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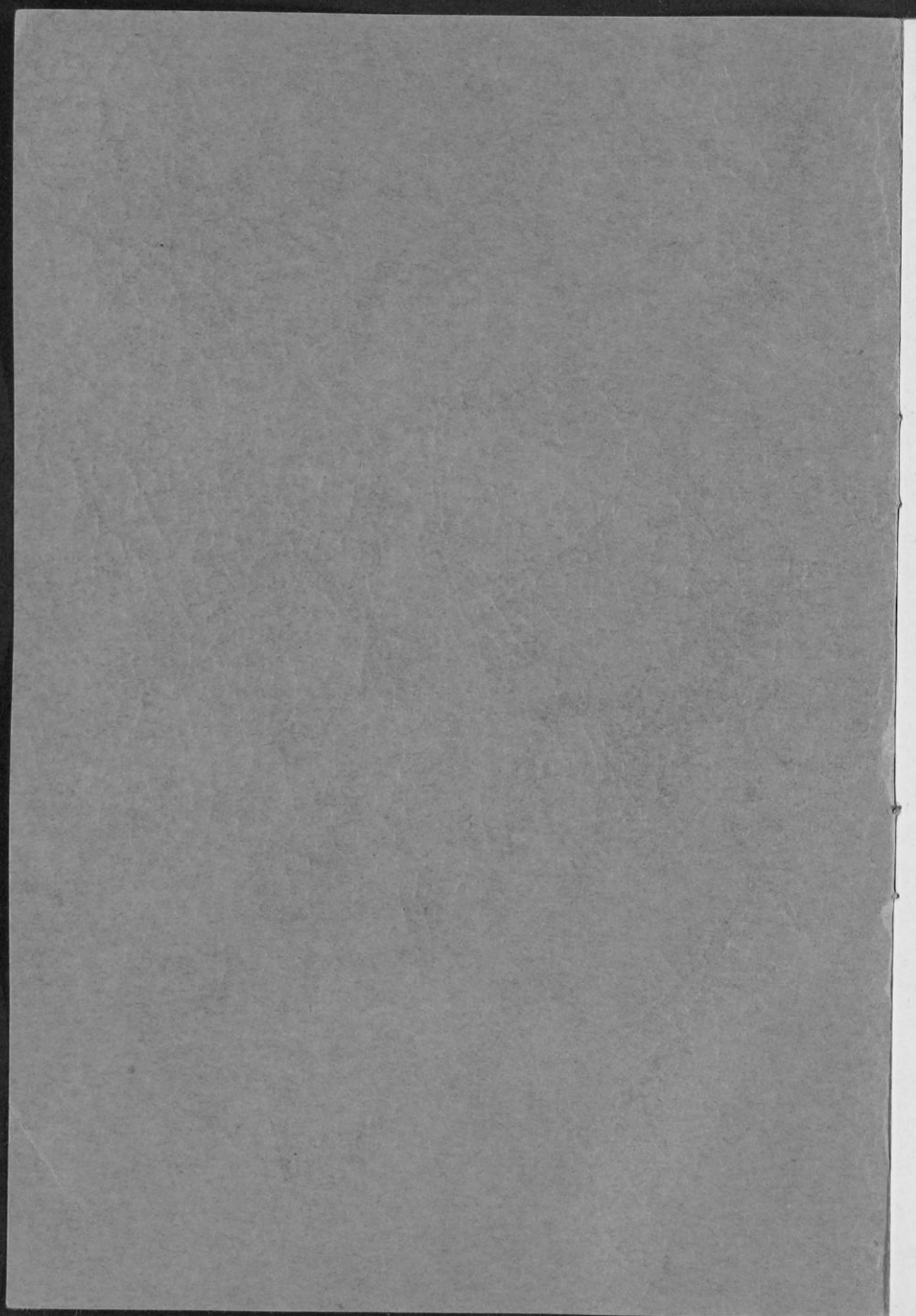
WHY PRIESTS DO NOT MARRY

By

Rev. Bertrand L. Conway, C.S.P.



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Why Priests Do Not Marry

BY BERTRAND L. CONWAY, C.S.P.



CELIBACY is not a precept of the divine or natural law; neither is it a dogma of the Catholic Church. It is simply an obligatory law of the Western Church imposed with a view to the dignity and duties of the priesthood.

Jesus Christ, "the Prince of Virgins," as Bishop Methodius of Olympus styles Him,¹ praises the state of virginity most highly. He says: "All men take not this word, but they to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who were born so from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made so by men; and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven."²

Our Saviour was restoring marriage to its primitive purity, and prohibiting divorce even in case of adultery. "What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."³ When the disciples found this teaching too strict, and objected, saying that if divorce were forbidden, it was better not to marry at all, Jesus took occasion of their remonstrance to set forth clearly the Christian counsel of celibacy "for the Kingdom of Heaven." The prohibition of divorce is a divine commandment for all Christians; the practice of celibacy is a divine counsel for the élite few. Our Saviour's words mark the beginnings of asceticism, for virginity is its essential element. Asceticism is possible even when the other practices of poverty, obedience and mortification are absent, but without virginity it does not and cannot exist.

¹ *Convolutum*, Orat. X., 3. ² Matt. xix. 11-13. ³ Matt. xix. 6.

St. Paul's teaching on celibacy is to be found in the seventh chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians.⁴ He himself led a life of celibacy and recommended it, as our Saviour had done, to all who felt a special calling to the virgin life. "I would that all men were even as myself; but every one has his proper gift from God; one after this manner, and another after that. But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they so continue, even as I."⁵

He expressly teaches, however, that there was no commandment of the Lord either to marry or to lead a life of celibacy. Both were to be the free choice of the Christian. "Concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord, but I give counsel. . . . Art thou bound to a wife? Seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife. But if thou take a wife, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned."⁶

Virginity, he adds, is preferable to marriage, because it enables a Christian to serve God better, and to be "holy both in body and in spirit." "He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God. But he that is with a wife is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife; and he is divided."⁷

St. John in the Apocalypse speaks with the greatest enthusiasm of the state of virginity. "They sang as it were a new canticle. . . . These are they who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth. These were purchased from among men, the first fruits to God and to the

⁴ Cf., *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, by Rev. Joseph MacRory, D.D.

⁵ 1 Cor. vii. 7, 8. ⁶ 1 Cor. vii. 27, 28. ⁷ *Ibid.*, 32-34.

Lamb. And in their mouth was found no lie; for they are without spot before the throne of God."⁸

Voluntary celibacy was commonly practised by the faithful as early as the second century both in the East and in the West; in Syria, in Asia Minor, in Greece and in Rome.⁹ Wherever Christianity spread, generous souls by the thousand spontaneously followed not merely the commandments of the Lord, but the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience.

St. Ignatius on his road to martyrdom at Rome sends greetings to the virgins of Smyrna.¹⁰ Even at this early date (A. D. 115) virginity was recognized as a permanent state, and was highly honored by the Christian people. So much so, indeed, that some of these ascetics began to think themselves superior to the Bishop. St. Ignatius in another letter¹¹ expressly warns them against this false pride. The *Didache* (A. D. 150) speaks of the prophets who were models of virginity and continence (XI., 12). Hermas in his *Shepherd* (150 A. D.) tells us that his wife was as a sister to him, and that his continence had gained for him the grace of God.¹²

St. Justin Martyr (A. D. 152), after painting a vivid picture of pagan immorality, says: "When we marry, we marry to bring forth children. When we renounce marriage, we are perfectly continent."¹³ In two other passages he speaks of the great number of Christians who are practicing celibacy.¹⁴ Other apologists of that early period (175-180 A. D.) call especial attention to the purity of the Christian ascetics—"whose bodies are spotless

⁸ Apoc. xiv. 3-5.

⁹ *Studies in Church History*, by Rev. Bertrand L. Conway; chap. i., pp. 1-31.

¹⁰ *Ad Smyrn.*, XIII., 1.

¹¹ *Ad Polyc.*, V., 2.

¹² *Vis.*, I., 2-4; II., 2, 3; *Mand.*, IV., 4; *Sim.*, IX., 29.

¹³ *1 Apol.*, xxix.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv. 2; xv. 6.

by a perpetual virginity; who live a celibate life for the sole purpose of uniting themselves more intimately with God."¹⁵

If thousands of these early Christians voluntarily practised celibacy "for the Kingdom of God" in imitation of Christ and His Virgin Mother, was it not almost imperative that their leaders—the bishops, priests and deacons—should themselves give an example of perfect Christian asceticism?

As a matter of fact, many of the clergy of the first three centuries did observe celibacy, although at that time no law of the Church, East or West, enforced it.¹⁶ About the year 200 A. D., Tertullian, in order to deter a widow from a second marriage, reminds her of the number of those in sacred orders who have embraced continence, and have chosen God for their spouse.¹⁷ A few years later (230 A. D.) Origen, discussing the divergent lists of priestly vestments in Exodus xxxix. and Leviticus viii., remarks that the priests of the Old Law were pledged to celibacy only during their time of service in the temple. The New Law knows no such limitation. He then contrasts the spiritual fatherhood of the Christian priests¹⁸ with the real paternity of the Jewish priests.¹⁹ Origen himself was a perfect type of the Christian ascetic. He lived in the most absolute poverty. He always walked barefooted, and wore but one garment. He abstained from wine, fasted frequently, slept but little and on the bare ground, and exposed his body relentlessly to cold. He

¹⁵ Tatian, *Oratio Ad Graccos*, 33; Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 33; Minucius Felix, Octavius, 39.

¹⁶ For the history of celibacy in East and West, Cf., Vacandard, *Célibat Ecclés. Dict. de Théol.*, 2,068-2,087

¹⁷ *De exh.*, cast., XIII.

¹⁸ Gal. iv. 19.

¹⁹ In Levit., hom. vi. 6, P. G., XII., 474.

even went to the extreme of making himself a eunuch for the Kingdom of Heaven.²⁰

In the fourth century the celibacy of the clergy is mentioned by Eusebius,²¹ St. Cyril of Jerusalem,²² St. Jerome,²³ and St. Epiphanius.²⁴ They tell us it is a common practice in the East, in Egypt and in Rome; that it is highly recommended by the Church as the Christian ideal; that it enables the clergy to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their sacred ministry.

We do not deny that married men were sometimes raised to the priesthood, because there were not as many single persons as were required. Clement of Alexandria speaks of married priests and deacons in the second century.²⁵ The historian, Socrates,²⁶ speaks (440 A. D.) of a married episcopate in the Eastern churches, although he declares that in Thessaly, Macedonia and Greece bishops and priests are deposed from their ministry if they continue to live with their wives. Again in his account²⁷ of the Council of Nicæa in 325, he mentions the effective opposition of Bishop Paphnutius of Upper Egypt, himself a celibate, to a proposed law of clerical celibacy.

The earliest law enforcing celibacy was passed by the Council of Elvira (canon 33) in Spain about the year 300. Bishops, priests and deacons were to be deposed if they lived with their wives and begot children after their ordination. A similar decree was enacted by a council held in Rome in 386 by Pope Siricius, who wrote letters to Spain and Africa insisting upon its observance.²⁸ A few years later Pope Innocent I. (402-417) wrote similar letters to Bishops Victricius of Rouen and Exuperius of

²⁰ Eusebius, *Hist., Eccl.*, VI., 3.

²¹ *Dem. Evang.*, I., 9.

²² *Cat.*, XII., 25.

²³ *Adv. Vig.*, II.

²⁴ *Haer.* LIX., 4.

²⁵ *Strom.*, III., XII.

²⁶ *Hist. Eccl.*, V., XXII.

²⁷ *Hist. Eccl.*, I., XI

²⁸ Jaffé-Loewenfeld, *Regesta rom. pon.*, I., 41; cf., P. L. LVI., col. 558, 728, 730.

Toulouse.²⁹ By the time of St. Leo the Great (440-461) the law of clerical celibacy was obligatory throughout the West.³⁰

The Eastern churches followed a less strict line of development with regard to the law of celibacy. The Council of Ancyra (canon 10) in Galatia (314) permitted deacons to marry if before their ordination they declared their intention not to lead a life of celibacy.³¹ The Council of Neo-Cæsarea (canon 7) in Cappadocia (315) forbade priests to contract a new marriage under penalty of deposition. The Council of Nicaea (325) refrained from passing any law on celibacy,³² but forbade the clergy to have in their houses any woman that might excite suspicion about their morality; mothers, sisters and other relatives were excepted (canon 3). The Apostolic Constitutions (400) forbade bishops, priests and deacons to marry after their ordination, but permitted them to keep the wives they had already married. The sixth canon, in fact, forbade bishops and priests to put away their wives "under pretext of piety."³³

The custom of insisting upon a celibate episcopate in the East, mentioned by Socrates³⁴ and by Bishop Synesius of Plotemäis,³⁵ became a law under the Emperor Justinian (527-565). The custom also of allowing priests and deacons to live with the wives whom they had married before ordination became general about the middle of the seventh century, and was solemnly sanctioned by the second Council of Trullo (692).

This law, with some slight modifications, still holds in

²⁹ *P. L.*, XVI., 501, 523, 524.

³⁰ *P. L.*, LIV., 1201.

³¹ *Mansi*, II., 517.

³² Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.*, I., 8; Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.*, I., 23.

³³ VI., XVII.; *P. G.*, I., 957; *Mansi*, I., 51.

³⁴ *Hist. Eccl.*, V., XXII.

³⁵ *Epis.*, CV., *P. G.*, LXVI., 1485.

the Eastern churches today, whether uniat or schismatic. The Russian and the Armenian schismatics, as a general rule, insist upon marriage as a condition of ordination to the secular priesthood. The Bishops are for the most part chosen from the celibate monastic clergy. Second marriages are forbidden to a priest who has been left a widower. The Nestorians are the only schismatics who allow priests and deacons to marry after ordination.

There are a number of writers like Dr. H. C. Lea of Philadelphia and G. G. Coulton of Cambridge, England, who take special delight in gathering together the scandals of past ages in order to prove that the practice of celibacy is impossible. They select certain periods of history when clerical morality was at a low ebb, and confidently assert that the law of celibacy has always been inoperative. But even in the worst days that followed the break-up of the Empire of Charlemagne, the Church always held aloft the high standard of clerical celibacy, and denounced most vehemently those who were faithless to their vows of chastity. When concubinage had become widespread on the continent, God raised up holy and energetic Pontiffs to combat the immorality of the unworthy bishops intruded into German, French and Italian sees, and the unworthy clergy who served under them. Leo IX. (1049-1054), St. Gregory VII. (1073-1085), Urban II. (1088-1099), and Calixtus II. (1119-1124) made a determined fight against clerical concubinage, and the reform they inaugurated was permanent. The decree of the First Lateran Council (1123) which declared the marriages of all in sacred orders invalid, was the high water mark of the cause of celibacy in the West. Laxity of observance at certain periods will of course be admitted by any candid historian, but no one who knows the facts can deny that the law

of clerical celibacy has been observed from the fourth century by the vast majority of the clergy of Western Christendom.

The statement that clerical celibacy was impossible and against human nature was voiced strongly by the worldly feudal prince-bishops in the time of Gregory VII., and by Martin Luther and his friends at the time of the Reformation. Luther's sermon on marriage was certainly the utterance of a man lost to all sense of decency, who argued merely from the corruption of his own heart. Celibacy is not impossible, for the grace of God is given abundantly to all His priests to keep them chaste. The daily Mass, the recitation of the divine office, the consolations of the confessional, the close contact with the sick and dying—these are all-sufficient to keep every priest loyal to his vow. He is not chosen at random for his sacred office, but is watched over for years by seminary professors and confessors, who declare him fitted for the ministry only after careful judgment.

Would you say that all the unmarried find it impossible to be chaste? Are your own unmarried children, sisters, widowed cousins, maiden aunts and bachelor uncles impure? Are all husbands who for certain reasons are separated from their wives for a long period, bound to commit adultery? The statement that celibacy is impossible is a libel on the purity of thousands. It proceeds as a general rule from hearts full of lust, who judge that others are like themselves. Celibacy is not an intolerable burden as some imagine. It is the free choice of élite souls who are old enough to know what they are doing, and who choose the celibate life to serve God and their brethren better.

Some have declared that celibacy is against nature. They are right, if by nature they mean the corrupt and

sensual inclinations of man's lower nature, which, as St. Paul says, is continually fighting "against the law of the mind."³⁶ They are wrong, if they imply that everyone is bound to marry under all circumstances. There are thousands of men and women who remain celibates out of mere natural affection for their own flesh and blood. Frequently there is nothing supernatural at all in their sacrifice. Most of us are acquainted with men who have remained unmarried merely to satisfy their mother's strongly expressed—even though selfish—desire; or with women who have joyfully taken a dead mother's place to provide for a family of younger brothers and sisters. Would you call their unselfishness and devotion unnatural?

Again, if it were unnatural, why is it that virginity has been admired and practiced for ages even among pagan nations? Judea, Greece, Rome, Gaul, Peru—all bear eloquent witness that chastity is not unnatural.

The scandals of history which some controversialists quote as a strong indictment against clerical celibacy prove nothing whatever. No one who knows the facts will dare maintain that a married clergy, Russian or Protestant, has been freer of scandals than the Catholic priesthood. The evident moral and intellectual inferiority of the Eastern compared with the Western clergy proves conclusively the wisdom of the Catholic Church in enforcing celibacy. Father Gagarin, S.J., in his book, *The Russian Clergy*, gives so vivid a picture of the degradation of the Eastern married clergy that we have no notion of introducing their mode of life into Western Christendom.

Practically speaking, the Church knows from her long experience that an unmarried clergy can do more effective work for God's people than a married clergy. It stands

³⁶ *Romans vii. 23.*

to reason that an unmarried man is freer and more independent than a man with a wife and family. Protestants have often admitted this to me, when advocating celibacy for their missionaries in pagan lands, or when commenting on the scandals of a minister's unworthy wife and children. It is true again that an unmarried man can afford to work for a smaller salary, and thus make fewer financial demands upon the people. A minister is bound to maintain a certain social status for his wife and family, and must needs demand money to support and to educate his children. More than once Protestants have told me that they were in favor of unmarried clergymen in poor country parishes.

The old-fashioned Protestant is fond of quoting the Bible as proof positive that celibacy was rightly abolished at the Reformation, when Luther broke his vows as priest and monk and forced a nun to break hers. Some of the texts most frequently cited are: Did not God command us "to increase and multiply?"³⁷ He certainly spoke these words to Adam and Eve, invoking, as the Scriptures add, a general blessing upon the race, which is to spread everywhere by the divine institution of marriage. There is no danger of the race dying out for lack of marriages. The chief danger lies in the intentional childless marriage. The words of Genesis do not imply that the man or woman who remains unmarried thereby breaks a commandment of God.

Was not St. Peter a married man? Does not the Bible speak of his "wife's mother lying sick of a fever?"³⁸ He was married, but tradition declares with St. Jerome³⁹ that he did not live with his wife after the divine call.⁴⁰ The words of St. Peter to Our Lord are plain:

³⁷ Gen. 1. 28.

³⁹ Epis. 48, ad Pammachium.

³⁸ Matt. viii. 14.

⁴⁰ Matt. iv. 19.

"Behold we have left all things and have followed Thee."⁴¹ What matters it, however, whether he were married or not? There was no law of clerical celibacy until the fourth century. We do not believe that celibacy is an enactment of the divine or positive law.

Does not St. Paul say: "To avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife?"⁴² The apostle is not urging the unmarried to marry, as the question implies, for in this very chapter he praises virginity as a counsel of Christ and a higher state of life than marriage. On the contrary, he is exhorting those already married⁴³ to fulfill religiously the duties of their state, and not to be guilty of the crimes of adultery and divorce.

Does not St. Paul say: "It is better to marry than to burn?"⁴⁴ In verses eight and nine, St. Paul expressly declares that he is addressing the unmarried. He advises them to remain unmarried if they feel called as he was to follow Christ in the practice of celibacy. "I say to the unmarried, and to the widows, it is good for them if they so continue even as I." If, on the other hand, men and women are living unmarried the better to satisfy their lusts, or if they are continually subject to carnal thoughts and desires, he urges them to marry. "But if they cannot contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be burned" (*i. e.*, with evil desires).

Does not St. Paul expressly state that he was married? He writes: "Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas?"⁴⁵ St. Paul declares he was not married in 1 Cor. vii. 8. The word translated *wife* does not in the original Greek mean *wife*, but any woman; the

⁴¹ Matt. x. 28.

⁴² 1 Cor. vii. 2.

⁴³ 1 Cor. vii. 2-7; x. 10, 11.

⁴⁴ 1 Cor. vii. 9.

⁴⁵ 1 Cor. ix. 5.

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word was translated wife by men who had already repudiated the celibacy of the Catholic priesthood. St. Jerome in his treatise against Jovinian⁴⁶ tells us that the apostle was referring to the holy women who, according to Jewish custom, adopted by Christ Himself, followed their religious teacher about and ministered to his wants.⁴⁷

Does not St. Paul teach that bishops and deacons must be married? "A bishop must be blameless, the husband of one wife."⁴⁸ "Let the deacons be the husband of one wife."⁴⁹

As we said above, there was no law enforcing celibacy until the fourth century, so that in the days of primitive Christianity many married men received orders. The words of St. Paul do not imply that all deacons and bishops *must* be married men—he himself was not—but that anyone twice married was not to be ordained to the sacred ministry. Bigamy—*i. e.*, successive bigamy—is still an impediment to holy orders. It is true that in the third, fourth and even fifth centuries we come across some priests and bishops who were married more than once,⁵⁰ but these were exceptional cases.

Does not St. Paul consider forbidding to marry one of the doctrines of the devil?⁵¹ St. Paul is not referring to the celibacy of the priesthood, but is denouncing the early Gnostic heretics who condemned marriage as evil in itself, and held that men were to secure a victory over matter by an unrestrained indulgence of the passions. If he were writing today he would condemn the celibacy of

⁴⁶ *Adv. Jovinianum*, I., 14.

⁴⁷ "Was St. Paul married?" *American Catholic Quarterly*, 1890, p. 697.

⁴⁸ 1 Tim. iii. 2.

⁴⁹ 1 Tim. iii. 12; *cf.* Titus i. 6.

⁵⁰ Tertullian, *De Monog.*, XII.; Hippolytus, *Philos.*, IX., XII.; *P. G.*, XVI., 3,385; Theodoret, *Epts.*, CX.; *P. G.*, XXXIII., 1,305.

⁵¹ 1 Tim. iv. 1, 3.

the libertine as a doctrine of the devil, not the celibacy of those who were continent for the Kingdom of God.

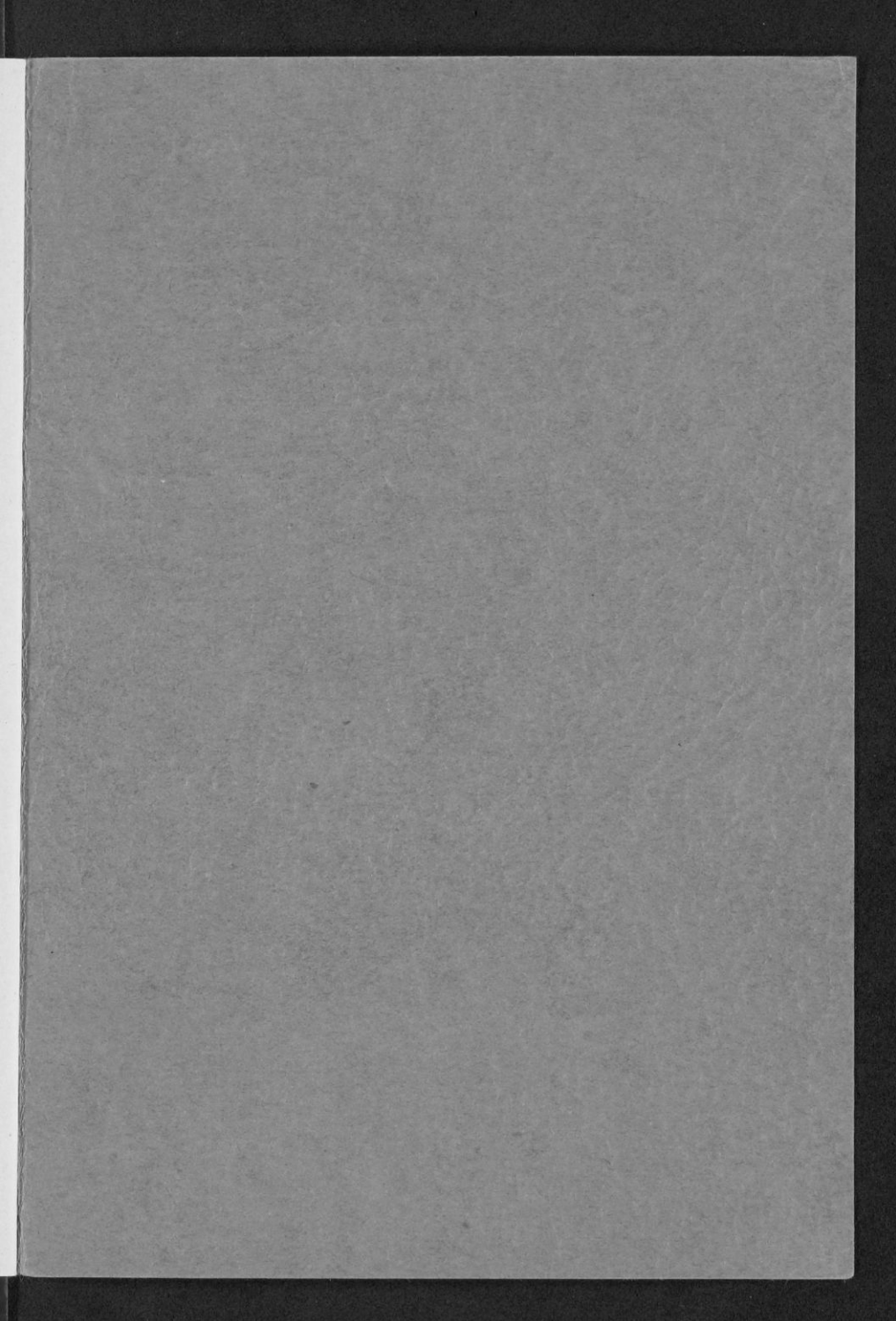
When the so-called Reformation in England and Germany abolished the Mass and the priesthood, it followed as a matter of course that its ministers, reduced to the status of laymen, should marry as the majority of their parishioners did. The mystical idea of the Church as the Virgin Bride of Christ Jesus, always a prominent idea among the early Fathers of the Church, was soon forgotten by a married State clergy, and with it the concept of a virgin church served by a virgin priesthood.

Nothing of course is more foreign to Catholic principles than the notion of the average Protestant that in exalting celibacy as a counsel of perfection for the few, the Catholic Church thereby belittles marriage. On the contrary, she regards marriage as a sacrament, holy in all its relations; adultery, divorce, polygamy and race-suicide are detested by her as contrary to the Christian gospel. Virginity is for the few, marriage for the many; both are holy, but in different ways. The outside churches which have set aside the counsel of virginity have at the same time degraded marriage by their denial of its sacramental character, and by their pagan views on divorce and family limitation. The Catholic Church has ever been loyal to the teaching of Christ: "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."⁵² "Woman shall be saved through child-bearing."⁵³ "They have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven. He that can take it, let him take it."⁵⁴

⁵² Matt. xix. 6.

⁵³ 1 Tim. ii. 15.

⁵⁴ Matt. xix. 12.



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