

Sisters in Arms

Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia

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Chapter One: The Apostolic Life

The women of Galilee were the first Christians. They came up to Jerusalem with Jesus and stayed with him in the bitter hours of his death. They buried him and later announced to the other disciples who were hiding from the Romans that the tomb was empty. One woman testified that she had spoken to him, earning the title Apostle to the Apostles. Having come to believe that their teacher was God himself, who had voluntarily taken a human body to redeem humanity with his own suffering and death, they determined to pursue fulfillment of his mission. Their earthly future was bleak. Jesus' legacy was nothing but a share in his suffering. But they believed that compassion, participating in his sacrifice through imitation, would earn them a place in his eternal kingdom. To that end, they were prepared to take up arms against the empire of this world.

We know some names: Mary, Jesus' mother, and her sister Mary, Clopas's wife; Mary of Magdala, Joanna, the wife of Chuzah, and Susanna, a trio from whom Jesus had exorcised demons; Salome and Mary, the mother of the sons of Zebedee. They were childless widows and separated wives. One had lived for a dozen years with a flow of blood, presumably a menstrual disorder that made her unclean to her Jewish community. Tradition named her Berenice or Veronica. There were other women too, though we do not know whether they were part of the group who followed Jesus to the cross. The Samaritan woman, who confided with shame that she was living with a man who was not her husband, was the first apostle Jesus sent to proclaim him as Messiah. Mary of Bethany, who sat among the apostles listening to Jesus after he refused to send her off to the kitchen, and her busy sister, the practical Martha, provided hospitality for his disciples out of affection for the master. Finally, there was the nameless woman taken in adultery and the Canaanite woman who begged for her child's cure as if for crumbs from a rich man's table.

The women of the gospel had no social identity, though we know that some were rich. They had fallen or leapt through the cracks in a dying order. They lived at a crossroads, a Janus time, that gave simultaneous birth to the Roman Empire and to the Christian religion. The men who should have anchored them to their society had apparently cast them adrift. For centuries, Rome had been engaged in the systematic conquest of the Mediterranean world, engulfing its diverse polities and sapping the power of their oligarchies. In general, these polities shared a sociopolitical model: the mass of people were ordered and supervised by a ruling class of "fathers" who headed great families of cadets, women, children, and slaves. In addition, the fathers controlled diverse groupings of dependents and clients. In contrast, the simpler unions of humbler people were barely recognized by the empire as marriage at all. The fathers' public life and their family responsibilities were thus mutually dependent. As Rome undermined their public power, they also lost the ability and even the will to protect their private domain from outside intervention. The final victim of this unifying conquest was the Roman Republic itself.

Jesus' contemporary Livy, writing of an idealized and vanished past, believed that the republic's decay began when the Senate failed to heed Cato's warning that uncontrolled women would bring the state to ruin. Its fall, in civil war and anarchy, was ascribed to the failure of old patriarchal virtues, best embodied in the flagrant dalliance of the consul Mark Antony with the seductive Egyptian queen Cleopatra while his good Roman wife languished in neglect at home. Patrician men avoided marriage and the burden of policing women, children, and slaves who were cut loose to shift for themselves. Many sank into misery but others prospered in unprecedented ways. When Antony's brother-in-law, who came to be known as Augustus Caesar, made himself a military dictator under the pretext of restoring the republic, he launched an elaborate program of renewing the old ancestral ways, including the mythical family of the golden age. Accordingly, the first emperor issued laws obliging all men (of the patriarchal class) to marry and all women to have children.

Over succeeding generations, penalties, promises, and finally persecution testified to the importance of the Augustan marriage laws in imperial society and to their failure. The imperial "household" itself destroyed the familial base of society by subsuming the patrician fathers under the patriarchal power of the emperor, who delegated authority to his own wife, slaves, and freedmen rather than to a senate of aristocratic elders. But the miniature imperium of the noble family was needed to maintain gender and class hierarchies. In robbing its patriarchs of the political authority that rewarded their assumption of the familial burden, the empire had weakened their commitment to these social duties. Many aristocratic men simply turned away to a more irresponsible celibate existence, preferring concubinage relationships to lawful marriage.

Many women too opted for a more independent life. They joined angry mobs that forced Augustus to recognize a longer period of widowhood before forcing them to marry again. They secured the steady enlargement of the "right of three children," which gave women free control of their own fortunes after they had borne three children (four in the case of freed women). Whereas Roman observers fretted obsessively about women's sexual license and lack of propriety, Christian writers boasted from the first about their chastity. Indeed, the first fruit of the ultimate Christian victory three centuries later was the extension of the right of three children to women who consecrated themselves to religion as virgins or chaste widows.

The tie between religion and the polity was also breaking. The political crises that produced the empire produced in turn a series of social and psychological stresses that nurtured Christianity. Public religion had generally been the province of men. Increasingly, it was being reduced to the empty forms that Jesus so despised, while private religion--centered on communities of elite initiates endowed with esoteric secrets--came to absorb people's deepest emotional commitments. The fall of so many kingdoms and their attendant gods before the spreading might of Rome convinced many people that the end of the world, or at least its radical transformation, could not be far off. Women seeking a new sense of identity figured prominently among the emperor's disoriented and alienated subjects. Juvenal complained bitterly of women who gave their devotion to emotional and irrational oriental cults. In city streets and desert oases, prophets urged

their followers to forsake family and fortune. To Jesus, "the true family of those who hear the word and keep it" included mother, brothers, and sisters but only one father, God in heaven. Although only a few gained a place in scripture, many women stood among the crowds who heard that the last would be first and the meek would inherit the earth.

The women of the gospel came to Jesus out of tragic and broken lives. They needed healing, for their bodies and for their souls. They needed to be relieved of whatever pressures had made them demoniacs or to be forgiven for sexual transgressions. But once restored, they did not simply go home. They joined the family of Christ, which anticipated the kingdom of heaven, where there would be no marriage or giving in marriage but all would be one. The vagabond community whose members contributed their experiences to the compilation of the New Testament commemorated a band of equals. In the aura of Jesus' love and power, other distinctions seemed to melt away. Women and men traveled together freely, shared what they had, and helped one another bear their losses. This ideal of syneisactism, women and men living together chastely without regard for gender differences, was the most deeply radical social concept that Christianity produced.

This principle probably explains Jesus' attraction for many of his female followers. The decay of the old polity based on a union of fathers opened some public space for women. Empresses set the pattern for lesser women to participate in various affairs, particularly in religious associations. Women who had wealth could hold some religious offices and function as patronae. A tomb in Smyrna built by "Rufina, a Jewess, president of the synagogue, for her freed slaves and slaves raised in her house" dramatizes the extent of this leadership. The old laws of inheritance had been designed to keep women in direct dependence on men and isolated from effective alliances with other women. Heiresses, however, found ways to evade the laws imposing tutelage. Divorced and widowed women gained control of their own dowries and other properties. Many women, through the right of three children, claimed recognition as legal persons. Freedwomen could dispose independently of their own property and enter into commercial enterprises that might support them comfortably or even make them rich. While many women were forced to turn to prostitution to earn a living, some Roman ladies actually registered as prostitutes to gain independence from male tutors, a scandal that imperial legislation tried vainly to correct.

Some of Jesus' female companions were among the beneficiaries of these social changes. Joanna was the wife of Herod's steward. With Susanna and Mary of Magdala she supported the little band of vagabonds. In one version of the story, a prostitute extravagantly anointed Jesus' feet with ointment worth hundreds of denarii. John, by contrast, attributes this generosity to Mary of Bethany, who lived with her sister Martha and brother Lazarus in a house large enough to provide hospitality for a fairly large number of peripatetics. Thus, the community of embattled women from Galilee who followed Jesus to the cross should be placed into a context of women from every part of Roman society actively seeking a wider and more purposeful life. Without their money and their labor and their witness, no religion would have been born and no church could have been built.

The Gospels reveal the syneisactic nature of the apostolic life but do not indicate that Jesus gave instruction on the matter. In the first generation, Christianity provoked many debates among its converts about the nature of the gender system in the new order. It was a widely debated topic at the time among the adherents of many religious and philosophical groups. Rejection of established gender roles and of sexuality itself appealed to many individuals outside the Christian milieu. The discussion seems dominated by a notion that gender was fluid, possibly based on the Aristotelian continuum that defined women as imperfect men. The whole concept suggested that women could become perfect by accumulating manly characteristics and that men risked becoming imperfect, or effeminate, if they let their manly self-control and vigor weaken. Writers of the early empire displayed profound uneasiness about society's loss of control over women. They tended to dwell on the sexual license of emancipated Roman women, haunted by Cleopatra and Livia, the seductress and the poisoner, as depicted by contemporary historians. Juvenal satirized religious devotions that took women away from home, claiming that even old established female cults masked orgies of unbridled lust.

These fantasies still represented power channeled through men. Throughout the first-century world, there were women and men experimenting with a new equation. The syneisactic principle put women on an equal footing by renouncing the sexual and procreative activities that made them unequal. Philosophical cults whose members renounced sex and marriage for the love of wisdom multiplied in the Hellenistic world. Cynic and Stoic writers recommended that women study philosophy and men submit to a single standard of morality. The same idea was implicit in the early Christian communities and made explicit by Clement of Alexandria (ca. 200), when he defended Christian women who perfected their philosophical capacities in the Christian mission against pagan critics.

Pliny identified the *therapeutae*, aging virgins in Hellenized Egypt who voluntarily chose to devote themselves to wisdom rather than to husbands, as a Jewish counterpart of certain ascetic Greek sects of philosophers. He described the women as serving one another without slaves, as though all were one family. They segregated themselves from their male companions solely for the sake of their own modesty, coming together to sing in choir and then parting to study privately.

Out in the desert, the Essenes were committed to extreme physical purification. They lived together, kept a common purse, and practiced manual labor for their own support. Most members of these sects were male but there were some females among them. References in the Dead Sea Scrolls confirm that most of them were wives and children of the members. But the marriages may have been instigated by women actively seeking a chaste life devoted to worship. Widows of former members or virgin daughters who remained with their parents past marriageable age may account for the rest of the female bones in the cemetery. Thus, though admission to an Essene community probably depended on the sponsorship of a man, it provided the choice of a syneisactic life for a few women.

Aside from the freedom from confinement that renunciation of sexuality achieved, there was a pervasive belief that unsullied virginity commanded certain powers: hence, the consecration of the vestal virgins, a small handful of women reserved from marriage for cultic purposes. Ironically, they were among the first women to be endowed with the right of three children. First-century Christians believed that even in the Temple of Jerusalem some virgins were maintained in total purity. There they imagined the young Mary flowering until approaching menarche precipitated her betrothal to Joseph. She had perhaps a counterpart in the aged Anna who is mentioned in the New Testament as a widow who spent her life in the Temple praying.

Other women acted without male support, using religion to free themselves from the sexual demands of men and from the burden of endless childbearing. Juvenal warned husbands against wives who "fill the house with covens of worshippers of strange oriental deities," who encouraged them to torture and mutilate their bodies "to atone for having slept with their husbands the night before." Perhaps he was talking of Isis, sometimes associated with prostitutes, but in another persona a champion of a woman's right to refuse. At the end of the century, the emperor Domitian condemned to death two vestal virgins as well as several Christian virgins who refused to marry. He pursued devotees of Isis even more brutally. Likewise, Roman laws tried to extirpate cults of the Great Goddess that encouraged men to castrate themselves in her honor.

These were the models available to the women of the gospel and other women attracted to the teachings of Jesus in the first century. The band of women from Galilee were the good ground where Jesus' message took root: God loves most the one whom he forgives the most. The seed flourished in them and they gave fruit a hundredfold. Some women may have been among the anonymous "seventy" dispatched to spread the word. Certainly, the Samaritan woman preached effectively, bringing back a crowd of converts. It was Jesus' mother, Mary, who began the instruction of the disciples, gathered together once more at Pentecost, and preped them for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The swift spread of Christianity in the first generation could not have been achieved without an active apostolate of many women and men. They all had memories to contribute to the reconstruction of Jesus' life and message, represented by the four canonical Gospels. Other memories and ideas were embedded in the elusive traditions of the Apocryphal We cannot know in any detail what they preached and what they sought to make of the new kingdom, but we do know that Christian women and men have never stopped experimenting with the possibilities inherent in the gospel message.

We have only fugitive visions of the fates of a few of the disciples after Pentecost. Collections of apocryphal and Gnostic writings from the second and third centuries may not yield trustworthy historical data but they do illuminate the tradition that passed through many Christian communities. The life of Jesus' mother was enlarged and enhanced as befitted a cult that would swell in importance over the centuries. In the influential apocryphal gospel, the Protoevangelion, she was betrothed to Joseph as a pure virgin, and a midwife named Salome attested to Mary's continuing virginity through and after the birth of Jesus. Other traditions claimed that during her later life in Ephesus with the apostle John she established the first community of Christian virgins. Various

apocryphal gospels pay respect to her continuing role as a teacher of the apostles culminating at last in her death and assumption bodily into heaven.

After Pentecost, the original community seems to have split up. The Apocrypha give us glimpses of Salome, Berenice, and the several Marys (gradually conflated into a single figure) as teachers and apostles. In the mysterious Gospel of the Egyptians Jesus promises to save "Mary" by making her a man. Centuries later, as medieval mythology began to take shape, Mary and Martha resurfaced as apostles in Provence, figures of the contemplative life (Mary the hermit) and the active life (Martha the dragon slayer). These powerful mythic figures take us far from the women who swiftly crossed the gospel pages, but they serve to remind us that those women and many others had a life after Pentecost. They were present at the creation of Christianity and, though their testament has been drowned out by the thundering voice of Paul, it was their religion and they had a decisive share in its formation. They were the first in a continuing tradition of sisters who struggled not only to spread the news of the kingdom of heaven but also to translate the teachings of Jesus into new forms of life on earth.

Our meager knowledge about the organization and spread of Christianity in the century after Jesus' death is dominated by the Pauline tradition recorded in the Book of Acts and his Epistles. The work of other apostles and the internal lives of their communities, each seeking to define the Christian life, went unrecorded. The first community in Jerusalem, fleetingly glimpsed in the Book of Acts, attempted to maintain the total egalitarianism of the apostolic life by requiring all members to give up their property. This characteristic may have been unique, resulting from the tie to the temple, or it could have been intended as a model for the mission churches. There is, however, no indication that it was imitated there. Nor is it clear that this Christian communism served to make women equal with men. It may simply have deprived them of the balancing advantage of wealth in the gender equation.

Luke the Evangelist, the probable author of Acts, makes only a passing reference to the women in that community, whom he simply calls "the widows." If Luke was speaking of some or all of the women from Galilee, he may have been using a courtesy title for women living without husbands. In the early days of the Jerusalem community, an altercation arose because the "Hellenists" believed that "their widows were neglected in the daily distribution by the Hebrews." It is not clear why widows should have been singled out like this in a community that boasted of sharing everything. The widows in Acts were not necessarily poor or in need of charity. The community, in fact, may have been financially dependent on them. But it is also possible that once their money had gone into a common purse, the leaders felt that they had better uses for it than the care of "dependent" women. They could have been resisting the recruitment of additional women, hoping to restrict the group to the original followers of Jesus, who would not be replaced as they died out. Already the outlines of a male priesthood were appearing with the inevitable result of limiting the usefulness of women. Paul himself, in defending his right to support from the community, spoke critically of those apostles who expected charitable Christians to support wives accompanying them in their travels.

The quarrel patched over, the group strove to establish a community at least theoretically free of distinctions of wealth, social status, race, and gender, as echoed in the famous formula, "In Christ there is neither bond nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female." Possibly part of the original baptismal liturgy, the same attitude appears in other early Christian works like the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, where Jesus promises entry into the kingdom of heaven when opposites are resolved and male and female are one. A letter attributed to Clement of Rome, Peter's companion and successor (who died about 100), explains that the saying means only that a brother and sister in Christ should not think of each other as sex objects. At the least it defines a minimal syneisactism, the discipleship of equals where all the baptized throw off their divisive identities in favor of new unity and equality. Women prayed and prophesied with men and shared with them in the communal feasts that bound the community together.

The widows may have acted as a particular unit or subdivision within the group, possibly even directed by Jesus' mother and the women who had been with her at Jesus' death. Peter came to be credited with the institution of three orders of widows. Two devoted themselves to prayer for the rest of the faithful and the transmission of revelations arising from their contemplations. The third group attended sick women and looked into the needs of the poor and sick of every sort, securing assistance from the presbyters and deacons in charge of communal goods. In many communities, women who were not necessarily widows were appointed as deaconesses for this work. Thus they gave institutional shape to the tale from Luke, which allotted to Mary and Martha of Bethany the twin roles that women made for themselves within the Christian community: the mystic and the minister. The development of these two roles will occupy the bulk of this history. Women maintained a firm hold on the contemplative life through the development of both reclusive and communal (monastic) lifestyles. The feminine apostolate to the poor and the sick has had a more difficult history because of the reluctance of society to recognize the public roles it allotted to women, but it has been maintained firmly as one of the glories of the Catholic sisterhood.

Jesus' disciples may only have intended the radical communal spirit of the Jerusalem church to last for a short period until they saw him again. As the first generation died away and Jesus did not reappear, Christians began to resettle into the world. Epistles attributed to Peter and interpolations into the Pauline corpus reflect an early attempt to reassert a household code formed on more traditional social values. Though it survived and flourished, the "order" of widows was soon subject to restriction in the more conservative atmosphere. Paul (or whoever wrote I Timothy in his name) attempted to limit the number of "true widows" who had a claim on the community's support. They had to be sixty years old or more, an age that put them beyond the strictures of the Augustan marriage laws. They had presumably fulfilled their obligations to their children and could cut their other ties, take vows of chastity, and devote themselves to prayer and good works. The Jerusalem community did not become the model for the churches of the diaspora and fell into deep obscurity after the Jewish war at the end of the first century. The widows, however, survived and their counterparts soon became a fixture in every Christian community.

Nor was experimentation at an end. Paul's voice, despite its volume, did not have the authority in the first century that it later acquired. Christianity was still being made by its believers. In Jerusalem, members of the original community apparently added their commemorative common meal and perhaps other liturgies to their worship at the temple. In time, Christians seem to have enjoyed choices between some sort of temple worship and home ceremonies suited to local conditions. The lack of established structure may have had special appeal for the women among the gentiles who had already partially broken through gender barriers by heading households and running businesses. Lydia, a dealer in purple dye, was successful enough to support a household that formed the core of the church in Philippi, apparently without a husband present. Perhaps she was one of the freedwomen who, in the early Roman Empire, could amass fortunes and undertake business ventures of their own. Wherever Paul went, he converted numbers of leading women and their populous households, which formed a church in themselves and a nucleus for a larger community. Paul's letters never fail to include greetings to women acting as deacons, apostles, or simply "true yokemates" in the field of the faith. There was also Tabitha, a seamstress in Joppa whose disciples appealed to Peter to raise her from the dead because they could not bear her loss.

House churches--communities of Christians in a single household providing a center of worship, study, and hospitality for wandering preachers--flourished until well into the third century, even in Rome. It was an obvious and convenient way to organize a loose network of Christian congregations springing up around the eastern Mediterranean and even to Rome. As late as the fourth century, Jerome could refer to Marcella's *domestica ecclesia*, though probably as a complimentary reference to an outdated practice. The form suited a widely dispersed and insecure missionary church perfectly. It remained practicable in later centuries when Christians were always under threat of a local persecution or where they were neither numerous enough nor wealthy enough to erect public temples.

We know little about what went on in those churches. Certainly, hospitality for wandering preachers figured importantly in their religious life. As they entertained Paul and his friends so must they have entertained many others, women as well as men, who went abroad to preach the word. By the late second century, nervous priests were warning against the scandal of small sects grouped around wandering preachers behind closed doors. The syneisactic unions of women and men, of charismatic preachers and their supporters, excited the worst fears of prescriptive writers. The foundresses probably preached such idiosyncratic versions of the gospel message as still survive among the Gnostic and apocryphal Gospels that grew up in the second and third centuries. Their liturgy would probably have involved some reenactment of central scenes. Jesus had specifically singled out Mary of Bethany's anointment of his feet for commemoration. The common meal, modeled in some manner after the Last Supper, was always a part of Christian worship and well suited to a house church, though it must have lacked the sacramental qualities that eventually came to require a priest.

The house churches were by nature syneisactic. Paul addressed a few husband-and-wife teams but most women leaders seem to have headed their communities alone. We cannot

necessarily conclude that they were unmarried. Women and men often devoted themselves to different religious cults; and Christianity, with its demand for exclusivity, must have appealed far less to men with public lives involving the official worship of the emperor than to their wives. Roman women were often members and patrons of clubs, generally family associations, which strengthened the informal associations among kindred and members of the same households. Such associations, through cultic functions, linked members of various social strata. Paul maintained hopefully that the unbelieving husband might be sanctified by the believing wife.

His communities were ready to think even more radically. Paul's famous Letter to the Corinthians casts an oblique light on the passionate discussions of new social relationships between women, men, women and men, slaves and masters, parents and children. In response to Chloe's inquiries, Paul cautiously suggested that married people might periodically abstain from sexual relations, by mutual consent if that did not tempt either party to look elsewhere for satisfaction. These first Christians, like their apostle, were readily persuaded that the time for marriage and giving in marriage was past, that women would soon come to curse the fate that gave them children in that terrible time.

The appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none ... for the form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon to you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

For unmarried people he was willing to consider permanent celibacy, while stressing that he had no direct command from the Lord. He suggested that widowed women might be happier if they remained unmarried. His caution and reluctance to encourage too radical a rejection of the old boundaries comes through clearly in his ambiguous endorsement of continence for men: "if anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed and his passions are strong and it has to be, let him do as he wishes; let them marry, it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So that he who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better."

Some scholars have interpreted this passage to mean that there were people in Corinth practicing marriage without sexual relationships or living together unmarried in chaste restraint. Certainly, the women and men who formed one of the first Christian congregations known to us outside the Gospels were engaged in a radical debate concerning the structure of their most intimate personal relationships. Some apparently attempted to practice a form of free love, others to keep themselves from marriage altogether, and still others to form a spiritual union free of physical expression. Paul condemned the first group and cautioned the rest that the ordinary sexual unions of

married people were acceptable if carried on with mutual respect and affection. For the heroic few he endorsed but did not initiate the ideal of a syneisactic relationship unfettered by conjugal concerns.

Christianity was widely viewed as a religion of women and slaves, a denigrating caricature but one it shared with the imperial government itself. The Christian "household" was more radical than Caesar's not only because it was based on syneisactism but also because the chaste partnership of women and men often joined upper-class women and lower-class or slave men in religion. It required a rejection of sexuality in the sense that it was not compatible with either the exclusivity or the hierarchy that characterized sexual relationships. At the end of the century, the emperor Domitian tried persecution to stem a tide that swept women, children, and slaves against the ancestral altar of the paterfamilias. Christian legend maintains that Domitian's nightmare was realized in the syneisactic union of one of his own relatives, Domitilla, with a pair of male slaves who had converted her to Christianity. Further, the same virgin convinced her betrothed not to consummate their marriage but to join her and the slaves in death rather than to sacrifice virginity.

Women practiced Christianity without need of the clerical hierarchy when the occasion demanded it. A letter attributed to Clement of Rome describes common prayers and scripture readings, rites of exorcism women gave one another. Despite his uneasiness, he was willing to leave them to pursue a full religious life with all the trappings of prophecy, common prayer, teaching, charity, and even ritual if they lacked male partners. Indeed, in writing to male virgins who worked as itinerant preachers, the author advised that, rather than expose themselves to temptation, they should leave women without clerical guidance if there were no men in the community already. Ironically, his caution may well have fostered the spread of female-headed communities.

In sum, the women of the house churches may have been married: some, no doubt, were clerical wives or widows consecrated to chastity. Some of them could have been virgins who had never subjected themselves to husbands and escaped the attention of the law, or penitents, or women estranged from their husbands or abandoned by them. We can never know. But among these congregations composed of widows and their female relatives, friends, dependents, and slaves, we should seek the first communities of celibate women in Christendom.

Sexual renunciation was the key to the new time, with women acting as a metaphor for all the humble and meek destined to inherit the earth. The unblemished integrity of the Christian virgin became emblematic for the victories of martyrs. Although clerical writers attributed the victories of virgin martyrs over their pain and suffering to the glory of God rather than to female strength, they recognized that the virgins' sacrifice won them a special place among the teachers of the new religion. Virgins, whose refusal to marry put them immediately outside the law, gained freedom to preach and minister to their communities, to lead the apostolic life. The four prophetic daughters of Philip the Deacon were remembered for centuries as consecrated virgins whose tombs were honored in Asia Minor.

A network of prophets, both female and male, occupied a special place outside the developing hierarchy, preaching and forming ties among scattered communities. They had their bases in the house churches where they received shelter and entry into the local community. Itinerant preachers living for brief periods of time in the houses of the faithful were complemented by settled persons upon whom the Spirit chose to alight, like the widows of the first two orders. The women, of course, were not included in the developing clergy, which viewed the uncontrolled prophetic mission with deep misgiving. Their claim to continuing revelation from the Holy Spirit was profoundly incompatible with the clerical effort to establish a stable doctrine based on immutable scripture. The idea of virginity as a source of transcendent power providing access to a higher plane of existence derived from these extrascriptural revelations.

How could an androgynous order of charismatic virgins be absorbed into a church where a married clergy exercised authority over a married laity? A syneisactic order would not be vulnerable, as women alone were vulnerable, to charges of hysteria and foolishness. The presence of women among a moral elite clearly threatened much more than the occasional sexual lapse. Virginity broke the continuum of sexuality, denying the universal definition of women as imperfect men that rendered a balanced and complementary relationship with men ludicrous. Ancient Greek traditions had always attributed prophetic power to virgins, and the new Christian communities took advantage of the association to develop a theology based on spiritual illumination. Second- and third-century pagan philosophers tended to separate mind from body, freeing the soul from its chains of flesh. Cynic and Stoic philosophers already recognized that the female mind detached from its bodily restrictions might become equal to the male. Philo Judaeus noted that the empress Livia had become "male in her power of reason." Clement of Alexandria argued that women were female only in their sexual and procreative functions but not in their broader humanity.

Although they substituted the excellence of virtue for the rigors of philosophical training as authority for their ideas, virgins devoted themselves to the study of various devotional books. These would have included the scriptures and probably apocryphal Gospels as well whose authors, women or men, were preaching to the celibate communities. The Apocrypha originated in the second and third centuries and are now generally recognized as didactic stories written, like many novels in modern times, as vehicles for theological ideas. The apocryphal Gospels are the first works to promote the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary and the idea of her immaculate conception. Belief in the assumption of Mary whole and incorrupt into heaven also inspired to an extensive literature on her active apostolate after the death of her son. Mary's obedience to God's will in bearing Jesus, her embrace of the choice offered by the angel, positions her as the anti-Eve, the virgin antidote to the curse suffered by the original disobedient mother. It also poses her as an alternative to the Gnostic Sophia, the divine woman brought low by her entanglement in procreative desires. This theology of Mary provides the basis for a more developed doctrine of virginity rooted in scriptural or quasi-scriptural traditions.

Paul may have tendered his grudging and cautious approval for some unmarried women to remain as they were only in view of "the impending distress," but his name was

destined to become indissolubly linked to the virginity movement. The apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla endowed him with a devotion to virginity not apparent in his canonical writings, though the same romance relates Paul's dismay when asked to countenance Thecla as an apostle. This female rebel, a noble girl supposedly converted by Paul's eloquence to Christianity and the virgin life together, became the model and patron of the new woman. Whether or not the story is in any respect true, there is no question that by the early second century it was being accepted as a model for women determined to embrace the virgin life. Once Paul rejected her fellowship in his apostolate, Thecla cut her hair and dressed like a man. Threatened with martyrdom, she baptized herself in a puddle of water, challenging the newly developing priestly monopoly over the sacraments. Rescued by a miracle, she broadened her teaching mission and traveled as a prophet for many years before exchanging the active life for the contemplative life of a hermit.

The Acts of Paul, Peter, Thomas, Andrew, and John all display a commitment to the superiority of sexual purity over the most pious marriage. Indeed, a passage from the Acts of John (whom tradition associated with the bridegroom at Cana who was supposed to have converted with his wife on seeing the miraculous transformation of the water into wine) contains a diatribe against marriage in condemnation of the flesh and all its works. Similarly, in the Acts of Paul, the apostle preaches a series of thirteen beatitudes of chastity rooted in the brief remarks that Paul actually made in the Letter to the Corinthians. He concludes that there is no salvation without chastity.

The Acts of John, Peter, Paul, Andrew, Thomas, and Xantippe center on female characters and female interests. Most particularly they portray the pursuit of sexual purity, either in the preservation of virginity or the renunciation of conjugal union, as a heroic undertaking, a quest taken up by inspired women. They focus on chastity as the agent of rebellion against the tyranny of husbands and a path of liberation from the "villainous" plots of parents to drive their daughters into marriage. The refusal to bear children is interpreted as obedience to the gospel command to abandon all to follow Jesus--a virtue rather than a misfortune or even a vice. Not infrequently, the stories feature happy endings for the heroines and violent punishments for their would-be seducers. In brief, the apocryphal Gospels, though generally orthodox in theology, were radical in their social teachings. The message that women, for the sake of chastity, should deny themselves children, defy their parents, and even forsake their husbands struck a potentially mortal blow to the ancient order.

This was a world in which the state reinforced the power of parents or guardians to put women into marriage beds. Inevitably, sexuality itself became revolting to many women. If fastidious men could be disgusted by the physical realities of sex and childbirth, how could women not recoil from a procreative process over which they had no control? The obedience expected of women included their willing participation in the dissolute lives pursued by their husbands, as one Roman woman threatened with martyrdom for refusing that demand knew. What murderous nightmares must have haunted women forced into unwanted fidelity on the one hand and unwilling vice on the other?

Gnostic prophets spoke to this revulsion and fear, proclaiming the flesh itself evil. Their illuminating myth centered on the fall of the divine Sophia (Wisdom) from a higher plane because she had been seduced and raped into the toils of the flesh. The Gnostic message, never intended to be clear to the uninitiated, veered between revulsion for the seductive flesh of women and the hope of undoing Sophia's tragedy. Women were attracted to their sects partly because they offered an active role for the initiates of both genders and possibly because revulsion for the seductions of the flesh was even stronger among them than among the misogynistic preachers who taught that woman was a creation of the devil along with the lower half of man. The extreme asectic sect called Encratites, who welcomed women as leaders, actively worked to end the world of the flesh by refusing to procreate. Their women preachers probably saw men as the principal instrument of flesh, just as men saw women. In any case, they all considered the virgin life a path to a higher stage of existence, an overwhelming justification for women's rejection of marriage and motherhood. They argued that total purity would disentangle trapped souls, reuniting them with the light. Other Gnostics argued that the Resurrection would abolish the procreative works of women or that true marriages would join only the souls of the partners, every sexual act being an act of adultery.

In the middle of the second century, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, testified that groups of women from every walk of life were leaving their homes, parents, and husbands--too literally interpreting the gospel commands. Sometimes they went with prophets like Marcus, who was seducing women from the bishop's own congregation. Irenaeus accused him of sexual misconduct ranging even to the use of love potions on women who resisted his blandishments. He said that other Gnostics persuaded women to leave their husbands by promising that they would live as brother and sister while spreading the gospel. Irenaeus, naturally, did not believe that such a promise would be kept, and there is no reason why a modern reader should not be equally skeptical of the intentions of self-appointed cult leaders toward their female companions. Clearly, however, the real risk that bothered the good bishop was not the risk that women ran of sexual exploitation but the risk to the reputation of men like himself if non-Christians should confuse them with men like Marcus. Beyond that, he expressed the fear of a community without any gender barriers.

As the second century ended, the clergy made a concerted attack on the prophets, especially where they produced revelations that altered established doctrine. Preachers like Montanus, who relied on the ongoing revelatory action of the Holy Spirit, were condemned as heretics. Syneisactism, made particularly noticeable by the propensity of male and female prophets to travel together and to regard one another as equals in the prophetic life, became a tentative indicator of heresy. Nevertheless, women and their chaste male partners were making a place for themselves in Christian churches everywhere. In the Syrian church, the syneisactism of the original community had been maintained by requiring both women and men to join a vow of sexual purity to their catechismal promises. Tertullian (ca. 200) often noted the numbers of celibate women in the African church and advised men who wished to enter into living arrangements with virgins to choose from among those who were aged and ugly. Origen in Alexandria is said to have castrated himself so as to include women among his philosophy students

without the reproach of seducing them. Having transcended the limitations of gender, such women could join men in a public life forbidden to ordinary married women.

Sexual renunciation was not necessarily bound to the repertory of self-inflicted torments later associated with asceticism. In fact, the virginity movement was primarily an urban women's phenomenon. Its practitioners did not renounce their property or live in solitary meditation. Instead a network of women lived in their own homes, possibly forming smallhouse churches with virgin slaves or other dependents. They scandalized clergymen like Cyprian of Carthage and Clement of Alexandria with their sociability. They went about the city in their litters on charitable and devotional rounds, stopping to chat in the marketplace and sometimes sharing a small picnic at some church where they were working. They met for prayer, discussion, and possibly common meals on special occasions. In such communities, some rule of life probably prevailed, with the older women training the younger in the theory and practice of virginity. By 200, a prescriptive literature was accumulating addressed to a defined group of women expected to preserve their virginity permanently. But no evidence suggests that they were recognized as an order in the sense that they took formal vows, lived in common, or sacrificed their private property. No one describes any special costume, though they were urged to veil themselves as was the custom among matrons.

It is likely that virgins even conducted formal discussions similar to the fictional encounter related by an early-fourth-century bishop, Methodius (d. 312), for the edification of a community of virgins in Lycia. The Symposium represents a synthesis of the various doctrines concerning virginity that would ultimately be incorporated into the orthodox canon. Ten virgins living in their own homes in a mythical city gather in the garden of Arete (virtue) to meet with the legendary Thecla and discourse in the manner of Plato's Symposium on the subject of virginity. Each woman gives a brief speech expanding on some area of the subject. Among other things, they demonstrate that the virginal life is the culmination of the new Christian age, superseding the old pagan family and its procreative purposes. The evening ends with a hymn in praise of virginity, expressing the women's anticipation of the glorious day when they will lead all humanity in procession to God's heavenly court, singing the new song that only they can sing and only God can hear.

Believing themselves to be so exalted, virgins refused to be silent and submissive. They boasted of their own superiority to married people. They advertised their state by dressing in an eccentric manner, refusing traditional women's veils and sometimes actually adopting male clothes and hairstyles. They behaved as though they had the dignity of men. Paul sarcastically suggested that if women did not wish to veil themselves when praying and prophesying in church, they might go all the way and shear their heads. By the end of second century, this was no longer a joke. Tertullian complained that virgins refused the widows' veil and tried to argue that Thecla was not a viable model for other women. The virgins answered that Paul's command to women did not apply to virgins. Hardly able to contain his indignation, Tertullian asked whether this perverse logic would oblige male virgins to veil themselves because they were no longer men. He saw their

refusal to veil themselves as an effort to claim prerogatives of a sacerdotal nature associated with men alone.

Tertullian had good reason for wanting to anchor the spirit firmly in the body and therefore in physical sex differences. In Gnostic circles, hostility to procreativity had sometimes resulted in the idea that only men could be saved. This notion was countered, however, by the idea that deserving women would be reincarnated as men. In the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, Jesus refused Peter's demand that Mary leave them: "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Ideas about the relationship of body and spirit swirled through such circles, suggesting that the body was not stable but fluid, malleable to the will of the spirit. The ascetic ideal, rooted in the rigors of body building through fasting, spiritual exercise, and discipline began to produce limitless fantasies.

If women ceased to live and act as women, many believed, they could move along the sexual continuum and begin functioning as men. The role of women in prophecy reached its peak in the sect associated with Montanus, whose rigorous teachings and belief in ongoing revelation were ultimately condemned as heretical. Like so many of the Christians excluded from the developing orthodox church, he encouraged the equal participation of women on a syneisactic basis. The prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla, who claimed to be virgins (though their critics said they were runaway wives), pursued "manly" careers as wandering prophets for many years--not only manly but Christlike. Priscilla had a vision of Christ as a woman who endowed her with wisdom. Epiphanius of Cyprus defended the priesthood of women among the Montanists as an expression of the mystical union of male and female expressed in Galatians. Thus at the very moment when the clergy was within reach of a monopoly over church leadership, Tertullian feared that virgins might grasp at their sacramental roles. He fiercely castigated those women who followed the model of Thecla and claimed, by her example, the right to baptize.

"Clement of Rome" (or the author of the two letters attributed to him) may have feared more than scandal or sexual misconduct when he tried to prevent the union of male and female virgin prophets. Tertullian knew of a case where a virgin under twenty years of age had been admitted into the order of widows. He thought that monstrous. The whole shape of the developing church was at issue. At the end of the second century, Cyprian of Carthage knew of a prophetic woman in Cappadocia who claimed the power not only to baptize but also to celebrate the Eucharist. Women led gatherings of the Encratites, organizing fasts and feasts, meals of parched grains and repasts of radishes. Irenaeus of Lyons complained that a prophet named Marcus conducted services with a woman who joined him in some liturgy involving a consecrated chalice. Those consecrated women who became wandering prophets did not necessarily sink into poverty. The widows were a vulnerable middle ground. When they transferred their patronage to prophets, they inflicted heavy losses of prestige as well as wealth upon the clergy.

Tertullian himself established three ranks of virgins. To women who had maintained their physical purity from birth he added those who, like the Syrian converts, embraced "virginity" from the moment of their rebirth in baptism by renouncing sexual relations within marriage and those who turned away from remarriage when widowhood gave them a second chance. His was always a divided voice, torn between stiff traditionalism and the lure of Montanist rigor. Even while he condemned virgins who enrolled in the ranks of widows, he praised widows for "becoming virgins." He was increasingly drawn into the ascetic movement and was personally close to some of its female practitioners. He called them his "best beloved sisters" and "handmaids of the living God, my fellow servants and sisters." He did not completely scorn the idea that in some mystical manner virgins were indeed manly: "For you too, women as you are, have the self-same angelic nature promised as your reward, the self-same sex as men; the self-same advancement to the dignity of judging does the Lord promise you."

The intensity of their religious conviction, their prophetic illuminations, and their bold embrace of a new life far beyond the old social boundaries made the virgins conspicuous in the eyes of the Roman persecutors. In one case, we know that they deliberately singled out a young slave girl for special torment hoping to make an example of Christian cowardice. Eusebius wrote that as she hung on her cross, the martyr Blandina "put on Christ, the invincible athlete." Through a literal act of compassion, she became Christ or at least his avatar and blessed her companions, assuring their redemption as they suffered in turn. At the beginning of the third century, Perpetua, a young mother in prison awaiting her martyrdom, recorded her agonies as she systematically stripped herself of all that had made her a woman. Out of her own sense of loss and fear, she experienced transformation. On the night before her final ordeal she dreamed that she entered the arena to fight and was stripped. "And I became a man." Perpetua's virile career was doomed to extreme brevity, but her prison diary provided inspiration for hundreds of women to follow in her painful footsteps.

Virgin martyrs became emblematic of the Christian opposition to worldly power. But where men tended to see a symbol, women lived the harsh reality of suffering and humiliation. After a century of anarchy, punctuated for the Christians by sporadic outbreaks of persecution, the full power of the empire was restored in the final decades of the third century. The imperial program for reform aimed at restoration of the Roman bureaucracy, the Roman army, and the Roman family. Diocletian's laws tried to freeze everybody in their designated places and ordered them to provide children for their own replacement, reinforcing the ancient Augustan marriage laws. He revived and strengthened emperor worship as a state religion to cement this imposing fabric. After several years of toleration, he launched the Great Persecution.

Despite the tendency of ancient chroniclers to use numbers with abandon, it remains clear that the female victims of the Great Persecution were numerous. Although storytellers tend to choose the most attractive subjects--and virgins in peril always make an attractive subject--we cannot ignore the evidence that consecrated women were a favorite target. They were easily caught since their unmarried state could not be hidden and left them vulnerable to both frustrated suitors and jealous neighbors. Moreover, by example and

probably by preaching as well, they were spreading sedition against the foundations of the social system.

Christian tradition translated this last and most determined assault into a struggle between naked, helpless women and armed, vicious men. Smashed and mutilated women, like Agatha with her breasts sliced away and Lucy with her eyes torn out, formed the front line of Christ's army. Imperial decree condemned all women who refused marriage to be raped or sent to a brothel. At Antioch, Eusebius said that the bishop was martyred in company with forty-four priests, seven deacons, forty-two acolytes, fifty-two exorcists, and over a thousand widows. Some of these women were far advanced in age and persuaded their tormentors to spare them from rape out of respect for their own aged mothers. Magna, who skillfully avoided the consummation of her unwanted marriage, died among the two thousand virgin martyrs of Ancyra. Future virgins in a safer world enjoyed the legend of three clever martyrs called Agape, Irene, and Chiona, whose lustful jailor was deluded into raping the sooty pots and pans instead of his virgin captives. Another Christian virgin escaped from a brothel by changing clothes with a male sympathizer. When the trick was discovered, they were martyred together, purity intact.

The stories associated with martyrdom capitalized on the idea of bodily transformation. The dead were joined in legend by heroines whose escapes and rescues remained examples for generations. Soteris, an ancestress of Ambrose of Milan, mutilated herself to escape rape by her executioners. In Rome, a generation or so later, when a memorial to a martyr named Agnes was discovered, an author borrowing the illustrious name of Ambrose of Milan popularized her as a virgin who scorned the lustful advances of a Roman aristocrat for the sake of her purity. The thwarted lover went to Diocletian, who condemned her to a brothel. Happily, just when she was most helpless, her long hair miraculously hardened around her naked body encasing her in an impenetrable sheath. Thus, despite the brutal lust of her enemies, the lamb of God achieved her death still inviolate. Romans knew when they condemned Christian virgins to rape that sexual integrity was the key to the transformation of the suffering body into the redeemed soul.

But Christians understood virginity as a spiritual state that embraced the widows and married people converted to chastity. A woman who retained her purity of mind, even though she had been raped, could not be deprived of her virginity. When a judge threatened the virgin Theodora, martyred in 303, with this penalty, she answered: "I think that you do not understand this thing. God sees our hearts and considers only one thing, the will to remain chaste. If, then, you force me to submit to an outrage, I will have committed no voluntary fault but will have suffered violence.... God considers the will, He sees all our thoughts and penetrates them in advance. Therefore, if I am violated yet shall I remain pure."

These stories preserve an authentic atmosphere of terror and oppression. Ultimately, Rome struggled to retain its ancient customs and its ancient social system by ferociously attacking women of every age and condition. The triumphant church was always to honor its virgin martyrs, but the church that Constantine accommodated as part of a new Roman order did not preach the doctrine of "neither male nor female" any more loudly than it

opposed slavery. Virgins were indeed to have the place they had seized in the dirt and blood of the arena. But the ultimate lesson of the spirit's triumph over the body was to be turned inside out. Virginity of mind was to be construed as total innocence of the truth of a soiled and ugly world and therefore to be protected even more ruthlessly than its physical housing. The church of late antiquity prized its respectability and expected its virgins to act with decorum and humility quite unlike the boldness of the heroic days. But the lives and deaths of the virgin martyrs did not go unnoted. They left a living legacy to their sisters. For some, these are stories of terror and threat but for others, surely, they are stories of victory--stories of women young and old whose courage overcame the mightiest empire in the world.

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