



## Clerical Celibacy in the West: c.1100-1700 (Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700)

*By Helen Parish*

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### Clerical Celibacy in the West: c.1100-1700 (Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700) By Helen Parish

The debate over clerical celibacy and marriage had its origins in the early Christian centuries, and is still very much alive in the modern church. The content and form of controversy have remained remarkably consistent, but each era has selected and shaped the sources that underpin its narrative, and imbued an ancient issue with an immediacy and relevance. The basic question of whether, and why, continence should be demanded of those who serve at the altar has never gone away, but the implications of that question, and of the answers given, have changed with each generation. In this reassessment of the history of sacerdotal celibacy, Helen Parish examines the emergence and evolution of the celibate priesthood in the Latin church, and the challenges posed to this model of the ministry in the era of the Protestant Reformation. Celibacy was, and is, intensely personal, but also polemical, institutional, and historical. Clerical celibacy acquired theological, moral, and confessional meanings in the writings of its critics and defenders, and its place in the life of the church continues to be defined in relation to broader debates over Scripture, apostolic tradition, ecclesiastical history, and papal authority. Highlighting continuity and change in attitudes to priestly celibacy, Helen Parish reveals that the implications of celibacy and marriage for the priesthood reach deep into the history, traditions, and understanding of the church.

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### **Review**

'In characteristically forceful tone, Pope Benedict XVI declared in 2005 that apostolic celibacy was a 'total entrustment to God', and a 'total openness to the service of souls'. Helen Parish shrewdly observes that this latest iteration of the long-standing debate about clerical celibacy brings to the fore the question of the nature of the priesthood. As her chronologically extensive study bears witness - a breadth not fully reflected in the dates in the title of this book - this debate reaches back to the earliest days of the church and has taken many forms. It is to Parish's credit that she recounts the story with flair and an eye for complexity... With the Reformation material Parish is on familiar ground, and she writes crisply and with authority, reminding us that the argument was not simply about celibacy but concerned scripture and authority, the nature of the priesthood, tradition, and the heritage of the ancient church.' English Historical Review 'This is a masterful, well-written volume that will serve as an invaluable reference work for years to come... Parish deserves unqualified praise for having brought together within the covers of a single book a treasure-trove of facts, texts, and careful analysis of a topic that has not lost its significance with the passing of the centuries.' Anglican and Episcopal History 'Specialists who study clerical celibacy within a particular historical context will be guided towards a better understanding of the precedents for and consequences of the phenomena they examine, while nonspecialists will find in Parish's work a convincing account of the evolution of ideas about the clergy and sexuality over time, as well as an extremely valuable survey of the scholarly literature on this subject.' Speculum 'Parish's excellent and nuanced study makes it clear that even as it is debated today, the issue of the value, sacred nature, and historical validation of clerical celibacy still evokes the same multidimensional framework as it has for nearly two millennia.' Catholic Historical Review

### **About the Author**

Helen Parish is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Reading. She is the author of Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation (2000), Monks, Miracles and Magic (2005), and a number of articles on religion, church, and clergy in the early modern period.

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