



# Sexually Integrated Asceticism & Spiritual Marriage in the History of the Church

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*Contemporary Implications*

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## Introduction

Celibacy has always been a radical and controversial lifestyle. At different periods in history, abstinence has been honored and despised, promoted and discouraged, a sign of holiness and a mark of pride. “Prepubescent marriages and gruesome practices like genital mutilation and the imposition of chastity belts have long been used in the name of guarding a girl’s ‘purity.’ Tales of famous females like Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I and Florence Nightingale, to name a few, have helped uphold this chaste ideal, while medical literature from as late as the 19th century advised men to preserve their semen to boost vitality--a notion that dates back to Hippocrates and continues to this day among superstitious athletes.”<sup>1</sup> Catholic priest James Carroll parrots the popular opinion that the Church’s discipline of mandatory celibacy is to blame for the infamous priest sex scandals.<sup>2</sup> Katie Couric broadcasted how profoundly counter-cultural chastity has become, saying 47% of teenagers are losing their virginity before graduating high school, at the average age of 17, and 95% of all Americans have sexual relations before they are married.<sup>3</sup> Others, lacking a theology of sexuality, struggle to understand chastity as a vocation, as a potentially sincere loving union with the invisible God.

Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus, were married and celibate. It may be true that their marriage was covenantal (Jewish) rather than sacramental (Christian), but that hypothesis seems inconsistent with God’s economy of grace. After all, Mary receives the benefits of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection long before they are manifested in time – as is evident in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception – why then would she (and Joseph) not also live a

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<sup>1</sup> Stephey, M. J. 2009. "A Brief History Of: Abstinence." *Time* 173, no. 8: 16.

<sup>2</sup> See Carroll, James. 2010. "Mandatory celibacy at the heart of what's wrong." *National Catholic Reporter* 46, no. 17: 18-23. Stephey, M. J. 2009. "A Brief History Of: Celibacy." *Time* 173, no. 20: 14.

<sup>3</sup> Couric, Katie. "The Virginity Movement." *Katie: Talk That Matters*. <http://katiecouric.com/2014/04/25/the-virginity-movement/> (accessed April 28, 2014).

sacramental life in advance of its explicit institution? Canon law states “the consent of the parties, legitimately manifested between persons qualified by law, makes marriage.”<sup>4</sup> An important question is raised by the love which Mary and Joseph shared. Why did they take the incredible path of marriage without consummation, rather than one of the two obvious alternatives? Of course, Jesus himself remained a virgin as well, and many who followed after him abandoned their sexual relations in imitation. Christians have been contemplating and experimenting with the meaning of these Scriptural passages since the time of Christ.

One of the most natural developments of celibacy occurred in the context of chaste male-female relationships. Some in the Church have taken the position that continent sexual-integration is an unsustainable situation this side of Heaven. The detractors tend to be advanced holy men who matured within gender-balanced environments and maintained close friendships with the opposite sex. Those in support of “spiritual marriages” of various kinds are usually those in circumstances excluding the possibility of, or the calling to, sexual isolation. Far from cries of heresy or appeals to tradition, *prudence* remains the rule of discernment. It need not be assumed that any charism of ascetic life is superior to another, but, like all charisms, each rises and falls according to the needs of the Kingdom of God.

As will be shown, attacks against cohabitation of male and female ascetics from antiquity to the Reformation, either against couples or communities, all too often resorted shamelessly to the demonizing of the feminine and the female. Despite the obvious practical efficiency of blanket separation of the sexes, the orthodox Church’s theological (as distinct from pastoral) arguments against spiritual marriage consistently relied on an underdeveloped theology of marriage and gender. Thus, turning the thesis of ancient writings upside-down, it is the bold

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<sup>4</sup> Canon 1057.

assertion of the author that perhaps, *in modern times*, the total separation of the sexes in ascetic life is more supportive to negative habits of behavior than it is shielding. Nevertheless, it is not the purpose of this paper to defend such a contention, but only to explore the history of sexually integrated asceticism and uncover its rather unsettled theology.

### **1 Corinthians 7:25-38 in Modern Exegesis and the Earliest Church**

“Syneisaktism” refers to two celibate people of the opposite sex who attempt to live in a quasi-marriage. The practice became commonplace with early Christianity, and it has been suggested that rare instances occurred among the Qumran Essenes.<sup>5</sup> Several modern scholars have purported that St. Paul was aware of this ascetic practice and spoke of it explicitly in 1 Corinthians 7:36-38, which reads:

But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin, if she should be of full age, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin, he will do well. So then both he who gives his own virgin in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better.<sup>6</sup>

Historically there have been four interpretations of these opaque verses from Paul. Either Paul is writing about a man and his wife to be, a father and his virgin daughter, a levirate marriage, or finally a man who is celibate and married.<sup>7</sup> The engaged-couple position has been the opinion of the majority of scholars, as is evident in English translations of the Bible, but it is still far from conclusive in its assessment. The Greek term used to refer to the man’s supposed fiancé is unusual because it is missing a contextual modifier which normally designates

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<sup>5</sup> See Zias, Joseph E. 2000. "The Cemeteries Of Qumran And Celibacy: Confusion Laid To Rest?." *Dead Sea Discoveries* 7, no. 2: 220-253. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost.

<sup>6</sup> Peters, G. 2002. "Spiritual Marriage in Early Christianity: 1 Cor 7:25-38 in Modern Exegesis and the Earliest Church." *Trinity Journal* 23, no. 2: 212.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

betrothal, as in the case of the Virgin Mary in Luke 1:27.<sup>8</sup> The virgin-daughter interpretation is usually considered the oldest position, traceable back to the writings of John Chrysostom, and generally considered the opinion of the Church fathers.<sup>9</sup> This view however is the most straining on the Greek language used by Paul. The third interpretation, that Paul is referencing widows who have only been married once, has been well argued by J. Massingberd Ford but gathered little to no supporters.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Carl von Weizsäcker, in *The Apostolic Age of the Christian Church* (1894), was the first proponent of the spiritual marriage view of 1 Corinthians 7. He wrote:

At Corinth, the inclination to celibacy had in a short time developed so strongly, that there was not only a class of virgins; the custom was already fostered to such an overstrained extent, that the grossest depravity threatened to grow out of it. What the Apostle says of men bearing responsibility for these virgins is not clear enough to let us perceive with the necessary precision the relations to which he refers. . . . There rather seems to have existed a kind of spiritual betrothal between the virgin and a man, which secured to him the guardianship of duty of oversight, but, through the freedom of the intercourse thus established, also formed a source of danger. In any case, all these traits taken together furnish a picture of a fanatical cherishing of sexual continence, which here presents itself in a unique form, and to which no certain parallel occurs on Jewish Christian ground.<sup>11</sup>

Taking up Weizsäcker's thesis, Hans Achelis (1902) is the great explicator of the spiritual marriage interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7, even contending that it was Paul who instituted syneisaktism in his "instructions."<sup>12</sup> In the twentieth century, this reading of the Corinthians passage became the dominant view. Its advocates included Hans Lietzmann (1923), Samuel Belkin (1935), Clarence Craig (1953), John Hering and T.W. Manson (1962), John Hurd and Margaret Thrall (1965).<sup>13</sup> Scholarship today takes for granted a plethora of ascetic groups

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 213.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 214.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 215.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 216. Quoting Carl von Weizsäcker, *The Apostolic Age of the Christian Church*, 2 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1894–1895), 2:371-72.

<sup>12</sup> *1 Cor 7:25-38 in Modern Exegesis*. 217.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 218-221.

springing up in response to the teachings of Jesus Christ, and therefore considers the spiritual marriage interpretation of this epistle entirely plausible, if not the most tenable position.

Three additional historical sources of syneisaktism in Pauline times come from Philo of Alexandria, the vision of Hermas, and Ephrem the Syrian. In *De vita contemplativa*, Philo “records the existence of an ascetic community living near Alexandria which he called the *Therapeutae*, or ‘healers,’ who are, at times, equated with the Essenes of Qumran.”<sup>14</sup> The *Therapeutae* consisted of men and women committed to life-long virginity, who slept in separate homes but lived within the same community. They would have already been established before Paul wrote to the Corinthians. The vision of Hermas, known as *The Shepherd*, recounts the situation of a celibate man sleeping with virgins “as brother, not as husband.” Though controversial, this text was honored as Scripture in the Eastern Church into the second century and therefore strongly suggests an orthodox acceptance of spiritual marriage in the early Church.<sup>15</sup> The last and possibly most important evidence of syneisaktism in Biblical Corinth is Ephrem the Syrian’s (c.306-373) commentary on Paul, in which he “clearly supports the practice of spiritual marriage. This is the earliest reference, with the possible exception of 1 Corinthians itself, explicitly supporting syneisaktism.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, if the evidence holds, this text would show that there existed a pro-syneisaktism reading within the Church predating Chrysostom’s highly contagious father-daughter interpretation.

Another significant text in the historical reconstruction of syneisaktism comes from Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202). In Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses* (1,6,3) he accuses some Valentinians of “pretend[ing] at first to live in chastity with them [sc female Valentinians] as

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 222.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 223-24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 224.

with sisters [but] have been proved in the course of time to be in the wrong, when the sister gives birth to a child of her brother.”<sup>17</sup> Scholars have frequently taken this passage to be one of the primary source references to the practice of syneisaktism.<sup>18</sup> However, Irenaeus never mentions whether these are married couples or ascetic cults. After looking closely at the fragmented history of “Valentinianism” Van der Sypt came to the following conclusion:

After investigating the Valentinian doctrine according to Ptolemaeus and its context, the initial question whether this Valentinian doctrine lent itself to an ascetic practice as syneisaktism, should be answered in the negative. By taking a detailed look at the range of thoughts of Ptolemaeus’s Valentinianism, I showed that Irenaeus’s *Adversus Haereses* 1,6,3 is a polemical reproach on which one should not rely if one wants to investigate the history of syneisaktism.<sup>19</sup>

Richard Price (2006) reports that first Corinthians is partially a response to the Encratite movement. Encratites taught that *every* baptized Christian should become celibate even if they were already married. “*Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is well for a man not to touch a woman.’* But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7:1-2, my emphasis). Paul was clearly in favor of continence but shied away from making a universal dictate. Nevertheless, he did treat marriage as “a mere safety valve,” impairing any sense of vocational equality between the chaste and the married, and likely inciting an even greater zeal for celibate life.<sup>20</sup> “If Paul had written that celibacy is indeed a gift from God *but so is marriage*, he would have helped the development of a positive theology of marriage.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, he set the stage for a long history of tension in asceticism and gender relations.

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<sup>17</sup> Van der Sypt, Liesbeth. 2012. "The Unreliability of Irenaeus's Reference to Syneisaktism (Adversus Haereses 1,6,3)." *Vigiliae Christianae* 66, no. 5: 552.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 553.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 557.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 123.

<sup>21</sup> Price, Richard M. 2006. "Celibacy and Free Love in Early Christianity." *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal Of The Institute For The Study Of Christianity & Sexuality* 12, no. 2: 121-141. *SocINDEX with Full Text*, EBSCOhost. 125.

## ‘Virgins of God’

In *‘Virgins of God:’ the Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley historian Susanna Elm examined the evolution of Christian asceticism in the fourth century. Elm examined the crucial development of institutional celibacy in this century, from the variety of early forms to the monastic standard set by Basil of Caesarea and Athanasius. Focusing specifically on accounts of female asceticism in Asia Minor and Egypt, Elm argues that monasticism was reformed (not innovated) by these two men in the fourth century for doctrinal and socio-political purposes, namely, to draw clear distinctions between the emerging orthodox Trinitarian-Christians and the fading Arian and quasi-Arian teachers, all of whom had parallel ascetic communities which were mostly indistinguishable before this time.

In 314, at a gathering of priests and bishops in Ancyra, the practice of cohabitation between professed virgins and men was prohibited.<sup>22</sup> Many of these men were clergy-members who “adopted” or “married” virgin helpers. Such unions had proven very practical relationships of mutual pious support in a busy and demanding urban environment. One conservative example comes from Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca* where he mentions that Origen had spent years hidden in the house of the virgin Juliana in Caesarea.<sup>23</sup> For Origen to have spent two years in the home of Juliana - the absence of mention implies she had no husband - she must have been both wealthy and beyond reproach in the Christian community. Such arrangements seem to have been common among female Christian virgins or widows who also had social status. Another source, dated in the early fourth century, comes from the Greek homily on virginity, *Peri Parthenias*. Reflecting on 1 Corinthians 7:37-38, the homilizer gives advice to the fathers of

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<sup>22</sup> Elm, Susanna. 1994. *Virgins of God : the making of asceticism in late antiquity / Susanna Elm*. n.p.: Oxford : Clarendon Press ; New York : Oxford University Press, c1994., 1994. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 29.

aspiring virgins, again verifying that virgin-women of lesser means often found social protection in the home of an ascetic man. Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Saint Macrina*, his sister, illustrates another example of the ascetic phenomenon in early Christianity, that is, the choice, especially by women, to live as virgins within one's own family. The account of Macrina's life in particular shows how willful and innovative such a decision was for women of that society.<sup>24</sup>

Still another form of acetic life was the "pseudo-marriage" of two celibates. The Greek words associated with the women involved in these relationships were *synerchomenai*, who were later forbidden at a council in Ancyra, and *syneisaktos*, those renounced in the canons of Nicaea.<sup>25</sup> These Greek words imply the permanence of the arrangements, unlike Origen's temporary stay with Juliana, and they also implicate initiation on the part of the man.<sup>26</sup> *Syneisaktos* was also used in the early third century to describe the unorthodox situation of Paul of Samosata. This same derogatory label was also used to discourage syneisaktism (with qualification) in the writings of Basil, bishop of Ancyra, in the mid-fourth century.

The entire household of Basil of Caesarea came to embrace the ascetic, celibate, life in this same period. Inspired by his sister Macrina and his brother Naucratus, Basil organized the first precepts for orthodox acetic communities. Benedict of Nursia would later draw from these in the formation of his "rule" for Benedictine monasticism. But before Basil's initiatives, Macrina was the head of her own ascetic household, which consisted of both men and women.<sup>27</sup> It was not until sometime between the years 357 and 380 that the sexes were segregated.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 48-9.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 98.

Macrina's younger brother Peter became the elder of the men and Macrina remained leader of the women.

The transformation of Macrina's immediate family into an ascetic community proceeded in successive stages, which can be viewed as the gradual dissolution of the traditional family structure and its reconstruction on a spiritual basis: personal poverty; the manumission of slaves and their treatment as equals; the widening of the inner circle to include those slaves; and finally, the reception of members without any relationship to the original household into the newly created ascetic community, which now, interestingly, reflected the social composition of society at large, with the majority of its members from a low stratum of society, and the leaders, including Macrina herself, from the highest.<sup>28</sup>

Simultaneously, and in close proximity, Basil and Macrina together developed the future foundations of religious life. Though they were hardly the first to live "the (Christian) philosophical life" – involving simple means, manual labor, service to others, and obedience to Scripture – because of their high social-status, Basil's family formalized and popularized the ascetic life in their region. While Basil's initial movement was to live remote from the world, Macrina's asceticism began as "virgin-widow" in her own house in the city. These differing forms of isolation were perhaps appropriate to the accepted gender roles. It has been suggested that Basil devised his rules for female asceticism directly for Macrina's community, but Elm thinks this conclusion is unsubstantiated.<sup>29</sup> Macrina's independent ascetic leadership was equally influential to Basil, as he was to her.<sup>30</sup>

During the childhood of Basil and Macrina, the other Basil, of Ancyra, was writing a treatise, *De Virginitate*, likely in correction of ascetic practices evolved from the teachings of Eustanthius of Sebaste.<sup>31</sup> Many of Eustanthius' practices had been condemned by a council of Fathers at Gangra. The false practices included the total disparagement of marriage, the shaving

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 100.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>30</sup> Silvas, Anna, and of Nyssa, Saint Gregory. 2008. *Macrina the Younger, philosopher of God / Anna M. Silvas*. n.p.: Turnhout : Brepols, c2008., 2008. 57.

<sup>31</sup> *Virgins of God*. 131.

of women's heads, the dressing of women in men's clothes, and the elimination of gender distinctions. In addition to these errors, some followers of Eustanthius took literally Matthew 19:12: "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." Thus, it was thought, the mutilation of outward sexual distinctions would bring about an inward angelic state of indifference to sex. Although Basil of Ancrya is often associated with Eustanthius because of their shared *homoiousian* position, Basil's teaching on asceticism was overtly opposed to rigorist Eustanthianism if not Eustanthius himself. Basil emphasized above all the *interior* state of virginity, or sexual purity, and whatever environment was needed to cultivate it. Interestingly though, Basil agreed that integration of the sexes, when strictly regulated and in certain continence, was the highest form of ascetic perfection.<sup>32</sup> This integrated asceticism is what Elm calls the "Homoiousian model."

Sources dated between the 360's and the 390's show that the practice of female and male ascetics living in common was very popular. These ascetics can be divided into three main types: radical ascetics who rejected society all together, ascetics who lived in the context of their families and homes, and organized communities of men and women. In this last group Elm sets the Homoiousian model at odds with the model of Basil of Caesarea. "In all but Basil's model, men and women practiced the ascetic life together, in community," thus Basil the Great was defying the most rooted form of asceticism in Asia Minor.<sup>33</sup> Elm raises the question: if Basil had not been on the correct side of the doctrinal debate with the Homoiousians and Pneumatomachoi, supported by imperial legislation, would his initially untraditional (and arguably less Scriptural)

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 131.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 206.

model of asceticism still have become the future standard of orthodoxy?<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the success of Basil's revisions was not unaided by family and friends in high ranking Church positions.<sup>35</sup>

Two elements in particular mark Basil the Great's reforms: the move of ascetic communities from urban environments to the countryside to avoid entanglement in too many worldly affairs and the separation of men and women into separate areas to avert difficulties between the sexes. However Basil also avoided an opposite extreme by promoting community life rather than life in isolation.<sup>36</sup> The most controversial of Basil's reforms was the division of the sexes: "The Scriptures are quite clear, if ascetic life makes humans resemble angels while still on earth, and if angels neither marry or are given in marriage, and are thus asexual, then ascetics are above and beyond sexual distinction – 'there is neither male nor female in Jesus Christ' (Gal 3:28). Thus the highest form of ascetic life is that of men and women together."<sup>37</sup> Such was the rationale of the majority of ascetics before Basil, and it is uncertain that Basil's revision of this belief was ever totally accepted. The separation of men and women appears to have had the most negative consequences on the role of female ascetics, since it drastically limited female interaction with male hierarchy, and therefore, significantly reduced the female role in doctrinal and charitable works of the Church.

Anna Silvas expresses a more positive view of Basil's influence, in *Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God*. According to Silvas, Basil greatly esteemed female ascetics, giving them the first form of ecclesial status and formal vows, and presenting them as the ideal models of the Church that is "Bride of Christ." He even "affirms that women have surpassed

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 207.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 213.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 214-15.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 222.

men in the pursuit of piety, that in the sphere of the soul there is no question of a ‘stronger’ and ‘weaker’ sex. In his spirited defense of female asceticism one cannot but feel that the person of Macrina and the example of Annisa [her religious community] inform all that he has to say.”<sup>38</sup> Silvas also suggests that the normalcy of Homoiousian asceticism is perhaps overstated by Elm. Eustanthius’s censure at Neocaesarea, the anathemas of Gangra, the histories of Sozomen, and Macrina’s avoidance of Eustanthian asceticism all clearly evince the heterodox elements of the Homoiousian model.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, situations of sexually integrated asceticism did precede Eustanthius’s extreme practices of male-female syneisaktism and androgyny.

A similar diversity of asceticism flourished in Egypt during this same period, especially among females. Celibate women lived out their piety either within the normal family structure, as anchorites in the desert, as wandering virgins, in community with men, or living with members of the clergy.<sup>40</sup> Like the disputes in Asia Minor, Egyptian ascetic reform coincided with doctrinal development, specifically in the confrontation between Athanasius and the “Arians.” The power struggle between these two factions was largely influenced by the support, and attack, of female ascetics on both sides.<sup>41</sup> Athanasius’ success in reforming urban asceticism was assisted, indirectly, by Anthony of the Desert and Pachomius. In his *Life of Antony* most notably, Athanasius constructed a model of asceticism that became the organizational norm in the West.<sup>42</sup> Like Basil of Caesarea, Athanasius’ reform involved the simultaneous change from gender integration and urban setting to gender separation and rural setting. The connection of these two factors is worth further investigation in regard to modern religious renewal.

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<sup>38</sup> *Macrina the Younger*. 57.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 21-32.

<sup>40</sup> *Virgins of God*. 253.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 350-369.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 371.

“From the point of view of institutionalization, the emergence of organized ascetic communities for women in particular can be understood as a continuous interpretation and modification of the concept ‘family’ – more precisely, of the essentially aristocratic notion of *familia*.”<sup>43</sup> Ascetic movements were always couched in family language whether as “virgin of God,” *spiritual* mother, father, daughter, son, sister, or brother, or in the concept of the spiritual marriage. “Indeed, if the family was the original social model spawning ascetic variations, then this in itself would suffice to account for a finding which is otherwise surprising: the first ascetic communities consisted of men and women who lived together.”<sup>44</sup> Practices such as *syneisaktism* were not only widespread in ancient Christianity, but were probably the original *orthodox* pattern. In their writings, Basil of Caesarea and Athanasius both seem rather reluctant to denounce integrated asceticism altogether (though they are uniquely averse to the idea of spiritual marriage), yet both end up totally separating the sexes more to emphasize the sweeping doctrinal changes of the period and demarcate their particular ascetic camp.

Elm takes an interesting stance on the relationship of doctrine to this ascetic reform. The council of Nicaea and the formation of Christian Rome altered the previously Origenistic models of the Faith, which were deeply influential to the ascetic movement.<sup>45</sup> Origin's theology of salvation essentially assumed a kind of eschatological fulfillment in the Christian man or woman, so that the highest degree of asceticism meant complete dominion of the soul over the body. It was thought Christians could transcend their sex and live “like the angels in heaven.” This is related to the phenomenon of the “transvestite nun” and both men and women wearing the same “philosopher's cloak” because many considered the male gender closer to the angelic state. With

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 374.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 374-75.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 378-79.

Athanasius and the Nicaea-Constantinople definitions of the Trinity, a new paradigm arose in the theology of salvation. A fresh emphasis on the mediation of the *Incarnate* God drastically sharpened the Creator-creature distinction. While, Origen emphasized the divine dignity of the human person, Athanasius stressed human dependence on God's gifts. Thus, salvation came through struggle with the body rather than by subduing the body; being disposed to Christ's Grace through humility became more important than the willful effort to live the life of Heaven. The need for more stringent rules about gender followed this line of reasoning.

The move of ascetic communities from urban to rural environments, although undoubtedly motivated by a desire to remove ascetics from political-doctrinal entanglements, was also not unrelated to this heightened awareness of human sinfulness. Instead of trying to transform society from within, the ascetic reformers thought it better for the pious to be remote from aristocratic affairs. The weakness of the fourth and fifth century ascetic reforms may be more apparent in this latter change. Just as extreme isolation from social-political life is certainly not the Christian way (i.e. the Amish); neither should there be an extreme isolation of men from women and women from men in ascetic life (even though it may be an individual charism). One might note that a reverse paradigm is developing in religious life since Vatican II, in both a return to sexual integration and a return to the city.

### **Dyan Elliot's Research on Spiritual marriage**

One of the most ground-breaking works in the discussion on "mystical marriage," in the Christian context, is Dyan Elliot's *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell* (2012). Looking at the fluctuating meaning of the phrase "bride of Christ," from ancient to medieval times, Elliot concludes that the expression became increasingly loaded with negative associations between

virgin spirituality and demonic activity culminating in persecutions of “brides of the devil.” Although criticized for its thesis-driven conjecture, rather than pure historical description, this academic text has uncovered many important details in the history of “heteroasceticism” especially as regards women.<sup>46</sup>

In Chapter One, Elliott discusses with the first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 7, where it is unclear if Paul is addressing fathers who have not yet arranged a marriage for their daughters, or husbands who have not yet consummated their marriages, or both. “By the time of the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which was already in circulation by the end of the second century, a presumed female proclivity for the virgin state is apparent.”<sup>47</sup> Early Church writings on virgins could not avoid contestation over gender roles, and much is said about the allure of female virginity as a way of “becoming male.” In its first few centuries, Christian theology – in anachronistically “Gnostic” as well as in orthodox writings – tended toward the view that sexual differentiation was a post-lapsarian phenomenon, thus womanhood and sin came into the world together and should be overcome together.<sup>48</sup>

Gender transformation was also formulated in terms of “angelic life,” citing Luke 20:34-36. The assumption that a lack of marriage in heaven meant a lack of gender on earth seems to be common, and virginity was thought to bring about this “realized eschatology.” Galatians 3:28, “no male or female, but all one in Christ,” was often cited in reference to ascetics becoming androgynous rather than simply male. Nevertheless, a bias toward maleness remained strong in the early Christian Church and was supported in other Scriptures such as in those that refer to

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<sup>46</sup> Elliott, Dyan. 2012. *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell : Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. See Dreyer, Elizabeth. 2012. "The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200–1500 (review)." *The Catholic Historical Review* no. 4: 767. Project MUSE, EBSCOhost.

<sup>47</sup> *Bride of Christ*. 9-10.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 11-12.

eunuchs (always male in antiquity) and the virgins of Revelation who “have not defiled their clothes with women” (Rev 3:4, 14:4).<sup>49</sup> The Old Testament nuptial language of God as husband of Israel extended into Paul’s theology of the Church as bride of Christ, priests, and eventually Bishops, as husbands of their flocks, and men as priests over their domestic families. “Paul’s understanding of the mystical marriage bends gender in one way and one way only: there are male brides, but no female grooms.”<sup>50</sup>

Elliot (contra Silvas) identifies Tertullian as the first to crown consecrated virgins with the title “bride of Christ.”<sup>51</sup> At first, this move seems contrary to Tertullian’s extensive polemics against the married state and especially against any form of female pretention, but Elliot connects it to his view of Genesis. Tertullian was uneasy about the idea of mingling humans and angels (and therefore about the idea of androgyny) because of a popular interpretation of Genesis 6:2 wherein it was believed God had punished angels for breeding with humans. “It is in this context that the sexed body emerged as the benchmark of difference in his writings.”<sup>52</sup> So absolute was Tertullian’s view of the everlastingness of the body, and its literal transformation through sexual intercourse, that he crusaded relentlessly against the practice of remarriage. In fact, Tertullian would have been at a loss to comprehend the later teaching that Mary and Joseph had a true marriage which was never consummated because of his view of virginity and marriage was so irrevocably dichotomous (and always in favor of celibacy).<sup>53</sup>

Tertullian famously called women “the devil’s gateway” assuming, like Paul in first Corinthians 11:10, that an immodest woman was a dangerous temptation to male society as well

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 18.

as to the angelic realm. Moreover, he assumed that the angelic transgression of Genesis 6:2 was with virgins, since sexual relations with a non-virgin would be an unthinkable debasement for a heavenly creature. Eve herself was destined to be a virgin until sex entered the world as a result of the fall.<sup>54</sup> But embracing the originally intended equivalence between womanhood and virginity, the Virgin Mary undoes Eve's failure. Tertullian avoided the conflation of virginity with androgyny or maleness and replaced it with the concept of virginity as fulfillment of embodied femininity.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Tertullian is often held responsible for the shift in focus from virginity as a spiritual state to virginity as a state of the body. At the same time, he offered the consecrated female-virgin a distinct and equal status alongside her male counterpart, the voluntary eunuch, in this life and the next.<sup>56</sup>

By the time of Cyprian (c. 200-258), the virginal state was exalted above all others save martyrdom. Again cases involving one or more virgins living with a clergy member were frequent. In relation to these cases of syneisaktism, Cyprian differed from Tertullian in that his level of commitment to the "bride of Christ" analogy extended to God's intense jealousy of male counterparts in the virgin's life, and greater punishments for her infidelity. Those virgins who even shared the bed of a living man were adulterers due the penalty of adultery. Not coincidentally this change coincided with the increased separation of male and female ascetics.<sup>57</sup> So excited was the effort to preserve physical virginity at this time that brides of Christ would be subject to gynecological examination if suspected of unfaithfulness to their vows and a virgin whose chastity was at stake was encouraged to commit suicide in imitation of early martyrs –

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 33.

Ambrose and Jerome were among the supporters of this idea, but thankfully Augustine put the legitimacy of the practice to rest soon after.<sup>58</sup>

In Augustine's time, the *Book of Enoch* lost its doctrinal credibility along with its romantic interpretation of Genesis 6. Augustine interpreted the "sons of God" as merely concupiscent men, not angels. Later, John Cassian associated them with the decedents of righteous Seth, while the "daughters of men" were from the lineage of Cain.<sup>59</sup> In the pseudo-Cyprian tract *De singularitate clericorum* clergy who practiced syneisaktism were condemned as repeating the concupiscence of these "sons of God." After Ambrose, the *sponsa Christi* thus maintained its lofty social status, including the official hallmarks of veiling and episcopal blessing in a public liturgical ceremony outdating the liturgy of marriage (distinct from cultural rites) by at least three hundred years.<sup>60</sup>

*Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* by Dyan Elliot is considered the seminal study on celibate unions in the West. Elliot begins the examination with these lines from Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle*:

Beauty, truth, and rarity  
Grace in all simplicity,  
Here enclosed in cinders lie.

Death is now the phoenix' nest,  
And the turtle's loyal breast  
To eternity doth rest,

Leaving no posterity:  
'Twas not their infirmity,  
It was married chastity.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 58-59.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 46.

Father David Beauregard studied this tradition of poetry, focusing on Robert Chester's "Truth of Love" collection, and uncovered its inspirations in the medieval Catholic traditions of mystical union, spiritual friendship, and continent marriage.<sup>61</sup> Beauregard also quotes Pope Leo the Great, Chaucer, and several other popular figures writing positively about the idea of marriage where there is deep emotional connection without sexual union. Although usually associated with an aversion to sexual intercourse (prevalent in the early Church) or identified with religious exceptionalism (as against sanctity in 'everydayness'), the opinion of the authors cited by Beauregard portrays a popular romantic sentiment toward spiritual marriage not often discussed. Shakespeare laments the death of the Phoenix and the Turtle whose passing symbolizes the relative disappearance of the continent couple after the Reformation and Counter-Reformation cleared.<sup>62</sup>

Elliot chose the phrase "spiritual marriage" for her research on intramarital chastity despite its frequent equivocation with syneisaktism and its confusion with allegorical meanings, such as a Bishop's marriage to his see, Christ's union with the Church, and the mystical marriage of God with the human soul.<sup>63</sup> "Chaste marriage" did not suffice because it was a common designation used in the high Middle Ages to describe a married couple who simply upheld their marriage vows. "Celibate marriage" she considered too anomalous and too often implying a transition to single religious life. Elliot sees the phenomenon of spiritual marriage as a double-edged "spontaneous and complex reaction" against society's "reproductive imperative" and

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<sup>61</sup> Beauregard, David. 2011. "'The Mutual Flame of Love': Spiritual Marriage in Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and Turtle*." *Religion & The Arts* 15, no. 1/2: 131-147. *Religion and Philosophy Collection*, EBSCOhost. 132, 137.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 143-45.

<sup>63</sup> Elliott, Dyan. 1993. *Spiritual marriage : sexual abstinence in medieval wedlock / Dyan Elliott*. n.p.: Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, c1993., 1993. 3.

against the idea that asceticism requires separation of the sexes.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, spiritual marriage (and integrated asceticism in general) involved a definite challenge to normative gender roles, allowing women more autonomy in self-conceptualization and forcing men to deal with more female social-political influence.

This freedom for self-possession and self-gift is inherent to the New Testament kerygma, even beyond its expression in celibate life. However, the early instantiations of Christian liberty, for women in particular, involved (perhaps in many cases, *required*) the renunciation of marriage. Whereas, the distinction between celibate men and married men was clearly demarcated by the duties and decorum of priesthood, the implications for women were less transparent. Thus, “there was, understandably, a natural affinity between the clergy and celibate women... certain members of the orthodox clergy had begun to experiment in chaste, heterosexual cohabitation, setting up housekeeping with female ascetics. The female companions came to be referred to among their critics as *syneisaktoi* in the East and *subintroductae* in the West – both terms implying implicit cohabitation.”<sup>65</sup>

Elizabeth Clark’s study on John Chrysostom’s rhetoric to the *subintroductae* shows how controversial the practice had become by his time (d.407). Although modern and ancient scholars argued that *syneisaktism* was a tradition condoned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, Chrysostom, siding with many orthodox contemporaries, would not entertain this idea because he thought the virgins *subintroductae* interfered with male holiness more than they helped.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, Chrysostom’s attack on spiritual marriages did not assume that these relationships

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>66</sup> *Spiritual Marriage*. 12-13. Clark, Elizabeth A. 1977. "John Chrysostom and the Subintroductae." *Church History* 46, no. 2: 171-185. *ATLA Religion Database*, EBSCOhost. 175. The landmark work on Paul’s attitude toward *syneisaktism* was Hans Achelis’ *Virgines Subintroductae* (1902), other important thinkers include Eduard Grafe, Roland Seboldt, Warner Georg Kummel, and Henry Chadwick.

led to a loss of virginity – unlike Jerome’s opinion that all *subintroductae* were harlots with swelling wombs.<sup>67</sup> Instead Chrysostom used the following arguments against syneisaktism: “perpetual sexual arousal; the offense to ‘weaker brothers;’ the opportunity for enemies of the Church to criticize her; the ‘adultery’ of the brides of Christ; the necessity of suffering and denial in the Christian life; the dubious practical benefits secured by the relationship; the sacrifice of the freedom virginity was intended to bring; and the overturning of the sexual roles and functions which ‘nature’ as well as God had ordained.”<sup>68</sup>

There are many valid points in Chrysostom’s arguments but also many problems. While he compares spiritual marriage to trying to fast while sitting before a feast, and this to the formula for torture, he also argues in other places that the spiritual couple is living too comfortable a lifestyle. Masochism and sloth are obviously contrary vices. The most disappointing of Chrysostom’s contentions is that no man would ever put up with a woman in his home if not to lust after her or to bear his children.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, proximity to a woman makes a man weak and effeminate.<sup>70</sup> He also uses the more common argument that brides of Christ who live with men are committing spiritual adultery. The most compelling rebukes come against the practical rationalizations by the spiritual couples themselves. “If the men argue that aiding indigent virgins is a way of demonstrating Christian charity, Chrysostom points out to them that there are plenty of old, blind, sick, and impoverished people of *both* sexes who would be fitting recipients of their generosity-not just comely young maidens.”<sup>71</sup> The same argument holds for

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<sup>67</sup> *John Chrysostom and the Subintroductae*. 176.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 177.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 181.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 179.

potential helpers in business and domestic affairs, in fact, someone of the *same* sex would probably be more aware of a busy monk's or virgin's needs.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to know what those living in spiritual marriages would have said for themselves first-hand, since all records of the practice come from polemics against it or from historically unreliable hagiographies. But Clark does not consider the pragmatic advantages of communal living sufficient reasons for syneisaktism's persistence. She offers two noteworthy alternative considerations: "Syneisaktism, we think, offered to men and women a unique opportunity for friendships which involved a high degree of emotional and spiritual intimacy."<sup>72</sup> Sadly, Chrysostom does not believe such relations between the sexes are appropriate *even within marriage* and this is due to a sorely erroneous theology of gender. "These couples, we think, were tending toward the recognition of the possibility of friendship between the sexes, something considered improbable in the ancient world. To the classical mind, friendship in its truest sense meant a kind of parity between two people, and women, by virtue of their inferior nature and status, could thus rarely qualify as suitable candidates for friendship with men."<sup>73</sup>

Roger E. Reynolds has written on the history on *virgines subintroductae* in Celtic Christianity. In the fifth century, St. Patrick is recorded as saying: "Henceforth let not a monk and a virgin live together in one dwelling, travel about in one wagon from villa to villa, or discourse continuously together."<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, individual Irish saints, such as St. Scothine, St. Mel, St. Kentigern, the Anglo-Saxon, St. Aldhelm, and Robert of Abrisel, all recognized as

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 182.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 183-84.

<sup>74</sup> Reynolds, Roger E. 1968. "Virgines subintroductae in Celtic Christianity." *Harvard Theological Review* 61, no. 4: 547-566. *ATLA Religion Database*, EBSCOhost. 549.

saints by the same Church which condemned syneisaktism, lived in consort with one or more women, proving that the tradition had very deep roots in Celtic Christianity.<sup>75</sup> It has been argued that this practice came from Spanish and North African Christian influences pre-dating Patrick.<sup>76</sup> The Celtic culture is a unique example because of its relative isolation from Roman Europe. There was no diocesan system, as on the Continent, because there were no urban centers, social institutions were non-Roman, and almost everyone lived a nomadic lifestyle. It was also common for women to perform masculine duties such as serving in war, and after their conversions to be enlisted as catechists, altar ministers, and assistants to wandering males.<sup>77</sup>

Celtic syneisaktism had special characteristics uncommon to other locales, including open discussion of frequent, even nightly, battles with chastity.<sup>78</sup> This aggressive confrontation with lust at its source was considered a theological justification for syneisaktism, compared in kind to St. Antony expunging demons from their desert hideaways.<sup>79</sup> Also, the women who lived with ascetic men often underwent some difficult test of their chastity before they were allowed to cohabit. Another Celtic nuance was the frequent use of cold baths in the maintenance of chastity.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, Irish asceticism was dually inspired by a sense of realized eschatology and the restoration of paradise. “Syneisaktism in Celtic Christianity, far from being a perversion of early Christian morality, was the continuation of a Christian practice which dates from the origins of Christianity and which was spread through-out the early Church, both in the East and in the West. The existence of *virgines subintroductae* in Celtic Christianity is, then, a

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 549-51.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 553.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 551.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 560.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 563.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 561.

further demonstration that Irish Christianity was not a ‘wholly new and extremely original current,’ but that it was the last flowering in the West of the most primitive Christianity.”<sup>81</sup>

Augustine may be considered the architect of spiritual marriage in the West since he was the first to develop a theory of nuptial union not dependent on the conjugal debt.<sup>82</sup> At the beginning of the fifth century the Christian opinion of traditional marriage was at its lowest, yet the theology of marriage was beginning to flower. Augustine held that virginity was a higher calling than marriage but that marriage was nonetheless a natural good. Augustine broke from the common view that sex entered the world with Original Sin, and instead proposed that Adam and Eve were always intended to have sexual activity. However, this was as far as Augustine went in support of sex, for the procreative organs were considered the most damaged post-lapsarian aspect of humanity. Furthermore, Augustine raised Mary and Joseph's union to the status of an ideal marriage, thereby contributing to the popularity of celibate marriages even if not intending to do so.<sup>83</sup> Many couples took up this ascetic practice in imitation of the Holy Family, either as perpetual virgins or after having been married normally for a time, in order to distinguish themselves from the pagan world which was collapsing back into the Roman Empire in Augustine's time.

Augustine himself dealt with some of the pastoral realities which this situation presented. In Augustine's letter to Armentarius and Paulina, a married couple who came to regret their vows of chastity, he warns that breaking chastity (post-vows) would be a serious evil unless their original intentions to remain chaste in marriage were somehow flawed.<sup>84</sup> In the event that one

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 566.

<sup>82</sup> *Spiritual Marriage*. 43.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 48-50.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 59.

party within marriage sought to consummate or continue sexual relations against the desire of the other, the spiritually stronger party was counselled to give-in to the weaker.<sup>85</sup> Alongside the hagiographies of mutually chaste partners, a motif of sexual evasion arose wherein one party, usually the wife, successfully avoided, or brashly refused, sex with their spouse for the sake of piety.<sup>86</sup> Although Augustine and other Church fathers *cautiously* supported the transition to chastity within marriage, other models of celibate marriage often took the limelight. “The flamboyant virginal union was the darling of hagiographers and chroniclers alike, while the constrained movement to chastity had become a central feature of clerical discipline.”<sup>87</sup>

### **Medieval Trends in Marital Chastity**

Although clerical continence was encouraged from the beginning of Christianity, and increasingly so through the centuries, the Church continued to ordain married men until the end of the tenth century. *The Apostolic Canons*, Leo I, and Gregory the Great all forbade priests from abandoning their wives and insisted on chaste cohabitation (in these specific instances).<sup>88</sup> This arrangement became maximally frustrated in the period of the Frankish kings as any deviation from clerical celibacy came under public scrutiny. The focus on priesthood during Carolingian reforms resulted in both a de-emphasis on female spirituality and the Church’s stabilization of marriage. Records of female saints and of spiritual marriages dwindled in this era. Representations of lay asceticism were deemed anti-clerical because if the holy priesthood suffered to maintain its chastity how could lay people manage it? Likewise, female heroism was

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 84.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 87.

relegated to the domestic family and the Carolingian period has been correlated to women's loss of influence in the Church.<sup>89</sup>

The eleventh century and Gregorian reform saw the demarcation between celibate priesthood and married laity continue to sharpen. As a side-effect of the push for clerical reform, lay marriage became an important contrast to priestly purity and thus lay asceticism was not encouraged. "The many crossing and recrossings between these two rather artificially polarized states – between sexual activity and celibacy – not only tended to blur these boundaries but also gave rise to some notable hybrids."<sup>90</sup> Married priests were violently separated from their wives in this period, and Papal legislation coerced the laity to boycott such cohabiting priests' sacraments.<sup>91</sup> Not surprisingly, this atmosphere led to the frequent demonizing of women, as is evident even in the writings of saints like Peter Damien.<sup>92</sup> In multiple respects Christian society idealized the male gender: virginal status was displaced by priesthood, the cult of the virgin king was popularized, and life was divided into "trifunctional orders of men: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work the land – a clearly vexed description insofar as it ignores both the rising merchant class and women altogether."<sup>93</sup>

By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries two streams of marriage theology coexisted. Hugh St. Victor, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas took up the position of Augustine that marriage was a good in itself, including the sexual activity, pending it upheld its three ends: faith, procreation, and indissolubility. Hugh of St Victor gave blatant approval to spiritual

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 92-93.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 101-02.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 94.

unions separating marriage into two “sacraments,” one for procreation and one for love.<sup>94</sup> Peter Lombard’s articulation of marriage represented the older stream. In his view, the good of the conjugal act was still in question though he was willing to exempt it from sin if the fullness of the three ends were present in the act (and if it was almost devoid of pleasure).<sup>95</sup> In the thirteenth century, the revival of the practice of chaste marriage stimulated unprecedented debate over the theological and legal ramifications of the conjugal debt and of the binding levels of vows.<sup>96</sup>

The Gregorian reform provoked many theological and canonical discussions about marital union. In medieval society, the popular conception of marriage was dissatisfying to clerical authorities since it did not involve enough Church sponsorship. In addition, the public tradition was too complex, requiring a legal pact, an exchange of property, and the sexual intercourse itself.<sup>97</sup> The Church thus sought to mitigate the rift between sacramental marriages and socio-political marriages. By asserting the ecclesial model of consent theory – which stated that mutual consent was the efficient cause of marriage – the Church could take away some of the power that rich nobles held over the marriages of their progeny. At least in theory, young noble people could be wed without the permission of their parents and arranged marriages would lose some of their traditional political and economic dimensions.<sup>98</sup>

Locating the essential element of matrimony in the parties’ consent resulted in debates about the role of sexual consummation in marriage. In a predominately Christian milieu, the marriage of Mary and Joseph naturally arose as the archetypal situation for dispute. “For consent theorists of the twelfth century, a spiritual marriage was a reflection of the type of union that had

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 135.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 167.

<sup>97</sup> Resnick, Irven M. 2000. "Marriage in Medieval Culture: Consent Theory and the Case of Joseph and Mary." *Church History* 69, no. 2: 350. *Sociological Collection*, EBSCOhost. 352.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 353.

joined Adam and Eve before the Fall.”<sup>99</sup> Therefore, Mary and Joseph represented a perfected form of marriage, consummated by consent, and indicative of the Christian calling to a higher mode of living. This emphasis on the sacramental nature of vows would eventually become the basis for invalidating carnal marriage for the professed religious.<sup>100</sup>

Consent theorists faced pronounced resistance because of the perennial belief that unconsummated marriages were not “finished” and because it was taken for granted that parents had the authority to arrange marriages for their children. Consent theory also exposed one to the practical dangers of forced consent, secret consent, or false attestations of consent. “It did not take very long before the secular nobility, faced with the growing influence of consent theory, began to exploit this weakness.”<sup>101</sup> To reduce these exploitations, many thought sexual intercourse or procreation was the most reliable sign of consent, much to the detriment of rape victims. A relative conclusion to the debate came from the formulation of Simon of Tournai (d.1201): “The truth of the sacrament of marriage is double: (1) mutual consent, which signifies the union of the faithful soul to God; (2) the commerce of the flesh, by which two become one, which signifies the mystery of the Incarnation.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, consent could be considered a first step into marriage but not enough to establish its indissolubility. Coition would be the determining factor in a marriage’s “perfection.” A version of this doctrine remains the canonical norm, with the additional clause that “if the spouses have lived together consummation is presumed until the contrary is proven.”<sup>103</sup> The marriage of Mary and Joseph was essentially relegated to a special case, since procreation in some sense did occur, and this coincided with the undesirability of

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 356.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 357.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 360.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 369.

<sup>103</sup> Canon 1061:2.

asceticism among the laity as an important motivation for Church hierarchy to advocate consummation in marriage.

The rise of the cult of Mary was no less important in the development of matrimonial norms – as was the cult of Joseph’s perpetual virginity which arose in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In order to dissuade the laity from aspiring to imitate the marriage of Mary and Joseph, some clergy began to assert the contingency of Mary’s *personal* vow of virginity, and thus emphasized Mary’s openness to obey Joseph, her parents, and God, if any of them had asked her to choose otherwise. Insofar as the marriage of Mary and Joseph was the Christian ideal, it should be seen as categorically superior to normal human marriage, that is, admirable but not imitable.<sup>104</sup> “Thus while Mary’s double capacity as virgin and mother exerted considerable influence on chaste celibates, she remained, for the married, rather one-dimensional, reinforcing the general mores of married life.”<sup>105</sup>

It was the famous distinction between internal and external forum, inspired by the primacy of intention over action in Abelard’s *Ethics*, which opened the door to fresh spiritual creativity among women. The high theological value of the internal life, since it was often a woman’s only realm of autonomy, transformed many pious married women’s lives, leading into an age of married-female mysticism.<sup>106</sup> The female concern with chastity was renewed in this new age along with the occurrences of spiritual marriage<sup>107</sup> – the *intention* to be chaste was given an almost equal status to actual virginity.<sup>108</sup> The Christian spirit of the thirteenth century was one of penitence, a fruit of the mendicant orders, and this spirit resurrected ancient practices of

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<sup>104</sup> *Spiritual Marriage*. 177-78.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* 180.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* 234.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* 196.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* 240.

lay asceticism. The penitential zeitgeist was especially beneficial to women since its rigors often put men in a position of sympathy for feminine submission and obedience, even to the point of acknowledging the inherently female disposition toward grace.<sup>109</sup> In support of this theory, the number of female saints almost tripled from the twelfth to the fifteenth century and women took over the majority of canonizations from the laity.<sup>110</sup>

Restrictions on the female vocation in consort with ascending zeal for ascetic life naturally led to radical assertions of piety within marriage.<sup>111</sup> Women who felt an early vocation to celibacy were easily undermined by arranged marriages and many spiritual marriages came about in this way. Widespread tales of saintly chastity within wedlock helped many of these women attempt marriage-bed conversions of their husbands, many succeeding.<sup>112</sup> Those who failed allowed the conjugal debt to become a form of extreme penance and incessantly pleaded for sexual fasts and eventual continence.<sup>113</sup> Because women were required by Church and state law to garner consent from their husbands for excessive pieties, some women resorted to clandestine penances. Such was the case with princess Hedwig of Bavaria (d.1243), who was depicted in some records as a quasi-adulterer with Christ.<sup>114</sup> Other influential models of spiritual marriage from the later Middle Ages include Bridget and Catherine of Sweden, Jeanne-Marie of Maillac, Catherine of Genoa, Dorothea of Montau, Frances of Rome, Empress Cunegund and Dauphine and Elzear.<sup>115</sup> The beatifications and canonizations of most of these holy people “not only anticipated the return of the spiritual marriage motif to women, but it also signaled the

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* 200.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* 204.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* 209.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* 211.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 224.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 234.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* Appendix 5-6.

resurfacing of the completely unconsummated marriage as a distinct and well-publicized model of the married state.”<sup>116</sup>

In 2011, Anne Alwis published the first edition of her dissertation translating and analyzing the Byzantine hagiographical accounts of three celibate couples: Julian and Basilissa (c.500), Andronikos and Athanasia (c.500-1000), and Galaktion and Episteme (c.800-900). Julian was a wealthy Egyptian Christian who was forced to marry though he wished to remain pure. In a vision, God tells Julian that he will marry a holy woman but they will remain virgins. Julian and Basilissa convert their homes into monasteries and attract a large following of students. Basilissa dies before Julian, who is left to be persecuted under the reign of Diocletian and Maximian, is tortured and eventually beheaded. In the process, Julian converts some of his persecutors and his relics become associated with later miracles.<sup>117</sup>

Andronikos and Athanasia were a wealthy and pious couple from Antioch whose two children died young, crippling them with grief. God comforted them with a mutual call to the monastic life in Egypt in separate communities. Years later, Athanasia met Andronikos again on a journey to Jerusalem, but did not recognize her since she was disguised as a (male) monk. The two became intimate friends and lived together as brother and sister until her death, only after which her true identity was revealed.<sup>118</sup> Galaktion and Episteme lived in the Syrian city of Emesa in an unspecified time of Christian persecution. Once married, Galaktion convinced Episteme that they should embrace ascetic lives on the Sinai Peninsula, in separate communities.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 266.

<sup>117</sup> Alwis, Anne P. 2011. *Celibate marriages in late antique and Byzantine hagiography : the lives of Saints Julian and Basilissa, Andronikos and Athanasia, and Galaktion and Episteme* / Anne P. Alwis. n.p.: London ; New York : Continuum, 2011., 2011. 3.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 4.

They did so, not even laying eyes on one another again until Galaktion was arrested and Episteme rushed to join him. The two were gruesomely tortured and martyred together.<sup>119</sup>

Alwis immediately points out that there is no idiomatic expression associated with celibate marriage in these writings. “Such disinterest in classifying an unusual and potentially transgressive union in three different literary traditions and time periods indicates the malleability of this form of marriage as well as the difficulties involved in conceptualizing it.”<sup>120</sup> In contrast to the examination of celibate marriage in the West by Dyan Elliot (barring a few exceptions), these hagiographies do not focus on the torments of sexual-penance or the dynamics of gender-roles, but rather emphasize the road to sanctity *through* the very relations, sexual or not, of marriage. What makes these stories unique, in the context of the East, is that the focus is not, as it is usually, on the ascetic or celibate aspect, but on the relationships themselves. “What is so interesting about these Greek *vitae* is that all three couples (to varying degrees) are portrayed as still being emotionally bound to one another even if the primary force in a man and woman’s licit union is eliminated.”<sup>121</sup>

Despite its resurging popularity and historical resilience spiritual marriage did not survive the turmoil of the Reformation. The Protestant attacks against celibacy, Mariology, and the cult of the saints poisoned the soil of this devotion.<sup>122</sup> Post-Tridentine Catholic reformers were forced to reassert clerical authority and lay pieties were viewed with suspicion. Female

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>122</sup> *Spiritual Marriage*. 297.

asceticism was particularly scrutinized and any “initiative toward an active lay apostolate was ultimately suppressed or redirected to a cloistered milieu.”<sup>123</sup>

### **Contemporary Implications**

In his short study on *Celibate Love* (1979), Dominican Paul M. Conner has revitalized the conversation about ‘spiritual marriage’ in post-modern Christianity. His thesis revolves around the question of masculine-feminine complementarity and whether it is possible in a celibate context (in this life). “Many priests, brothers, and sisters admit confusion and frustration in their personal attempts to harmonize sensitive, warm, masculine and feminine love with their openhearted commitment to celibacy for the sake of divine love.”<sup>124</sup> The state of the theological question on the relationship between human loves and divine love is still muddled today, even more so in religious life.<sup>125</sup> Some consecrated women are rejecting bridal and spousal descriptions of their vocation in favor of participating in Christ’s ministry, some organize dating experiments between priests and religious sisters, and some still seek a “third way” between marriage and consecrated chastity.<sup>126</sup> At the other extreme, are the well-known practices of social isolation and friendship restrictions for those in vows.

Conner desires a balanced, scientific and theological appraisal of “mixed celibacy.”<sup>127</sup> He goes on to tell the stories, primarily from actual correspondences, of undisputed holy people and their romantic friendships: Saints Frances de Sales and Jane de Chantel, Saint Teresa of Avila and Blessed Gracian, Saint Catherine of Siena and Blessed Raymond of Capua, Blesseds

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Conner, Paul M. 1979. *Celibate love / Paul M. Conner*. n.p.: Huntington, Ind. : Our Sunday Visitor, c1979. 12.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 16.

Jordan of Saxony and Diana D'Andalo.<sup>128</sup> He also discusses Saint Dominic's beautiful theology of integrated friendship.<sup>129</sup> Although these examples prove that celibacy does not exclude profound sexual complementarity and emotional intimacy, none of these cases include much semblance to syneisaktism, or male-female cohabitation. This latter practice may indeed be incompatible with the celibate vocation or, perhaps, only a transient phase during the transition from betrothal to asceticism. However, the boundaries of male-female intimacy up to the point of genital arousal (outside traditional matrimony) may be entirely a matter of personal discernment between said couples and the Church.

Conner concludes that the ability to live in sexually integrated celibacy is a *real* but scarce calling, with considerable risks as well as proportionate blessings. "Intimate friendships between consecrated men and women cannot be recommended generally, because rare indeed are the persons who can sufficiently avoid the dangers so as to enjoy the benefits."<sup>130</sup> Prudence does not favor the banning of sexually-complementary celibate living, but judgments about such relationships require personal case-by-case analysis and counsel. Ultimately, if a spiritual 'partner' nurtures one's relationship with God and enhances one's ministry "the final judgment cannot be an inflexible morality of safety."<sup>131</sup> To live at all in a fallen world is to be in peril of sin; prudence should be the law of one's discernment and service the spirit of one's choices. As the ancient Celtic tradition shows, a disciplined form of syneisaktism could be some couple's particular charism for building up the Church and rooting out the devil. The orthodox procedure for pursuing such a call is undoubtedly in need of ecclesial clarification. "Each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind" (1 Corinthians 7:7b).

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 56-94.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 49-56.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. 156.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 157.

## Conclusion

One of the key issues of this topic, not developed in the discussion above, is what today is called “emotional-intelligence.” While the priority of the intellect over the passions is still a debated question in theology, most historical ideologies seem strongly disposed to ‘rationalism.’ For example, Leonard Ferry has argued against any “pro-passion” interpretation of Aquinas, stating that Aquinas distrusts the passions and “does insist on the necessity of rational control [domination] over the passions.”<sup>132</sup> Any contribution of the passions independent of the intellect would only be an inclination toward sin. It is difficult *not to* connect this kind of extreme bias for the intellect with traditional patriarchy in society and politics. It is the opinion of the author that one of the few positive developments in contemporary American culture is the emergence of relational philosophies and the study of emotional-intelligence, initiatives born into otherwise fact-driven education models. The increasing awareness of this type of relational intelligence is tantamount to a rise in female influence, and so long as this influence remains feminine (contra masculine ‘feminisms’), the author is convinced it will lead to desirable social changes.

One of the advantages of integrated asceticism, whether between male and female individuals or within religious communities, is the contribution which the opposite sexes make to each other’s relative masculinity or femininity. There is a phenomenon observed in gender psychology, wherein masculine parties increase the femininity of their partners and feminine parties increase the masculinity of their partners.<sup>133</sup> “Claims are being made by some theologians that Christian love and friendship, particularly between consecrated celibates, is a

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<sup>132</sup> Ferry, Leonard Donald Gordon. 2012. "Passionalist or Rationalist? The emotions in Aquinas' moral theology." *New Blackfriars* 93, no. 1045: 292-308. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost. 294.

<sup>133</sup> Tannen, Deborah. *He Said, She Said: Exploring the Different Ways Men and Women Communicate*. Barnes & Noble Audio, 2004. Recorded Lecture Series on CD.

great aid to attaining intimacy with the Trinity in prayer.”<sup>134</sup> Of course, such advantages are impossible without sexual integration. Similarly, Augustine himself thought that a couple who lived in chastity or were transitioning into chastity would also *increase* in spiritual intimacy. In general, integrated asceticism has had spiritual theology on its side but has been found wanting in pastoral practice. This tradition, even as celibate marriage, was never censured across the board, but only in local situations as deemed necessary, leaving its resurgence a real possibility.

Dyan Elliot pointed out that the custom of spiritual marriage has a real affinity with modern socially and economically expedient unions.<sup>135</sup> Conversion today naturally manifests in situations of mixed-asceticism. The historical repression of integrated chastity mirrors trends in male chauvinism: its depressions have always coincided with concerns of male leadership and clerical authority. Contrarily, the popularity of spiritual marriage followed rises in female spirituality, gender equality, and Marian devotion. Perhaps, in this present ‘Age of Mary’ integrated celibacy will find new life to challenge the contemporary milieu that believes intimacy within almost *any group* cannot be sustained without inviting sexual relations. Rigid sexually-isolated asceticism may be counterproductive for the psychologically, especially emotionally, underdeveloped society that exists, at least in America, today.<sup>136</sup>

The history of the Church demands that the practice of integrated celibacy be approached with ecclesial caution and professional oversight, nevertheless this task may be more tenable in the present age than it ever was in the past. As Elizabeth Clark “indicates that the rare usage of *philia* (as opposed to *eros*) to describe the love of the cohabiting celibates for one another is a

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<sup>134</sup> *Celibate Love*. 15

<sup>135</sup> *Spiritual Marriage*. 298.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. *Celibate Love*. 13-14.

sign that the *Subintroductae* represent a vital shift in the history of inter-gender friendship,”<sup>137</sup> one might hope this evolution in sexual relationships would continue to advance and reclaim the Gospel’s superior liberality – strategically vital ground overtaken and displaced by the sexual revolution. Freedom for love is the Catholic Church’s sole and special claim. “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life” (Proverbs 13:12).

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<sup>137</sup> Unknown. "Yearning for Complementary Companionship: Virgins Subintroductae and Male-Female Relations in the Early Church." Finding Tangle. <http://findingtangle.wordpress.com/?s=subintroductae> (accessed March 28, 2014).

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