

THE PROHIBITION OF CLERICAL MARRIAGE IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

Uta-Renate Blumenthal

By the eleventh century the prohibition of marriage for clerics of most ranks and not only monks—whose very name implied the solitary life—was very old. One could go back as far as the letters of St. Paul who, it is well known, exhibited a deep ambivalence towards marriage.¹ Ascetic, monastic, and cultic tendencies inherited from antiquity by the young Christian church led early on to attempts to require clergy to lead celibate lives, especially in the West. Indicative of such efforts in the context of ecclesiastical legislation are the canons of Elvira (306–314).² Despite the passage of time they were by no means forgotten in the 11th century. They were taken up in the widely known and influential *Liber decretorum* of Bishop Burchard of Worms of ca. 1023. Through Burchard's collection they reached the *Panormia* of Bishop Ivo of Chartres (of ca. 1093), the one collection that rivaled Burchard's influence in the 11th and early 12th centuries.³ Burchard's sources, as far as they could be determined, were the *Paenitentiale ad Otgarium* of Hrabanus Maurus and the *Libri duo de synodalis causis* by Regino of Prüm, who in his turn was also heavily dependent on the penitentials.⁴ The influence of the penitentials on the history of celibacy cannot be overestimated,

¹ See I Corinthians 7.25–40 as example.

² For this church council see J. Vives, *Concilios Visigóticos e hispano-romanos* (Barcelona, 1963), pp. 5, 6, 13 and J. A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago, 1987), pp. 69f. (especially n.102 regarding the disputed date of the Elvira meeting), 75, 110f., 150f., and 205.

³ For the canonical collections of Burchard and Ivo see P. Fournier and G. LeBras, *Histoire des collections canoniques en occident*, 2 vols. (Paris 1931 and 1932), vol. 1, pp. 364–421 and 2, pp. 55–114; H. Fuhrmann, *Einfluss und Verbreitung der pseudoisidorischen Fälschungen*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica [abbreviated below MGH], Schriften 24 (Stuttgart 1972–1974), part 2, pp. 442–85 and pp. 542–62; L. Kéry, *Canonical Collections of the Early Middle Ages* (Washington, D.C. 1999), pp. 133–155 (Burchard) and pp. 253–60 (Ivo's Panormia); L. Fowler-Magerl, *Clavis Canonum: Selected Canon Law Collections Before 1140*: Access with data processing, MGH Hilfsmittel 21 (Hanover, 2005), index p. 279 and 281.

⁴ Burchard's sources are identified in H. Hoffmann and R. Pokorny, *Das Dekret des Bischofs Burchard von Worms*, MGH Hilfsmittel 12 (Munich, 1991).

although efforts at enforcement were sporadic at best and had very little success until we come to the 11th century.

Given the influence in particular of Burchard in the 11th century, and especially at the time of the Gregorian reform in the second half of the century, it is all the more remarkable that such influence appears to be totally lacking in the legislation of Pope Gregory VII, who is generally considered the unquestionable force behind the effective establishment of clerical celibacy as an unbreakable norm in the West, an establishment that is seen as one of the major accomplishments of this period of reform.⁵ As this paper will show the eleventh-century ecclesiastical reform was by no means limited to the reign of Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085). We have to look to the pontiff's predecessors rather than Gregory himself in order to uncover the roots of the legislative strands of the new emphasis on the prohibition of clerical marriage and the reasons for its effectiveness. This will be the focus of this paper, whereas other important developments such as the formation of a matrimonial law under ecclesiastical jurisdiction or changing concepts of consanguinity, in other words marriage and the laity, will be disregarded here.

The historiographical discourse does not yet acknowledge the differences between the moralistic, popular and cultic emphases found in the 11th-century treatises of an Abbo of Fleury, of the cardinals Humbert of Silva Candida and Peter Damian, for instance, and the entirely different emphasis in papal legislation dealing in the first place with the social and economic consequences of clerical marriage and concubinage, with cultic considerations in the far-background. Intriguing precursors for the condemnation of clerical marriage in the 11th century are the writings of Abbo of Fleury (d. 1004), oblate, student and eventually teacher at this powerful abbey, formally known as Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire. His arguments, as represented in his *Liber Apologeticus* which he composed for kings Hugh Capet and Robert the Pious around the year 993, supported claims to a privileged status for monks within the Christian community by virtue of the virginity and sexual purity of monks. In a neo-Platonic sense of progression toward perfection monks assumed the highest possible rank in Abbo's scheme, designed not to promote virginity which was seen as a given, but rather in order to exempt monasteries from the discipline and visitation rights of the

⁵ J. Lynch, "Marriage and Celibacy," *The Jurist* 32 (1972), 189.