

The power and appeal of celibacy in the first two centuries came above all from the direct example of Jesus Christ

Celibacy in the first two centuries

By Michael E. Giesler

■ It is a fact that virginity and continence (restraint from sexual activity) were highly regarded in ancient times. Many non-Christian peoples valued these practices for their ascetical example as well as for their religious significance.¹ Hebrew priests were asked to abstain from intercourse in order to prepare themselves for certain rituals, the Roman vestal virgins were considered sacred guardians of the city, and many tribal religions considered sexual abstinence, at least for a time, as a way to win favor from God. Closer to the time of Christ, a religious group of Jews called the Essenes seems to have practiced a form of celibacy in expectation for the coming of the Messiah. From what we can gather from Scripture, John the Baptist was celibate, along with two of the greatest Hebrew prophets, Elijah and Jeremiah.

Occasionally we also hear of Jewish scholars, such as the Rabbi Akiba in the second

century A.D., who with the permission of their wives lived long periods of continence in order to devote themselves more completely to the study of the Law.² But while most first-century Jewish rabbis were expected to marry, in the hope of adding to the numbers of the chosen people and raising children well-formed in the Law, we do know of one egregious exception to this practice, the young rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus Christ. He did not choose to marry, and there is clear evidence that he also asked his apostles to live celibacy in order to follow him. As a matter of fact, many scholars believe that he was making a defense of his own and his apostles' celibacy when he affirmed that "there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive

this" (Matt. 19:11). In other words, Jesus and his apostles had freely renounced their right to have a wife and children, in order to spread the kingdom of God. And he later declares that this generosity will not go unrewarded: "For everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:29). Luke's Gospel specifically mentions the *leaving of a wife* for the sake of God's kingdom (Luke 18:29), along with the reward that God will give.

Christ also speaks of the kingdom of God as the definitive state of mankind, where there will be no marrying or giving in marriage (cf. Mark 12:25). Though at that point he was answering a question about eternal life posed by his opponents, his response highlights the power and beauty of celibacy: those who practice it in this world are truly anticipating the final state of man in paradise, where God's love is the greatest and most exclusive reality. Therefore virginity for the sake of God's kingdom can truly be called the "pearl of great price" (Matt. 13:46), to use the expression of one of Christ's parables.

It is clear then that the origin of virginity or celibacy is intrinsically connected with love for God, and as a result of that love, with evangelization. Implied in both love and evangelizing is closeness to Christ: we can surmise that this was the main motive of the apostles, at least at first, when they made their commitment to celibacy. We know that one of them, Peter, had married, though we are not sure if his wife was still living at the time of the Gospels, since we never hear of her. We can assume that some of the others were married also, but again, we hear nothing of their spouses, since the main message of the Gospel is that they gave up everything to follow the Master. They wanted to be close to the Messiah, and therefore practiced *his* way of life; they were deeply and personally drawn to his holiness and mission. This exclusive love of Christ seems to have been experienced par-

ticularly by one of his apostles, John, who according to Catholic tradition lived virginity all of his life. And the Master requited his dedication in a deeper way than to the others: for it was John, the youngest of them, who was called the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23), and it was to him that he entrusted his virgin mother.

It is also clear from the Gospel text and later Church history that Christ did not restrict his invitation to celibacy and the hundredfold to the apostles or to priests. At the time of their calling the apostles were not priests, but simply his disciples. The very wording of Christ's invitation is purposefully general—*let him who can take it, take it*; that is, virginity for the kingdom of God is open to all those who have received this grace, and who wish to follow him in this special way. Certainly, among all the apostles, Saint Paul understood this most clearly, and manifested it in his letters. In 1 Cor. 7 he speaks of his own celibacy, and encourages as many men and women as possible to embrace this state in life, in order to be more concerned with the Lord's affairs (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-35). Though some think that he was originally addressing only Jewish Christians and their marital concerns in this text, the early Church always understood his words in a broader way, referring to the gift of celibacy and its power to free a man or woman for spreading Christ's kingdom, as Paul himself had done so assiduously. Another reason that the Apostle gives for endorsing celibacy is the fact that time is passing by quickly: "I mean, brethren, that the time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning" (1 Cor. 7:29). Obviously Paul has his eyes on the coming of Christ and the definitive kingdom of God, as did so many of the early Christians; in this context human marriage, like all earthly realities, is a temporary condition and will pass away. Given this reality, it is much easier and more advantageous for people of faith to live continence, including within marriage.



The other great apostle, John, was himself a virgin and celibate all of his life, as we mentioned above. In the fascinating book of Revelation, which many believe to be his work, there is a vision of celibate men “who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as first fruits to God and the Lamb” (Rev. 14:4). Again, as in the case of the Gospel and the text of Paul, there is no indication that these men were all clerics.³ The main point of the vision is that they had given up everything, including their right to intercourse with women, in order to follow Christ.

In immediate post-apostolic times we have clear testimony that men and women throughout the Roman Empire had received the charism of celibacy and lived it fervently, though we have no specific numbers of them. One of the earliest post-apostolic documents that we possess is the letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, from around the year 95, which gives witness to the charism of continence or celibacy. In this letter, as the head of the church of Rome, Clement is trying to restore order to the church in Corinth, which had been divided into factions and was not loyal to their bishop. In speaking of what God intends for them, he mentions the various gifts received in the church of Corinth, including wisdom and charity, and states that each one has its place. For those who practice celi-

bacy or continence he simply says: “Let him who is continent (literally holy in the flesh) not boast of it—knowing that it is another that giveth him the power of continence.”⁴ Obviously continence was highly esteemed in Corinth, but it had to be accepted and practiced with humility. The persons receiving this gift had to realize that it came from God, and not from human virtue or power alone.

Writing only ten years later, Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to martyrdom in the Colosseum in Rome, wrote to Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna about those who practiced celibacy and the need to be humble: “If anyone is able to remain continent, to the honor of the Flesh of the Lord, let him persistently avoid boasting.”⁵ This particularly significant text places the source of celibacy’s greatness in Christ; those who give up sexual experience are really honoring the *Flesh of Christ*, who himself was a virgin. This is without doubt a great gift and privilege, but it should not give way to pride. Apparently in Smyrna there was a danger that some men (or women) would fall into boasting. In another text he speaks of the Flesh of Christ in the Eucharist, which unites all of us in himself, “for one is the Flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one the cup to unite us with his Blood, and one altar, just as there is one bishop assisted by the presbytery and the deacons, my fellow servants.”⁶

Other very early works, such as the *Didache* and the *Letter of Barnabas*, contain strong moral exhortations to charity and sexual purity, but they do not directly mention the gift of continence or virginity. Perhaps the reason for this is the purpose of the documents themselves. The *Didache* was written for recent converts, and highlighted the basic morality of the Church and how to follow it. Continence or virginity was a more advanced gift to be considered later for some of them. The *Letter of Barnabas* was probably written to Jewish Christians suffering persecution by the Jews during the first decades of the second century; it exhorts them to have purity of life and self-control, but does not directly mention celibacy.

The *Letter to Diognetus*, which appears to be an apology and defense of Christianity written to a certain educated pagan, contains a moving passage about Christians living in the middle of the world, as the soul is in the body, and how they lived personal and marital chastity; the fact that some men and women lived total continence is implied, but not stated. Aristides of Athens in his *Apology* (ch.15) to the Emperor Hadrian also highlights the Christians' cleanness of life, contrasted to the lives of non-Christians.

Justin Martyr, on the other hand, writing his *Defense of Christianity* around A.D. 150 to the Emperor Antoninus Pius, refers specifically to individuals who have given up marriage to practice continence, and whose lives and dedication are well known to the other faithful (cf. *Apology* I, n.29). He does refer to one Christian youth, who actually had asked to be made a eunuch, but the Roman authorities refused him (cf. *Apology* I, n.29). Earlier in his *Defense* (n.15) he reports how widespread the practice of celibacy and virginity had grown throughout the Roman Empire: "And many, both men and women, who have been Christ's disciples from childhood, have preserved their purity at the age of sixty and seventy years; and I am proud that I could produce such from every race of men and women."⁷ *Remaining pure* (in Greek, *aphthoroi*) could refer either to leading a chaste life or to embracing a continent or celibate life from the time of baptism. He cites these examples because he obviously considers that Antoninus, who was a practicing Stoic, would understand the meaning of virtue and self-denial, and would be impressed with this asceticism. Referring to the Christian community in general, he also speaks of the sexual purity of Christians; they marry to bring children into the world, and they do not abandon them or expose them, nor practice promiscuity. He obviously states these facts in order to contrast the family life of Christians with that of the pagans, many of whom practiced contraception and abortion.

It also appears that Justin himself never

married and spent many years teaching at a school that he founded in Rome, trying to show the underlying unity between Christian and Greek philosophy. Some speculate that he could have been a deacon, but it is just as likely that he was a layman who had received the gift of celibacy and had dedicated himself completely to spreading Christ's truth through his words and classes. He apparently converted many young people to Christianity but earned the enmity of certain pagan philosophers in Rome who denounced him as a Christian. He was beheaded under Marcus Aurelius in 165, along with several of his students.

Shortly after this time another Christian apologist, Athenagoras of Athens, wrote a plea to Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus, also defending the Christians, while asking them to consider objectively the virtues of the Christians. As Justin did, he reiterates that Christians marry for the sake of having children, not to gratify lust, then adds significantly that "one might find many amongst us, both men and women, who are growing old in virginity, their hope being to have greater fruition of God."⁸ In line with Justin's statement mentioned earlier, we hear that there were *many* (in Greek, *pollous*) men and women who lived the charism of celibacy, most likely dwelling in the major cities of the Empire. We also note that the dedication of these faithful Christians was lived over a lifetime; it was not restricted to young people only, and its purpose was not to possess moral excellence in itself (the Stoic ideal), but to have a life of closer communion with God. In the next chapter he refers to the persecution that Christian celibates had to endure from the non-Christians.⁹

Yet not all non-Christians were so hostile. Galen, the great physician and philosopher of the second century, and contemporary of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras, was particularly impressed at the high standards of morality practiced by the followers of Christ. After praising their continence and fearlessness before death, he states that the Christians "also number individuals who, in self-disci-

pline and self-control in matters of food and drink, and in their keen pursuit of justice, have attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.”¹⁰ To be called a “philosopher” was a great honor in the minds of non-Christians of that era; it was also one of the central aspirations of Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

Writing at the end of the second century, Minucius Felix in his apologia entitled *Octavius* speaks of those who practiced perpetual virginity of body. In this dialogue Octavius, a Christian, does not describe their life in detail, but is simply trying to show the pagan Caecilius that the Christians were not low-life criminals, as they were accused of being, but that they had very high moral standards.

We should note that all of these apologists were addressing pagans, and wanted to impress them with the holiness and purity of Christians, often in contrast to the immorality of non-Christians. Believers in Christ had been maliciously slandered and portrayed as fanatics and criminals. In general these early apologists do not state the greatest reasons for celibacy—to be close to Christ and to spread his kingdom. These reasons must have been very obvious to the Christian community from the start, but there was no need to mention them to pagan emperors or leaders. Not only would they misunderstand these reasons, but also, since Christianity was proscribed, they could have these celibate men and women arrested for being zealots. Therefore the Christian apologists stressed personal virtue and moral conduct instead, emphasizing asceticism, which noble pagan minds would find more impressive.

We saw earlier that there was a danger of pridefulness in some celibate faithful even at the end of the first century. This tendency would actually develop into a heresy during the second century under the influence of Gnosticism, which despised marriage and marital relations as unclean and material. The heretic Marcion was tainted with this view, since he would admit and baptize into his church only those who practiced continence.

The mere fact that his heretical group was so successful demonstrates the large number of Christians who were actually practicing continence in the second century. Apart from spiritual ideals, it seems that many of them were simply repelled by the sexual excesses of the pagan society in which they lived; practicing celibacy or continence was a dramatic way of showing their independence and conviction. One of Justin’s students, Tatian, author of the *Diatesseron*, actually took the ideal of continence too far, and he left the Catholic Church to found his own sect, called the Encratites, which eschewed marriage and considered themselves to be the “self-controlled,” as opposed to those who married. Many apocryphal writings of Gnostic origin, including parts of the Gospel of Thomas made famous in the spurious novel *The Da Vinci Code*, actually scorned marriage, and even went to the point of saying that Christ did not really exist in the flesh, but was a kind of spiritual apparition. The apocryphal work entitled the *Acts of Peter and Andrew* is also of this variety.

But there are many other apocryphal writings of the second and third centuries that show the real value of celibacy, connecting it with dedication to God and the mission to evangelize. One of the most famous of these is the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which narrates the life of a dedicated virgin and disciple of Saint Paul from Iconium (Asia Minor).

Without question the power and appeal of celibacy in the first two centuries came above all from the direct example of Jesus Christ, his mother and the apostles, and from the dedicated lives of both male and female Christians. The fact that the charism of virginity and celibacy was highly esteemed, and that it was extended and thriving among both sexes is clear from the above early writings. How much influence did these celibate men and women have on the Church and pagan society? Judging from the lives of persons such as Saints John and Paul, Cecilia and Seraphia, it must have been great, equivalent in some ways to martyrdom in both pagan and Chris-

tian eyes. We know from later Church writings that both virgins and martyrs were called "Christopheroi," or "Christ bearers."

We don't know with certainty how the early faithful lived their dedication. Many celibate women seemed to have lived at home; that was the case of the famous virgins and martyrs Cecilia and Agnes. But other women, either individually or in groups, appear to have served the Church from earliest times through their domestic work. This custom surely began with the services of the holy women to Christ and his apostles mentioned in the Gospel (cf. Luke 8:1-3). From that example other dedicated women continued to serve the apostles and presbyters in the years ahead as sisters in Christ (see 1 Cor. 9:2-6). Since they had more social independence, celibate Christian men may have lived alone or in communities. Since Christ himself and his apostles lived as a group of celibate men in complete dedication to God and his kingdom, it is quite possible that in subsequent decades other groups of faithful, particularly men, would want to imitate them in some way. Certainly Saint Justin in the middle of the second century seemed to have formed some kind of community around himself as he taught Catholic philosophy to his students, particularly about Christ as the *Logos*, or Saving Word, who recapitulated and elevated the best of Greek philosophy in himself. Since Justin himself seems to have been celibate, it is quite likely that many of his students would choose the same path, though one of them after Justin's death erred from the Church's teachings, as we saw above.

In the first part of the third century we have two letters, originally attributed to Clement of Rome, that are addressed to virgins of both sexes who lived in community. They are certainly praised and encouraged for their commitment, which is said to be like that of Christ and the apostles, but are severely warned against lack of charity and temptations against chastity.¹¹ In the latter part of the third century continence and virginity were more and more connected with special consecrated states of

life, which separated celibate men and women from other Christians. This was the beginning of the religious phenomenon, from the era of Saint Anthony onwards. By the time of Saint Augustine (late fourth century), many virgins had actually taken a kind of public vow and were called *spouses of Christ*; a Church ceremony was also established in the fourth century called the *velatio*, in which these women were given special veils to wear, signifying their mystical marriage with Christ. In the third century a ceremony began for the public profession of consecrated virgins before the bishop, which has been restored to the Church in recent times.

We do know however that in Saint Augustine's time there were still virgins and continent men called *confessors* who continued to live in the world; they most likely lived alone or with their families, and would meet frequently in groups for common prayer and support. In 590 Gregory the Great also refers to celibate men and women living in the world, encouraging them to be generous, and not to fall into a lukewarm dedication.

In later centuries however, perhaps due to the barbarian invasions with the resulting chaos in society, and also due in part to the phenomenal growth of monasteries and convents, the charism of continence among the lay faithful in the middle of the world—motivated by the desire to imitate Christ and to spread his kingdom—largely disappeared from the Church. The practice of virginity or celibacy became almost exclusively restricted to ordained ministers and to those in religious orders.

End Notes

¹ Cf. Gran Enciclopedia Rialp, Vol.5, section on "Celibato" n.1 (Madrid, Spain: Ediciones Rialp, 1991), 450.

² A text from the Jewish Mishna (Keth.62b) speaks of the famous Rabbi Akiba who abstained from marital relations with his wife for twelve years in order to study the

(continued on page 42)

CELIBACY IN THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES

(continued from page 31)

Torah. The Mishna (meaning Second Law) was a series of oral traditions on the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures; they were compiled and handed down by rabbis in the century following the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

³ With regard to the celibacy of the clergy, Stefan Heid and others have given ample evidence that the practice of continence, or abstaining from sexual relations, was part of a priest's and bishop's commitment, even if they were married. Through a scholarly analysis of New Testament sources and early Church documents, they demonstrate that the celibacy and continence of the clergy, including deacons, is a perennial tradition that has its roots in the life of Christ and his apostles, and was not a mere man-made law or juridical discipline from the fourth or fifth century. See Stefan Heid, *Celibacy in the Early Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).

⁴ Clement of Rome, *Letter to Corinthians*,

Ch. 38.2. Quoted from *Ancient Christian Writers*, edited by J. Quasten and Joseph Plumpe (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Bookshop, 1946), 32.

⁵ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to Polycarp* (n.5), from Ibid, p.98.

⁶ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to Philadelphians* (n.4), from Ibid, p.86.

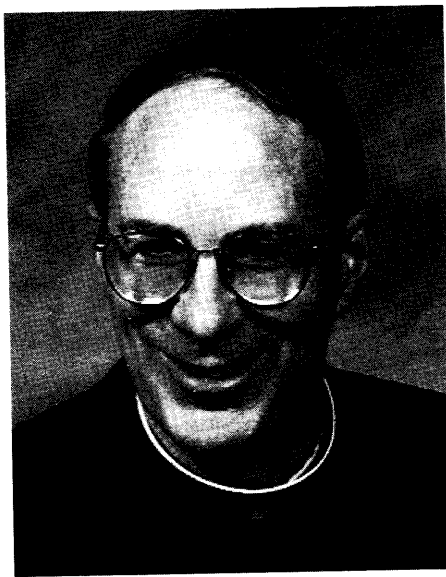
⁷ St. Justin Martyr, *Apology to the Emperor Antoninus Pius* nn.15 and 29, taken from *Ancient Christian Writers*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 32.

⁸ Athenagoras of Athens, *Apology to Marcus Aurelius*, chapter 33, taken from *Ancient Christian Writers*, (London: The Newman Press, 1956), 74.

⁹ Ibid., chapter 34.

¹⁰ This statement was preserved in an Arabic document (see Leslie W. Barnard, *Athenagoras* [Paris: Editiones Beauchesne, 1972], 55). Also R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (Oxford, 1949), 19-20.

¹¹ See Joannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Vol. I), (Utrecht-Antwerp: Spectrum Publishers, 1966), 58-59.



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