

The Rise of Celibacy Jews and Essenes

At the time of Jesus, most Jews considered marriage to be an institution established by God and to marry and raise a family was in accord with the Law. They did not tolerate adultery and they saw marriage as a natural state. They did not endorse celibacy because they thought that celibates were just trying to avoid the responsibilities of family life. But this seems to be contrary to the lives of many of the prophets who seemed to be free of the responsibilities of the family. In the Old Testament the story of Samson seemed to hint that he was celibate and that his untrimmed hair was a key to his strength. But the real source of strength for him was his obedience to God. When he was doing God's work he was at full strength, but when he was serving himself, he was much weaker. It is not clear if any of the Nazirites were celibate.

It was not just Jesus alone, but the Jewish people had a respect for chastity and sexual discipline that was unique in the ancient world. In the Greek and Roman world, most Jews had the respect of their pagan neighbors because the Jews prized marital fidelity and not yielding to the temptations of the flesh. However, the Jews did not require celibacy and they felt an obligation to procreate and lead new members in the ways of the Law. It was common in ancient Judaism for military commanders to order their subordinates to be chaste before battle because this preserved their strength. Samson was a unique individual because his military strength came from his hair, beard and his chastity and his strength was a divine gift. Young people were expected to maintain chastity before marriage and fornication by them was frowned upon.

But in the middle of the second century before Jesus, around 150 B.C., a group called the "Essenes" emerged. In caves on the west coast of the Dead Sea, numerous manuscripts were discovered which told of their life and practices. They lived in very intense communities. They shared their property, believed they were the true remnant of Israel and were completely faithful to the Law. Pliny claimed that they had existed for a long, long time and that their priestly class did not marry, and this was confirmed by Josephus. They were very devoted to charity, forbade anger, memorized the names of all the angels and ritually cleansed themselves every day. They required that the priests among them would be celibate and some in the community did not marry. The scrolls did not specify why the priests were celibate, but the likelihood is that this kept them pure so that they could offer genuine sacrifice.

My opinion was that Jesus may have gotten the idea of celibacy for his followers from the Essenes. We know that the Sadducee class of priests was severely rejected by most Jews for being worldly and being too attached to the goods of the world, and celibacy may have been away of manifesting their purity. The Essenes believed that the Temple priesthood needed to be Spiritually reformed and renewed. Their celibacy protested against the worldliness of the Temple priests, and Jesus joined in their criticism of the priests.

Jesus and the Gospels

Jesus was celibate himself and those who around him were celibate too. If individuals were married, like Cleopas and Mary, that was stated clearly. There was no indication that Jesus had been married and the Christian presumption was that Joseph and Mary were married but there was no suggestion that they had relations. The Virgin Mary followed him. It is not clear if Mary Magdalene was married but it is not likely that she was. In Chapter 19 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus made it clear that those who abandoned family and children for the sake of the Kingdom would receive special blessings. Jesus taught against adultery and even lustful thoughts were forbidden. Even though the sins of the flesh were condemned he was slow to punish and was swift to forgive them.

Jesus did not explicitly command that the Apostles or disciples practice celibacy, but he did declare that all who gave up marriage and family and friends to serve the Gospel would be great in the Kingdom of heaven. In the early Church, one of its striking features is that we know of few missionaries whose families remained with them on their missionary journeys. We doubt that Saint Paul was married, and it does not seem that Peter or the Zebedee brothers were married. It seems reasonable that the rest of the twelve were not married and departed for their missionary journeys without wives or children. Their understanding was that the preaching of the Gospel was so important and so valuable to people that celibacy was an appropriate response to it. The long-awaited news of the salvation of humanity could replace the value of marriage and family. Saint Paul preached all over the Mediterranean and he never hinted that he kept his family with him on the journey.

Chastity and Christian Asceticism,

The early Christians were one of the few peoples after the time of Jesus which had a respect for chastity. By the end of the second century, large numbers of men and women had either taken to the desert to live in solitude, prayer and chastity, or they formed communities of monks, hermits or consecrated women. This was "Christian asceticism". And these people

were held in high regard in the early church and were seen as models of Christian devotion. These women were regularly seated by themselves in the front of Church to honor them and Gibbon, the great early historian, claimed that the Roman empire could only produce 3 virgins (the 3 vestal virgins) while the Christians produced them in great numbers with little difficulty. And it was not just that they embraced chastity, they devoted their lives to prayer and good works.

Chastity was valued because the redeeming actions of Christ were done out of chaste love for us and they demand a chaste, loving response. This moved many of the early Christians to turn to the desert to pray, meditate on Christ and live in chastity. Many of these early Christians understood that the flesh could lead to sin and hatred, and they embraced chastity and asceticism. Christians went to the desert to abandon everything and follow Christ (MT. 19:27). This was seen as the most perfect form of discipleship there was. In doing this they were placing themselves under the cross and their life was spent carrying this cross and dying with Christ. As the martyrs sacrificed their life for Christ, they were sacrificing some of the most treasured aspects of their lives by living the Cross. "The crown of martyrs". Living the angelic life: poverty, obedience and chastity. Expected early Parousia.

The Apostolic Church

While the Apostles were still alive, many communities were headed by a bishop who had authority over the community and who offered the sacraments. By the late first century, many Christian communities chose to have one single individual, a bishop, and out of reverence for him his spiritual powers and his mission the practice of him being celibate quickly took hold. He chose assistants to help him with his tasks and meet the needs of the growing communities and some of them excluded marriage for the same reasons as did the bishop. It was felt by many at the end of the first century that those who nourished the community with the bread of life and wine of salvation, who gave the fullness of the presence of Christ, should keep themselves pure. The Old Testament priests of Temple believed that their honored role as priests entitled them to their luxuries. But they were criticized by being subservient to the kings and they often betrayed the faith to serve the kings. The Christians believed that it was better to preserve the purity and simplicity of the priesthood. This view was also found among some of the Essenes and many of their leaders adopted celibacy. This was not required of any but those who chose it were commended.

In the Eastern Churches, it was agreed that those who were bishops or above were to be celibate, but they felt that celibacy was too burdensome to impose on the lower clergy and they did not require it. Married men could be ordained to the priesthood, but they were held to very strict standards. Out of reverence for the Eucharist, many of them chose to be chaste the night before they celebrated the Eucharist.

In the Latin west, the two figures who promoted universal celibacy for the clergy were Tertullian in the third century and Augustine in the fifth. Both agreed that the Christians were to reform the Old Testament priesthood and they were impressed by the Essene celibates desire to preserve the holiness and purity of the Eucharist. As Christ remained unmarried and wholly consumed with his saving ministry, those ordained to the priesthood should follow suit. And we should remember that Augustine was far from celibate in his early life, but nonetheless he urged it for all the clergy.

The Latin church grew apart from the Eastern Orthodox churches on this matter, and by 300 bishops and councils of bishops began to require celibacy. There were legal problems with married clergy and inheritances, and some celibate priests sought to marry after their ordination. In general, the movement in the Latin Church was to encourage celibacy for sub-deacons and those living in religious communities. Again, the primary motivation for this was reverence for the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Anyone drawing this close to God, should purify themselves.

Between 300 and 500 the requirements increased, and celibacy came to be imposed by law on people the closer they drew to the altar. Some sub-deacons did this and the obligation of celibacy was imposed on them.

The Middle Ages

With the collapse of the Roman empire the Catholic Church was about the only institution that could organize Europe in the aftermath. In this long and tumultuous era from about 400 to 1000, the Latin Church focused much attention on chastity and clerical celibacy. The medieval Church was monastic, and it demanded chastity from everyone and celibacy from many of them. The Church taught that the sacraments draw us so close to God that its ministers should not be tainted with worldly pleasures and demanded celibacy for deacons, priests, and bishops. This became very difficult to enforce for many reasons. In the rural areas, the poverty and destitution was extreme and a priest living alone would have a difficult time even surviving by himself. Normally, it took a family to feed, clothe and house. Also, particularly during the early middle ages their education was almost nil and

they had little understanding of why celibacy was needed. Also, there was almost no screening and few means by which people could assume the burdens of celibate life. In this medieval era, the Church was also battling other evils besetting the Church and clergy like simony, investiture and corruption. The struggle to sustain celibacy was unremitting in the Latin West but in the east, the orthodox churches continued to allow their lower clergy to be celibate. At the Vatican Council in the 1960's the eastern Churches urged the Latin Church to not require it of priests because it was "too burdensome".

It was the council of Trent which finally established celibacy on solid grounds. It established principles for selecting candidates for the priesthood and consecrated life. The episcopacy was restored and reorganized and discipline was restored in the Church.

Celibacy Today

We have seen a crisis of celibacy in our own era. For the most part, Catholic celibates and virgins were widely respected not only in the Catholic Church, but by all people. The sexual revolution of the 1960's destroyed chastity as a public virtue and celibates became more the object of ridicule and scorn than respect. The issue of clerical celibacy was hotly discussed at Vatican II and there were many there who wished to abolish the requirement. All across Catholicism there were many who were seeking its abolition and the feelings of many celibates came into the open. The numbers of priests, monks and nuns who abandoned their vows had surpass all previous limits and it was shocking to many. It was clear that many of these people saw that abandoning marriage and family was an "unbloody martyrdom". It was very difficult to sustain and many, many celibate religious were very unhappy in it.

Fortunately, this has changed and a new generation of Catholics holds this in higher reverence than was the case before. The post-Covid generation of serious Catholic youth seems to be serious about prayer, celibacy and religious life. Seminaries and programs for the spiritual formation of religious are seeing prospective candidates in numbers that haven't been seen in a half a century. The aggressive response of the American Catholic hierarchy to the priest sex-abuse problem is certainly helping this. Having paid out more than three billion dollars to compensate victims has done much to restore confidence in the Church