

The Early Church Fathers on Clerical Celibacy

Critics of clerical celibacy will often allege that it is unnatural and an invention of the Catholic Church. However, celibacy has its roots in Scripture and the practice of the early Church. As the apostle Paul tells us: "I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided" (1 Corinthians 7:32-33). Jesus commends those who are celibate for the sake of the kingdom. In Matthew 19:12 He says the following: "Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it."

Clement of Rome

Let our whole body, then, be preserved in, Christ Jesus; and let everyone be subject to his neighbor, according to the special gift bestowed upon him. Let the strong not despise the weak, and let the weak show respect unto the strong. Let the rich man provide for the wants of the poor; and let the poor man bless God, because He hath given him one by whom his need may be supplied. Let the wise man display his wisdom, not by [mere] words, but through good deeds. Let the humble not bear testimony to himself, but leave witness to be borne to him by another. Let him that is pure in the flesh not grow proud of it, and boast, knowing that it was another who bestowed on him the gift of continence. Let us consider, then, brethren, of what matter we were made,—who and what manner of beings we came into the world, as it were out of a sepulcher, and from utter darkness. He who made us and fashioned us, having prepared His bountiful gifts for us before we were born, introduced us into His world. Since, therefore, we receive all these things from Him, we ought for everything to give Him thanks; to whom be glory for ever and ever (Letter to the Corinthians, 38:2 [A.D. 95]).

Ignatius of Antioch

If anyone can continue in a state of purity, to the honor of Him who is Lord of the flesh, let him so remain without boasting (*Letter to Polycarp* 5 [AD 110]).

Justin Martyr

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 (*Defense of Christianity* 15 [A.D. 150]).

Tertullian

How many men, therefore, and how many women, in Ecclesiastical Orders, owe their position to continence, who have preferred to be wedded to God; who have restored the honor of their flesh, and who have already dedicated themselves as sons of that (future) age, by slaying in themselves the concupiscence of lust, and that whole (propensity) which could not be admitted within Paradise! Whence it is presumable that such as shall wish to be received within Paradise, ought at last to begin to cease from that thing from which Paradise is intact (*On Exhortation to Chastity* 8 [A.D. 204-212]).

Clement of Alexandria

Even Paul did not hesitate in one letter to address his consort. The only reason why he did not take her about with him was that it would have been an inconvenience for his ministry. Accordingly, he says in a letter: "Have we not a right to take about with us a wife that is a sister like the other apostles?" But the latter, in accordance with their particular ministry, devoted themselves to preaching without any distraction, and took their wives with them not as women with whom they had marriage relations, but as sisters, that they might be their fellow-ministers in dealing with housewives. It was through them that the Lord's teaching penetrated also the women's quarters without any scandal being aroused (*Stromata* 3:6:53 [A.D. 202]).

Eusebius

I am glad to say we are able to provide teachers and preachers of the word of holiness, free from all ties of life and anxious thoughts. And in our day these men are necessarily devoted to celibacy that they may have leisure for higher things; they have undertaken to bring up not one or two children but a prodigious number, and to educate them in godliness, and to care for their life generally. On the top of all this, if we carefully examine the lives of the ancient men of whom I am speaking, we shall find that they had children in early life, but later on abstained and ceased from having them... To this I must refer the student, only warning him that according to the laws of the new covenant the producing of children is certainly not forbidden, but the provisions are similar to those followed by the ancient men of God. "For a bishop," says the Scripture "must be the husband of one wife." Yet it is fitting that those in the priesthood and occupied in the service of God, should abstain after ordination from the intercourse of marriage (*Church History* 1:9 [A.D. 325]).

Spanish Council of Elvira

We decree that all bishops, priests, and deacons, and all clerics engaged in the ministry, are forbidden entirely to have conjugal relations with their wives and to beget children; whoever shall do so, will be deposed from clerical dignity (Canon 33 [A.D. 305]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

For it became Him who is most pure, and a teacher of purity, to have come forth from a pure bride-chamber. For if he who well fulfils the office of a priest of Jesus abstains from a wife, how should Jesus Himself be born of man and woman? (*Catechetical Lectures* 12:25 [A.D. 350]).

Epiphanius

Holy Church respects the dignity of the priesthood to such a point that she does not admit to the diaconate, the priesthood, or the episcopate, no nor even to the subdiaconate, anyone still living in marriage and begetting children. She accepts only him who if married gives up his wife or has lost her by death, especially in those places where the ecclesiastical canons are strictly attended to (*Panarion* [A.D. 376]).

Jerome

In accordance with this rule Peter and the other Apostles (I must give Jovinianus something now and then out of my abundance) had indeed wives, but those which they had taken before they knew the Gospel. But once they were received into the Apostolate, they forsook the offices of marriage. For when Peter, representing the Apostles, says to the Lord: Matthew 19:27 Lo we have left all and followed you, the Lord answered him, Luke 18:29-30 Verily I say unto you, there is no man that has left house or wife, or brethren, or parents, or children for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this time, and in the world to come eternal life (*Against Jovinianus* 1:26 [A.D. 393]).

Ambrose of Milan

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 unspoiled 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, Exodus 19:10 they even used to wash their clothes. If such regard was paid in what was only the figure, how much ought it to be shown in the reality! Learn then, Priest and Levite, what it means to wash your clothes. You must have a pure body wherewith to offer up the sacraments (*On the Duties of the Clergy* 50:258 [A.D. 391]).