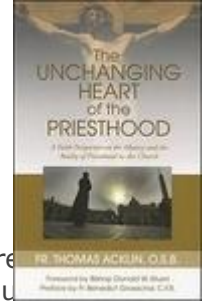


# Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy

From: *The Unchanging Heart of the Priesthood*, chapter 5 (pp 108-110)  
Fr. Thomas Acklin, O.S.B.



Let us now look back to the concrete history by which the divine plan for us has been realized. There has been considerable debate regarding the practice of celibacy in the life of the Church. It has usually been held that married men were ordained priests as a matter of common practice in the East, as well as throughout much of the history of the Church in the West. This assertion is true. Yet to understand it, we need to distinguish between two words that we have been using: continence and celibacy. *Celibacy*, from the Latin *caelebs*, means "unmarried."<sup>14</sup> *Continence*, in this sense, means "sexually contained or abstinent." It is correct to assert that in the West the prohibition against ordaining married men came relatively late in the history of the Church, at the time of the reform of Pope Gregory VII and the Lateran Councils.<sup>15</sup> Celibacy in this sense was a twelfth-century innovation in the West. But throughout the earlier centuries, while married men could be ordained, all men ordained to higher orders were obligated to sexual continence, whether they were virginal, widowers, or married. For the first seven centuries of the history of the universal Church, both East and West observed this discipline of sexual continence for ordained men. It was the seventh-century innovation in the East for sexual continence only to be required of bishops as legislated by the Second Council of Trullo in the year 691.<sup>16</sup>

This call to embrace sexual continence in following Jesus more closely springs from the evangelical counsel of Jesus (Mt. 19:9-12), and the practical application of this by Saint Paul (1Cor. 7) and the pastoral letters (1Tim. 3; Tit. 1). Evangelical legislation of this practice insists that this tradition goes back to apostolic times. In the West, this earliest legislation is found at the Spanish Council of Elvira in the year 306,<sup>17</sup> the Roman Synod in the year 385 (led by Pope Siricius), and the Council of Carthage in the years 390 and 401.<sup>18</sup> Legislation in the East, likewise claiming only to codify a discipline of sexual continence for

Throughout the earlier centuries, while married men could be ordained, all men ordained to higher orders were obligated to sexual continence, whether they were virginal, widowers, or married.

deacons, priests, and bishops going back to apostolic times, is found in the Code of Justinian, including laws passed between the years 529 and 565, modified in the seventh century to only include bishops.<sup>19</sup> The conviction that this tradition of continence went back to the practice of the apostles themselves, whether they were married or unmarried, was also a conviction held by all leading theologians of the third and fourth centuries in both the East and the West,<sup>20</sup> including Pope St. Clement of Rome, Tertullian of Carthage, Saint Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, Saint Eusebius of Caesarea, Ephiphanius of Salamis, Saint Jerome, Saint John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and others.<sup>21</sup>

When the practice of sexual continence for ordained clergy began to crystallize into legislation in the fourth century, it was not due to a pressure to relax the requirement of continence, but was directed against schismatic Donatists, Novationists, and Priscillians. These

<sup>14</sup> Stefan Heid, *Celibacy in the Early Church: The Beginning of a Discipline of Obligatory Continence for Clerics in the East and West* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 13, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Heid, *Celibacy in the Early Church*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Heid, *Celibacy in the Early Church*, 311-315.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas McGovern, *Priestly Celibacy Today*, (Princeton: Scepter Publishers, 1998), 35.

<sup>18</sup> McGovern, *Priestly Celibacy Today*, 36-37.

<sup>19</sup> Heid, *Celibacy in the Early Church*, 306-11.

<sup>20</sup> Cochini, *Apostolic Origins*, 79-83.

<sup>21</sup> For Tertullian of Carthage, see Heid, *Celibacy in the Early Church*, 72-81; for Clement of Alexandria, see 65-72; for Origen of Alexandria, see 93-105; for Eusebius of Caesarea, see 115-120; for Ephiphanius of Salamis, see 145-49; for Jerome, see 149-52; for John Chrysostom, see 152-56; for Theodore of Mopsuestia, see 159-70; and for others, see 297.

groups, known as rigorists, were yielding to a Manichaean tendency to disparage the body and sexuality to disparage the body and sexuality in reaction to laxity of clerical discipline with regard to continence after ordination."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, there is no historical evidence of opposition to the discipline of clerical continence until the reaction of Priscillianist reformers in Spain in the late fourth century, which did call for a relaxation of the discipline, and the Novationist legend about why the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicea, did not legislate on clerical continence.<sup>23</sup> In subsequent centuries, the Church again forged a middle path between rigorism and laxism.

It was only during the centuries leading up to and through the Reformation that an attack unlike any until that time took place upon the very legitimacy of the discipline of celibacy. It became one of the leading points of contention raised by the reformers, especially Zwingli and Luther.<sup>24</sup> There was now an increased need for the Church to present the deepest reasons for this practice even more effectively – often as a defense not only against the arguments of reformers but even against those within the Church, such as Desiderius Erasmus. This challenge was made even greater by the spiritual and intellectual climate of the time, which tended to assume a merely humanistic or naturalistic approach to understanding celibacy. This is not unlike many arguments in our own times against maintaining the discipline of celibacy, which are prone to ignore the reality of the supernatural life of grace and the importance of asceticism, instead wanting to make concessions to demands for an easier path.

The conviction that this tradition of continence went back to the practice of the apostles themselves, whether they were married or unmarried, was also a conviction held by all leading theologians of the third and fourth centuries in both the East and the West.

Ultimately, the Church once again responded to the reformers by entering into a period of renewal, which flowering in the sixteenth century with the Council of Trent. Not only did this council renew the practice of celibacy, but it also undertook many measures to reform priestly life and to restore its relationship with the episcopacy.<sup>25</sup> This was furthered by an overall spiritual renewal of priestly life that came through the establishment of seminaries and oratories and the inspiration of persons like Jean Jacques Olier and Saint Vincent de Paul. The fruits of this Catholic Reformation would continue to nourish priestly life through the centuries of enlightenment and rationalism and up into the twentieth century.

During the second half of the past century, the discipline of celibacy once again came very much into question, especially in the decades immediately following Vatican Council II – a time of sexual revolution, intense secularization, and increased emphasis on personal expression and fulfillment.



Fr. Thomas Acklin, O.S.B., first professed vows in 1976 at St. Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. He was ordained a priest in 1980 and studied theology and psychology of religion at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, where he earned an S.T.D. (Doctor of Sacred Theology). He undertook psychoanalytic training at the Belgian School of Psychoanalysis and graduated from the Pittsburgh Psychoanalytic Institute. Fr. Acklin then served as master of junior-professed monks for four years and as president rector of St. Vincent Seminary for twelve years. He is a member of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, the Pittsburgh Psychoanalytic Society and Foundation, the American Psychoanalytic Association, and the International Psychoanalytic Association. He is certified in the psychoanalysis of adults by the International Board of Accreditation and Certification and the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis. Currently, Fr. Acklin is professor of theology and psychology at St. Vincent College and St. Vincent Seminary, where he has taught since 1976, and is a faculty member of the Pittsburgh Psychoanalytic Institute and Foundation.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 297-305.

<sup>24</sup> A.M. Stickler, "The Evolution of the Discipline of Celibacy in the Western Church from the End of the Patristic Era to the Council of Trent," in *Priesthood and Celibacy*, 582.

<sup>25</sup> Stickler, "The Evolution of the Discipline of Celibacy," 591-92.