**Twelfth Century Clerical Celibacy**

The starting point for my MA dissertation was the declaration by the abbess of the convent of the Paraclete that she preferred to be ‘whore’ than ‘wife’, a statement that illustrated how little I understood medieval clerical relationships. This simple quote led me to the 600 year journey of the church as it defined what was meant by a Christian marriage. That was complicated enough, but the position for Heloise and Abelard was different, for they were not part of the laity, but of the Church and their romance was caught up in the European wide attempt by the papacy to enforce celibacy on its clergy.

The reform papacy set out to define the clergy in opposition to lay aristocrats, and sexual abstinence was to be a key discriminator. My study set itself the task of attempting to judge how effective the papacy was in enforcing this new policy, how much difference it made to the actual behaviour of the clergy in England in the twelfth century. Did the Pope’s councils, his main method of promulgating his new rulings, actually achieve anything? To find out I needed to run a longitudinal survey of the sexual behaviour of clergy almost 1000 years ago....

Existing literature is equally confused; for every writer who claims that the 12th century clergy normally took wives and mistresses there is a writer who says they were generally sexually continent; some claim that the Conquest cleansed a corrupt Anglo-Saxon clergy, others that the conquest made no difference. There was little consensus, though perhaps the most authoritative statements came from the father and son Professsors Brooke; Zachary Brooke maintains that no married bishops were appointed after 1170 and Christopher’s view is that clerical marriage amongst the higher clergy ‘died out’ in the mid twelfth century.

**Methodology**

I chose 1070 as the starting point for the study because the council of that year represents the real start of the post-Conquest Church in England. The death of Ealdred and the removal of Archbishop Stigand (Canterbury & Winchester!) and his associates gave William of Normandy an opportunity to bring in his own men and reorganise the church along Norman lines. There were two groups of the higher clergy open to study: firstly the bishops and the cathedral canons. The makeup of the Chapters of many cathedrals can be traced from the *Fasti Ecclesiae Angelica*, the principal reference work detailing the cathedral clergy on a diocesan basis. I used these lists to discover how many Cathedral canons had sons who in turn became Cathedral canons. An entry such as: “Ranulf was son of Dean Erchemar and had a son Ranulf” leaves little doubt that both Ranulf and Dean Erchemar were not sexually continent.

For the purposes of tracking changes over the period, I gave each fatherly canon a date. This is rather problematic. A canon may have three mentions in the *Fasti Ecclesiae Angelica* across a period of 30 years, or he may have no specific record, only being referred to as the father of a canon. In general I used the date of a canon’s first mention, or took 20 years off the first reference to his son. While this method is inevitably approximate, I attempted to apply it consistently.

Bishops were public figures many of whom left a record of their lives. A systematic interrogation of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, focussed reading of the major chronicles of the period (including Eadmer, Hugh the Chanter, William of Malmesbury, Oderic Vitalis, John of Worcester, Gervase of Canterbury, Henry of Huntingdon and Gerald of Wales) allowed me to create a picture of the behaviour of many of the bishops in the period under study. Specific references to married clergy are rare, and examples such as Bishop Roger of Salisbury whose wife and children are known by name are highly unusual.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The other problem with the chronicle record is establishing its veracity. Chronicles were not neutral, objective accounts of what we might now call history. They represent a view, usually a very partial one! It is clearly possible that accusations of sexual misconduct were made for personal or political gain rather than as a matter of record. So when we read in William of Malmesbury that Walter, Bishop of Hereford, “died while raping a seamstress” what are we to make of this? It could mean that William had a score to settle with Walter, that William’s patrons had a score to settle with Walter, that Walter was lewd and disreputable person and it is believable that he died while raping a seamstress. Or that this is an accurate report of what actually happened.

An even more difficult case is that of Geoffrey Ridel, who became Bishop of Ely in 1173 having previously been Chief justice of Henry II. According to De Diceto he was accused of ‘incontinence’ but denied that he had *while in holy orders.* However, according to Roger of Hovedene he was married *after* becoming bishop. Here we have a veritable surfeit of sources – two references to the sexual behaviour of a senior churchman, but they differ.

Geoffrey’s successor at Ely was William Longchamp, of whom Gerald of Wales tells us ‘*he made homosexuality so common that heterosexuals were ridiculed at court and that when the bishop undressed a young woman dressed as a man he wouldn’t touch her when he found she was a girl ‘although she was very beautiful and ripe for the pleasures of the marriage bed*.’’[[2]](#footnote-2)

While many of Gerald’s most entertaining comments are about the commonality of clerical sexuality, and this is another one, it has to be borne in mind that he was presenting himself as the ‘reform’ candidate for Bishop of St Davids, the man who would sweep away the existing corruption. It therefore served his purposes to expose as much of that corruption as possible!

Despite the problems with these methods, I was able to create a large spreadsheet of attested incontinence amongst the higher clergy. This is an example page....

Collating these results created the following table. It shows how many bishops in each 25 year period I deemed to be sexually incontinent, and the number of canons I identified as father of other canons across the same period.

**Table 2:**

**Incontinent bishops and canons**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **1070-95** | **1096-20** | **1121-45** | **1146-70** | **1171-95** | **TOTAL** |
| **Total no. of bishops appointed** | 38 | 18 | 30 | 22 | 35 | 143 |
| **Incontinent** | 9 | 5 | 10 | 3 | 6 | 33 |
| **% incontinent bishops** | **24%** | **28%** | **33%** | **14%** | **17%** | **23%** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Total no. of incontinent canons** | 9 | 16 | 20 | 13 | 16 | 74 |

I then used the data to produce a record of incontinence by diocese. Once again we have to be aware that the quantity of information collected varies dramatically between the excesses of London and the sparcity of Litchfield or Exeter. Unsurprisingly, therefore, London records the highest known number of canons who are identified as married, and its four incontinent bishops mean that 50% were incontinent in the period of study. Ely, which was not founded until 1109 and with only three bishops across the entire period, manages a 100% record for incontinence. Monastic Durham has 43% and Litchfield, York, Salisbury and Norwich have a third of their bishops incontinent. Looking at our most local bishoprics, Chichester recorded 29% of bishops as incontinent and Winchester 20% .

On the other hand I could find no reference to the incontinence of any Bishop of Exeter, Bath, Rochester or Carlisle. In the latter case there was only one bishop in our timeframe, but Bath had six bishops, Exeter eight and Rochester ten.

The monastic chroniclers were confident that monastic chapters would be more inclined to celibacy, not something my analysis supported. The data suggests that in fact 22% of monastic bishops were incontinent an identical figure to that for the secular sees. However, if we look at the numbers of canons identified as having children then we find very few in the Monastic chapters, just ten of the 74 we have recorded.

The data can also be split to show us how many non-celibate bishops were appointed by each King. We can note that while William Rufus seems to live up to his stereotype, some will be surprised at the quality of Edward the Confessor’s bishops.

**Table 5:**

**% incontinent bishops appointed by king**

The bishops can also be charted according to profession. This suggests that those who have served a King in a personal capacity before taking office are more likely to be sexually active.

**Table 6:**

**Incontinent bishops appointed by profession**

But the primary aim of the study was to judge whether the papal rule as promulgated by councils had any effect on the behaviour of the higher clergy. So the final variable which needed to be added was the number of councils which had the enforcement of clerical celibacy as a major objective.

With some nervousness I then collated these various results to see if there was any correlation. The data had been generated using different sources and the results included a percentage (bishops), a raw number (canons) and the number of councils. This assembly of data had all been gleaned from analysing the very small amount of data available. Could it possibly show any useful or meaningful correlations?

**Graph 1:**

**Incontinent bishops and canons from 1070 – 1195**

The above graph suggests a clear correlation between bishops and canons, and tells a coherent story. Starting with around a quarter of bishops incontinent in the early part of the Conqueror’s reign, this fraction rises across the period of Archbishop Anselm’s primacy and continues to rise even as the councils of the 1120s set ever higher standards for priests’ sexual behaviour. However, in the quarter following this flurry of councils there is a sharp fall, from 33% to just 14%. This pattern is mirrored almost exactly by the headcount of canons.

It also appears that not only do the incidences of incontinence drop dramatically after the rapid sequence of five councils, but it starts to rise again after a long period without councils focusing on celibacy. This certainly suggests a causal link between the number of councils dealing with celibacy and the resultant incontinence of the higher clergy.

Taking all this into consideration my analysis would suggest that the councils of Lanfranc (1076) and Anselm (1102) had little impact, but the councils of 1120s and 1130s did in some way affect the behaviour of those appointed to the higher clergy a generation later.

The analysis also casts doubt on the views of the eminent Professors Brooke with which I started. Zachary’s view was that no married bishops were appointed after 1170, while my survey suggest there were six (John de Greenford, Geoffrey Ridel, Richard Fitzneale, Richard of Ilchester, William Longchamp and Gwion at Bangor). This data also suggests that Christopher Brooke’s view that clerical marriage amongst the higher clergy ‘died out’ in the mid twelfth century again may be questioned by this data. The evidence we have collated suggests that there are clear signs of a **rise** in incontinence in the final quarter of the century, rather than a continued falling away. That this rise was perceived at the time is confirmed by another flurry of both Lateran and English councils reinforcing the condemnations on clerical marriage and inherited benefices, a final attempt to enforce the papal line.

The full results of this survey, including a detailed record of every single account of sexual incontinence is currently being compiled onto a database at [www.clericalcelibacy.co.uk](http://www.clericalcelibacy.co.uk). This exercise should be completed early next year, and other researchers will then be invited to continue contributing to this record.

My final question is for your good selves. I have probably gone as far with this research as I can without embarking on a full PhD. However, I would like to do some work in a more local surrey context building on this work, and am open to suggestions as to how I might do this.

1. We know Matilda of Ramsbury’s name largely from the accounts in Oderic Vitalis of her defence of Roger’s castles against King Stephen and her capitulation when Stephen threatened to execute her son in front of the besieged castle walls. OV Vol VI, Book XIII, p533. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *GC Opera Vol IV p423* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)