about the discipline of continence/celebracy as a law of God, sanctioned by the canons of the Church:

“And so, dear brother, hold with vigilance the helm entrusted to you, and direct your mind's gaze around on all which you see put in your charge, guarding what will conduce to your reward and resisting those who strive to upset the discipline of the canons. The sanction of God's law must be respected, and the decrees of the canons should be more especially kept. Throughout the provinces committed to thee let such priests be consecrated to the LORD as are commended only by their deserving life and position among the clergy. Permit no licence to personal favour, nor to canvassing, nor to purchased votes. Let the cases of those who are to be ordained be investigated carefully and let them be trained in the discipline of the Church through a considerable period of their life. But if all the requirements of the holy Fathers are found in them, and if they have observed all that we read the blessed Apostle Paul to have enjoined on such, viz., that he be the husband of one wife, and that she was a virgin when he married her, as the authority of GOD'S law requires,[then ordain them(3)].¹⁴¹

10. As we saw previously, Pope **Gregory the Great** often refers to the law of perfect priestly continence. He regards it as a solid discipline and a very clear law of the Universal Church. He does not state in any of his letters that the origin of the discipline of perfect priestly continence lies in ecclesiastical legislation. Nevertheless he does not explain the motivations that justify the discipline of perfect priestly continence. This is understandable because these motivations had been explained very clearly by his predecessors and by the Councils, and he fully agrees with them and does not feel obliged to repeat them. This also explains Pope Gregory's resolute defense of the ecclesiastical legislation. Gregory the Great is in line with his predecessors and therefore indirectly confirms the apostolic origin of perfect priestly continence.¹⁴²

It is worth pointing out that the motivation classified as “ecclesiastical law” never appears in the first seven centuries of the Church. If one speaks of ecclesiastical law in reference to continence/celebracy, it is only in the sense of a ratification that

¹⁴⁰ cf. Note 76-77.

¹⁴¹ Leo the Great, JA2 411, PL 54, 666: the letter continues: “.....And this we are extremely anxious should be observed, so as to do away with all place for excuses, lest any one should believe himself able to attain to the priesthood who has taken a wife before he obtained the grace of Christ, and on her decease joined himself to another after baptism. Seeing that the former wife cannot be ignored, nor the previous marriage put out of the reckoning, and that he is as much the father of the children whom he begot by that wife before baptism as he is of those whom he is known to have begotten by the second after baptism. For as sins and things which are known to be unlawful are washed away in the font of baptism, so what are allowed or lawful are not done away.”

¹⁴² cf. Note 80-81-82.

confirms a discipline of apostolic origin, and never instead in the sense that it was the reason for observing continence/celibacy.¹⁴³

I feel duty bound to draw the conclusion that, after examining the testimony of the Fathers, Councils and Popes of the first seven centuries of the Church, we cannot dispute the fact that the discipline of priestly continence for the married, and priestly celibacy for the unmarried, goes back to the Apostle.

11. **In connection with the second period**, which stretches from the Council of Trent until the present day, the problem of the nature of ecclesiastical celibacy, whether it is of ecclesiastical institution or apostolic origin, emerged as a strong issue during the **Council of Trent**, when some Council Fathers asked that the ecclesiastical nature of the law of priestly celibacy be defined. The Council refused to give such a definition. We do not know for sure why the theological commission delegated by the Council to find a solution was unable to reach the necessary unanimity for proceeding. They had many good reasons for not committing themselves and choosing silence instead. For instance, it would have been risky to approve the “ecclesiastical nature of the law of celibacy” because the formulation was ambiguous: if the petitioners were referring to celibacy in itself, this at least was of apostolic origin because it cannot be disputed that the apostles associated both married men and celibates to their priesthood. If, however, the petitioners were referring to celibacy as a “law”, through which the Church chose one of the two biblical forms of access to the priesthood as the only legitimate one for the future, then one could certainly say that this was an ecclesiastical institution. The refusal to give any definition was therefore the most prudent decision. Nevertheless, the lack of a decision by the Council of Trent cannot lead us to conclude that the Council was uncertain about the apostolic origin of celibacy.

12. This distinction between celibacy in itself and the law of celibacy appears very clearly in **PO 16**:

“Perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, commended by Christ the Lord(33) and through the course of time as well as in our own days freely accepted and observed in a praiseworthy manner by many of the faithful, is held by the Church to be of great value in a special manner for the priestly life..... For these reasons, based on the mystery of Christ and his mission, celibacy, which first was recommended to priests, later in the Latin Church was imposed upon all who were to be promoted to sacred orders”.

This distinction is also made in Chapter III of the encyclical of **Pius XI “Ad catholici Sacerdotii”**, in the Council, and in paragraph 17 of the encyclical

¹⁴³ Proof of this is the fact that, as we shall immediately see, when some wanted to replace this discipline with an ecclesiastical law, the only solution they found was to link it to the will of the apostles: the reason for this is that, until then, the only justification for the discipline of continence/celibacy was its apostolic origins. How then did these doubts arise if continence/celibacy was of apostolic origin or simply of ecclesiastical origin? Thanks to the Second Council of Trullo, which upheld the Greek Church as the true repository of apostolic teaching. Obviously, if this was true, and the Latin Church insisted on celibacy/continence, this could only be explained as an ecclesiastical decision.

“Sacerdotalis Coelibatus” by Paul VI. The two encyclicals do not seem to trace the current law of celibacy back to the Apostles, but they clearly trace back to the Apostles and Christ the origin of priestly celibacy.

CONCLUSION: on the basis of the testimony provided by Fathers of the Church, the Councils and, above all, the Popes, I believe that we can say that priestly continence for married men and priestly celibacy for unmarried men are of apostolic origin. However, the law of celibacy in itself, as the only way of access to the priesthood, is of ecclesiastical origin.

Chapter 7

PRESSURE FOR THE ABOLITION OF THE LAW OF CELIBACY

Many people are currently waiting for an evolution in the Church’s attitude towards celibacy. In spite of the Church’s repeated interventions on the matter (Vatican II, Encyclical Letters, Synods of Bishops, Apostolic Exhortations, Holy Thursday Letters to Priests), it seems that the problem just won’t go away. Many who live within the Catholic Church wonder what the future of celibacy will be and they obviously try to influence the ecclesial reality as much as they can from their own perspective.

How will the Catholic Church behave in the face of these pressures which are destined to become stronger? Will there come a time in which she will have to yield and abolish celibacy once and for all, at least following the example of the Eastern Church, which allows a conjugal life to those who got married before ordination?

In order to predict the future we must look back at the past. The Catholic Church has experienced more difficult periods than this, yet she has never given up on the discipline of priestly continence; quite the contrary: the Church has always asserted the discipline of priestly continence and has eventually chosen celibacy as the normal way of living this continence. This emerged in our study when we examined the great crisis within the Church of the IV century. The Universal Church, both Eastern and Western, closed ranks and drew up its legislation in Ecumenical and local Councils, through the interventions of the Bishops, especially the bishop of Rome, and it thus succeeded in emerging from a crisis that seemed to separate it from the apostolic origins.

The same thing happened in the period of the investitures under Pope Gregory VII. It makes one shudder to think of the disastrous situation in which the entire Church found herself because of the investitures: the behavior of the clergy and powerful people in the Church led to total humiliation. Yet it was celibacy that allowed the Church to reemerge with dignity and full fidelity to her origins. It was precisely in this period that the Church decided to declare not only illicit, but also invalid, any marriage contracted by major clerics and people in religious life. The Second Lateran Council did not introduce celibacy into the Catholic Church: this is a historical misunderstanding, manipulated by many who desired, or who still desire, the abolition of celibacy. The Second Lateran Council simply declared invalid what had always been forbidden.

The same thing happened during the Protestant reformation when, once the sacrament of Orders had been abolished, celibacy could be considered completely superfluous. Yet it was precisely at that time that the law of celibacy finally came into force, excluding any possibility of a man becoming a priest after marrying. Diocesan seminaries were established in order to prepare candidates adequately for priestly/celibate life. History has shown that the Council of Trent's decision was extremely beneficial for the entire Church. In providing the Church with an immense number of celibate candidates to Sacred Orders, it no longer needed to turn to married men to provide for the spiritual necessities of the faithful.

The French revolution also made its own voice heard on the matter of Catholic celibacy. We know of the many privileges enjoyed by the priests who swore fidelity to the revolutionary government. Nevertheless, there was a price to pay: these priests had to swear fidelity to the revolution, abandon the Pope and marry. In spite of the many defections, the French Church opted for a catacomb experience and emerged from the crisis reinforced, at the time of Napoleon who had once persecuted the French Church. The courage shown by the French celibate clergy of the XIX century gave life to a great new period of ecclesial and missionary vigor in France and in all the French territories.

After Vatican II, a real anti-celibacy war broke out and it continues today, made worse by various factors: the misinterpretation of the post-Conciliar encounter between the Church and the modern world, the recent scandals within some Churches and the campaign fought by international anticlericalism. Once again, the Church has remained faithful to her Founder and the Apostles and, over the last forty years, has never ceased to reassert her option in favor of ecclesiastical celibacy (cf. Vatican II, "Sacra Coelibatus" by Paul VI, all the apostolic exhortations at the end of the

continental synods in preparation to the great jubilee of the year 2000 and, above all, “Pastores Dabo Vobis”, at the end of the Synod on priestly formation ¹⁴⁴).

After Vatican II, the Catholic Church formulated a theology of the priesthood that reasserts even more the necessity of celibacy: the theology of the unity of the sacrament of Orders in three degrees, the theology that regards the priest as acting in *persona Christi*, and the identity of the Catholic Priest that derives from his representing the celibate Christ, head and pastor of the Church. ¹⁴⁵ These are merely eloquent signs of the Church’s decision to continue along the path indicated by her Founder and by her conviction that priestly celibacy is ultimately explained through its close relationship with Christ the Priest.

This is the most profound reason for the Catholic Church’s steadfast fidelity to priestly celibacy: ultimately, it is of apostolic origin and not merely of ecclesiastical origin. The Church could not possibly disavow her roots and origins, or a fidelity that has lasted for two thousand years, and whose sole explanation lies in the fact that celibacy has a more profound origin than a legislation introduced at the beginning of the fourth century. If it were merely a question of ecclesiastical law, the Church would have found more than convincing reasons for replacing it with other apparently more efficient and less demanding laws. Yet she has never done so, quite the contrary, precisely because the origin of this vocation lies not within itself, but in its Founder, through his Apostles.

¹⁴⁴ cf. “Pastores Dabo Vobis” of John Paul II n. 29: In this light one can more easily understand and appreciate the reasons behind the centuries - old choice which the Western Church has made and maintained -- despite all the difficulties and objections raised down the centuries -- of conferring the order of presbyter only on men who have given proof that they have been called by God to the gift of chastity in absolute and perpetual celibacy. The synod fathers clearly and forcefully expressed their thought on this matter in an important proposal which deserves to be quoted here in full: "While in no way interfering with the discipline of the Oriental churches, the synod, in the conviction that perfect chastity in priestly celibacy is a charism, reminds priests that celibacy is a priceless gift of God for the Church and has a prophetic value for the world today. This synod strongly reaffirms what the Latin Church and some Oriental rites require that is, that the priesthood be conferred only on those men who have received from God the gift of the vocation to celibate chastity (without prejudice to the tradition of some Oriental churches and particular cases of married clergy who convert to Catholicism, which are admitted as exceptions in Pope Paul VI's encyclical on priestly celibacy, no. 42). The synod does not wish to leave any doubts in the mind of anyone regarding the Church's firm will to maintain the law that demands perpetual and freely chosen celibacy for present and future candidates for priestly ordination in the Latin rite. The synod would like to see celibacy presented and explained in the fullness of its biblical, theological and spiritual richness, as a precious gift given by God to his Church and as a sign of the kingdom which is not of this world -- a sign of God's love for this world and of the undivided love of the priest for God and for God's people, with the result that celibacy is seen as a positive enrichment of the priesthood."(78)

¹⁴⁵ *ibidem*: “It is especially important that the priest understand the theological motivation of the Church's law on celibacy. Inasmuch as it is a law, it expresses the Church's will, even before the will of the subject expressed by his readiness. But the will of the Church finds its ultimate motivation in the link between celibacy and sacred ordination, which configures the priest to Jesus Christ the head and spouse of the Church. The Church, as the spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her head and spouse loved her. Priestly celibacy, then, is the gift of self in and with Christ to his Church and expresses the priest's service to the Church in and with the Lord.”

In spite of all the theories and the illusions, the Church will never allow marriage for its priests who have received the Sacred Orders in the celibate state because this would mean breaking with an age-old unanimous discipline in the history of the Western and Eastern Churches. If the Church were to change the discipline of celibacy now and allow priests to marry, she would rightly be rebuked by the Eastern Church, which only allows a conjugal life to those who have received ordination after marriage. Even more, the Church would become an object of ridicule because she would be denying herself. This fact must be firmly emphasized in order to take away the illusion of many outsiders that the Church will change her policy in the future, as well as the illusion of many members of the Church who harbor the same ideas. The marriage of celibate priests is a theological absurdity, which the Church will never consider because she has always rejected it throughout her age-old history, beginning from the Apostles.

Another possibility that is being proposed with growing strength in some ecclesiastical contexts is the ordination of married men with permission to have a conjugal life after ordination. It is said that this would help to solve the vocation problem and ensure that the many Christian communities currently without a priest could celebrate the Eucharist. Yet it is difficult to see how this could happen when we consider that the Eastern and Latin Churches fought against this abuse for centuries. After seven centuries, the Eastern Church partially gave in, but not the Latin Church; quite the contrary and to the great benefit of the entire Church. The only possible hypothesis is the ordination of “viri probati”, namely, those married men who promise continence. Nevertheless, on the basis of the history of the past two thousand years, it does not seem that even this is possible. In reply to a question on the possibility of ordaining married men, Cardinal Stickler, an expert on the history of celibacy, says:

*“In the light of Tradition, I must say that it would be not impossible in itself, as long as continence is preserved, such as it was largely practiced during the first millenary of the Latin Church. When people talk today about the ordination of married men, however, it is generally implied that they should retain, after the ordination to the priesthood, the possibility of continuing to practice conjugal life, because people generally do not know that such a concession was never granted when married men were ordained..... Whether there is a chance that the Church might go back to such practices –demanding celibacy/continence as a condition- I could not say. When one thinks that she tried little by little to decrease this kind of ordination because of its inconvenience, and to ordain single men, excluding from the priesthood those who married after having received minor Orders, I do not think that one would want to restore a practice that is obsolete now, at least under the present circumstances. But there is nothing to prevent the ordination of older bachelors or widowers or even married men in the case of a couple deciding to opt on both sides for consecrated life and therefore continence”.*¹⁴⁶

Historical and theological points of view oblige us to draw the following conclusion: it is an illusion to think that those who have received Major Orders may be allowed to marry because this would mean reversing an age-old discipline that goes back to the

¹⁴⁶ Stickler A.M. in *Osservatore della Domenica*, April, 8, 1979 n.115, p. 2.

Church's Founder. It is also very improbable that the Latin Church will decide in favor of the "viri probati".

The Church has always interpreted the ministerial priesthood as an intimate participation in the priesthood of Christ, who desired to serve the Father and his brothers with an undivided heart, as a celibate, by his own free choice. He asked all those called to follow him to love and serve him with an undivided heart: the married through priestly continence, the celibates through celibacy.

The Church, treasuring her historical experience and with the authority conferred upon her by Christ, has chosen celibacy as the normal way of living and bearing witness to the priesthood of Christ. Priestly celibacy should therefore be considered the most sublime form of priestly continence, which, in fidelity to Christ, the Church has always demanded of her sacred ministers since the time of the Apostles.

Therefore, it is our task to embrace the Church's will joyfully, embody it fully and protect it continually, in the awareness that we priests carry this inestimable treasure 'in vasis fictilibus'. In other words, we cannot think we will be capable of living this great gift fully unless we draw on the spirituality of Christ who, although he was God, has taught us that priestly chastity must be the object of great attention and spiritual prudence: we only have to look at Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. This spirituality is rooted in prayer and it leads us to a profound intimacy with Christ, through the renunciation of many things that may be acceptable to lay people, but not to us priests. Modern times can never invalidate the importance of this spirituality; the very fact that modernity attacks it more and more only stresses its importance. It would be absurd to think that we could cultivate and make such a treasure shine without a specific rule of spiritual life.

For this reason, priestly celibacy demands of us a continual tension towards holiness. "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11: 45).

It is for this holiness, the supreme guarantee of priestly celibacy, that I continually pray and wish sincerely for all the Priests, Deacons, especially for those belonging to the Diocese of Vanimo.

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