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### Jerome on Virginity: An Analysis of St. Jerome's Position on Consecrated Virginity and Celibacy and their Relation to Marriage

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JEROME ON VIRGINITY: AN ANALYSIS OF ST. JEROME'S  
POSITION ON CONSECRATED VIRGINITY AND CELIBACY  
AND THEIR RELATION TO MARRIAGE

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by  
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Approved by Quentin F. Wesselshmidt

## JEROME ON VIRGINITY

On March 25, 1954, Pope Pius XII issued the encyclical, "Sacra Virginitas," in order to refute those, ". . . who, straying from the right path in this matter, so exalt marriage as to rank it ahead of virginity and thus depreciate chastity consecrated to God and clerical celibacy."<sup>1</sup> Concerning such people in modern times who would exalt marriage to the status of consecrated virginity Pope Pius declared that, ". . . apostolic duty demands that we now in a particular manner declare and uphold the Church's teaching on the sublime state of virginity, and so defend the catholic truth against these errors."<sup>2</sup>

So it is that in the present day we see evidence of a conflict that existed at the time of Saint Jerome. In fact, the roots of the modern Roman Catholic position on virginity and celibacy can to some extent be traced to the life and work of Jerome, for although Jerome is today remembered primarily for his scholarship and exegesis as the author of the Vulgate, he was also a vocal and very influential champion of the Christian ascetic life, of which an essential element was celibacy.

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<sup>1</sup>Pope Pius XII, "Sacra Virginitas," The Papal Encyclicals, 4 (McGrath Publishing Company, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

How and why Jerome came to be a champion of this cause is a story in itself, and his own accounts of his personal experience are often emotional and dramatic. Of greater significance, however, is the theological legacy to which Jerome contributed by his strong emphasis on Christian celibacy, particularly consecrated virginity. In this paper I will investigate Jerome's position on Christian celibacy and virginity, including the influences that contributed to his position, in order to identify the theological implications that were a part of his position, and to discuss briefly the exegesis with which he supported his position.

#### Jerome's Life and Background

Before embarking on a detailed discussion of Jerome's position, it would be helpful to review his background and the factors in his life that may have influenced his view on virginity. Jerome was born in Stridon of Dalmatia, on the eastern shore of the Adriatic, probably in the year 331.<sup>3</sup> He was raised an orthodox Christian in a rather well-to-do family, and according to common practice at the time, was not baptized as an infant. Because of his family's affluence, Jerome was able to receive a high quality education. This probably began with a primary school in Stridon, and it may be that his quick wit and astonishingly retentive memory at an

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<sup>3</sup>There is some debate as to the actual date of Jerome's birth. For a more complete discussion see J. N. D. Kelly, Jerome, (Harper & Row: New York, 1975), pp.337-339.

early age prompted his father to see that he learned from the best teachers in Rome.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the reason, Jerome set off at an early age, along with his boyhood friend Bonosus, to learn rhetoric and law from the masters in Rome. This was apparently a very stimulating time in Jerome's life. He took to his studies with tremendous aptitude, and many of his later writings reveal just how deeply his education at Rome was to influence him. An example would be the tremendous struggle that Jerome underwent to give up his reading of classical pagan authors.<sup>5</sup> Among his teachers in Rome was the famed Aelius Donatus, "the most celebrated Schoolmaster of his time,"<sup>6</sup> and during his stay there it is likely that Jerome was able to hear from other prominent masters as well.

Jerome's education in Rome also saw the development of several close friendships which would have a strong influence on him in the future. The first was Bonosus, his boyhood friend from Stridon; the second was Turranius Rufinus, with whom he would have a passionate and turbulent relationship through the years; the third was Heliodorus, a lifelong friend and influence; the fourth was Pammachius, a son of one of the noblest families in Rome. Each of these schoolmates would

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p.9.

<sup>5</sup>Philip Schaff, ed., Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 14 vols. (New York: Charles Scribners, 1903), Second Series, 6:35 (Letter 22, 30). Hereafter abbreviated as NPNE.

<sup>6</sup>Kelly, p.10.

have an impact on Jerome's future life, and all of them would become strong advocates of asceticism.

During his education in Rome, it would seem that Jerome was also taken with the Roman lifestyle and at some point lost his virginity. This was to be a heavy burden for him to bear in the future, not only in terms of the guilt that he felt over his sin, but also because of the temptations that such memories provided. The anguish of temptation that he suffered is vividly portrayed in an account of his stay as a monk in the Syrian desert:

How often, when I was living in the desert. . . did I fancy myself among the pleasures of Rome. . . although in my fear of hell I had consigned myself to this prison, where I had no companions but scorpions and wild beasts, I often found myself among bevvies of girls.<sup>7</sup>

Sometime either during or shortly after his education in Rome, Jerome and his friends seemed to go through something of a "Christian revival." Although Jerome doesn't speak of it much in his later writings, we do know that he became involved in the growing practice of venerating the martyrs in the catacombs<sup>8</sup> and that in Rome he "received the garb of Christ"<sup>9</sup> in baptism. It is interesting to note that Jerome did not take up the ascetic life at this point, although he almost certainly was acquainted with the idea.

After his time in Rome, Jerome's next move was to the

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<sup>7</sup>NPNF, Second Series, 6:25 (Letter 22, 7).

<sup>8</sup>Kelly, p.22.

<sup>9</sup>NPNF, Second Series, 6:18 (Letter 15, 1).

city of Trier, in Gaul, with his friend Bonosus. As Trier was "the effective capital of the West for much of the fourth century,"<sup>10</sup> it is likely that they were seeking a government appointment. The move to this city, however, would turn both of their lives in a radically different direction, because it was at Trier that Jerome and Bonosus became seriously interested in ascetic withdrawal. Apparently there was an active community of ascetics in Trier, possibly due to the influence of Athanasius,<sup>11</sup> which had a profound impact on Jerome and Bonosus. While Jerome doesn't give us much detail about the time he spent in Trier, we do know that he left a different person.

Upon his "conversion" to the ascetic discipline, Jerome returned to his home area, residing primarily at the city of Aquileia, and continued to be a vigorous proponent of ascetic withdrawal. His zeal was confirmed by a circle of friends in Aquileia who shared his high opinion of the ascetic life. These friends included his schoolmates Bonosus, Rufinus, and Heliodorus, and also a priest named Chromatius whose home was already at this time an informal monastery. Chromatius would later become bishop and would always maintain ties with Jerome.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Kelly, p.27.

<sup>11</sup>Athanasius, a strong ascetic himself, had been exiled to the city of Trier in the year 336. Kelly, p.29.

<sup>12</sup>Kelly, p.32.

Already in this early stage of his career, celibacy and consecrated virginity seem to have played a significant role in the ascetic theology of Jerome, and the extent to which it had affected him can be seen in the conflict that soon arose between Jerome and his own family. Within three years of his return to Aquileia, Jerome became involved in a conflict so severe as to send him from his home region. Characteristically, Jerome doesn't give the precise details of this conflict but only alludes to it in such terms as "the unexpected whirlwind."<sup>13</sup> Most scholars<sup>14</sup>, however, have adduced with reasonable certainty that the conflict was at least connected to the strong influence that he began to exert on his younger brother and sister to embrace a life of virginity.<sup>15</sup>

In the year 372, probably as a result of the conflict in which he had become embroiled, Jerome decided to at last make good on his desire to become an ascetic and set off for the East. His plan was to complete a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and then to settle there as a monk. He made it as far as Antioch before he became ill, and during his illness he was hosted by a rich friend named Evagrius. During his stay at Antioch, Jerome received word that his friend Bonosus had

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<sup>13</sup>NPNE, Second Series, 6:5 (Letter 3,3).

<sup>14</sup>Cavallera, Kelly, et. al.

<sup>15</sup>It is likely that there was also conflict in other circles at Aquileia, as Kelly discusses, but here I am simply pointing out his strong convictions regarding celibacy.



taken up a hermitic lifestyle on an island in the Adriatic. This, combined with rumors that his friend Rufinus was living with the monks in Nitria of Egypt, prompted Jerome all the more urgently to take up the ascetic life without delay. Foregoing his trip to Jerusalem, he decided to become a monk in the Syrian desert, not far from Antioch.

His stay in the desert of Syria lasted for about three years, and it is interesting to note the effect that it had on his life. On the one hand, the isolated life seemed very hard on Jerome. Never one to be alone, Jerome struggled with the loneliness and wrote often to friends and acquaintances. He also suffered severe temptations, according to his own accounts, and was plagued with chronic ill health. In addition to all of this, Jerome soon became involved in conflict with other hermits of the region about a current Christological controversy.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, his gruelling experiences served only to deepen his conviction regarding the ascetic life.

It should be noted that Jerome seemed to exhibit a genuine struggle in taking up the ascetic lifestyle. Not only did he make numerous attempts at the ascetic life without complete success, but he also vividly recounts many struggles with sin and terrors of conscience. The prominence of chastity in the life of an ascetic can also be seen in his

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<sup>16</sup>The controversy involved the "three hypostases" description of the trinity. For a more complete discussion of Jerome's involvement, see Kelly, pp. 52-56.

experiences. The very fact that he struggled so much with his desires reveals the underlying importance of the quality of chastity, both mental and physical, in a monk.

After conflict with the other monks drove Jerome from his home in the desert, he returned to Antioch, where he allowed himself to be ordained by bishop Paulinus on the condition that he be free to pursue the ascetic life. Shortly thereafter he moved to Constantinople and was probably there during the second ecumenical council of 381. Following his time in Constantinople, Jerome was summoned to Rome by Pope Damasus to be a personal assistant. His stay in Rome lasted from 382 to 385, and it was during this period that he became well known as a champion of celibacy and consecrated virginity.

There were several factors which contributed to Jerome's prominence and activity in Rome regarding the doctrine of celibacy. The first factor was that Pope Damasus himself was an avid supporter of virginity and the ascetic lifestyle in general. It was Pope Damasus who cleaned, restored, and embellished the catacombs of Rome and encouraged the veneration of martyrs,<sup>17</sup> and Jerome took full advantage of the authority the Pope afforded him in pursuing his cause.

A second factor that inspired Jerome to take up the cause of virginity publicly was the support and encouragement of those in Rome who were of a similar mind on the matter. In

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid, pp.22-23.

particular, Jerome became closely acquainted and associated with several women of noble standing. Marcella was a widow who had already committed herself to live as an ascetic in her own home, and while Jerome's relationship with her primarily involved the study and exposition of scripture, he came to regard her as a friend and ally in the cause of celibacy. Perhaps more significant was Jerome's relationship with the widow Paula and her two daughters, Blaesilla and Eustochiam, to whom he became a teacher and mentor on the ways of the ascetic life. Jerome's frequent letters to these women form an important source for determining his doctrine on celibacy and virginity, particularly the famous Letter 22, which Jerome wrote to Eustochiam after she had consecrated her life to virginity.

A third factor that contributed to the activity of Jerome was a vocal and tenacious group in Rome who opposed the growing trend of asceticism and the exaltation of virginity. Although the size and influence of this group is difficult to determine, we do know that they were not afraid to express their opposition to Jerome when Blaesilla, one of Jerome's ascetic "students," died in a manner that was presumed to be a result of her ascetic denials. We also know that the opposition had at least one public spokesman at the time, a man named Helvidius, who was refuted by Jerome for his "impious" claim that virginity was not superior to marriage. This refutation was entitled The Perpetual Virginity of the

Blessed Mary.<sup>18</sup>

After the death of Pope Damasus, Jerome became involved in conflict and scandal once again. The details are unclear, but Jerome left Rome in the year 385 under a cloud of suspicion. Joining up with Paula and her daughter Eustochiam,<sup>19</sup> (Blaesilla was already dead by this time), Jerome set out at last to complete his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. After touring the Levant rather extensively, including a stay in Egypt, the party eventually settled in Bethlehem where they established a monastery/convent. Jerome remained in Bethlehem for the remainder of his life, and while he devoted himself mainly to the exegetical and translational scholarship for which he is remembered, he did publish a work dealing with virginity entitled, Against Jovinian, which will be discussed later.

In summary, we might conclude that the doctrine of celibacy/virginity played a significant role in Jerome's life. From his early "conversion" to monasticism in Trier, Jerome was a vocal and enthusiastic proponent of virginity in the life of a Christian, and celibacy where virginity was no longer possible. Later on in his life, as his knowledge and reputation grew, Jerome also became an apologist for this

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<sup>18</sup>This document will be discussed in greater detail elsewhere.

<sup>19</sup>While Jerome's detractors were not above insinuations about his relationship with these women, it is unlikely that their relationship was anything less than honorable.

practice, arguing for the superiority of virginity and celibacy in such works as, The Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary, and Against Jovinian.

Although we will move on to discuss more precisely the position that Jerome takes and the manner in which he defends it, it was my intention here to show that by the order of events in his life, Jerome had a very personal interest in the cause of virginity; and while Jerome was certainly his own person, there can be no doubt that connections with such individuals as Pope Damasus, Marcella of Rome, and bishop Chromatius, along with his strongly ascetic circle of friends, must have had an influence on him throughout his life.

#### Jerome's Key Works on behalf of Virginity

Now that we have taken a cursory look at the background of Jerome, we can move on to discuss the documents which most clearly reveal his position on virginity and the circumstances under which they were written. For the sake of clarity I have provided a basic timeline of Jerome's life on which I have plotted the documents that I will discuss. [See Appendix]

There are five documents in all; three of which are letters, and two of which are published works of a more polemical nature. The first document, chronologically, is the short work, The Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary, published in Rome in the year 383. This was written against a certain man named Helvidius, who had published a tract maintaining on the basis of Scriptural arguments that Mary was

a virgin only prior to the birth of Jesus and that she bore subsequent children. Jerome argued strongly in favor of Mary's perpetual virginity and refuted in detail each of Helvidius' arguments. Yet while the main substance of the document dealt with Mary's state after the birth of Christ, there is evidence to indicate that the real issue under debate was the relationship between virginity and marriage. Helvidius, it seems, had written in response to a certain Carterius who held that Mary's perpetual virginity was proof that virginity was a superior lifestyle to marriage,<sup>20</sup> a fact Jerome seems to be aware of in the closing paragraph of the document when he says, "You compelled me, Helvidius; for brightly as the gospel shines at the present day, you will have it that equal glory attaches to virginity and the married state."<sup>21</sup>

The second document to be considered is the famous Letter 22 to the virgin Eustochiam written in Rome not long after the treatise against Helvidius. Eustochiam was the daughter of Paula, the ascetic Roman matron, who had recently committed herself to a life of virginity. Jerome's letter was a fairly long document containing teachings and encouragement

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<sup>20</sup>David G. Hunter argues that Helvidius did not attack consecrated virginity in the Christian life, but only objected that one state be placed above the other in value. "Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth Century Rome," Journal of Early Christian Studies, Spring, 1993 1:1, pp. 48-49.

<sup>21</sup>NPNE, Second Series, 6:346 (The Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary, 24).

about the motivations, rules, and rewards of virginity.

Against Jovinian, the next work to be discussed, is perhaps the most significant of all Jerome's works on virginity. This treatise was written in 393, almost ten years after his previous works and long after he had settled in Bethlehem. As the name indicates, it was a refutation of a monk named Jovinian who had published a work in Rome basically stating, among other things, that all who were baptized were equal in the kingdom of God--virgins and married people alike. This caused scandal in Rome among many who were of the ascetic mind, and Jerome's friend Pammachius sent him a copy of Jovinian's work with a request that Jerome write a refutation. Jerome responded vigorously in this work with a systematic and detailed argument against Jovinian's position.<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting to note that for all the effort Jerome put into Against Jovinian, it seems to have been somewhat of a flop in Rome. While the majority of influential people disagreed with and eventually refuted Jovinian,<sup>23</sup> Jerome's document was generally seen in a negative light. In

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<sup>22</sup>An evaluation of this work depends on whom you talk to; J. N. D. Kelly referred to this work as, "singularly superficial and unconvincing" (p.186), while John Gavin Nolan states that, "It is without a doubt Jerome's most brilliant and carefully organized work." "Jerome and Jovinian," abstract of a dissertation, (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1956), (p.27). Whatever the case, it does seem that Jerome pulled out all the rhetorical stops in this refutation.

<sup>23</sup>Ambrose of Milan was a key figure in the refutation of Jovinian.

fact, the work caused such scandal that Pammachius, who had originally requested the document, made efforts to remove copies from circulation and to prevent further copies from being made. There is conjecture about the reason for this scandal. Some suggest that Jerome's personal attacks were seen to be beyond the reasonable limit, while others believe that Jerome may have gone too far in deprecating marriage. Either or both of these factors may have contributed to the scandal. Another alternative is presented by David Hunter, who argues persuasively that Against Jovinian may have been rejected for perceived Manichaean tendencies.<sup>24</sup>

Whatever the case may have been, Jerome was not ashamed of his document by any means, and wrote a brief defense of it in a letter to Pammachius.<sup>25</sup> This letter, the fourth of the five I mention, contains a strong affirmation of the position held in Against Jovinian, as well as further clarification on some of the more controversial points.

The final document of significance is a letter written to the woman Furia<sup>26</sup> in the year 394. Furia was a widow who had apparently considered remarriage, and in this letter Jerome encourages her to continue in her life of widowed celibacy.

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<sup>24</sup>David G. Hunter, "Resistance to the Virginal Ideal in Late Fourth Century Rome," Theological Studies, 48 (1987).

<sup>25</sup>NPNF, Second Series, 6:67-79 (Letter 48).

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 6:102-109 (Letter 54).



These, then, are the five documents to which I will refer in my analysis of Jerome's position on virginity and celibacy. I found it interesting that these five documents, taken as representative of Jerome's career on the issue, are divided into two major periods of activity. A quick glance at the timeline will reveal that the first two were written at roughly the same time in Rome, while the other three were written within two years of each other in Bethlehem.

There are two points to be inferred from this: First is the fact that Jerome's activity regarding virginity took place fairly early in his career--possibly corresponding with his youthful zeal and struggles. Second, and more important, is the implication of a strong connection to Rome--his first two works were written there, and two of the latter three were in direct response to a controversy in Rome. Perhaps this is due to the fact that most of the eastern world had already accepted the tenets of asceticism, leaving no need for argument on the matter in the East. Yet it is unavoidable to conclude that there was a vocal and persistent opposition to asceticism in Rome. While in the end asceticism would win the known Christian world, at least in Rome there seems to have been a bitter resistance to the idea with such leaders as Helvidius, Jovinian, Vigilantius, and allegedly even Pelagius.

#### Jerome's Position on Virginity

Celibacy and consecrated virginity were by no means new to the Christian experience at the time of Jerome. The

ascetic life in general had been practiced already for centuries--sometimes dictated by persecution for the sake of the gospel, and sometimes assumed for the sake of individual piety. The controversy that arose within Jerome's context, however, seems to revolve around the growing tendency to hold up the ascetic life, which was most meaningfully expressed in consecrated virginity or celibacy, as superior to that of "ordinary" Christians. This view seems to have been accepted fairly readily by the Eastern Church in general, but made its way into the Western Church gradually and with notable resistance. Much of this influence toward the ascetic viewpoint in the west took place during the lifetime of Jerome. From the exile of Athanasius to the west in the early 330s to the influence of Popes such as Damasus and Siricius<sup>27</sup> in the late fourth century, Jerome was both a witness and participant in the advance of this viewpoint.

In the presentation of his position on virginity and celibacy, Jerome basically argues on two levels. On the one hand he argues theologically that his position is in accord with Scripture and the rule of faith, yet he also presents pragmatic arguments for the superiority of virginity over marriage. Although these two levels of argument are mingled

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<sup>27</sup>The first Papal decretals enforcing continence on married clerics were issued during the episcopate of Pope Siricius (384-399). For an interesting discussion on the increasingly negative view toward married intercourse during this time period see Daniel Callam, "Clerical Continence in the Fourth Century: Three Papal Decretals," Theological Studies, 41 (1980).

in his writings, I will deal with them separately here.

Jerome's theological argument rests primarily on three assertions. The first is that Mary, along with Christ, is the basis, example, vindication, and first-fruits of consecrated Christian virginity. This position is explicitly stated on many occasions in his works in such statements as: "For me, virginity is consecrated in the persons of Mary and Christ,"<sup>28</sup> and, "Therefore. . . the virgin Christ and the virgin Mary have dedicated in themselves the first fruits of virginity for both sexes."<sup>29</sup>

This was an important assertion to maintain because it gave Jerome a Scriptural basis on which he could "trump" Scriptural encouragements toward marriage. If Mary was a perpetual virgin, then hers was the highest example to which Christians ought to strive. But it would be hard to argue that virginity gave any advantage over marriage if the one whom all nations would call "blessed" was herself married in the true sense of the term. This assertion, I believe, was at the heart of Jerome's vigorous response to Helvidius. If Mary's virgin example was lost, then the claim of virginity's superiority would be seriously discredited.

This assertion also led to the elevation of Mary to an almost immaculate status in Jerome's eyes, (A view that was not yet accepted by the catholic Church), which can be seen in

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<sup>28</sup>NPNF, Second Series, 6:29 (Letter 22, 18).

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 6:79 (Letter 48, 21).

his exhortation to, "set before you the blessed Mary, whose surpassing purity made her meet to be the mother of the Lord."<sup>30</sup> Jerome even goes so far as to posit, perhaps only on a rhetorical level, the virginity of Joseph himself: "I claim still more that Joseph himself on account of Mary was a virgin, so that from a virgin wedlock a virgin son was born."<sup>31</sup>

A second assertion that Jerome made in his theological argument was that a greater reward is given for virginity than for other lifestyles.<sup>32</sup> This was somewhat scandalous, as you might imagine, and for the most part Jerome seems to temper this assertion with statements that not "mere physical chastity" is enough to gain a reward, and also that marriage is not to be disparaged. Yet there is definitely a greater reward or "crown" for virginity in the context of his writings:

See to it that God say not some day of you: 'the virgin of Israel is fallen and there is none to raise her up.' I will say it boldly: though God can do all things, he cannot raise up a virgin once she has fallen. He may indeed relieve one who is defiled from the penalty of her sin, but he will not give her a crown.<sup>33</sup>

Further complementing this assertion is the idea that

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 6:39 (Letter 22, 38).

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, 6:344 (The Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary, 21).

<sup>32</sup>Jerome taught an explicit ranking of vocations on the basis of Matthew 13:8, which will be discussed in the next section.

<sup>33</sup>NPNF, Second Series, 6:24 (Letter 22, 5).

celibate widowhood brings a lesser reward than virginity, as is seen in Jerome's words to Eustochiam about Blaesilla, Eustochiam's sister who was widowed at a young age:

Your sister Blaesilla, before you in age but behind you in declining the vow of virginity, has become a widow but seven months after she has taken a husband. . . . She has lost at once the crown of virginity and the pleasures of wedlock. And, although, as a widow the second degree of chastity is hers, still you cannot imagine the continual crosses which she has to bear. . . having a lesser reward for her present continence.<sup>34</sup>

The corollary of Jerome's assertion that virginity receives a greater reward is that marriage and other vocations receive a lesser reward, with the implication that marriage is inferior. In response to this implication, Jerome occasionally seeks to assure his reader that marriage is not to be deprecated. He even recommends that one who, "pretends to have a vocation simply. . . to escape from service,"<sup>35</sup> ought to marry in accordance with the apostle Paul's advice. Yet while he praises marriage as an acceptable way of life for a Christian, his praise rests not on the married state, but on the children which are produced by marriage. Thus Jerome says:

I praise wedlock, I praise marriage, but it is because it gives me virgins. I gather the rose from the thorns, the gold from the earth, the pearl from the shell. . . (and) wedlock is the more honored when what is born of it is loved.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 6:27 (Letter 22, 15).

<sup>35</sup>Ibid, 6:35 (Letter 22, 29).

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, 6:30 (Letter 22, 20).

In his letter to Pammachius, which he wrote in defense of his position on virginity, he wrote:

We are no disciples of Marcion or Manichaeus, to detract from marriage. . . but while we allow marriage, we prefer the virginity which springs from it. Gold is more precious than silver, but is silver on that account the less silver? Is it an insult to a tree to prefer its apples to its leaves or roots?<sup>37</sup>

Yet even as marriage was allowed by Jerome, the goal of marriage was still to be celibate, as we see in the following advice he gives for a married man:

Do not seek your own welfare at the price of another's ruin. Keep your wife for a little, and do not try too hastily to overcome her reluctance. Wait till she follows your example. If you will only be patient, your wife will some day become your sister.<sup>38</sup>

The third assertion made by Jerome in his writings is that virginity is superior to marriage as the new covenant is superior to the old. Marriage was a result of sin, since, "in paradise, Eve was a virgin, and it was only after the coats of skin that she began her married life."<sup>39</sup>

While Jerome pushed his theological argument on the basis of these three assertions, he also presented arguments for celibacy on a more pragmatic level. This was particularly true in his letters when in an effort to reinforce his theological position he elucidated some of the "advantages" of virginity over marriage. This he did on a merely physical

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid, 6:67 (Letter 48, 2).

<sup>38</sup>Ibid, 6:69 (Letter 48, 6).

<sup>39</sup>Ibid, 6:29 (Letter 22, 19).

level, citing examples to the effect that marriage was a miserable and distasteful life, inferior to the freedom, simplicity, and joy of the celibate life. But he also argued that there was a spiritual advantage to celibacy. Celibates, according to Jerome, were at greater liberty with respect to prayer and personal piety since marital intercourse served as a barrier to prayer, the Lord's Supper, and general devotion. This is clearly articulated on many occasions with statements so bold as, ". . . for so long as the debt of marriage is paid, earnest prayer is neglected."<sup>40</sup> This point of view quite naturally affected Jerome's feelings toward marriage to the point that he asks:

What, I pray you, is the quality of that good thing which hinders prayer? Which does not allow the body of Christ to be received? . . . If we are to pray always, it follows that we must never be in the bondage of wedlock, for as often as I render my wife her due, I cannot pray.<sup>41</sup>

This is an interesting position for Jerome to take regarding marriage, and the idea that intercourse even within marriage was somehow "defiling" if not sinful seems to have been gaining influence during his lifetime.<sup>42</sup> The only Scriptural basis of Jerome's that I was able to locate for

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid, 6:345 (The Perpetual Virginitv of the Blessed Mary, 22).

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 6:351 (Against Jovinian, 1.7).

<sup>42</sup>For more details on the growth of this assumption in the fourth century see Daniel Callam, "Clerical Continence in the Fourth Century," Theological Studies, 41 (1980). According to Callam, this premise eventually gave rise to the enforcement of clerical continence.

this position was his interpretation of 1 Peter 3:7, where he takes the exhortation of Peter for husbands to "live with your wives according to knowledge. . . so that nothing will hinder your prayers" to mean that prayers are hindered by the performance of marital intercourse.<sup>43</sup>

Jerome's position on virginity and chastity, then, can be summarized in these three assertions: 1) that Mary is the basis of consecrated virginity, 2) that greater reward is given for virginity, and 3) that virginity was a part of the new covenant as marriage was a part of the old. In his presentation of these assertions he also gave arguments on a pragmatic level for the physical and spiritual advantages of virginity and celibacy, with the assumption that married intercourse was a hindrance to true piety. The degree to which this position can be supported by the Scriptures will be the subject of our further discussion.

#### Scriptural Arguments for Jerome's Position

Jerome's position on consecrated virginity and in particular its relationship to marriage was somewhat scandalous, and even within ascetic circles it was not always received without reservation. The main source of scandal was not so much his high view of virginity, which was generally accepted as a noble undertaking, but rather the theological statement that virgins were superior to others and the

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<sup>43</sup>NPNF, Second Series, 6:351 (Against Jovinian, 1.7).



perception (probably justifiable) that Jerome was an opponent of marriage. In response to charges that he was a "Manichaeian" who forbade marriage, therefore, Jerome made decided efforts to show a Scriptural foundation for his position. The work in which he is most explicit in presenting his Scriptural basis is Against Jovinian, to which I now turn for specific Biblical references.

The manner in which Jerome presents his *sedes doctrinae* in Against Jovinian is a combination of allegorical typology and grammatical exegesis, both of which are normed by the three presuppositions that we have discussed. (And I suspect also by the assumption that married intercourse was impure.) Thus he willingly acknowledges the numerous texts of the Old Testament that speak of and even command marriage and he also affirms that the New Testament allows a Christian to marry without sin. In his way of thinking, however, it does not necessarily follow that marriage is the desired way of life in the Scripture. Much in the same way that divorce was allowed "for the hardness of their hearts" in the law of Moses, Jerome strongly implied that marriage served as a safeguard against a greater evil and that Christians should strive all the more to rise above marriage now that the gospel was revealed in Christ.

In his response to Jovinian, Jerome gives a survey of both testaments, drawing out specific examples from the text. Beginning with the creation account, he reveals many "types"

that point toward the exaltation of virginity--such as the typology of the number two, which symbolizes marriage and is therefore the reason that the second day of creation was not called "good."<sup>44</sup> (We have already mentioned his contention that Eve was a virgin before the fall, and only after sin entered into marriage.)

Moving on to the patriarchs, Jerome concludes that circumcision was a type that pointed toward the "putting off of marriage" in the New Testament fulfillment. Thus he comments on Paul's exposition of circumcision as follows:

We must conclude, therefore, that a higher meaning be given to circumcision and uncircumcision. 'Was anyone called being circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised.' If, he says, at the time you were called and became a believer in Christ, if, I say, you were called being circumcised from a wife, that is unmarried, do not marry a wife, that is do not become uncircumcised, lest you lay upon the freedom of circumcision and chastity the burden of marriage.<sup>45</sup>

Jerome also saw a type in the call of Moses:

Who when he saw a great vision and heard an angel of the Lord speaking in the bush, could not by any means approach him without first loosing the latchet of his shoe, that is, putting off the bond of marriage.<sup>46</sup>

Likewise also Joshua:

. . . went forth, and was met by the Prince of the host, sword in hand; that is, either to show that he was ready to fight for the circumcised people, or to sever the tie of marriage.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid, 6:360 (Against Jovinian, 1.16).

<sup>45</sup>Ibid, 6:354 (Against Jovinian, 1.11).

<sup>46</sup>Ibid, 6:361 (Against Jovinian, 1.20).

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, 6:362 (Against Jovinian, 1.21).

Another widely used source text for Jerome in the Old Testament was the Song of Solomon, which he allegorizes to be a passionate call to consecrated virginity. Thus he upbraids Jovinian:

I pass to the Song of Songs, and whereas our opponent thinks it makes altogether for marriage, I shall show that it contains the mysteries of virginity.<sup>48</sup>

The key for Jerome's understanding of this text is not in the literal understanding, but in the mystical interpretation that must be applied. This mystical interpretation consists of the allegory of small portions of the text, often phrases or images. Thus when the text says:

"Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my bride, thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck," What he says is something like this--I do not reject marriage: you have a second eye, the left, which I have given you on account of the weakness of those who cannot see the right. But I am pleased with the right eye of virginity, and if it be blinded, the whole body is in darkness. And that we might not think he had in view a carnal love and bodily marriage, he at once excludes this meaning by saying, "thou hast ravished my heart, my bride, my sister." The name sister excludes all suspicion of unhallowed love.<sup>49</sup>

Further on he continues:

Then follows: "A garden shut up is my sister, my bride: a garden shut up, a fountain sealed." That which is shut up and sealed reminds us of the mother of our Lord who was a mother and a virgin.<sup>50</sup>

After citing several such examples of interpretation, Jerome concludes by stating:

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid, 6:368 (Against Jovinian, 1.30).

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, 6:369 (Against Jovinian, 1.30).

<sup>50</sup>Ibid, 6:370 (Against Jovinian, 1.31).

This is not the time for me like a commentator to explain all the mysteries of virginity from the Song of Songs; I have no doubt that the fastidious reader will turn up his nose at what has already been said.<sup>51</sup>

The texts that Jerome treats in the New Testament might be divided into two categories: texts to which he appeals for support, and texts with which he is accused. Into the former category would fall Matthew 13:8, the parable of the good soil that produced, "an hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown," which Jerome repeatedly allegorizes to represent the states of virginity, celibacy, and marriage, respectively. This text is also his chief proof for the assertion that Christians receive differing rewards according to their vocation.<sup>52</sup> He also cites the account of the "144,000. . . not defiled with women. . . the firstfruits of God" of Revelation 14 to justify this interpretation:

If virgins are the firstfruits unto God, then widows and wives who live in continence must come after the first fruits. . . we place widows, then, and wives in the second place and the third, and for this we are charged. . . with condemning marriage altogether.<sup>53</sup>

The texts against which Jerome answered the accusations of his opponent were chiefly two: the text of First Timothy that states the qualifications of a bishop, and Paul's discussion of marriage in First Corinthians 7. With regard to First Timothy, the troublesome point was the statement that a

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid, 6:370 (Against Jovinian, 1.31).

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 6:67 (Letter 48, 2).

<sup>53</sup>Ibid, 6:71 (Letter 48, 10).

bishop must be, "the husband of one wife," which implied that bishops were at least allowed to marry. Jerome responded to this in a twofold manner. Firstly, he protested the translation of the Greek word *σωφρονα*, refusing to adopt, "the faulty reading of the Latin text's *sobrietas*, but *castitas*."<sup>54</sup> Secondly, he argued that "husband of one wife" referred to the time prior to a bishop's ascendance, not while he actually served.<sup>55</sup> Thus a bishop was allowed to marry and raise his children, but could not continue marital intercourse as a bishop.

Jerome's treatment of 1 Corinthians 7 is also rather interesting. In response to Paul's statements that it is "better to marry than to burn," and that if a virgin should marry "she has not sinned,"<sup>56</sup> Jerome resorts to the implication behind Paul's language. If Paul says that it is "better" to marry, that doesn't mean that marriage is the "best." Thus he interprets Paul to mean that marriage is not an advisable or noble undertaking, but an alternative to sin, since "it is one thing to avoid sin, and another to do

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid, 6:366-367 (Against Jovinian, 1.27).

<sup>55</sup>Ibid, 6:372-373 (Against Jovinian, 1.35).

<sup>56</sup>Jerome accepts that a virgin does not sin in marriage provided that she is not a consecrated virgin. One who has taken vows of virginity would "bring damnation" upon herself if she married. NPNF, Second Series, 6:356-358 (Against Jovinian, 1.13).

good."<sup>57</sup> Again, when Paul says that it is "good" for the unmarried to remain so if possible, Jerome takes "good" to imply that the alternative is "bad." Just because a person would rather eat barley than dung to survive does not mean that barley is on the same level with fine wheat.<sup>58</sup> Finally, the fact that Paul does not command virginity, but rather exhorts it, is so that virginity will not be given out of compulsion, but freely. Thus an even greater value is attached to virginity, and consequently, "Christ loves virgins more than others because they willingly gave what was not commanded."<sup>59</sup>

#### Conclusions

It would certainly be a fair assessment to say that Jerome held to his position on the superiority of virginity and celibacy very strongly. It was an issue that was important to him not only publicly, as he was frequently involved in conflict over it, but it was an important issue to him on a very personal level as well--a fact evidenced by the passion with which he treats the subject and supported by the events and influences in his life.

Jerome's influence with regard to the doctrine of virginity was probably much stronger in the later church than

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid, 6:355 (Against Jovinian, 1.12).

<sup>58</sup>Ibid, 6:351 (Against Jovinian, 1.7).

<sup>59</sup>Ibid, 6:355 (Against Jovinian, 1.12).

it ever was during his lifetime, since he became somewhat of an icon as a champion of virginity in the medieval church. During his lifetime, however, his influence was limited to a relatively small circle, most of whom were already ascetics in their own right,<sup>60</sup> and his writings on the subject were often met with opposition, particularly in Rome. It should also be noted that Jerome's influence on the issue of virginity was reduced by the presence of writers who were more readily received than Jerome. (The most notable works on this topic are those of Ambrose and Augustine.)

As for Jerome's high view of virginity and celibacy, he was by no means unique and was rather in step with the ascetic trend that progressed throughout his lifetime. He does seem a bit more extreme than many of his contemporaries, however, for although asceticism was generally gaining influence in the church, there were many who still balked at the position of Jerome. Perhaps this was due to Jerome's willingness to take the "next step" in asserting that asceticism was not merely noble, but ranked above ordinary vocations in the eyes of God himself.

The exegesis used by Jerome to support his position was somewhat of a mixed bag. Although Jerome was capable of being very detailed and responsible in his work with a text, pressing his case on the basis of context, grammar, and

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<sup>60</sup>"Jerome and Jovinian," Abstract of a dissertation by John Gavin Nolan, p.14.

lexicography, he was also capable of using allegory in a most uncontrolled manner. His proof texts on virginity seemed to "cover the spectrum," sometimes textually based and sometimes clearly driven by his presuppositions.

With regard to celibacy and consecrated virginity, Jerome was nothing if not passionate. Living as we do in a society that looks askance at celibacy and the ascetic life in general, we would do well to note the good points that Jerome makes about the value of virginity or celibacy and the seriousness of serving God in such a vocation. Jerome's position as a whole, however, is largely untenable on the basis of Scripture, since for the most part his conclusions are driven further by his ascetic ideals of Christianity than by the text of Scripture. His exegesis on the superiority of virginity is not supported in the broader context, and his argument is often inverted; that is, he often seeks to show that a text does not preclude his suppositions rather than showing a clear testimony of support.



## JEROME'S KEY WORKS ON BEHALF OF VIRGINITY

### **Timeline of Jerome:**

- 331-366 Childhood and Education in Rome  
366-369 in Trier  
370-373 in Aquileia  
373 Departure to the East  
374 Illness at Antioch (Anti-Ciceronian dream)  
374-379 Hermit in the Syrian Desert  
379-380 in Antioch; ordained by Paulinus  
380-381 in Constantinople  
382-385 in Rome<sup>1,2</sup>  
386 Departure to the East; settlement at Bethlehem  
386-420 in Bethlehem<sup>3,4,5</sup>

### **Documents Focusing on Virginity:**

- <sup>1</sup> The Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary (383)  
<sup>2</sup> Letter 22--to Eustochiam (384)  
<sup>3</sup> Against Jovinian (393)  
<sup>4</sup> Letter 48--to Pammachius re: "against Jovinian" (393/4)  
<sup>5</sup> Letter 54--to Furia (394)

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