When he was still a young man, Augustine prayed: “make me chaste, make me continent, but not right now.” The story of his earlier life and his eventual conversion is familiar to most readers. Augustine had severe problems overcoming his own sexual impulses, but he finally succeeded and later spent much energy preaching on the subject. A proponent of the ascetic life, he also advocated marital chastity in numerous sermons and other writings devoted to the correct behavior of married couples. Similarly, Jerome gave advice to married couples on how to live according to God’s demands. Both Jerome and Augustine contended that virginity was preferrable to marriage, but they accepted the facts of human life, viz. that most Christians married and had children. In light of this fact, the question is how their ideal of the married life affected Christians of the day. Did they respond positively to the teaching of Augustine and others by showing a new awareness of their moral conduct or did they remain unaffected?

In this article I will argue that Christian married couples certainly did—at least on the normative level—become concerned about their moral conduct, especially in sexual matters. Their salvation depended on it. How we may determine their compliance is, of course, part of our critical inquiry. For, as one often observes, the formal rhetoric of
intellectual élites or church leaders does not always convey the faith and practices of ordinary believers. Nor is it entirely clear how much really changed in private life with the growing dominance of Christianity through the fourth century. Nonetheless, in these matters Augustine’s legacy for later generations of Latin-speaking Christians was, to say the least, profound. Consequently, I will begin by considering some of the more important passages from Augustine and Jerome on the mores of married couples. Then I will compare the result of this reading with the evidence from contemporaneous epitaphs by Roman Christians in commemoration of their deceased spouses. On the whole, these epitaphs have not been examined closely as a record of the faith and piety of ordinary folks. My aim is thus to present the material available and let it speak for itself.

Two problems ought to be mentioned at the outset. The first is that all the epitaphs used for this analysis come from the city of Rome itself. Augustine and Jerome spent much of their lives, and produced most of their writings, far away from Rome. Augustine’s moral treatises and sermons on marriage, for example, come almost entirely from his episcopal see at Hippo Regius. Nonetheless, both Augustine and Jerome spent considerable time in Rome and had many direct contacts there. Jerome’s letters, for example, show him corresponding with friends in Rome and advising them on matters of marriage, sexuality, and asceticism. Indeed, both men had extensive correspondence with persons all over the empire, and their works were widely read. Therefore, I see no reason why their opinions should not have influenced or been in accordance with those of the orthodox church in Rome.


4 This implies that references to modern research are somewhat sparse, especially in the section on the inscriptions. For my part, I came to this study through my previous work on Roman family life, with special attention to funerary inscriptions from Rome. So see my articles, “The physical context of Roman epitaphs, and the structure of ‘the Roman Family,’” *Analecta Romana Instituti Danici* 23 (1996) 35–60; “Ditis examen domus? On the use of the term Verna in the Roman Epigraphical and Literary Sources,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 42 (1991) 221–40; and the articles cited in n. 74 below. In light of these patterns of pagan funerary commemoration, social aspects of the Christian inscriptions from Rome seemed to me to merit closer analysis. As a Classicist, however, I make no claim to deal with all the theological issues that arise in connection with this topic.