

Abstinence from Conjugal Relations Before Reception of the Body of Christ: A Brief History

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This study addresses a traditional Christian ascetical and liturgical practice that has been largely obscured or forgotten in recent times—the custom of abstaining from sexual intercourse for a period of some days preceding the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ in Eucharistic Communion. This study focuses on abstinence from the conjugal act as a means of preparing for reception of Communion by married Christians who possess the moral and physical ability to lawfully engage in sexual intercourse. Following an initial section on the relevance of the practice to Christian asceticism, the subsequent three sections correspond to three broad historical periods. Section II considers scriptural precedents for the practice of sexual abstinence as preparation for encounters with God’s holiness. Section III addresses evidence of abstinence from the conjugal act as a means of preparation for receiving the Body and Blood of Christ among early Christians. Section IV considers evidence of the practice from the seventh to the sixteenth century.

I. THE RELEVANCE OF CONJUGAL ABSTINENCE BEFORE COMMUNION IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

To some it will seem quaint, outdated, or perhaps unbelievable that married Christians ever practiced sexual abstinence as a means of preparation for the reception of Communion. Certainly this is a topic that few clergy in the early twenty-first century would broach in a pastoral setting. The hesitation among clergy may stem in part from the influence of Karl Rahner over their seminary studies. In an essay titled “Problems Concerning Confession,” Rahner laments several “random” examples of “legalistic and magical” attitudes found in “ordinary man and hence the piety of the people:”

How many taboo-like undercurrents are not present in the medieval casuistry regarding the lawfulness or unlawfulness (even to the point of mortal sin) of receiving the sacraments after having had marital intercourse the night before. In 1277, Bishop Stephen of Paris condemned the proposition: *Quod delectatio in actibus veneris non impediatur actum seu usum intellectus* [that the pleasure in the conjugal act does not impede the act or the use of the intellect]. St Bernardine of Siena (1443) says in one of his sermons that it is a piggish irreverence and a mortal sin if husband and wife do not abstain from marital intercourse for several days before receiving Holy Communion. Even the *Catechismus Romanus* still properly prescribes a three-day abstinence.¹

Rahner mentions failure to abstain from conjugal relations in preparation for Communion as an example of something the faithful confess merely “so that there may be something to confess.”² The dominance of Rahner’s dismissive attitude toward pre-Communion sexual abstinence partially explains the relegation of the tradition to obscurity. Yet even while belittling the tradition, Rahner suggests its significance—at least to Bernardine of Siena, the *Roman Catechism*, and the piety of ordinary faithful.

If silence on the topic may be considered evidence, the significance of pre-Communion sexual abstinence among the faithful has waned. Any suggestion that sex should be subjugated to other goods is likely to be received with little sympathy. But the subjugation of sex—a created good, but a material and passing good—to eternal goods has been ensconced in the Christian tradition from its inception, in part as an inheritance from ancient Hebrew practices. Ascetical practices bear witness to the preference of mind and heart that Christians should give to the Creator over any created good.³

Ascetical practices also express Christian penance. Pope St John Paul II, in his Encyclical on Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church Today *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, asserted:

1 Karl Rahner, “Problems Concerning Confession,” in *Theological Investigations III: The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl-Heinz Kruger and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1967) 190–206, at 194–195.

2 Ibid., 195.

3 Cardinal Raymond Leo Burke, “Sacred Liturgy and Asceticism: Respect for the *Ius Divinum*,” in *Antiphon* 17 (2013) 3–30, at 9.

Contemporary man...seems to refuse instinctively and often irresistibly anything that is penance in the sense of a sacrifice accepted and carried out for the correction of sin. In this regard I would like to emphasize that the church's penitential discipline, even though it has been mitigated for some time, cannot be abandoned without grave harm both to the interior life of individual Christians and of the ecclesial community and also to their capacity for missionary influence. It is not uncommon for non-Christians to be surprised at the negligible witness of true penance on the part of Christ's followers.⁴

John Paul II here repeats a conviction articulated by his predecessor Pope Paul VI. In his Apostolic Constitution on Fast and Abstinence *Paenitemini*, Paul VI reminds the faithful "of the significance and importance of the divine precept of penitence."⁵ Insisting that penance is a divine precept, or a necessary practice of the Christian faith, he writes:

The necessity of the mortification of the flesh also stands clearly revealed if we consider the fragility of our nature, in which, since Adam's sin, flesh and spirit have contrasting desires. This exercise of bodily mortification—far removed from any form of stoicism—does not imply a condemnation of the flesh which sons of God deign to assume. On the contrary, mortification aims at the "liberation" of man, who often finds himself, because of concupiscence, almost chained by his own senses. Through "corporal fasting" man regains strength and the "wound inflicted on the dignity of our nature by intemperance is cured by the medicine of a salutary abstinence."⁶

Paul VI does not explicitly mention abstinence from conjugal relations as a means of "corporal fasting." By comparison, however, he mentions food twice and meat three times in *Paenitemini*. Nonetheless, Paul VI's language, considered in the context of the Catholic tradition, implies that sexual abstinence is assumed to be a salutary category of fasting and abstinence. Paul VI's use

4 Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church Today *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (2 December 1984) 26.

5 Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution On Fast and Abstinence *Paenitemini* (17 February 1966).

6 *Paenitemini*, chapter II.

of the theological term “concupiscence” points in this direction. Since Augustine, “concupiscence” connotes all disordered desires of the flesh, preeminent among them being disordered sexual desire. Moreover, Paul VI alludes to Augustine’s image of “the chain of sexual desire”⁷ when he teaches that voluntary mortification frees the faithful from the chains of concupiscence.

In conclusion, Popes Paul VI and John Paul II teach that God calls the faithful to fulfill the divine precept of penance in part by corporal fasting and mortification. Neither pope explicitly mentions abstinence from legitimate conjugal relations as a method of penance. Nonetheless, in light of the tradition of conjugal abstinence in preparation for Communion and the language these popes use, one may justly infer that they condone such abstinence. Few of the faithful are likely to make this inference, however, in part because of the influence of Rahner and the decline of the notion that eternal goods are to be preferred to temporal goods. Yet this notion can be traced back to God’s revelation on Mt Sinai.

II. SCRIPTURAL PRECEDENTS: ABSTINENCE AND ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LORD

The inclusion of sexual abstinence as a means of preparing to encounter the divine first appears at a pivotal point in salvation history: the moment that the Lord gave the Law to the chosen people through Moses on Mt Sinai. On the cusp of the revelation of the Law, the Lord commanded Moses: “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments, and be ready by the third day; for on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” (Ex 19:10–11).⁸ When Moses came down from the mountain to the people and had them sanctify themselves and wash their garments, he warned them: “Be ready for the third day. Have no intercourse with any woman” (Ex 19:15). Moses commanded the people to sanctify or consecrate themselves for this sacred moment of encounter with the divine by abstaining from sexual relations for three days or until the third day.

7 Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII,vi,13 (CCL 27:121): “Et de uinculo quidem desiderii concubitus, quo artissimo tenebar ... me exemeris.”

8 All biblical translations are taken from *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1966).

Another key passage demonstrates that abstinence from conjugal relations before encountering the holy became a regular practice not simply limited to the singular moment when God delivered the Law on Mt Sinai. In 1 Samuel, while fleeing from Saul, David visited Ahimelech, the priest of Nob. Ahimelech came trembling to meet David and asked:

“Why are you alone, and no one with you?” And David said to Ahim’elech the priest, “The king has charged me with a matter, and said to me, ‘Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.’ I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place. Now then, what have you at hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.” And the priest answered David, “I have no common bread at hand, but there is holy bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women.” And David answered the priest, “Of a truth women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition; the vessels of the young men are holy, even when it is a common journey; how much more today will their vessels be holy?” So the priest gave him the holy bread; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the LORD, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away. (1 Sam 21:2–7)

This passage indicates two situations in which men and presumably their wives abstained from sexual relations during David’s time. First, David’s soldiers abstained in order to be consecrated at arms or prepared for battle. Second, the priests abstained when serving before the Lord in the Tabernacle and partaking of the holy shew-bread. On this exceptional instance in which non-priests partook of the holy bread, those non-priests could do so only upon affirming that they had abstained from sexual relations.

The meeting between David and Ahimelech demonstrates that during the period of their service in the Temple, Levites and priests were separated from their wives. Drawing from such scriptural evidence, early Christians believed that continence was imposed upon the priests of the Old Covenant, as Augustine writes in his *Questions on the Heptateuch*.⁹ Furthermore, early Christians

9 Augustine, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum, Lib. III: Quaestiones Levitici*, 85 (CCL 33:229): “Erat ergo consequens continentia sacerdotis, ne propter filiorum procreationem aliquibus diebus non inponeretur

readily recognized a spiritual association with the reception of consecrated shew-bread in the Tabernacle or Temple under the Old Covenant and the reception of consecrated Bread in Holy Communion under the New Covenant.

These practices of sexual abstinence to prepare for or participate in the holy give a largely positive notion of “consecration” in relation to sexual abstinence in the Old Testament. The flip side of this is the notion of uncleanness or impurity. “If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen,” the Torah prescribes, “both of them shall bathe themselves in water, and be unclean until the evening” (Lev 15:18). This impurity is of far lesser consequence than, for example, the impurity associated with menstruation or coming into contact with a corpse. During menstruation, a woman “was unclean for seven days in all, and when that time had elapsed, needed nothing more than to wash her body and her clothes.”¹⁰ Contact with a human corpse, on the other hand, communicated uncleanness not only to the living person, but also to one’s entire house or tent, along with the vessels in it. After seven days, those who had contact with the corpse were purified through a complex ritual including not only the washing of their bodies and clothing, but also a sacrificial offering, sprinkling water, and hyssop.¹¹

Granting that the relative impurity incurred by sexual relations is less grave than other types of impurity in the Old Testament, why would sexual relations be considered impure at all? The imposition of prescribed periods of abstinence from the conjugal act vexes biblical scholars, in part because, as J. H. Kurtz points out, “marriage was encouraged in every way by the law, and conjugal intercourse is spoken of as a *duty*.”¹² Indeed, the conjugal act is required in certain contexts, and therefore con-

continuationis incensum, quod a solis summis sacerdotibus bis die solebat inponi mane et uespera, quandoquidem post coitum coniugalem etiam loto corpore inmundus erat usque ad uesperam a quo id necesse erat inponi. Quod autem ait: quae sanctificant filii Israel, intellegendum est offerendo sacerdotibus offerendum per eos domino.”

10 Johann Heinrich Kurtz, *Offerings, Sacrifices and Worship in the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998) 421.

11 Ibid., 422–423.

12 Ibid., 416. Here Kurtz cites Exodus 21:10.

sidered as good or as performing a good function. Nonetheless, the conjugal act is forbidden in other contexts, insofar as it is incompatible in an immediate sense with encountering the holy.¹³ Thomas Aquinas summarizes what many ancient Hebrews as well as ancient Christians understood almost intuitively: “Just as certain places are holy because they are devoted to holy things, so are certain times holy for the same reason. But it is not lawful to demand the [conjugal] debt in a holy place. Therefore neither is it lawful at a holy time.”¹⁴

This attitude towards conjugal relations reappears in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians, Paul admonishes spouses: “Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control” (1 Cor 7:5). This passage provides scriptural support for sexual abstinence for the sake of prayer in general and for participation in the sacraments in particular.

Reading together passages from Exodus, 1 Samuel, and 1 Corinthians regarding conjugal abstinence in preparation for prayer or encountering the holy, early Christians naturally viewed sexual abstinence as a means of preparing for reception of Communion.

III. SEXUAL ABSTINENCE AND ENCOUNTERS WITH THE HOLY AMONG ANCIENT CHRISTIANS

This section pursues the evidence for sexual abstinence in preparation for encounters with the holy among ancient Christians through a series of broad sketches, beginning with early apocryphal literature and continuing with less suspect sources: ancient Church orders; early eastern canons; and the witness of Jerome, Caesarius of Arles, and Gregory the Great.

Apocryphal literature from the first centuries of Christianity reflects the Encratites’ extreme views of sexuality. Such literature insists that,

13 See Rick Goldberg, “Biosocial Regulation of Husband and Wife: The Requirement for Periodic Conjugal Separation and Reunion,” in *Judaism in Biological Perspective: Biblical Lore and Judaic Practices*, ed. Rick Goldberg (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2009) 118–138.

14 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 5 (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981) Supp., q. 64, a. 7.

The Christian way entails the renunciation of the things of this world.... Such renunciation includes contempt for wealth and luxury and worldly honour, and may also include frugality in diet (it is a peculiarity of Eucharistic celebrations in the apocryphal Acts that wine is not used), but its most prominent feature in the apocryphal Acts is sexual abstinence. Most of the apostles in them preach the ideal of complete celibacy, and many stories illustrate this preaching and its socially disruptive effects.¹⁵

The *Acts of Thomas* “seems the most emphatic in considering sexual activity wholly incompatible with Christian faith and salvation.”¹⁶

Compared with the Encratite extreme of completely proscribing conjugal relations, the restrictions on conjugal relations in ancient Church orders appear balanced. The *Apostolic Church Order*, also known as *Ecclesiastical Canons of the Apostles*, attributes the following statement to John the Apostle:

It is proper that the presbyters be like elders who have passed the time of having intercourse with their wives. They shall share

15 Richard Bauckham, “Imaginative Literature,” in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler, Volume 2 (London: Routledge, 2000) 791–812, at 808. This essay examines early Christian “imaginative literature” that falls into the category “apocryphal.”

16 Bauckham, “Imaginative Literature,” 808. *Ibid.*, 808–809: “It is important to notice, however, that the theological context in which this sexual asceticism is understood is different in each case. The stories of sexual abstinence are a prime example of the way narrative motifs pass from one to another of these works but serve subtly or even obviously different theological agendas in each case. In the *Acts of Paul* the theological context is a kind of eschatological radicalism based especially on i Corinthians 7 (‘Blessed are those who have wives as if they had them not...’). The dualism involved is the eschatological dualism of this word and the next, not at all a matter-spirit dualism. Sexual abstinence implies no depreciation of the body. On the contrary, it keeps the body pure (‘Blessed are they who have kept the flesh pure, for they shall become a temple of God’). Not the body but passions that defile the body are evil. So there is no contradiction involved when the Paul of the *Acts of Paul* also, in correspondence with the Corinthians, decisively condemns the Gnostic dualism which denies that God created the human body, that Christ has come in the flesh and that there will be a resurrection of the flesh.”

in the mystery with the bishop, helping him in everything and gathering around him with love for their shepherd. The presbyters on the right shall carefully assist at the altar.¹⁷

This raises the question of the requirements of continence among clergy, which, although closely related, is not the topic of this study. It suffices to note that clerical continence is a natural extension of the tradition that even the married faithful should refrain from conjugal relations before participating in the sacred mysteries of the altar.

That tradition of Eucharistic abstinence is found in the *Canonical Responses* attributed to Timothy I, bishop of Alexandria between 378 and 384:

Question. If married people have intercourse during the night, may they receive Communion or not? *Reply.* They may not since the apostle says, “Do not defraud one another except by consent for a time so that you have time for prayer; come back together again so that the devil may not tempt you for your incontinency.”¹⁸

Question. On what days are the married to refrain from intercourse and on what days is intercourse permitted? *Reply.* Let me repeat what I said previously. “Do not defraud one another except by consent for a time that you may have time for prayer; come back together again so that the devil may not tempt you for your incontinency.” They must refrain from doing so on Saturday and on Sunday because on these days the spiritual sacrifices are offered.¹⁹

According to Timothy I of Alexandria, then, married Christians must refrain from sexual relations for at least one day and one night before receiving Communion. This, the early canonist

17 *Apostolic Canons*, 14, trans. Lawrence J. Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, vol. 1 (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), section 46, par. 853, pp. 267–268.

18 Timothy I of Alexandria, *Canonical Responses*, 5, trans. Johnson, vol. 2, section 92A, par. 2466, p. 423; translated from *Iuris Ecclesiastici Graecorum Historia et Monumenta*, vol. 1, ed. I. B. Pitra (Rome, 1864) 630–633.

19 Timothy I of Alexandria, *Canonical Responses*, 13, trans. Johnson, vol. 2, section 92, par. 2474, p. 424.

notes, accords with the instruction in 1 Corinthians that married couples may refrain from conjugal relations for a time for prayer.

In his treatise *Against Jovinian*, Jerome also cites 1 Corinthians, and links sexual abstinence with prayer and reception of Communion:

A layman, or any believer, cannot pray unless he abstain from sexual intercourse. Now a priest must always offer sacrifices for the people: he must therefore always pray. And if he must always pray, he must always be released from the duties of marriage. For even under the old law they who used to offer sacrifices for the people not only remained in their houses, but purified themselves for the occasion by separating from their wives.... That married men are elected to the priesthood, I do not deny: the number of virgins is not so great as that of the priests required.²⁰

Jerome discusses abstinence in more detail in *Letter 49*, addressed to Pammachius. In this letter, Jerome cites 1 Corinthians 7 in response to critics who attack him for forbidding the faithful to receive the Body of Christ after engaging in conjugal relations.

Paul the apostle says that we are not able to pray after having had sexual relations with our wives. Peter exhorts continence so that our prayers not be impeded. [...] What is greater? To pray or to receive the Body of Christ? If intercourse hinders what is less important, so much the more does it hinder what is more important. In the same work I stated that David and his companions, because of the Law, were not able to eat the loaves of proposition unless they were able to answer that for three days they were free from women, not only from prostitutes – some-

20 Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* I,34 (PL 23:257[291]): “Si laicus et quicumque fidelis orare non potest, nisi careat officio conjugali, sacerdoti, cui semper pro populo offerenda sunt sacrificia, semper orandum est. Si semper orandum est, ergo semper carendum matrimonio. Nam et in veteri lege qui pro populo hostias offerebant, non solum in domibus suis non errant, sed purificabantur ad tempus ab uxoribus separati.... Eliguntur mariti in sacerdotium, non nego: quia non sunt tanti virgines, quanti necessarii sunt sacerdotes.” Trans. W.H. Fremantle, et al., in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 6, *Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994) 371–372.

thing prohibited by the Law – but from their wives to whom they were rightly joined. The people also, when about to receive the Law on Mount Sinai, were ordered to abstain from their wives for three days. I know that at Rome it is customary for the faithful always to receive the Body of Christ, a practice I neither censure nor approve – let all be fully convinced in their own minds – but I appeal to the consciences of those who on one and the same day receive Communion after having had intercourse and, according to Persius, “have washed away the night in a stream.” Why, I ask, do they not dare go to the martyrs? Why do they not presume to enter the churches? Is there one Christ in public and another Christ at home? Whatever is not permitted in church is not permitted at home. Nothing is hidden from God. Night shines like the day before him. All are to examine themselves and then approach the Body of Christ. Postponing Communion for one or two days does not make a Christian more holy so that what I have not merited today I will merit tomorrow or the next day. If I grieve that I did not receive the Body of Christ, then I should for a short time refrain from my wife’s embrace so that I might prefer the love of Christ over that of my wife.²¹

21 Jerome, *Epistula 49(48)*, 15 (CSEL 54:376–377): “Paulus apostolus dicit, quando coimus cum uxoribus, nos orare non posse; Petrus ad continentiam cohortatur, ne inpediantur orationes nostrae... an idcirco arguor, quod de meo sum ausus adicere: quale illud bonum est, quod corpus Christi accipere non permittit? ad hoc breuiter respondebo: quid est maius: orare an Christi corpus accipere? utique corpus Christi. si per coitum, quod minus est, inpeditur, multo magis, quod maius est, diximus in eodem uolumine panes propositionis ex lege non potuisse comedere Dauid et socios eius, nisi se triduo mundos a mulieribus respondissent, non utique a meretricibus, quod damnabatur in lege, sed ab uxoribus, quibus licito iungebantur. populum quoque, quando accepturus erat legem in monte Sina, tribus diebus iussum esse ab uxoribus abstinere. scio Romae hanc esse consuetudinem, ut fideles semper Christi corpus accipiant, quod nec reprehendo nec probo – unusquisque enim in sensu suo abundat –, sed ipsorum conscientiam conuenio, qui eodem die post coitum communicant et iuxta Persium noctem flumine purgant, quare ad martyres ire non audeant, quare non ingrediantur ecclesias, an alius in publico, alius domi Christus est? quod in ecclesia non licet, nec domi licet. nihil deo clausum est et tenebrae quoque lucent apud eum. probet se unusquisque et sic ad Christi corpus accedat, non quo dilatae communionis unus dies aut biduum sanctiorem efficiat Christianum, ut, quod hodie non merui, cras uel perendie merear, sed quo, dum doleo non

In this passage, Jerome gathers key scriptural passages cited to support the practice of abstinence from sexual relations before receiving the Body of Christ: Exodus 19; 1 Samuel 21; and 1 Corinthians 7. Origin, who combined these same passages to exhort the faithful to abstain from conjugal relations before receiving the Eucharist, may have influenced Jerome's interpretation.²² Jerome poses a fundamental question for married Christians: is the sexual expression of love of one's spouse to be preferred to the love of Christ? Are conjugal relations more desirable than reception of the Body of Christ?

Jerome wrote these admonitions in treatises and letters, but did not have the opportunity to preach them to a congregation including married Christians. In sixth-century Gaul, Caesarius of Arles did. Caesarius boldly preached to the faithful that they should refrain from conjugal relations before communicating in the sacraments:

As often as you come to the Church on some solemnity, and you wish to receive the sacraments of Christ, for several days (*plures*) keep continent, so that with a sure conscience you may approach the altar of the Lord; you should also be continent throughout Quadragesima and until the Pasch, in order that you might chastely and purely approach the paschal solemnities. For he is a good Christian who not only preserves continence for several days before communicating, but also does not approach his wife except with the desire to beget children: because a wife should not be taken for libidinous desire, but for the sake of begetting children.²³

communicasse corpori Christi, abstinence me paulisper ab uxoris amplexu, ut amori coniugis amorem praeferam Christi." Trans. Lawrence J. Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, vol. 3, section 145-I, par. 3955–3956, p. 361.

22 Origen, *In 1 Cor.*, fr. 34, ed. Claude Jenkins, "Origen On 1 Corinthians. III," in *Journal of Theological Studies* 9 (1908) 500–514, at 501–502; Henri Crouzel, *Virginité et mariage selon Origène* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963) 54–56.

23 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo* 44,3 (CCL 53:196–97): "Quotiens ad ecclesiam in qualibet sollemnitate venitis, et sacramenta Christi accipere vultis, ante plures dies castitatem servate, ut cum securo conscientia ad altare domini possistis accedere; quam rem etiam per totam quadragesimam et usque ad finem paschae fideliter custodite, ut vos paschalis sollemnitas castos et puros inveniat. Qui enim bonus christianus est, non

Caesarius then notes that children are the purpose of matrimony articulated in the matrimonial tablets read at wedding celebrations. Later in the same sermon, Caesarius again insists that spouses should refrain from conjugal relations on Sundays and other festivities. This time he warns that children conceived in times when abstinence should be observed may be born with leprosy or epilepsy, or in a state of demonic possession.²⁴

Not all preachers, even in the patristic period, had the gumption to preach about limits on the conjugal lives of the married faithful. In a study of the Eusebius Gallicanus collection of anonymous sermons from late ancient Gaul, Lisa Kaaren Bailey notes: “Confrontational attacks on [such] common practices required a charismatic preacher with a strong position in his community. Caesarius was such a preacher... Not all pastors were prepared, or perhaps able, to take Caesarius’ approach.”²⁵

Like Caesarius, Augustine possessed the position and gumption to confront common practices among married faithful. Augustine taught that a married man was expected to fast and abstain from sexual intercourse during Lent in preparation for

solum ante plures dies quam connumicet castitatem servat, sed uxorem suam except desiderio filiorum non agnoscit: quia uxor non propter libidinem, sed propter filiorum procreationem accipitur. Denique et ipsae tabulae matrimoniales hoc continent: liberorum, inquit, procreandorum causa. Videte quia non dixit, libidinis causa, sed liberorum procreandorum.”

24 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo* 44.7 (CCL 53:199): “Ante omnia, quotiens dies dominicus aut aliae festivitates veniunt, uxorem suam nullus agnoscat... Nam qui uxorem suam in profluvio positam agnoverit, aut in die dominico aut in alia qualibet sollemnitate se continere noluerit, qui tunc concepti fuerint, aut leprosy aut epileptic aut forte etiam daemones nascuntur.” Caesarius also warns here against approaching for intercourse one’s wife when she is pregnant.

25 Lisa Kaaren Bailey, *Christianity’s Quiet Success: The Eusebius Gallicanus Sermon Collection and the Power of the Church in Late Antique Gaul* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) 58. “He complained that men openly boasted of their affairs, saw no sin in having sex with their wives on forbidden days, and expected to take a concubine before settling into marriage.” See, e.g., Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo* 44.4–6. William E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 190, lists the occasions on which, according to Caesarius, spouses should practice sexual abstinence.

baptism and the reception of the Body of Christ. Augustine called this an ecclesiastical prescription, and indicated that the married man who refuses to keep it will be barred from baptism.²⁶ This abstinence also extended for a time after baptism, at least in some areas. According to canon 24 of the *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua*, a collection of canons that dates to fifth-century Gaul, those “newly baptized shall for a time refrain from luxurious feasts, from the theater, and from intercourse with their wives.”²⁷ This prescription must relate to the fact that neophytes were expected to attend church daily during the week after Easter, when they likely communicated daily. The same canon recurs in other legislative collections, including the decretals of Gratian.²⁸

One final testimony from the early Christian period is worthy of extended consideration. Around 601, Gregory the Great responded to a series of nine questions that Augustine of Canterbury had sent from his mission in England. Bede incorporated this response, known as the *Libellus responsionum*, into his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The eighth question addresses various customs with regard to church attendance and sacramental reception during times of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and sexual intercourse.²⁹ Regarding abstinence from conjugal relations, Gregory, as quoted by Bede, writes:

A man who has had intercourse with his wife ought not to enter the church unless he has washed himself; and even when washed he ought not to enter immediately. Now the law commanded the ancient people that when a man had intercourse with a woman he ought to wash himself and should not enter the church before sunset; but this can be explained in a spiritual

26 Augustine, *De Fide et Operibus* 6,8 (CSEL 41:43).

27 *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua* 24 (lxxxvi), in *Concilia Galliae A. 314 – A. 506*, ed. Charles Munier (CCL 148:171): “neophyti aliquamdiu et lautioribus epulis et spectaculis uel coniugibus abstineant”; trans. Johnson, vol. 3, section 125, par. 3081, p. 190. Munier dates the collection around 475.

28 *Decretum Magistri Gratiani* (Concordia discordantium canonum), pars 3 (de consecratione), dist. 5, canon 12, textus, pag. 1415, linea 20: “Neophiti aliquamdiu a lautioribus epulis, et spectaculis, uel coniugibus abstineant.”

29 For more discussion of this source, see Daniel G. Van Slyke, “The Churching of Women: Its Introduction and Spread in the Latin West,” in *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 115 (2001) 208–238, at 212–216.

sense. A man has intercourse with a woman when his mind is united with her in thought in the delights of illicit concupiscence, so unless the fire of concupiscence is first quenched in his mind he should not consider himself worthy of the company of his brethren while he sees himself burdened by the sinfulness of depraved desire. Although different nations think differently in this matter and appear to observe different rules, yet it has always been the custom of the Romans from ancient times, after intercourse with one's own wife to seek purification by washing and reverently to abstain from entering the church for a brief period.³⁰

Gregory refers to the prescript of Leviticus 15:18, and so initially appears to use "church" or *ecclesiam* loosely to designate the assembly of the Israelites for worship. In his characteristic manner, Gregory interprets this passage spiritually (*spiritualiter*) and morally. For Gregory, the prescription to separate the conjugal act from divine worship fosters freedom from unlawful concupiscence and unruly passion.

Following this interpretation, Gregory notes that various churches have differing customs with regard to the admission of couples who have recently engaged in carnal intercourse into the churches or assemblies for worship. Gregory indicates that Roman Christians have the custom of washing and forbearing "for some time" from entering the Church (*ab ingressu ecclesiae paululum reuerenter abstinere*) out of reverence. He explains that matrimony is not evil but the pursuit of the pleasure associated with sexual intercourse is properly separated from entrance into the holy place and reception of the Body of the Lord:

In saying this we do not reckon marriage as a sin; but because even lawful intercourse cannot take place without fleshly desire, it is right to abstain from entering a sacred place, for the desire itself can by no means be without sin. The man who said, "Behold I was conceived in iniquity and in sin my mother brought me forth" was not born of adultery or fornication but of lawful wedlock. He knew himself to have been conceived in iniquity and lamented that he was born of sin: for, like a tree, he bears in the branch the sap of evil which he drew from the root: in these

30 Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, I,27, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave & Roger A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 94–95.

words, however, he does not declare the intercourse of married people to be a sin, but only the desire for intercourse. There are indeed many things which are right and lawful and yet we are to some extent defiled in doing them... And so fleshly copulation is lawful when it is for the sake of producing offspring and not of desire; and the fleshly intercourse must be for the sake of producing children and not the satisfaction of vicious instincts. So if anyone approaches his wife, not carried away by lustful desire but only for the sake of getting children, such a man is by all means to be left to his own judgment both in the matter of entering the church and of receiving the mystery of the Lord's Body and Blood. But when it is not the love of getting children but desire which dominates in the act of coition, the couple have cause to lament. Though the holy word of prophecy concedes this, yet the very concession gives them cause to fear. For when the Apostle Paul said, "Let him who cannot contain himself have his own wife," he took care to add forthwith, "But this I say by way of indulgence, not of commandment." For that which is lawful is not granted by way of indulgence, so because he said it was an indulgence he provides it to be an offence.³¹

In this section of his response, Gregory assumes that one cannot entirely avoid sin when seeking the pleasure of the conjugal act. Gregory presupposes that the only pure motivation for conjugal intercourse is the desire to beget children. One who pursues intercourse for the sole purpose of begetting offspring might with fewer qualms of conscience not only enter the church, but also receive the Body and Blood of the Lord. Gregory reflects an already longstanding consensus among Christians also reflected by Caesarius of Arles above—the primary purpose of the conjugal act is the begetting of children.³²

In his response to Augustine of Canterbury, Gregory adds the reception of Communion to the problem of entering into a church after conjugal relations. Gregory expounds on the appropriateness of purity of body for receiving the Body of the Lord:

31 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I,27, ed. and trans. Colgrave & Mynors, 94–97.

32 See Michael M. Sheehan, *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 301–302.

It should be considered carefully that when the Lord was about to speak to the people from Mount Sinai he first commanded them to abstain from women. And if such a standard of bodily purity was demanded when the Lord spoke to men through a creature as his substitute, that those who received the words of the Lord were not to approach women, how much more carefully should women who are receiving the Body of the omnipotent Lord preserve the purity of the flesh lest they be weighed down by the greatness of that inestimable Mystery. For this reason also the priest instructed David that if his followers had not approached women, they might receive the showbread, which they would by no means have received if David had not first declared that they were pure in this respect. A man then who, after intercourse with his wife, has washed, is able to receive the mystery of the Holy Communion, since it is lawful for him, according to what has been said, to enter the church.³³

Gregory's thought shifts from Mt Sinai to the reception of Communion by women to David's meeting with Ahimelech. He argues that women as well as men ought to refrain from intercourse before receiving the Body of the Lord or both should wash before entering a church and receiving.

Gregory's pastoral sensibilities shine through his reply to the queries of Augustine of Canterbury. Gregory delicately suggests that those who seek the pleasure of conjugal relations should pause before entering a church and partaking of the Body of the Lord. A less nuanced approach to the pre-Eucharistic abstinence appears in the penitentials that began to proliferate in Gregory's time.

IV. ABSTINENCE FROM CONJUGAL RELATIONS BEFORE COMMUNION FROM THE SEVENTH TO THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY³⁴

This section first considers the penitentials of the early Middle Ages, which offer widespread evidence of the practice or ideal of abstaining from conjugal relations before Eucharistic Communion. After briefly introducing the canonical tradition, this section discusses St Hedwig and ends with Roman documents produced in the sixteenth century.

33 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I,27, ed. and trans. Colgrave & Mynors, 96–99.

34 Pierre J. Payer, "Early Medieval Regulations Concerning Marital Sexual Relations," in *Journal of Medieval History* 6 (1980) 353–376.

Penitentials first arose in Irish monasteries, and then spread throughout the Frankish kingdoms at the hands of Celtic missionaries during the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries. These small handbooks were cheap and practical for quick consultation by parish priests in the confessionals. A confessor simply found the confessed sin in his penitential and prescribed the written penance. Parish priests quickly recognized the practical value of penitentials and utilized whatever versions fell into their hands. These penitentials both witness and contributed to the spread of attitudes and practices that were at least nominally enforced by hundreds if not thousands of priests.³⁵ All the penitentials prescribe periods of abstinence from conjugal relations in accordance with the sacred times of the year that were associated with the reception of Eucharistic Communion.

J.-L. Flandrin elucidates the times of sexual abstinence prescribed in the penitentials.³⁶ Among the dozens of penitentials consulted, Flandrin lists twenty-six that insist upon three days or three nights of conjugal abstinence before the reception of Communion. The other penitentials Flandrin studied prescribe more days of abstinence before Communion (and sometimes after), ranging from four to fourteen days. Complicating the question, however, is the fact that the age of the penitentials—the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries—also saw a decline in the reception of Communion by the faithful. Many of the faithful began to receive only during Christmas and Easter or solely during Easter. It is no coincidence, then, that Advent and Lent remained prominent seasons for abstinence from conjugal relations in the penitentials.

Owing to discrepancies among the various books, questions of authority, and a lack of pastoral flexibility, penitentials received increasing criticism from at least the ninth century. A synod in Paris in 829, for example, severely condemned their use. Around 850, Ebbo of Rheims wrote: “The penitential tasks contained in the booklets that are in the hands of our priests are so confused, contradictory among themselves, and so lacking in authority that

35 See *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents*, by John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (New York: Octagon Books, 1965).

36 Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Un temps pour embrasser: aux origines de la morale sexuelle occidentale (VI-Xe siècle)* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

it is impossible to apply them.”³⁷ Under such pressure from ecclesiastical authorities, the penitentials gradually fell into disuse.

Yet prescribed periods of abstinence from conjugal relations associated with times of prayer and the reception of Communion continued in the canonical tradition. The *Collection of Ancient Canons* gathered by Yves, bishop of Chartres from 1090 to 1115, provides a representative example. A canon that Yves cites as coming from an epistle to James, the brother of the Lord, admonishes that in the reception of the Body and Blood of the Lord great discretion must be observed. This discretion includes abstaining for some days from carnal works and purifying one’s body and soul, following the example of David, who abstained from conjugal relations before receiving the shew-bread from the priest.³⁸ Another canon Yves cites prescribes that during the Quadragesimae, Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, spouses should refrain from conjugal relations.³⁹ Similar canons appear in other collections and the practice became ensconced in traditions of both the West and the East.⁴⁰

37 Ebbo of Reims, *Epistola ad Halitgarium Cameracensem episcopum*, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae Karolini*, vol. V (Berlin: Weidmann, 1928) 616–617.

38 Yves de Chartres, *Decretum* II,24 (PL 161:166): “Quod discretio magna esse debeat in perceptione corporis et sanguinis Domini. Ex epistola Clementis papae (Epist. II ad Jacob., fratrem Domini). In perceptione corporis et sanguinis Dominici magna discretio adhibenda est... Probet seipsum homo, et sic de pane ille edat, et de calice bibat [1 Cor 11]: ut videlicet abstinens aliquantis diebus ab operibus carnis, et purificans corpus animamque suam, praeparet se ad percipiendum tantum sacramentum, exemplo David, qui nisi confessus fuisset se abstinuisse ab opera conjugali ab heri, et nudius tertius, nequaquam panes propositionum a sacerdote accepisset [1 Kgs 21].”

39 Yves de Chartres, *Decretum* XV,163 (PL 161:893–894): “*De temporibus quibus se continere debeant conjugati ab uxoribus. Ex concilio Eliberitano.* In tribus quadragesimis anni, et in die Dominico et in quarta feria, et sexta, conjugales se continere debeant, nec illis diebus copulari quamdiu gravata fuerit uxor, id est, a quo die filius in uterum motum fecerit, usque ad partum; a partu post 33 dies, si filius est; si autem filia, post 56.” See also *Decretum* XV,165 (PL 161:894): “*De illis qui in Dominico die nupserint. Ex conc. Triburiensi, cap. 51.* Si quis nupserit die Dominico, petat a Deo indulgentiam, et quatuor dies poeniteat.”

40 “In some Orthodox traditions, preparation for communion requires not only confession, but up to a week of fasting and abstention from marital relations.” Paul Meyendorff, “Fr Alexander Schmemmann’s

The mere fact that canons were recorded and recommended by ecclesiastical authorities does not prove that anybody actually followed them. The lives of the saints, however, evidence that some spouses did live out such prescriptions. The anonymous author of the *Vita* of St Hedwig, duchess of Silesia (1174–1243), praises her as a model of marital chastity. While her husband yet lived, she successfully exhorted him so that with one mind they would observe continence through all of Advent and Quadragesima, on Rogation Days, Fridays, vigils and solemnities of the saints, and on Sundays. At times, the anonymous author notes, Hedwig and her husband abstained from conjugal relations for six or eight weeks.⁴¹

André Vauchez argues that the *Vita* of Hedwig reflects the emergence of a new ideal of holy conjugal chastity in the thirteenth century. This ideal included the practice of regularly abstaining from conjugal relations on a set of days that had become fixed: Advent, Quadragesima, Fridays, Ember Days, vigils and feasts, and Sundays. Although these periods of sexual abstinence had been well established for centuries, Hedwig receives particular praise for following them. Furthermore, according to Vauchez, Hedwig represents a new attitude on the part of the Church: that by following a version of the evangelical counsels proper to their state in life, married faithful may attain not only to salvation, but even to sanctity.⁴² As a side note, the model of married chastity exhibited by Hedwig's *Vita* is distinct from *syneisaktism*, or "spiritual marriage," understood as "a legally binding marriage in

Liturgical Legacy in America," in *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 53 (2009) 319–330, at 327.

41 *Vita Hedwigis*, par. 4, in *Acta Sanctorum Octobris*, vol. 8 (Brussels: Gruese, 1853), 225: "O quam felices sunt matrimonae matrimonialibus adhuc vinculis subjugatae, si huius beatae foeminae imitari conantur exemplum, quae non solum, ut praedicitur, concept sobole continenter de cetero vivere studuit, verum etiam salutaribus consiliis et exhortationibus suum ad hoc generosum maritum inflexit, ut tunc secum voluntarie continentiam observaret singulis annis per totum Adventum et per Quadragesimam, omnibus diebus Quatuor Temporum et sextiis feriis, in Sanctorum vigiliis ac solemnitatibus eorundem et in diebus dominicis."

42 André Vauchez, *Les laïcs au moyen âge: pratiques et expériences religieuses* (Paris: Cerf, 1987) 207–209.

which sexual relations have been remitted by the consent of both parties for reasons of piety.”⁴³

Vaucher observes that advocacy of periodic abstinence became official and widespread during the Middle Ages if it was not already. One prominent example is found at the end of the rites of the nuptial Mass in the *Missale Romanum* revised after the Council of Trent. There the priest is instructed to advise the newlywed couple that they should remain continent in times of prayer and especially during fasts and solemnities.⁴⁴ These times of prayer above all include occasions on which the couple might receive Communion. The *Roman Catechism* composed following the Council of Trent clearly states this in the section devoted to “preparation of the body” for receiving:

The dignity of so great a Sacrament also demands that married persons abstain from the marriage debt for some days previous to Communion. This observance is recommended by the example of David, who, when about to receive the showbread from the hands of the priest, declared that he and his servants had been clean from women for three days.⁴⁵

43 Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) 3.

44 *Missale Romanum: Editio Princeps (1570)*, ed. Manlio Sodi and Achille Maria Triacca, Monumenta Liturgica Concilii Tridentini, 2 (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998) Missa pro sponso et sponsa, no. 4075, p. 638: “Moneat Sacerdos oratione graui ut sibimetipsis seruent fidem. Orationis tempore et praesertim ieiuniorum ac solemnitatium, casti maneant: et vir vxorem, atque vxor virum diligit: et in timore Dei permaneant.” Cf. *Missale Romanum anno 1962 promulgatum*, ed. Cuthbert Johnson and Anthony Ward, Bibliotheca Ephemerides Liturgicae Subsidia: Instrumenta Liturgica Quarreriensia Supplementa, 2 (Rome: C.L.V.-Edizioni Liturgiche, 1994) Missa pro sponsis, no. 4771, p. [77]: “Moneat eos sacerdos graui sermone, ut in Dei timore manentes et alterutrum diligentes, mutuam fidem et coniugalem castitatem seruent, atque prolem in catholica religione sedulo instituant.” The *Missale Romanum* of 1970 does not include any version of this admonition: see *Missale Romanum ex decreto Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Pauli PP. VI promulgatum*, Editio typica (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970), Missa “pro sponsis,” 741–753.

45 *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*, trans. John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan (Rockford, IL: TAN, 1982) 248.

The same recommendation is found again in the *Roman Catechism* at the end of the section on matrimony:

But as every blessing is to be obtained from God by holy prayer, the faithful are also to be taught sometimes to abstain from the marriage debt, in order to devote themselves to prayer. Let the faithful understand that (this religious continence), according to the proper and holy injunction of our predecessors, is particularly to be observed for at least three days before Communion, and oftener during the solemn fast of Lent.⁴⁶

With these words, the *Roman Catechism* reflects the biblical sources that proved foundational and constant throughout the tradition of abstinence from conjugal relations in preparation for receiving Communion: David's partaking of the bread offered to the Lord and the preparation of the Israelites for the revelation on Mt Sinai, from which comes the three days.

CONCLUSION

This survey outlines a tradition of abstaining from conjugal relations in preparation for encounters with the divine and especially for reception of the Body of Christ in Communion from Mount Sinai to the *Roman Catechism* of the sixteenth century. In more recent times, this tradition has fallen into obscurity and disuse among the faithful. Nonetheless, no teaching authority has rejected the longstanding practice of pre-Communion abstinence from conjugal relations and it remains proper to the general abstinence and penance encouraged by Pope Paul VI in *Paenitemini* and Pope John Paul II in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*. Although the practice may not have pertained to all Christians at all places and times, an initial outline of the evidence suggests that the practice of pre-Communion sexual abstinence was widespread and significant enough to the lives of the married faithful that it deserves more serious attention than it presently receives.

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46 Ibid., 355.