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Religious Crisis and Civic Transformation

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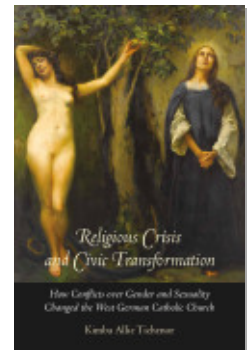
Published by Brandeis University Press

Tichenor, Kimba Allie.

Religious Crisis and Civic Transformation: How Conflicts over Gender and Sexuality Changed the West German Catholic Church.

Brandeis University Press, 2016.

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Celibacy for the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth

The postwar debate on mandatory clerical celibacy in the Catholic Church did not begin in earnest until 1968. Against the backdrop of the release of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* banning artificial contraception and calls for liberalizing the legal sexual order in West Germany, an internal Catholic debate on the charismatic nature of celibacy metamorphosed into a public debate, in which non-Catholics took an active role. For reform-minded Catholics and non-Catholics in the 1970s, the clerical celibacy requirement became emblematic of the Church's intransigence on artificial contraception and more generally of its negative valuation of sexuality. Resentful of the Church's active resistance to ecclesial and secular reforms concerning sexual morality, Catholic reformers and non-Catholics utilized the issue of celibacy to challenge the religious and secular authority exercised by the institutional Church in West Germany. In this challenge, the media played a critical role.

For the Church hierarchy, the celibacy debate posed multiple theological and practical challenges. Theologically, as we shall see, any challenge to the celibacy requirement had the potential to destabilize the priesthood, the relationship between clergy and laity, and marital morality. But maintaining clerical celibacy was fraught with peril for practical reasons. The immediate postwar era witnessed a dramatic increase in the shortage of priests. Initially, few Church or secular experts associated this shortage with the celibacy requirement. However, by the late 1960s, this link had been made; moreover, as Germans embraced more liberal attitudes about sexuality, they began to view the celibate priesthood as unhealthy, even perverse. This assessment was given credence by the secular media's coverage of the debate, which centered on titillating stories about the sexual exploits of priests and behind-the-scene political intrigues involving celibacy. The Church found itself caught in a public relations nightmare, despite the valiant efforts of some bishops and theologians to utilize psychology to show that celibacy constituted a viable choice that did not compromise the health of its adherents. But fewer and fewer Catholics and non-Catholics found these argu-

ments convincing as a growing number of dissident priests and theologians aired the Church's dirty laundry in public. These insider accounts of sexual intrigue reinforced public perceptions of a corrupt, patriarchal church whose influence on mainstream society should be curtailed. For the West German Catholic Church, these exposés made attracting new candidates to the priesthood even more difficult.

The Church's public image was further damaged when Catholic women entered the debate in the 1980s. For reform-minded Catholic women, the maintenance of a male celibate priesthood reinforced women's oppression in the Church and in society. They demanded that women be given more offices in the Church; in particular, they called for the creation of a female diaconate. When the West German episcopate would not or could not institute the desired changes because of universal Church doctrine, many women stopped engaging in Church life or created niches within the Church where they could voice discontent. Alternatively, conservative women saw the celibacy debate as indicative of moral collapse in the Church and in German society; for these women, the maintenance of clerical celibacy in conjunction with Church doctrine on marriage, birth control, and abortion became a rallying point; an embattled German hierarchy would choose to support this conservative core, as did the universal Church beginning with John Paul II's papacy. Under John Paul II, disciplinary actions against dissident theologians and priests increased dramatically, and the theological arguments advanced to support celibacy and to reject women's ordination, artificial contraception, abortion, and NRTs became more entangled. This interpenetration of theological arguments meant that the Church found itself embroiled in an escalating series of crises from the 1960s onward, as increasingly its views on sexual morality no longer coincided with secular views.

Clerical Celibacy's Significance for Catholicism

To understand the post-World War II celibacy debate, some information on the meaning the Catholic Church assigns to clerical celibacy is required. The word "celibacy" simply refers to the state of living unmarried.¹ But in Catholicism, celibacy means much more than bachelorhood. Since the Catholic Church considers all sexual activity outside of marriage sinful, celibacy also implies chastity. Celibacy is a requisite of clerical office, but it is also considered an eschatological sign of and stimulus for the call to ministry. The celibate priest is understood to be both bride and bridegroom

in the suprasexual nuptial relationship between Christ and Church. He is a chaste bride of Christ and a “living sign” of the world to come in which “the children of the resurrection neither marry nor take wives.”² He is also the bridegroom of the Church, “his bride,” with whom he has entered into an indissoluble marriage contract. Thus, as Tina Beattie pointed out, the female body is excluded from the suprasexual relationship between Christ and the Church.³ This exclusion informs both the Church’s understanding of marriage and the exalted status accorded the celibate priesthood.

For centuries, the Church taught that celibacy, as a form of spiritual marriage with God, constituted a state superior to that of earthly marriage.⁴ Although marriage represented a gift from God, in its sexuality it was tainted by original sin and consequently intended for those Christians who could not practice continence. In the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, sexual intercourse prior to the Fall was a function of reason. Afterward, sexual intercourse became corrupted by lust, and the emphasis shifted to man’s loss of control over the sexual organs.⁵ Eve’s role as temptress and instigator of human suffering meant that marriage was intended not only as a means of controlling human sexuality, but more specifically as a means of controlling women.⁶ To this end, the Catholic Church taught that the primary purpose of marriage was the generation and rearing of offspring.⁷ This conception of marriage as an inferior form of Christian life defined by parturition helped justify the celibate male clergy’s authority over the laity, particularly in the bedroom.

Untainted by sexual intercourse, the priest was a man apart from and above his congregation. Franz Franken, a laicized priest, described the pre-Vatican II public image of the priest: “A priest was not seen as a collaborator or mediator, but as a magical numinous being with special hidden access to God, a being to which one could attach one’s most secret wishes and hopes, like the devotional objects of pilgrimage sites . . . so that at the time of Vatican II, a priest who no longer lived a celibate life was frequently branded and condemned in the Catholic public sphere as the most terrible disgrace of the Holy Catholic Church.”⁸ The Church went to great lengths to safeguard the sexual purity of its priests. Both codes of canon law valid during the time span covered by this monograph—those of 1917 and 1983—advised priests to avoid persons who might jeopardize their celibacy. The 1917 Code of Canon Law identified such persons specifically as women. In Germany, the 1954 Cologne Diocesan Synod established detailed rules governing interactions between priests and women. For example, young priests on vacation were

prohibited from swimming with groups of young girls, and seminary students were not allowed to have any contact with girls during holidays.⁹ One priest reported that, during his seminary training, he was advised to avoid interactions with his sister because this too could be fraught with danger!¹⁰ The priest's authority was based on his otherness, and the most visible manifestation of that otherness was his celibacy.

In addition to establishing rules regulating interactions between priests and women, both codes delineated punitive measures to be taken against those who broke the celibacy vow. Under these codes, the celibacy vow was binding for life. A priest who was removed from office or resigned from office remained obligated to practice celibacy. A priest could be released from his celibacy vow only if he applied for and received a dispensation from the Apostolic See; dispensation from celibacy did not automatically accompany laicization. Prior to the 1983 code, a former priest who married without dispensation was automatically excommunicated, as was his wife. Under both codes, such priests were removed from office, returned to the lay estate, and barred from holding any future office in the Church—including most offices open to the laity.

The Pre–Vatican II Era: Celibacy and the Clerical Shortage

The Latin Church has not always demanded celibacy or continence of its priests. There is evidence that, beginning in the third century, many bishops and priests were married and had children. In fact, until the fourth century, no law was promulgated by Church authorities concerning clerical marriage or continence. The Council of Elvira in roughly AD 305 would be the first to decree that married priests practice continence; however, it did not exclude married men from the priesthood. Celibacy became mandatory for priests in the Latin Church only after the Second Lateran Council in 1139. Between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries, the celibacy requirement in the Latin Church was subject to multiple challenges; this state of affairs ended when Pius V (1566–1572) made it clear that the matter was closed. Although the issue surfaced from time to time, particularly during the French Revolution, the celibacy requirement and the elevated status assigned to the celibate state had been largely quiescent within the Latin Church from the late eighteenth century until the late 1960s.¹¹

That said, this renewed celibacy debate did not develop overnight; it had its origins in the dynamic interplay between theological innovations, latent contradictions in existing Church doctrine, and social changes reshaping

Europe in the early twentieth century. In the late 1920s, the elevated status assigned to celibacy by the Latin Church experienced a significant challenge when theologians such as Dietrich von Hildebrand, Herbert Doms, and Norbert Rochol began reconsidering the Church's gendered and hierarchical understanding of marriage in response to the emergence of more companionate models of marriage in late-nineteenth-century Europe.¹² Instead of emphasizing the primary and secondary purposes of marriage, these theologians focused on the primacy of the human subject. Although they reserved a central role in marriage for procreation and childrearing, the development of the relationship between the man and woman took precedence. In *The Meaning of Marriage*, Herbert Doms, perhaps the most influential critic of the scholastic understanding of matrimony, denied that marriage entailed subservience to a purpose outside the spouses: "It consists in the constant vital ordination of husband and wife to each other until they are one."¹³

As Susan A. Ross has argued, in making the relationship between husband and wife one of mutuality and one in which gender roles were of minimal importance, Doms inadvertently called into question clerical authority. Marriage is one of the primary lenses through which the Catholic Church defines itself. Repeated references are made to the Church's nuptial relationship to God; the priest's nuptial relationship to the Church; the Christ-like authority of the husband; and the receptive character of the wife and the laity. An understanding of marriage that did not include a gendered conception of primary and secondary purposes jeopardized the masculine power of a celibate clergy to lead and instruct a receptive laity—if marriage was between two equals, the implication was that the relationship between clergy and laity was also between equals.¹⁴

In 1944, the Rota Romana banned the continued publication of Herbert Doms's *On the Meaning of Marriage* because the book placed the secondary ends of marriage on the same level as its primary ends. But personalism did not disappear. In fact, Pope Pius XI incorporated a modified version of this approach into his encyclical on marriage, *Casti Connubii*—as will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter on birth control.¹⁵ Suffice it to say for now that a more positive valuation of the institution of marriage led some Catholics to challenge the pronouncements of a celibate clergy on marriage and reproduction. In a 1968 interview with Auxiliary Bishop Walther Kampe of Munich, some young Catholics went so far as to make the following analogy: "You can compare the advice of a celibate priest on

marriage to that of a swimming instructor who gives instructions from the shore, without ever having swam himself.”¹⁶

Theological innovation was not the only internal dynamic that informed renewed debates on clerical celibacy in the 1960s. Critics also pointed to latent contradictions in current Church policy. For example, to this day, other churches in union with the Latin Church (Ukrainian, Melkite, and others) allow clergy to marry with certain restrictions.¹⁷ Moreover, the Latin Church has always made exceptions to the celibacy requirement. Both the 1917 and 1983 Codes of Canon Law outlined conditions under which exceptions could be made and stipulated that the pope alone could approve such exceptions.¹⁸ As we shall see later in this chapter, in the 1950s and 1960s, the German Catholic Church assimilated numerous married Protestant ministers unhappy with their church’s response to Communism. For many German Catholics, awareness of married priests working in their parish made the celibacy requirement seem arbitrary and suggested an alternative model for the priesthood, especially as the clerical shortage became more acute and scandals involving celibate priests received more attention.

In addition to these internal factors, social changes in Europe had an impact on the Catholic priesthood as well. The shift from an agrarian to an urban, industrialized society in the early twentieth century decimated the population from which the Church filled its clerical ranks. Traditionally most priests came from farming communities. As the 1958 International Enquête into the Priesthood in Europe concluded, the Church had to find ways of attracting the sons of laborers and white-collar employees to the priesthood in order to combat the devastating effects of this historic trend on the practice of Catholicism.¹⁹ If it failed to do so, the Catholic Church in Western Europe would cease to be able to fulfill its threefold mission: to provide for the spiritual needs of Catholics in Europe, to offer assistance to “brethren in the Church of Silence behind the Iron Curtain,” and to witness for Christ throughout the world.²⁰

The importance of this shortage of priests cannot be underestimated. According to Catholic doctrine, priests are the only persons who may officiate at the Eucharist celebration—described in the Catholic catechism as the “sum and summary of our faith.”²¹ The sociologist Richard A. Schoenherr argued convincingly in *Goodbye Father* that there is “no group of members more central to the technical core of the Roman Catholic Church than its ordained clergy. Therefore, the priest drain represents the continual loss of its most critical ‘economic’ resource and, as such, is the most powerful force

for structural change within contemporary Catholicism.”²² By the late 1950s, this “drain” had become a major preoccupation in Western Europe.

Yet participants at the 1958 enquête did not cite celibacy as a primary cause of the priest shortage. In addition to the demographic shift already mentioned, participants attributed the shortage to the decimation and dislocation of priests as a consequence of World War II, the de-Christianization of Europe, and the perceived collapse of traditional family values that accompanied these events. Other reasons sometimes cited for the shortage included insufficient prayer on the part of priests, the unwillingness of young people to make sacrifices, and an eroticization of public life.²³

In West Germany, statistical studies from the late 1950s indicated an increase in the ratio of parishioners to priests (see Appendix C). Moreover, the German bishops increasingly expressed concern about the decline in the number of candidates for the priesthood. In a 1959 letter, Archbishop Johann Dietz of Fulda wrote Josef Cardinal Frings, chair of the Fulda Bishops’ Conference (precursor of the post-Vatican II German Bishops’ Conference) concerning the priest shortage in the dioceses of North Rhine-Westphalia. In particular, he expressed concern about the newly created Diocese of Essen, noting that in 1959 only twenty-seven students had enrolled in theological studies, as compared with seventy-four in Münster, fifty-nine in Paderborn, fifty-four in Cologne, and forty-eight in Aachen. He attributed Essen’s more pronounced shortage to the demographic makeup of the new diocese. Unlike other German dioceses, Essen consisted primarily of “large cities and diaspora areas” rather than rural communities from which the Church traditionally drew its clergy. To combat this development, he stressed the importance of fostering traditional family values.²⁴ The bishop of Essen, in a 1959 pastoral letter, also highlighted the connection between the preservation of traditional family values and the future of the priesthood: “There is the expression that the family is the first priestly seminar; and it is rightly so . . . if the child is accepted as a gift from God; if the family does not deny God as the source of all life; if a religious spirit dominates in the family; if through the celebration of Sunday mass, feast days and daily prayer father, mother and children are joined before God; if the children are brought up prepared to make sacrifices happily and resolutely; then the priestly and religious vocations will grow out of such families.”²⁵ In short, the growing concern about the shortage of priests did not yet center on the issue of celibacy—not at the International Enquête in Vienna, not among the Church hierarchy, not even among young German priests and

seminarians. In a 1960 survey of priests and seminarians in the Diocese of Essen, celibacy was conspicuously absent from the responses of those who expressed discontent with their vocation. Instead, disgruntled priests complained about the overcentralization of church life. Seminary students believed that more prayer on the part of priests and positive modeling of clerical life by parish priests held the solution to the clerical shortage.²⁶

However, silence on the topic of celibacy should not be interpreted to mean that prior to Vatican II mandatory celibacy was not troublesome for some priests and seminarians; rather it reflects the fact that the topic was taboo within the Church. In 1973, Fritz Leist published *Zum Thema Zölibat*, in which priests and former priests described the “oppressive silence” engulfing the topic of celibacy in the Church. Repeatedly, the anonymous contributors referenced the absence of any comprehensive discussion during their seminary training. Several priests complained that, prior to ordination, only the value of celibacy, not its problems, was mentioned. One priest lamented, “They let us enter helplessly into the life of a priest.”²⁷ Another priest described the sudden entrance of women into his life upon leaving the seminary—an event for which he was totally unprepared.²⁸ Admittedly, the anonymous testimonies found in Fritz’s study offered a one-sided account of the experience of celibacy. However, the multiple references in official Church documents concerning the need to adequately prepare seminarians for a celibate life would suggest that the Church itself recognized this deficiency.²⁹

Clerical celibacy was never totally absent from public discourse on the priesthood. In a 1960 interview with the French Catholic philosopher Étienne Gilson, Pope John XXIII inadvertently fueled the fires of the post-Vatican II debate when he expressed compassion for priests who struggled with celibacy: “For some of them it is martyrdom. Yes, a sort of martyrdom. It seems to me that sometimes I hear a sort of moan, as if many voices were asking the church for liberation from the burden. What can I do? Ecclesiastical celibacy is not a dogma. It is not imposed in the Scriptures. How simple it would be: we take up a pen, sign an act, and priests who so desire can marry tomorrow. But this is impossible. Celibacy is a sacrifice, which the church has imposed upon herself—freely, generously and heroically.”³⁰ Despite the affirmation of celibacy contained herein and in his 1959 encyclical *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia*,³¹ opponents of celibacy employed these words as a rallying cry for their cause. It became a common tactic of Church reformers and

of the secular media to contrast the “good pope”—John XXIII—with the “bad popes”—Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI.

Pope John XXIII’s comments were not the only sign before Vatican II that some clergy members no longer embraced celibacy. On June 16, 1962, the Central Preparatory Commission for Vatican II considered the schema *De Sacerdotibus Lapsis* concerning priests who abandoned their office. The schema assumed that most clerical offenders did so because of the celibacy requirement. Although none of the sixty-eight prelates at the meeting challenged the validity of the discipline of celibacy for priests in the Latin Church, Cardinals Josef Frings of Germany, Augustin Bea of Germany, Leo Joseph Suenens of Belgium, Paul-Émile Léger of Canada, and others wanted to ease the ecclesiastical situation of “lapsed” priests, who faced automatic excommunication if they married without dispensation.³² But supporters of liberalization represented the minority position; the majority position is best summed up by the petition submitted by Karol Wojtyła, auxiliary bishop of Krakow and the future pope John Paul II: “A priest who has married without the blessing of the Church relinquishes claim to divine aid, as does his wife.”³³ The Central Preparatory Commission resolved that the issue of “lapsed priests” would not be broached by the Vatican Council, but left to the discretion of the Holy See. Thus, no Vatican II text addressed the topic of “lapsed priests.”³⁴

Meanwhile in the German-speaking sphere, Josef Cardinal Frings (Cologne) and Franz Cardinal König (Vienna) received a letter from Dr. Alfred Sztuka, a lay Catholic who in his youth had considered the priesthood. The letter contained a scathing critique of clerical celibacy that foreshadowed the vehemence of the post-Vatican II debate. Sztuka compared the tactics used by the Church to recruit young men to the priesthood to those of the Nazis and accused the Church of hypocrisy: “You were angry with Third Reich authorities when they abused youthful passion and enthusiasm for their own political purposes and ends. But what does the Church do? You obligate young men at the age of 25, and sometimes even younger, to practice celibacy, men who often have had a very truncated education and who frequently have grown up without a clear understanding of marriage. . . . What you denounced in the Nazi regime, you do in the name of God.”³⁵

Sztuka’s heated intervention represented the exception to the rule in the pre-Vatican II era. Most German Catholics, at least in the public discourse, upheld an idealized image of the priesthood. The idea that priests might

be secretly violating their celibacy vows or even engaging in criminal sexual offenses (both alluded to in Sztuka's letter) the German Catholic public rarely entertained. Even in 1970, self-identified Catholic readers of *Der Spiegel* reacted across the board negatively to the magazine's cover story about priests who rejected celibacy, describing these cases as rare exceptions. One female reader wrote: "Why should the Church abolish celibacy because of a few renegades? With devilish joy, you drag out some examples and then kick the dirt about everywhere, thereby defaming the large army of priests who are pure and faithful to their oath."³⁶ This positive assessment of a celibate priesthood, particularly among women—the backbone of the Church—eroded gradually as the clerical shortage became more pronounced, the negative press coverage escalated, and Catholic women embraced new concepts of womanhood that were developing both inside and outside the Church in the 1970s and 1980s.

Vatican II and Its Impact on the Celibacy Debate

Paul VI removed celibacy from the Vatican II agenda in October 1965. During the fourth seating of the council, Brazilian bishops wanted to discuss modifying the requirement (at least in geographic regions where the shortage of priests was most pressing) and tried to enlist the support of Leo Joseph Cardinal Suenens of Belgium—one of the four council moderators appointed by Paul VI. This situation prompted Paul VI's intervention. On October 11, 1965, Cardinal Tisserant read a papal letter to the assembly in which Paul VI asserted that public debate "is not opportune on this subject."³⁷ In the letter, the pope also made clear his intention to safeguard the tradition of compulsory celibacy in the Latin Church; however, he gave the bishops the option to communicate their concerns to the Council of Presidents, who would transmit these concerns to him.³⁸

Although a few council fathers expressed reservations about the celibacy requirement, the council affirmed the high valuation accorded celibacy by the Latin Church in four of the sixteen documents of Vatican II—*Lumen Gentium*, *Perfectae Caritatis*, *Optatam Totius*, and *Presbyterorum Ordinis*.³⁹ However, in the last two documents, the council fathers introduced two significant innovations, one procedural and one theological.

In *Optatam Totius*, the council fathers encouraged bishops to consider the results and methods of psychology in the recruitment and pedagogical training of young priests. They envisioned the deployment of scientific methods in the service of a healthy priesthood. But the new willingness

to embrace the social sciences had unanticipated consequences. The findings of psychology and psychoanalysis became critical elements in the attack against celibacy from within the Church. Catholic critics such as Fritz Leist, Hubertus Mynarek, and Eugen Drewermann called attention to the Church's suppression of what they considered a fundamental human drive (the sex drive) and cast suspicion on the type of man attracted to a celibate priesthood, whom they labeled psychologically suspect.⁴⁰ In the context of the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s, this critique found a receptive public audience and gave credibility to the countless rumors circulating in the secular press after 1968 of priests leading secret sexual lives. Since the Church had called for openness to the social sciences, it could not simply ignore these charges.

In *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the council fathers departed from Pius XII's 1954 characterization of clerical celibacy as "doctrine" (a truth revealed by God and therefore not subject to revision).⁴¹ Instead, they described celibacy as a matter of Church law: "Indeed it is not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood, as is apparent from the practice of the early Church and from the traditions of the Eastern Churches, where besides those who with all the bishops, by a gift of grace, choose to observe celibacy, there are also married priests of highest merit."⁴² Although John XXIII had alluded to the nondoctrinal quality of priestly celibacy in his 1963 interview with Étienne Gilson, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* was the first official post-World War II Church document to do so.

The characterization of celibacy as a gift rather than a doctrine opened the door to public challenges of compulsory celibacy, because it allowed the following question to be raised: If celibacy is a gift, how can it be imposed? The council fathers offered an answer to this question. As Michael Schmaus and Rudolph Lange explained, they believed that celibacy was "so appropriate" and "so consonant" with the priesthood that God would not "deny to those whom he called to the priesthood this other grace also."⁴³ In the post-Vatican II atmosphere of crisis, however, few Catholics found this explanation satisfactory.

The new emphasis on the charismatic nature of celibacy was not the only theological innovation of the council fathers that influenced the postconciliar celibacy debate. There were four others—the reintroduction of a permanent diaconate; the new theological understanding of the priesthood; the more positive valuation of the laity; and the reduced importance assigned to Marian devotion.

The diaconate had not been a permanent office in the Catholic Church for approximately twelve hundred years. The reintroduction of a permanent diaconate had been proposed at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) but had not been approved. Instead, admission to the diaconate was understood to be a preparatory step for the priesthood. The campaign for the revival of a permanent diaconate to which married men might be admitted began in Germany. In 1953 a Paderborn priest, Father Wilhelm Schamoni, authored *Familienväter als geweihte Diakone*, in which he advocated the restoration of the permanent diaconate and the admission of married men to this order. Interest in this proposal soon spread beyond Germany, and three years later at the First International Congress for Pastoral Liturgy in Assisi, Italy, Bishop Wilhelm van Bekkum, the apostolic vicar of Ruteng Island, Indonesia, called for the restoration of a permanent diaconate; he was the first bishop to do so publicly. Then, in October 1957 at the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate, Pius XII set a precedent by broaching the subject. Although Pius XII did not believe the time was right for its reintroduction, he did not rule out the possibility.⁴⁴

At Vatican II, the time proved ripe. The Central Preparatory Commission received many comments from bishops, theologians, and laypersons who favored the restoration of a permanent diaconate. Still, the first draft of *De Ecclesia*, the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, included no reference to a permanent diaconate.⁴⁵ However, a revised draft of the Dogmatic Constitution, now designated by its opening words, *Lumen Gentium*, called for the reinstatement of the diaconate as a permanent office and the possible admission of married men to this major clerical order. The latter proviso sparked heated debate among the council fathers. Cardinals Francis Spellman of the United States, Ernesto Ruffini of Italy, Alfredo Ottaviani of the Roman Curia, and Antonio Bacci of the Roman Curia all feared that admitting married men to the diaconate would devalue the virtue of celibacy; Cardinal Bacci asserted that the number of priests would decline, because young men would be tempted by “the easier way.”⁴⁶ Despite these objections, on September 29, 1963, the council fathers approved Paragraph 29 of *Lumen Gentium*, allowing for the creation of a diaconate to which married men of mature age and proven as family men and good husbands might belong. The council fathers did not make the reinstatement compulsory, but left it up to the discretion of the national bishops’ conferences with the approval of the pope. Although married men of mature age were exempted from the celibacy requirement, younger candidates for the diaconate remained obligated to

practice celibacy in perpetuity.⁴⁷ In the post–Vatican II era, the seeming co-existence of two diaconates (one for married men and one for celibate men) with the same duties sparked questions: If celibacy was no longer uniformly required of all members of the diaconate (a clerical order), why must it be uniformly applied to the priesthood and the bishopric?⁴⁸

The council fathers also introduced significant changes in the theological foundations of the priesthood, believing that renewal in the Church required a comprehensive theology of office. Until Vatican II, the decrees formulated at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) had shaped the theological understanding of the priesthood. The council fathers of Vatican II believed that Trent had failed to provide a complete theology of office. Trent focused exclusively on the sacramental dimension of the priesthood and on the necessity of a hierarchy of office. This focus reflected the Catholic Church's primary concern at the time—the condemnation of Protestant heresies and clarification of its teachings in response to the objections of reformers to the Catholic understanding of the sacraments. The Church wanted to make it clear that all believers did not have the same access to the Gospel and to the sacraments. In drawing a distinction between the priest and the laity, the Council of Trent emphasized the priest's role in the sacrificial mass.⁴⁹ Only through the priest was the eternal priesthood of Christ realized:

And forasmuch as, in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner, who once offered Himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross; the holy Synod teaches, that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory and that by means thereof this is effected, that we obtain mercy, and find grace in seasonable aid, if we draw nigh unto God, contrite and penitent, with a sincere heart and upright faith, with fear and reverence. For the Lord, appeased by the oblation thereof, and granting the grace and gift of penitence, forgives even heinous crimes and sins. For the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered Himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different.⁵⁰

Priests controlled the layperson's access to redemption; bishops controlled access to the priesthood; and the pope controlled access to the episcopate.

To buttress its hierarchical understanding of office and the Church, the Council of Trent utilized the Scholastic approach.⁵¹ In *What Happened at Vatican II*, John O'Malley argued convincingly that the council fathers of Vatican II largely eschewed Scholastic language in favor of a more patristic/

biblical approach that emphasized reconciliation rather than the defining of concepts, the winning of arguments, or the enforcement of laws. This shift in style introduced a parallel new vocabulary in conciliar documents. Instead of issuing condemnations, Vatican II council fathers employed words of reciprocity, such as “cooperation,” “partnership,” and “collaboration.” In terms of the priesthood, this stylistic change translated into a deemphasis on hierarchy.⁵²

Although the Vatican II council fathers reaffirmed the sacrificial and hierarchical character of the priesthood, they no longer placed the ordination and authority of the priest in the foreground; instead, they highlighted the priest’s status as co-participant in Christ’s mission along with the laity. In short, the priest was no longer characterized as intrinsically different from his congregants. The council fathers also emphasized the missionary aspect of the priestly vocation, calling upon the priest to go out among the people and proclaim the word of God.⁵³

The altered relationship between priest and laity was most visible in the discussion of the common priesthood of all believers. Although the Council of Trent had not explicitly rejected the common priesthood, it focused almost exclusively on the ministerial priesthood. In contrast, the Vatican II council fathers spoke at length about the significance of the common priesthood, thereby augmenting the vertical conception of the Church (from God to pope, through the bishops to the priests and finally to the laity) with a horizontal one (the Church as the “people of God”). In *Lumen Gentium*, the council fathers no longer referred to the laity as “subjects,” nor did they describe the structure of the Church as “monarchical.”⁵⁴ Striving for holiness was not just a clerical obligation, but the responsibility of all. A universal priesthood, identified with the “people of God,” whose authority was not derived from the ministerial priesthood but from baptism, signified a new, more positive valuation of the laity. This more positive assessment promoted a new appreciation of nonclerical offices; the priesthood ceased to be the only Church office held in high esteem. Catholics, wanting a more active role in the Church, now argued that they could and should perform many duties previously reserved for the priesthood.⁵⁵

Vatican II also made possible a more positive valuation of women in the Church. At the end of the second session of the council, Cardinal Suenens of Belgium provocatively asked his fellow council fathers: “Women too should be invited as auditors: unless I am mistaken, they make up half of the human race?”⁵⁶ As a result, the council invited fifteen women to serve

as official auditors. Never before in the history of the Catholic Church had women participated in a council; now thanks to Cardinal Suenens and a suggestion by the German theologian Bernhard Häring, some of these women collaborated on commissions responsible for formulating documents.⁵⁷ Their participation contributed to a new understanding of women's place in church and society: "With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent."⁵⁸ At least in theory, the Roman Catholic Church now recognized women as equal participants in the common priesthood of all believers.

The council fathers had aimed for consensus; consequently, many documents contained ambiguous or even contradictory passages that in the years to come would be subject to multiple interpretations. The nature of the relationship between this priesthood of all believers and the ministerial priesthood became a major source of contention in the post-Vatican II era. Advocates of greater democratization of the Church asserted that authority in the Church belonged to the people of God, not the clergy. This reform movement reached its culmination in 1996 with the founding of the International Movement We Are Church (IMWAC), whose manifesto demanded the co-participation of the laity in all aspects of ministry and Church governance.⁵⁹

However, this new understanding of the ministry and of the relationship between clergy and laity first found expression in an identity crisis among priests. Vatican II highlighted the missionary function of the priesthood, which brought priests into more intimate contact with married couples and their families; for some priests, contact with happily married couples led to a new appreciation of married life—one that contradicted the negative model of obligation and sin taught to them at the seminary. These priests began imagining the possibility of establishing new relationships, including ones with women. More intimate contact with families also inspired greater sympathy for married couples who failed to adhere to some Church doctrine, such as the ban on artificial forms of contraception. Increasingly, priests found themselves torn between their loyalty to the pope and their sympathy for their congregants; these divided loyalties led many to leave office. The Dutch sociologist Walter Goddijn explained: "He [the priest] is expected to proclaim truths behind which he no longer stands or no longer completely stands because he is expected to communicate values that he

believes are outdated, because he is supposed to transmit teaching statements and ecclesial positions that he personally does not accept, because he is expected to carry out actions in whose efficacy he no longer believes and because he must represent an authority with whose positions he cannot agree.⁶⁰ In some nations, this identity crisis preceded the Second Vatican Council. But in the politically charged post-Vatican II climate, priests were no longer willing to suffer in silence.⁶¹

Finally, the conciliar debate on Marian devotion influenced the post-conciliar debate on celibacy. Devoid of all connotations of sexuality, Mary had long served a twofold purpose in maintaining the discipline of celibacy. First, she provided a justification for a celibate priesthood. The medieval monk Petrus Damiani argued that because Jesus was born of a virgin, he could be touched only by virgin hands, thereby establishing a connection between sexual purity and the Eucharist celebration.⁶² Second, she served as a chaste role model and mother figure for priests. Mary, Pius XII wrote, provided the priest solace in his daily struggles against the temptations of the flesh: "When you meet very serious difficulties in the path of holiness and the exercise of your ministry, turn your eyes and your mind trustfully to she who is the Mother of the Eternal Priest and therefore the loving Mother of all Catholic priests."⁶³

Many bishops and theologians wanted the council to expand Marian doctrine; some supported conferring on Mary a new title, "Mother of the Church." However, not all council fathers shared this view. Some preferred that piety be more centered on the Bible and the liturgy and less on devotional practices, including Marian worship. They felt that Marian devotion often diverged from the message found in scripture and in the liturgy. They also feared that any elaboration of Marian devotion would undermine the ecumenical movement. Thus, the seemingly innocent question of where to locate a statement on Mary had far-reaching theological and political ramifications. On August 29, by a margin of only forty votes, the council fathers decided in favor of incorporating a statement on Marian piety into *Lumen Gentium*.⁶⁴

Although Paul VI later preempted the decision of the council fathers and bestowed upon Mary the title they had denied her, "Mother of the Church,"⁶⁵ the popularity of Marian devotion continued to decline in Western Europe. In the survey of all West German Catholics conducted for the Würzburg Synod in 1970, only 8 percent of Catholics between the ages of

sixteen and twenty described the veneration of Mary as an important dimension of faith, as opposed to 24 percent of Catholics over the age of seventy.⁶⁶ Among theologians and lay congregants, scripture increasingly took precedence. Unlike Marian devotion, scripture provided no unequivocal justification for mandatory clerical celibacy; many of Jesus's apostles had been married men, including Peter, the rock upon whom the Church was built.

In the 1980s, Marian piety came under vehement attack by European feminist theologians, such as Catherina Halkes and Uta Ranke-Heinemann. They argued that Marian piety provided the means by which celibate priests sublimated their sexuality into a sexually safe relationship with a virgin mother, untainted by original sin; the hostility caused by this sublimation was then projected onto real women, who could never realize the unattainable feminine ideal represented by Mary. The Church's exaltation of Mary did not speak to the dignity of women, but rather served as a counterpoint to real women, who in Church teachings remained the daughters of the sexual temptress Eve.⁶⁷

The Post–Vatican II Celibacy Debate in the Church

Many council fathers interpreted Paul VI's invitation to submit remarks on clerical celibacy as an invitation to continue the discussion in a different venue, one not subject to such intense media coverage. However, according to the five-volume history of Vatican II edited by Giuseppe Alberigo, this discussion never materialized prior to Paul VI's affirmation of mandatory celibacy for priests in the 1967 encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*.⁶⁸

In the encyclical, Paul VI enumerated seven objections voiced by critics of celibacy: (1) Jesus did not require celibacy of his apostles, nor did the apostles later require it of priests. (2) The celibacy requirement had its origin in values and historical circumstances that no longer existed. (3) A vocation to the priesthood was not synonymous with a vocation to celibacy. (4) Celibacy exacerbated the shortage of priests. (5) Allowing priests to marry would eliminate infidelity and defections from the priesthood. (6) Celibacy injured the human psyche because it required repressing a fundamental biological drive. (7) A young man was incapable of appreciating the seriousness of the obligation. To these objections, Paul VI responded that the difficulties associated with celibacy could be "penetrated and resolved by the light of divine revelation." He stressed the authority of the Church to admit

to the priesthood “those whom she judges qualified: that is, those to whom God has given, along with other signs of an ecclesiastical vocation, the gift of consecrated celibacy.”⁶⁹

In West Germany, the publication of *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* triggered only mild protests among some clergy members and a few laypersons. Protesters claimed the encyclical was an affront to the post-Vatican II emphasis on collegiality and greater openness to the world. Only a few bishops and no priests had been consulted in the writing of the encyclical. For some theologians, such as Hans Küng, Vatican II made silent obedience impossible: “After the Council, is one to accept such solitary decisions, again made in the authoritarian style of the *ancien régime*, moaning, grumbling and despairing or hoping for better times? No, after the Council, the role of the theologians isn’t the same as it was before. Theologians have a responsibility for their fellow men and women. But they can exercise it only by making public statements. Public opinion in the church has a right to that. At the same time a signal has to be sent to Rome that such uncollegial proceedings in the spirit of pre-conciliar absolutism will not be accepted without resistance.”⁷⁰ Several German newspapers published Küng’s call for a plebiscite on celibacy in conjunction with a summary of the encyclical.⁷¹

However, not all Vatican II supporters of collegiality and openness in the Church reacted negatively to the encyclical. Karl Rahner, professor of dogmatics at the University of Münster and one of the architects of Vatican II reforms, published a defense of mandatory celibacy. His intervention quickly became the most frequently discussed text in the immediate post-encyclical West German celibacy debate. Rahner wrote his defense in the form of a letter to an anonymous brother who was struggling with his vow of celibacy. He expressed sympathy for those who struggled with celibacy; their difficulties, however, did not change his support of celibacy. He dismissed those “enemies of celibacy, acting as if its abandonment would open the gates of paradise to the poor clergy whom nothing but an antiquated, unnatural ecclesial law holds back from happiness and development of ‘personality.’”⁷² Rahner countered that no proof existed that a priest who failed at celibacy would be any more successful in marriage. He contended that the virtues that allowed one to succeed in marriage were the same ones needed to succeed in celibacy—solitude and self-denial. He suggested that if the Church permitted priests to marry, the bishops might have as many broken marriages on their hands as they now had “scandals” over celibacy.⁷³

To counter the claim that celibacy signaled a psychological or physical

defect in priests, Rahner drew on a study by Marc Oraison, a French Freudian psychoanalyst and Catholic priest, who viewed celibacy as a viable alternative “offered man by his nature.” Rahner affirmed Oraison’s position; he claimed, “Sexuality is not a fixed quantity but a task, a challenge, an opportunity, a riddle.”⁷⁴ For those critics who argued that the Church had turned the charisma of celibacy into a coercive institution, he responded that a commitment “until further notice” equaled no commitment at all: “A man who expects to be sustained by God’s grace without soberly and inflexibly demanding the utmost from himself will never discover that virgin roads into the unknown do lead to our destination in the end.”⁷⁵ Rahner acknowledged that a time might come when the Church must abandon celibacy to ensure a sufficient number of priests for the community. Yet he concluded: “I do not await the ‘future’ like that gargoyle on the cathedral at Freiburg, an old nun pointing to her last tooth to show that she may yet marry. I have already made my choice. I am sticking to the vocation that is my own.”⁷⁶

Like Küng’s response, Rahner’s letter received extensive coverage in the religious and secular media. The Austrian and German bishops distributed copies to all clergy members. *Der Spiegel* assessed Rahner’s position as both the more realistic one and the one endorsed by the majority of the clergy.⁷⁷ In the wake of Küng’s declaration and Rahner’s letter, no mass movement against clerical celibacy materialized. Only a few titillating reports of celibacy scandals appeared in the popular press. Most German Catholics gave clerical celibacy little thought.

With the publication on July 25, 1968, of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* condemning artificial contraception, this relative state of calm ended. Although public outrage focused on Paul VI’s condemnation of all methods of birth control, except rhythm, as contrary to natural and divine law, the floodgates of protest unleashed by *Humanae Vitae* had profound consequences for the celibacy debate in Germany. Traditionally, German Catholics supported the pope. Policies instituted by the new German state in 1871, intended to curtail the influence of the Catholic Church in Germany, not only resulted in the creation of an insulated Catholic subculture, but also made most German Catholics reluctant to speak out against the pope, on whose support they depended in the so-called *Kulturkampf*.⁷⁸ But unconditional public support of the pope ended with the publication of *Humanae Vitae*; ordinary middle-class West German Catholics lashed out against the encyclical.⁷⁹ In an effort to diffuse the situation, the West German bishops released “Wort der deutschen Bischöfe zur seelsorglichen Lage nach dem

Erscheinen der Enzyklika *Humanae Vitae*" (the Königstein Declaration) on August 30, 1968; the declaration affirmed the right of married couples to make their own decisions of conscience about the use of artificial birth control.⁸⁰

The Königstein Declaration dissipated tensions in Germany; however, it did not extinguish the spirit of protest. Anticipating controversy at the biennial Catholic Congress in September 1968, an unprecedented 424 journalists converged on the congress in Essen (Essener Katholikentag), resulting in 2,538 print stories, sixty-three radio broadcasts, and seventeen hours of television coverage.⁸¹ As the motto of the congress proclaimed, the West German Catholic Church found itself "in the midst of this world" (*Mitten in dieser Welt*). Under the watchful eye of the international press, German Catholics created a new type of congress. The triumphal reviews of a receptive and obedient laity by the hierarchy were replaced by a host of forums in which West German Catholics debated the doctrines and practices of their faith.

Essen inaugurated a time of great excitement, trepidation, and conflict in the German Catholic Church.⁸² Headlines such as "Conscience versus Obedience" and "3000 Catholics Demand Revision of the Pill Ban" captured the new mood in the West German Church.⁸³ Franz-Maria Elsner, a participant at the Essener Katholikentag, concluded that *Humanae Vitae* launched "a new period in the history of the German Catholic Church," one in which "participants at Catholic congresses could discuss the most difficult problems in open and democratic forums."⁸⁴ Official representatives at the forum on marriage voted in favor of a resolution calling on the pope to revise his position on artificial birth control. Outside the forum, Catholic youth carried banners that boldly declared: "The people of God betrayed—by Roman prelates"; "Everybody talks about the pill, we take it!"; and "Christ spoke with whores, not with bishops' frocks!"⁸⁵ The Vatican's credibility had suffered a serious blow among West German Catholics.

In West Germany, this loss of credibility did not translate into an immediate attack on the institution of celibacy. The conference of priests held on September 4, 1968, as part of the Essener Katholikentag received minimal media coverage. What coverage it did receive was largely neutral; only a few mildly negative reports appeared. The theme of the conference was the modern priesthood, but neither of the two keynote speakers—Karl Rahner or the Munich moral theologian Alois Müller—addressed clerical celibacy. Instead, spiritual and abstract rhetoric carried the day. The *Ruhr-*

Nachrichten labeled the conference “disappointing,” because the “concrete burning issues for the most part were excluded from the discussion.”⁸⁶ Other accounts emphasized Rahner’s efforts to bridge the gap between the Left and the Right. In his presentation, Rahner rejected “orthodox spiritual inertia,” on the one hand, and “modernistic theological non-conformism,” on the other.⁸⁷ According to press reports, some protesters attended the conference carrying banners condemning the “nebulous imagery of the celibacy encyclical,” but their protests were described as “tentative.”⁸⁸

The lack of outcry at the conference of priests did not indicate an absence of clerical unrest. Instead, clerical protests at this point also focused on the birth control ban. Press accounts described how priests and nuns applauded the resolution rejecting the papal position on birth control.⁸⁹ But when it became clear that the Church would not revise its position on artificial birth control, many German Catholics and non-Catholics turned a critical eye toward celibacy. They blamed the preservation of a male celibate priesthood for the Church’s intransigence on birth control and, more generally, for its negative valuation of sexuality. One man went so far as to describe the abolition of celibacy as necessary for human progress: “Taboos would collapse; prejudices and opinions of a negative nature would be dismantled; the number of upright, inhibited Catholics would decline (everything being a matter of education); the sanctimonious philistinism would shift rapidly from frustration to joy; the way to a happier society would be open.”⁹⁰

By the time the German bishops announced the General Synod of the Dioceses of West Germany (Würzburg Synod) in February 1969, celibacy had replaced birth control as the most pressing issue facing the West German Catholic Church. In November 1969, the editorial department, “Kirche und Leben,” of the Second German Television (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, ZDF) asked viewers to send in their opinions concerning the upcoming synod. Thirty-two hundred letters arrived by the deadline of June 1, 1970.⁹¹ Preliminary results released in February 1970 indicated that celibacy was the primary concern of respondents. Of these letters, 36 percent referenced clerical celibacy, more than twice the number received on any other topic; by May 1970, the proportion of letters on celibacy had risen to 45 percent, with the vast majority of respondents rejecting mandatory celibacy.⁹²

This small survey was not the only indication of changing West German Catholic attitudes toward celibacy. The official survey of all West German Catholics over the age of sixteen commissioned by the DBK showed that 62 percent of West German Catholics no longer supported a celibate priest-

hood. Among Catholics who identified themselves as having a strong connection with the Church, this number dropped to 31 percent (see Appendix D).⁹³ A survey of priests also conducted for the Würzburg Synod revealed that 28 percent of priests believed the celibacy requirement should be abolished, and 51 percent considered it worthy of consideration. However, these numbers did not tell the whole story; the survey exposed a sharp generational divide. Among priests ordained before 1921, only 6 percent supported the abolition of mandatory celibacy, as opposed to 54 percent of priests ordained between 1966 and 1970 (see Appendix E).⁹⁴ Younger priests, like their nonclerical counterparts, were rethinking Catholic moral doctrine.

Developments in the Dutch Catholic Church also shaped West German interest in the topic of clerical celibacy. While West Germans were preparing for their General Synod, the Dutch National Pastoral Council was under way. In the Netherlands, the clerical shortage was particularly acute. In 1962, there were 388 seminary students; by 1968, that number had dropped to 68. Even more alarming, 400 Dutch priests had abandoned office in order to marry between 1968 and 1970. Moreover, it was widely anticipated that delegates to the Dutch council would reject compulsory celibacy if allowed to vote on the issue.

In an effort to block that vote, Paul VI intervened. He wrote Bernardus Johannes Cardinal Alfrink, chair of the Dutch Episcopal Conference, asking him to remove celibacy from the Dutch council's agenda. Cardinal Alfrink never informed the council of the letter, although he acknowledged the letter's existence to delegates who via the media had read rumors of it. In response, Alfrink described the letter as private correspondence. He stated that the Vatican position was well known, and the council's task was to make the Dutch position known to the Vatican. On January 5, 1970, the delegates voted to abolish the celibacy requirement for future priests (ninety votes in favor, six against, and two abstentions).⁹⁵

Immediately, the Vatican launched a counterattack. On January 12, 1970, *L'Osservatore Romano* (the semiofficial Vatican newspaper) published Paul VI's letter to Cardinal Alfrink. Two weeks later, Jean Daniélou, a member of the Roman Curia and prominent Church historian, raised the stakes of the debate: "For some among the proponents, the campaign against celibacy represents merely a pretext. Through this campaign, they want to strike at the authority of the pope."⁹⁶ Shortly thereafter, Paul VI summoned Cardinal Alfrink to Rome. Rumors circulated in the European and American press that the pope would excommunicate the Dutch Church. Some news

reports predicted a schism in the Church; others believed that the pope would back down in order to preserve his own credibility.⁹⁷

Ultimately it was the Dutch Church that lost the battle; however, events in the Netherlands had drawn attention to the topic in Germany and elsewhere. In a show of solidarity with the Dutch Church, eighty-four theologians, led by the Tübingen professors of theology Hans Küng, Norbert Greinacher, and Johannes Neumann, presented a declaration to the Bishops' Conferences of West Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The declaration also appeared in the press:

The question of celibacy for the Latin Church has become an extremely serious problem not only in the Netherlands but also in our countries and threatens to lead to a split in the Catholic Church. We cannot and may not look on this development without taking action. Even those who don't reject a law of celibacy outright regard the unity of the Church as a greater good than the preservation of a disciplinary law which has neither applied for all times nor applies everywhere today. . . . Given the present heightening of the issue, the situation outside of the Netherlands is also very much more threatening than might appear at first sight. We therefore call on our bishops, in accordance with the shared responsibility of the bishops for the whole church which was endorsed again at Vatican II, as individuals and through their conferences to intercede publicly for the substantive conversation about this question in Rome which is long overdue and has often been called for.⁹⁸

The DBK received at least three other petitions in response to the Dutch controversy—two of which rejected any further discussion of clerical celibacy. A group of 134 theologians led by the Munich theologian Michael Schmaus and the Essen prelate Gerhard Fittkau asked the German bishops “in the interest of clarity” to issue a statement reaffirming the discipline of celibacy.⁹⁹ A petition sent by the Association of German Catholic Women Teachers (Verein katholischer deutscher Lehrerinnen) denounced clergy members who broke their vow of celibacy and made a “spectacle of themselves in the media.” They called upon the German bishops not to waiver in their support of the pope.¹⁰⁰ A fourth petition, submitted by a group of nine theologians acting as official DBK consultants for the upcoming Würzburg Synod (1971–1975), urged continued dialogue; Josef Ratzinger, the future pope Benedict XVI, numbered among its signers. Although this last petition recommended continued discussion, it refrained from making any statement about the desired outcome.¹⁰¹ Against this backdrop, the Ger-

man bishops released the list of topics for the synod. Many Catholics had criticized the German bishops for failing to take into account topics favored by German Catholics; however, the celibacy debate—at least indirectly—made the list. On the agenda of Subcommission VII, “Charismas, Ministries, Offices,” was the issue of the admission of married men (*viri probati*) to the priesthood.

Subcommission VII had many issues on its agenda besides celibacy; however, celibacy was the most divisive. The shortage of priests and the lack of candidates for the priesthood in Germany created a sense of urgency. As already noted, canon law allowed for exceptions to the celibacy requirement. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Germany experienced a relatively large influx of former Protestant ministers into the Catholic priesthood. In a 1959 letter to Josef Cardinal Frings of Cologne, the archbishop of Paderborn referenced ten to twelve former Protestant priests engaged in the conversion process. The letter stated that most of these men had lost their trust in the EKD because its leadership acquiesced to too many Communist demands. Although exactly how many former Protestant ministers joined the Catholic clergy is unknown, the number was sufficient for the German bishops to develop a systematic plan for the education and assimilation of these married men into the Catholic priesthood.¹⁰² This influx of married Protestant men into the Catholic Church as a result of the postwar ideological divide between Western and Eastern Europe contributed to a growing belief among many West German Catholics that the ordination of married men held the answer to the priest shortage. The post-Vatican II establishment of a married diaconate in West Germany, the celibacy debate in the Netherlands, and lay dissatisfaction with a celibate Church’s decision on birth control gave further credence to this belief.

Meanwhile in Rome, the Second Ordinary General Assembly of the World Synod of Bishops began in September 1971. The ministerial priesthood was one of two topics on the agenda. Under the watchful eyes of Paul VI, the bishops affirmed celibacy by an overwhelming majority.¹⁰³ Only a few bishops spoke out in favor of liberalizing the celibacy requirement. Two familiar motifs—the superiority of the celibate way of life and the exclusion of the female body from the suprasexual relationship between the Church and God—served as rationales: “While the value of the sign and holiness of Christian marriage is fully recognized, celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom nevertheless more clearly displays that spiritual fruitfulness of generative power of the new law by which the apostle knows that in Christ he is the

father and the mother of his community.”¹⁰⁴ The World Synod of Bishops also rejected the admission of married men to the clergy.¹⁰⁵

The decision of the synod placed the West German bishops in a no-win situation. Prior to the Second Ordinary General Assembly, they had approved discussion of *virī probati* at the Würzburg Synod, and Subcommission VII had already commenced discussion. The West German bishops must have realized that any reversal of their earlier decision would not be well received by synod members, the West German Catholic community, or the media. The disproportionate representation of clergy at the synod, the underrepresentation of women and youth, and the lack of relevance of many topics chosen for the Würzburg Synod had already generated harsh criticism in the Catholic community. A small but vocal minority in the Catholic Church went so far as to accuse the bishops of deliberately manipulating the Würzburg Synod’s agenda.¹⁰⁶ If the DBK took no action and the German synod approved *virī probati*, the West German Catholic Church would find itself in direct conflict with the Vatican, and the West German bishops would face having to make a very public choice between the wishes of the people of God and those of the supreme pontiff in Rome. In the immediate aftermath of the World Bishops’ Synod in Rome, the DBK remained silent, and members of Subcommission VII resolved to continue its discussion of *virī probati*, despite news of the Rome synod.¹⁰⁷

But members of Subcommission VII could reach no consensus on the wisdom or efficacy of admitting married men to the priesthood. Some members supported abolishing the celibacy requirement; they argued that priests should be free to choose between celibacy and marriage, and they envisioned celibate and married priests working side by side in the ministry. Others advocated the introduction of *virī probati* only as an extraordinary measure in areas where the clerical shortage was most acute. Still others wanted no changes to the existing law, insisting that the Church focus its efforts on developing the lay ministry and creating strategies for recruiting young men to the celibate priesthood. All participants recognized that each solution posed problems: If clerical celibacy was no longer required, how was celibacy as a charisma to be maintained? Would the introduction of a married clergy result in the ghettoization or even extinction of the celibate priesthood? If the introduction of *virī probati* was limited to extraordinary cases, how was its exceptional character to be maintained? If no changes were made, what concrete steps could be taken to develop a more positive valuation of celibacy among the clergy and the laity? To facilitate discussion,

the subcommission requested that the DBK provide statistical data on the number of candidates for the priesthood, the age structure of the priesthood, the number of priests who left office, and a breakdown of their reasons for leaving office.¹⁰⁸

In addition to statistical data and treatises generated by subcommission members and approved by expert consultants, Subcommission VII took under advisement numerous unsolicited petitions submitted by various clerical and lay groups. It appointed a member to act as the contact person for the group Priests without Office (Priester ohne Amt). Initially, the subcommission nominated a member of this group to act as an official adviser, but the central commission rejected the nomination on the grounds that "the category 'priests without office' is only the negative dimension of vocation or estate in the Church."¹⁰⁹ Through the designated contact person, Priests without Office lobbied for improvements in the status of laicized priests. They demanded that such priests have access to any Church office open to the laity. They also asked that priests not be forced to leave their home diocese as a condition of laicization.¹¹⁰

Interaction between this group of former priests and commission members gave a human face to abstract data on defections from the priesthood, as did the announcement by Bishop Tenhumberg on June 14, 1972, that a member of Subcommission VII had requested laicization and consequently had been removed as a member of the synod.¹¹¹ According to a paper submitted to the subcommission by Speyer theological students, Rome received 3,800 requests for laicization in 1970, as opposed to 167 in 1963.¹¹² The "talent drain" meant that the remaining priests had to take on responsibility for larger congregations. This phenomenon coincided with a growing expectation on the part of West German congregants that priests would take an active role in contemporary life. In the Würzburg survey, 76 percent of West German Catholics expected the active support of priests in dealing with personal problems, such as marital strife and conflicts between parent and child.¹¹³ Clearly a solution to the priest shortage had to be found in order for the clergy to fulfill old and new expectations.

Yet Subcommission VII was still deadlocked when on April 17, 1972, the DBK prohibited further discussion of *virī probati*: "Based on the detailed discussion about the acceptance of married men of mature age to the priesthood that has already taken place within the Bishops' Conference and in the general public, as well as the results of the Roman synod, the German Bishops' Conference considers it neither in order nor meaningful for the

General Synod of the Dioceses of the Federal Republic of Germany to address anew this question. In accord with previous experiences, it is unlikely that further discussion will provide new arguments.”¹¹⁴ Given the deadlock, the DBK’s conclusion may have seemed reasonable. However, neither commission members nor the Catholic public nor the media reacted positively to the announcement. Few accepted the bishops’ assertion that they did not want to “restrict freedom of discussion.”¹¹⁵

The decision sparked a “crisis of confidence” at the synod. Approximately one-third of the delegates threatened to resign. When the synod presidents attempted to explain the decision on May 13, 1972, a “lively debate” erupted. And shortly thereafter, a “rumor” circulated concerning “name-calling of bishops.” In fact, the rumor gained so much credence that the authors of the official text of the synod felt obligated to deny it. No one, they asserted, challenged the authority of the bishops to make the decision; criticism centered on the manner in which the prohibition had been communicated. A large-scale walkout was averted when several bishops offered public apologies. In his apology, Bishop Stein of Trier spoke of a learning process for the bishops, and Auxiliary Bishop Moser of Rottenburg-Stuttgart also apologized for the manner of communication. At the June meeting of Subcommittee VII, Bishop Tenhumberg clarified the decision to the satisfaction of participants.¹¹⁶

Removing *virī probati* from the Würzburg Synod’s agenda, however, did not bring an end to debate on the topic. Subcommittee VII continued to discuss related topics, such as the appropriate role of laicized priests in the Church, strategies for motivating young men to embrace a celibate way of life, and the point at which candidates for the priesthood should take the vow of celibacy. As we shall see in the next chapter, the removal of *virī probati* from the agenda created a new sense of urgency concerning the need to develop the lay ministry in order to alleviate the pastoral emergency. In doing so, it brought the question of a female diaconate into the foreground.

The Escalating Stakes of the Debate

By the mid-1970s, the scope of the celibacy debate had expanded. The discussion among Church officials about the continued relevance of celibacy, given the shortage of priests, had evolved into a debate on the structure and moral character of the Catholic Church. The media played a crucial role in the escalation of the celibacy debate, as did the entry of Catholic women into the debate in the 1980s. Although Catholic women also under-

stood the debate in terms of a crisis in the structure and moral character of the Church, their critique centered on how preserving a celibate male priesthood reinforced hierarchical and patriarchal structures that oppressed women. In particular, they associated the clerical celibacy requirement with women's exclusion from office in the Church.

During the Würzburg Synod, the secular press paid little attention to the deliberations of Subcommission VII on celibacy and *virī probati*. Instead, reporters focused on behind-the-scenes political intrigue and celibacy scandals. The sheer number of news stories detailing the alleged sexual exploits of priests and cases of political intrigue must have weighed heavily on the West German Catholic Church. From the time of *Humanae Vitae's* publication in 1968 until the end of 1979, *Der Spiegel* published forty-five stories on clerical celibacy in the Catholic Church. A 1970 cover showed a priest standing at the altar with his bride. During this same period, *Die Zeit* published forty-one articles with provocative titles such as "Only the Courageous Still Protest" and "Is Sex of the Devil?" Given the plethora of stories, it would be impossible to cover all of them. However, two scandals exemplified how media coverage contributed to the escalation of the debate. The first scandal pitted the German hierarchy against the former Catholic theologian Hubertus Mynarek. The second scandal centered on the efforts of the papal nuncio Cardinal Bafle to remove Bishop Wilhelm Kempf of Limburg from office because of his appointment of a married priest to a pastoral position.

On November 2, 1972, Hubertus Mynarek, a German theologian and professor at the University of Vienna in Austria, wrote an open letter to the pope. He sent copies of the letter to Cardinal König of Vienna and to the press. In the twenty-two-page letter, he announced his resignation from the priesthood and his separation from the Church: "After long and careful consideration and in the wake of numerous disappointing confrontations with the negative realities of the Roman Catholic Church, I have arrived at the decision, demanded by my conscience, to separate from this institution, composed as an absolute monarchy, its power structure quintessentially authoritarian."¹¹⁷ The Austrian and German press reprinted extensive excerpts of the letter. Mynarek's decision to leave the priesthood and the Catholic Church created a small stir. Most Catholic priests who surrendered office endeavored to maintain a continued presence in the Church and thus did not publicize their decision. The separation of such a prominent clergyman from the German Church had not happened since 1953.¹¹⁸

Yet Mynarek's very public separation from the Church marked only the

beginning of the controversy. Following his resignation, several publishers approached Mynarek about writing a book on his experiences in the Church. In the resulting book, *Herren und Knechte der Kirche*, Mynarek named five prominent German and Austrian theologians whom he alleged had secret sex lives. Anticipating a best seller, the Catholic publishing house of C. Bertelsmann sent advance copies to the news media. In their book reviews, *Der Spiegel* and *Stern* reprinted the names of the five accused theologians. All five theologians issued disclaimers, which both magazines carried. At this point, on the recommendation of its attorneys, C. Bertelsmann announced that it would not proceed with publication. The DBK initiated legal action against Mynarek. A Munich court ordered him to pay between 10,000 and 20,000 DM per theologian, plus court costs.¹¹⁹

Mynarek's case was not the first civil suit instigated by the West German Catholic Church against a former priest because of statements on celibacy. In 1969, Cardinal Höffner sued Edmund Steffensky for telling the *Kölner Anzeiger* that priests were married "to a thousand things from good food and drink, moving on up to masturbation, female friends, and homosexuality." However, unlike that against Mynarek, the case against Steffensky was dropped by the Church.¹²⁰

But the drama did not end there. In 1978, Mynarek published a second book on sexual exploits of clergy—*Eros und Klerus*. The new book did not name names but depicted "typical" cases of clerical sexual encounters. These typical cases included rape and child abuse. The book also described incidents in which priests pressured women to have abortions in order to keep their sexual exploits secret. The Katholische Nachrichten-Agentur (KNA) sued Mynarek and lost. In fact, a Bonn court ordered the KNA editor, Konrad W. Kraemer, to desist from referring to Mynarek as a scoundrel (*Schmutzfink*).¹²¹

Media coverage of the Mynarek affair diverged widely. *Der Spiegel* championed Mynarek as a reformer fighting against an antiquated, authoritarian Church; *Die Zeit* denounced Mynarek's two books as "trashy," "self-serving," and "hypocritical."¹²² Despite their very different conclusions, both news-magazines framed their narratives as moral indictments—in the former case against the Catholic Church and in the latter case against Mynarek.

The second incident generated greater public outrage. In August 1973, the papal nuncio Cardinal Bafle sent two confidential letters to the Vatican state secretary, Jean Villot. In the first letter, Bafle advocated appointing a coadjutor for the Diocese of Limburg. In the second letter, he made the

“humble suggestion” that Bishop Kempf be pressured to resign for reasons of health and that an apostolic administrator be appointed in his place. Bafile cited Otto Franzmann’s recent appointment to a leading pastoral role in the parish of Maria Hilf in Frankfurt as a justification. Franzmann, a former priest in the Old Catholic Church (Alt-Katholische Kirche), was married and the father of two children.¹²³

In 1971, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) had authorized Bishop Kempf to assimilate three married priests into his diocese. However, the authorization stipulated that the priests not be assigned to posts that placed them in regular contact with the Catholic public. Bafile believed Kempf’s actions set a dangerous precedent: “It cannot be taken lightly what effects this measure will have—not only in Germany—on the opponents of celibacy.”¹²⁴

Neither Bishop Kempf nor Cardinal Döpfner, chair of the DBK, knew of Bafile’s plan when the press broke the story. According to press reports, an anonymous Vatican official had sent a copy of Bafile’s letter to a group of priests in Kempf’s diocese. In an accompanying letter, the Vatican official stated that he wanted to expose the methods of papal nuncios, which he labeled “more terrible than those of the Soviets.” The Limburg priests gave the letters to the press. The ecclesial and secular media published excerpts, unleashing widespread protests in the West German Catholic Church. Prominent theologians, such as Norbert Greinacher, publicly denounced Bafile’s actions.¹²⁵ The DBK and ZdK issued public declarations supporting Bishop Kempf.¹²⁶

Bafile’s surreptitious move to remove Kempf from office had backfired. While press coverage of the Mynarek affair had been divided, the German press overwhelmingly condemned Bafile’s actions. Both *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit* compared Kempf favorably to John XXIII. In contrast, they depicted Paul VI as an “ascetic prince” whose ruling style was reminiscent of the Grand Inquisition.¹²⁷

As charges of authoritarianism and moral depravity saturated the headlines, enrollment at seminaries declined, lay confidence in Church leadership diminished, and the number of priests abandoning office increased. According to official Vatican statistics, roughly 13,000 priests in the world church were laicized between 1963 and 1970. However, this number did not include priests who left office without requesting laicization. Factoring in this second group, experts estimated the total number of priests who left office at somewhere between 22,000 and 25,000.¹²⁸

Under John Paul II, the liberal dispensation policy came to an abrupt end. Shortly after taking office in 1978, John Paul II appointed a special CDF commission to investigate laicization and celibacy dispensations. As a result, the Vatican released new guidelines on October 14, 1980. Henceforth, dispensations would be granted only to priests who had surrendered their office years ago and thus no longer could abandon their current life situation but wished to reconcile with the Church and to priests who never should have been ordained (coerced into office or lacked sufficient psychological maturity to accept the celibacy vow). Additionally, dispensation now required extensive documentation and examination under oath in order to establish that the applicant met the criteria. The new guidelines also stressed that dispensation from celibacy did not constitute “a right which the Church must recognize indiscriminately as belonging to all its priests.”¹²⁹ With the introduction of the new rules, dispensations from celibacy once again became rare. As a result, priests who were unhappy with their vow of celibacy either abandoned office without the blessing of the Church or opted to have secret sexual liaisons.

In the 1980s, women directly affected by the ban on celibacy added their voices to the debate. In April 1983, Anne Dördelmann-Lueg published an advertisement in the German Catholic journal *Publik Forum* for a solidarity group for women in intimate relationships with priests. The advertisement led to the founding of the Initiative Group for Women Affected by Celibacy (Initiativgruppe vom Zölibat betroffener Frauen). One year later, an association for married priests and their wives was founded in Germany—Vereinigung katholischer Priester und ihrer Frauen. Shortly thereafter, a series of books appeared in Germany detailing the celibacy debate from the perspective of the women in intimate relationships with priests and the children of these relationships.¹³⁰

The emergence of this new voice in the debate coincided with growing discontent among young West German Catholic women with the Catholic Church. Many of these women resented the Church’s teachings on sexuality, the inferior status assigned to women, and the role of the male celibate clergy in fostering these views. Vatican II had proclaimed women’s equal status in the common priesthood, yet twenty years later few women held positions with decision-making power in the Church. Instead, their positions accentuated traditional female virtues—caretaking and household work. Influenced by the emancipatory rhetoric of religious and secular feminists and by new options in the secular sphere, many young Catholic women no longer

accepted their exclusion from the decision-making bodies of the Church. For these women, the Church's preservation of a male celibate clergy fostered a negative valuation of female sexuality and by extension a pejorative assessment of women.¹³¹

By the early 1980s, this discontent led women to join the inner migration already taking place within the Church. This migration took two forms. Some Catholics, who disagreed with elements of the Church's teachings but did not wish to separate from the Church, created solidarity groups. These groups often focused on one issue, such as celibacy, liturgical reform, or women's ordination; all of them envisioned their protests as part of a larger grassroots effort to redefine the theology and structure of the Catholic Church. Paradoxically, Catholics involved in this form of inner migration became more engaged in religious life, while at the same time distancing themselves from the official Church. Other Catholics simply distanced themselves from the Church. They stopped attending mass and participating in Catholic organizations. Although they did not officially separate from the Church, the Church ceased to play a significant role in their lives.

This inner migration did not go unnoticed by the official Church. When it became apparent in the early 1980s that Catholic women were not immune to this trend, the German hierarchy became alarmed; Catholic women's loyalty could no longer be assumed. In response, the DBK attempted to work with the two largest West German Catholic women's organizations, the Katholische Frauengemeinschaft Deutschlands (kfd) and the Katholischer Deutscher Frauenbund (KDFB) to stem the tide.¹³² However, the Vatican's refusal to change its position on celibacy, on issues of reproduction, and on women's ordination limited the efficacy of any efforts undertaken at the national or local level in West Germany.

. . .

In this chapter, we have seen how the celibacy debate began as a relatively small component of a larger concern among Church officials about the post-1945 shortage of priests. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the issue of clerical celibacy took center stage, and an internal Catholic debate escalated into a public debate on the moral and structural authority of the Church. Via the media, Catholics and non-Catholics took an active role, and the Church became trapped in a public relations nightmare that further undermined its efforts to recruit new priests. The debate metamorphosed again in the early 1980s when Catholic women entered the fray. Influenced by new theological and secular conceptions of womanhood, Catholic women drew connections

between the preservation of a male celibate priesthood and women's oppression in the Church and in German society. In this context, the debate on clerical celibacy became inextricably linked to women's exclusion from Church office, including the priesthood. However, not all Catholic women supported change. Conservative women's groups received the support of an increasingly conservative German episcopate, further alienating moderates and progressives. For conservative Catholics, the Church's theological understanding of earthly marriage and of the suprasexual marriage between Christ and the Church became the lynchpin of Catholic identity and Catholic politics. In closing, it is important to note that widespread, substantiated allegations of child abuse by clergy did not surface in the German Church until 2010. Consequently, the clerical celibacy debate in Germany played out very differently during this time period than in the United States, where charges of child abuse surfaced in the 1980s, reminding us that although the clerical celibacy debate was transnational in scope, its articulation had distinctly national features.