Episcopal Virginity in Medieval England

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In his classic study of medieval sainthood, André Vauchez outlines the qualities that characterized a saint-bishop in mid-twelfth-century Europe: "He was not expected to perform ascetic exploits or shine as a scholar, but be sober and temperate. What was crucial was that he should be of good morals, and above all demonstrate the values of a leader and administrator. The chief virtues demanded of him were benevolence and discretion, moderation and balance."[1] Although Vauchez goes on to outline his theory that, from the twelfth century onward, the post-Gregorian "drive to monasticize the episcopate" led to increased emphasis on the celibacy and virginity of certain bishops, it is clear that he considers the episcopal office to be the central component of episcopal sainthood.[2] Despite the recent increase in scholarly interest in clerical masculinity and sexuality, historians of gender and sexuality have done relatively little to contradict Vauchez's findings. Indeed, the sexuality of medieval bishops has been the subject of surprisingly few studies, and to date there has been no coherent overview study of episcopal sexuality in later medieval England. Those scholars who have considered episcopal sexuality (notably Megan McLaughlin and Jacqueline Murray) have focused their attention on the problem of celibacy and the challenges it posed for male clerics.[3] Only once has virginity been proposed

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[1] André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 287.

[2] Ibid., 287–88, 296.

[3] Megan McLaughlin, *Sex, Gender and Episcopal Authority in an Age of Reform, 1000–1122* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and especially her article "The Bishop in the Bedroom: Witnessing Episcopal Sexuality in an Age of Reform," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (2011): 17–34; Jacqueline Murray, "Mystical Castration: Some Reflections on Peter Abelard, Hugh of Lincoln and Sexual Control," in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray (New York: Routledge, 1999), 73–91; Murray, "The Law of Sin That Is in My Members: The Problem

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as a defining characteristic of the medieval saint bishop, by Patricia Cullum in her 2007 essay on the cult of Richard Scrope, archbishop of York.[4]

This historiographical failure to consider virginity as a significant episcopal quality is attributable to two main factors: a tendency to consider virginity as a primarily female attribute, and a disinclination to grapple with the complexities of medieval sexual terminologies.[5] The literature on medieval sainthood is substantial, rich, and varied, but on one point it is almost unanimous: sexuality, in particular virginity, was of far greater significance to female saints than to their male counterparts. According to Robert Bartlett, virginity "always mattered more in the case of women. . . . [T]here are cases of male saints praised for maintaining their virginity, but they did not form a large, identifiable category in the way that female virgins did."[6] Some historians have gone even further and argued that when a woman lost her virginity she effectively destroyed her potential to be considered truly holy.[7] We have little reason to doubt that virginity was one of the defining characteristics of the medieval female saint and that the virgin-martyr was a particularly important figure in contemporary piety across Europe.[8] Yet according to Kathleen Kelly, "The male virgin never takes centre-stage in the saint's life," and Sarah Salih has argued that virginity had only limited significance for clerics and virtually no value for laymen.[9]

While some scholars have downplayed the significance of medieval male virginity, "many modern editors and translators," as Cullum has noted, "have found the idea of male virginity problematic and not addressed its implications."[10] This tendency stems in part from the complicated terminologies of sexual abstinence and the peculiar difficulty inherent in distinguishing between male chastity, celibacy, and virginity.[11] Modern definitions

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of Male Embodiment," in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval England*, ed. Samantha Riches and Sarah Salih (London: Routledge, 2002), 9–22.

[4] Patricia Cullum, "'Virginitas' and 'Virilitas' in the Life and Cult of Richard Scrope," in *Richard Scrope: Archbishop, Rebel, Martyr*, ed. Jeremy Goldberg (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2007), 86–99.

[5] For the long history of the assumption that virginity is primarily a female condition, see Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta, 2007).

[6] Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 202.

[7] Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 243.

[8] For a summary of the significance of their cults, see Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead*, 535–41, and for a more detailed analysis focusing on England, see Karen Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[9] Kathleen Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 104; Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 18.

[10] Cullum, "'Virginitas' and 'Virilitas,'" 93.

[11] See John Arnold, "The Labour of Continence: Masculinity and Clerical Virginity," in *Medieval Virginities*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2003), 102–18; and Maud Burnett McInerney, "Rhetoric, Power and Integrity in the Passion of the Virgin Martyr," in *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle*

are based on the assumption that these are relatively uncomplicated physical states: a virgin is someone who has not yet had sex, while celibacy and chastity are used virtually interchangeably to refer to a nonvirgin's temporary state of sexual abstinence.[12] Medieval definitions were rather more complex. A chaste man was usually one who did not engage in sexual activity, but the term could encompass those who engaged only in licit sexual activity, that is, marital reproductive intercourse. Technically, a celibate was simply an unmarried individual, although (as Ruth Mazo Karras has pointed out) in a medieval Christian context this should also imply chastity, especially for a priest.[13]

The picture was further complicated by the medieval tendency to embrace (and indeed emphasize) an individual's mental state alongside his physical experiences. This meant that a cleric was only truly chaste if he not only renounced all sexual partners but also eschewed all forms of sexual activity, including masturbation and impure thoughts.[14] Furthermore, it was possible both to lose one's virginity without having sexual relations of any kind and to regain spiritual virginity even after sexual relations had taken place.[15] The deeply problematic nature of clerical sexuality, especially of clerical virginity, is illustrated by the case of a young monk who had been physically attacked by a demon. Whenever this monk prostrated himself in prayer, "an evil spirit approaches him, places its hands on his genital organs, and does not stop rubbing his body with its own until he is so agitated that he is polluted by an emission of semen." The young monk was otherwise of good behavior. Yet when Bishop Hildegard of Le Mans (1096–1125) was asked to consider the case, he ruled that the monk could no longer be considered a virgin, since he had been "polluted . . . through masturbation" and had been tempted by the devil to consent to a "shameful act of fornication."[16]

Ages and Renaissance, ed. Kathleen Kelly and Marina Leslie (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 57–58.

[12] There is, however, some debate over the exact nature of the sexual acts required to lose one's virginity; see, for example, Melina Bersamin et al., "Defining Virginity and Abstinence: Adolescents' Interpretations of Sexual Behaviors," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 41, no. 2 (2007): 182–88.

[13] Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 29.

[14] Jacqueline Murray, "Men's Bodies, Men's Minds: Seminal Emissions and Sexual Anxiety in the Middle Ages," *Annual Review of Sex Research* 8, no. 1 (1997): 1–26.

[15] On the idea of spiritual virginity and its loss, see Patricia Cullum, "Give Me Chastity: Masculinity and Attitudes to Chastity and Celibacy in the Middle Ages," *Gender and History* 25, no. 3 (2013): 624. On virginity as something that could be regained, at least in a spiritual sense, see Clarissa Atkinson, "Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass: The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Family History* 8, no. 2 (1983): 131–43; and Irven Resnick, "Peter Damian on the Restoration of Virginity: A Problem for Medieval Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 39, no. 1 (1988): 125–34.

[16] John Hagen, ed., *Gerald of Wales: The Jewel of the Church* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 177–78.

These conceptual and linguistic complications have undoubtedly served as a barrier to modern understandings of medieval sexualities, and they have resulted in the significance of male virginity being downplayed by students of medieval holy men.[17] Yet the example of the medieval English episcopate demonstrates the extent to which this phenomenon has been underestimated. By using a case study of this culturally significant group of religious men, we can begin to explore the significance of virginity to later medieval holy men, and we can deepen our understanding of episcopal sexuality in a crucial phase of the formation of clerical identities.

Between the late eleventh and early fourteenth centuries episcopal sainthood experienced something of a golden age.[18] This trend was apparent across western Europe but particularly in England: the country produced over half of the bishops officially canonized during this period, and nine of the fourteen canonization processes held in the country between 1198 and 1431 related to former members of the English episcopate.[19] Many more English bishops were the subject of popular cults, inspiring widespread devotion, imitation, and scrutiny even though they were never officially sanctified. Moreover, the lives of these numerous saintly bishops are well documented, since they became the subject of detailed contemporary biographies and of comment in numerous chronicles.[20] Several bishops also produced their own writings, including substantial letter collections and a number of tracts on spiritual matters. The survival of this rich body of source material makes it possible to do a relatively in-depth study of episcopal lives and the ways in which they were presented and understood.

Given the historiographical insistence that virginity is, at best, a secondary characteristic of male saints, one might expect to find only passing references to cases of remarkable sexual purity among the English episcopate. On the contrary: virtually every English saint-bishop of the twelfth and thirteenth

[17] The exception to this is the virgin king, a well-studied ideal that became prominent in the eleventh century. See Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 113–31; and Joanna Huntingdon, "Edward the Celibate, Edward the Saint: Virginity in the Construction of Edward the Confessor," in Bernau, Evans, and Salih, *Medieval Virginities*, 119–39.

[18] This era might be described as a second golden age of episcopal sainthood, since the saint-bishop was also a significant figure in early medieval Francia. One of the most prominent cults was that of St. Martin of Tours, on which see Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead*, 17–21, and Sulpicius Severus's *vita* in *Early Christian Lives*, ed. Carolinne White (London: Penguin, 1998), 129–59.

[19] For this period, and especially the thirteenth century, as a significant period in the history of episcopal sainthood, especially in England, see Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 257–60. Vauchez also provides a useful overview of the characteristics of the saint-bishop at 292–310.

[20] For valuable studies of the English episcopal hagiography of this period, see Hugh Lawrence, *St Edmund of Abingdon: A Study of Hagiography and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960); Richard Southern, *St Anselm and His Biographer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963); and Michael Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006).

centuries, whether officially canonized or merely the focus of a popular cult, is explicitly stated to have been a virgin and thus to have gone far beyond the "good morals" that Vauchez described as a key feature of this type of saint. Thus William of Malmesbury described Wulfstan of Worcester (1062–95) as "so exceptionally chaste that, when his life was ended, he displayed in heaven the sign of his virginity which was still intact."[21] Similarly, nearly two hundred years later, Thomas Cantilupe, bishop of Hereford (1275–82), was commended for his purity and virginity by his one-time confessor, Robert Kilwardby.[22] Richard Wyche of Chichester (1244–53) refused marriage to a noble virgin and preserved his own virginity until his death.[23] John Dalderby of Lincoln (1300–1320) remained "pure and innocent" for his entire life.[24] As a twelve-year-old boy, Edmund of Abingdon (later archbishop of Canterbury, 1233–40) "vowed to give his virginity to Mary, the chaste mother of God, and promised to preserve it all the days of his life"—a vow that he was reputed to have kept.[25] Of course, not all bishops discovered their religious vocation at such a young age. Thomas Becket spent many years as a royal servant, exposed to the many temptations of the world, before becoming archbishop of Canterbury (1162–70), but he too was celebrated as a lifelong virgin. Indeed, his sexual purity was a key component in the case for his sanctity, demonstrating that he was possessed of a lifelong commitment to God that went far beyond conventional piety.[26]

[21] David Preest, trans., *William of Malmesbury: The Deeds of the Bishops of England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), 187. Wulfstan's sexuality is discussed in Kirsten Fenton, "The Question of Masculinity in William of Malmesbury's Presentation of Wulfstan of Worcester," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 28 (2006): 124–37, although her focus is on celibacy rather than virginity.

[22] Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 541.

[23] David Jones, ed., *Saint Richard of Chichester: The Sources for His Life* (Lewes: Sussex Record Society, 1995), 101–3. On the sexuality and masculinity of Richard Wyche, including further discussion of some of the passages considered here, see Katherine Harvey, "Perfect Bishop, Perfect Man? Masculinity, Restraint and the Episcopal Body in the Life of St Richard of Chichester," *Southern History* 35 (2013): 1–22.

[24] R. E. G. Cole, "Proceedings Relative to the Canonisation of John de Dalderby, Bishop of Lincoln," *Associated Architectural Societies' Reports and Papers* 33, no. 1 (1916): 243–76, 253, 257, 263–64.

[25] "In conspectu igitur sui confessoris cum virginitatem suam illibatam castissime Dei genetrici Marie dare et vovere et omnibus vite sue diebus conservare promisisset" (Lawrence, *St Edmund*, 224–25, 285).

[26] See, for example, Herbert of Bosham's account of Thomas's youthful continence in his *Vita Sancti Thomae: Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. James Robertson and Joseph Sheppard, 7 vols. (London: HMSO, 1875–85), 3:166–67. Becket's early sexual behavior has been much discussed, usually in relation to his supposed "conversion" at the time of his promotion to Canterbury. For recent commentaries (most of them at least mildly skeptical about the archbishop's virginity), see Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 45–47; Staunton, *Becket and His Biographers*, 77–82; Hanna Vollrath, "Was Thomas Becket Chaste? Understanding Episodes in the Becket Lives," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 28 (2006): 124–37; John Guy, *Thomas Becket* (London: Penguin, 2012), 122–25.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that while virginity may not have been an absolute requirement for a male saint, it was certainly viewed in a very positive light. Consequently, hagiographers were usually very keen to demonstrate that their subject possessed this virtue, and they did so by deploying one or more of a small set of literary motifs. Bishops of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries lived very much in the world, and the growing emphasis on pastoral care meant that they were obliged to exercise and administer the care of souls to both sexes. In fulfilling his duties, the bishop would be forced into contact with the primary source of sexual temptation: women.[27] The bishop's attitude to the female sex is therefore an important theme of many episcopal *vitae*. Numerous bishops were said to have avoided unnecessary contact with women, among them Robert de Béthune, bishop of Hereford (1131–48), of whom William de Wycombe wrote:

> Moreover, concerning the preservation and proof of his chastity, as far as we know, he was wont never to fix his eyes on a woman. For he had read that he who so fixes his eyes is the abomination of the Lord. He nowhere presumed to sit or speak alone with a woman except in the presence of appointed companions, not even in confession or any secret matter. What therefore may be thought concerning the purity of his flesh, I have said in a few words, that as far as I know, he died an old man still a virgin.[28]

Like his predecessor at Hereford, Thomas Cantilupe sought to avoid the company of women. From his youth he would draw his hood over his face when a woman passed, and as bishop he scorned the company of the female sex, including his own sisters.[29] Contact with women was dangerous for two reasons: first (and most obviously), because the bishop might fall prey to lust; and second, because medieval optical theory suggested that gazing on an object would cause the onlooker to absorb some of the properties

[27] For an investigation of medieval stereotypes of woman as temptress, see Georges Duby, *Women of the Twelfth Century: Eve and the Church* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

[28] "Proinde quod ad custodiam et argumentum pudicitiae pertinere dinoscitur; nunquam oculum in foeminam figere consuevit. Legerat enim quomodo abhominatio est Domino defigens oculum. Nusquam solus cum sola sedere vel loqui nisi coram positis arbitris praesumsit, nec de consessione quidem vel quolibet arcano. Quid igitur de mundicia carnis ejus sentiendum sit, cito dixerim. Quod scire potui, virgo senex obiit" (Henry Wharton, ed., *Anglia Sacra*, 2 vols. [London, 1691], 2:309). The translation of this passage is taken from B. J. Parkinson, "The Life of Robert de Béthune by William de Wycombe: Translation with Introduction and Notes" (B.Litt. thesis, Oxford University, 1951), 159–60. For a recent discussion of this source, see Matthew Mesley, "The Construction of Episcopal Identity: The Meaning and Function of Episcopal Depictions within Latin Saints' Lives of the Long Twelfth Century" (Ph.D. diss., University of Exeter, 2009), 113–77.

[29] Christopher Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 203.

of that object—in this case, the sexual corruption inherent in all women.[30] However, even the most pious man would sometimes be forced to endure the female presence. A few bishops deliberately sought out the company of women in order to demonstrate that they could stare temptation in the face and still resist it. Edmund of Abingdon seems to have been one such man. But such a strategy was not without its problems, since Abingdon's visits to holy women prompted scandalous rumors that greatly upset his then-servant, Richard Wyche.[31]

Kelly has argued that the "seduction narrative," in which male virginity is put to the test by a female temptress, declined in importance in the twelfth century.[32] However, hagiographical depictions of episcopal encounters with women were strongly influenced by one of the best known of such narratives, Gregory the Great's *Life of St. Benedict*. That saint's lifelong avoidance of vice was endangered when he was assailed by the "memory of a woman he had seen some time earlier." This memory produced in him "a feeling of carnal temptation stronger than any the holy man had ever experienced." Benedict's lust was extinguished only when he threw himself naked in a patch of thorns and brambles and received heavenly grace. After this, "he managed to control the temptation of sexual pleasure so completely that he never experienced it in the slightest."[33] This Benedictine model is echoed in several episcopal *vitae* in which the bishop as a young man is tempted by a woman who attempts to seduce him. He resists (often forcefully) and thereafter finds it easier to remain celibate.[34]

Adam of Eynsham, biographer of St. Hugh of Lincoln (1186–1200), made explicit the parallels between his subject and St. Benedict, claiming that "Hugh, like Benedict, had been fiercely assailed by temptation, like Benedict he had defended himself, and like him had conquered and overcome."[35] Although William of Malmesbury does not invoke St. Benedict by name, his lengthy account of the youthful experiences of Wulfstan of Worcester is clearly modeled on the life of that saint. The adolescent Wulfstan was devoted to chastity, but then a young girl "designed by nature for shipwrecking chastity and luring men into pleasure" began to "grab his hand, wink at him, and do everything that signifies virginity on the verge

[30] Christopher Woolgar, "The Social Life of the Senses: Experiencing the Self, Others and Environments," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Newhauser (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 24.

[31] Jones, *Saint Richard of Chichester*, 102.

[32] Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 97.

[33] Severus, *Early Christian Lives*, 168–69.

[34] This story is also retold by Gerald of Wales. See Hagen, *The Jewel of the Church*, 163–64.

[35] "Nam et iste modo sicut quondam Benedictus, carnis temptatione uehementissime impugnatus est, set cum Benedicto et Hugo repugnauit, cum Benedicto uicit, cum Benedicto triumphauit" (Decima Douie and Hugh Farmer, eds., *Magna vita sancti Hugonis*, 2 vols. [London: Clarendon Press, 1961], 2:56). This quote is part of a longer passage comparing the two saints, in which it is stated that St. Hugh had read about St. Benedict.

of departure." Wulfstan was deeply affected by her "alluring gestures" but fortunately came to his senses, wept, and took himself off to "a spot bristling with thorns and brambles." Falling asleep there, he experienced a vision in which he was "watered by the dew of heaven." After this, William reports, he was protected from lust: "Never after that was his heart or eye distracted by anyone's striking beauty, never was his quiet sleep interrupted by a wet dream." His virginity had been threatened but ultimately remained intact until his death.[36] Hugh of Lincoln underwent a similar experience, and his remedy was even more drastic. When the girl touched his arm "he felt such indignation at her snakelike act that he took a sharp knife and cut out the small portion of his flesh affected."[37] Similar tales were also told outside of hagiography. Gerald of Wales related the experiences of William of Blois, bishop of Lincoln (1203–6), who, as a Parisian master, had been forced to resist an attempted seduction by a wealthy lady who had lured him into her house.[38]

Even if there were no women present, a bishop might still face temptation from an even more dangerous quarter: the devil. Nocturnal struggles with lust are a particularly significant feature of the *Magna vita sancti Hugonis.* Before he became bishop of Lincoln, Hugh was prior of Witham, and following his promotion to that office he experienced such terrible temptation that "the thorns of the flesh almost caused his physical death."[39] As a good saint-bishop should, he did not give in to temptation but resisted it with tears, confession, and scourging of the flesh. Ultimately, however, he could be cured only by divine intervention. He experienced a dream in which St. Basil cut into his bowels, extracted "something resembling red hot cinders," and threw it away. After this, Hugh was completely cured and was no longer troubled by lustful thoughts.[40] Murray has interpreted such struggles as a battle for chastity; nocturnal struggles allowed the celibate,

[36] Michael Winterbottom and Rodney Thompson, eds. and trans., *William of Malmesbury: Saints' Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14–15. Unlike the other *vitae* considered here, the *Vita Wulfstani* was not an original work but instead purports to be a Latin version of a now-lost Old English Life by the Worcester monk Coleman (d. 1113), which was based on his personal knowledge of Wulfstan. It is, however, clear that William of Malmesbury did not produce a direct translation of the original; his version can justifiably be considered as part of the Anglo-Norman tradition of hagiography and thus worthy of consideration in this article. On the textual history of the *Vita Wulfstani*, see Preest, *William of Malmesbury*, xiii–xxxviii; and Andy Orchard, "Parallel Lives: Wulfstan, William, Coleman and Christ," in *St Wulfstan and His World*, ed. Julia Barrow and Nicholas Brooks (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 39–57.

[37] Charles Garton, ed. and trans., *The Metrical Life of St Hugh of Lincoln* (Lincoln: Honywood Press, 1986), 16–23.

[38] John Brewer, James Dimock, and George Warner, eds., *Giraldus Cambrensis Opera*, 8 vols. (London: HMSO, 1861–91), 7:202–3.

[39] "Stimulis quidem carnis paulo minus usque ad mortem accessit carnis" (Douie and Farmer, *Magna vita*, 1:50).

[40] "Uisceribus eius quasi strumam igneam inde uisus est exsecuisse" (ibid., 49–52, with the quote at 52).

peaceable, post-Gregorian priest to overcome an enemy and display military prowess without actually going into battle and shedding blood.[41] Since the outcome of such struggles was lifelong perfect celibacy, they also served to demonstrate the bishop's virginity, which had been threatened yet remained unassailable.

Episcopal hagiographies were full of details that were intended to prove that the bishop had lived his life in a state of virginity, but the ultimate proof of his sexual purity could only be obtained after his death. The condition of a corpse was believed to reflect the individual's conduct during his lifetime; rapid decay was indicative of sin, whereas bodily incorruption (especially when accompanied by the appearance of vast quantities of a sweet-smelling, oily liquid called balsam) was thought to reflect sexual purity.[42] Consequently, several hagiographies contain lengthy descriptions of the physical appearance of the bishop's corpse. In the case of high-status individuals such as bishops, it was common for at least a week to elapse between death and burial, and during this time the corpse was often put on display. For example, when Hugh of Lincoln died in London in 1200, his body was carried to Lincoln and then put on display in the cathedral there. After such a journey, a normal corpse would be beginning to decay, but Hugh's body was remarkable for its long-lasting perfection, an endurance that mirrored the death process of his favorite saint, Bishop Martin of Tours. Hugh's corpse remained remarkably clean and lifelike, "clearer than glass, whiter than milk . . . and redder than the rose."[43] Similarly, the corpse of St. Wulfstan "shone bright like a gem, and was white with a remarkable purity."[44] Richard Wyche's body "shone with such a brilliant whiteness" that it was like "a white lily."[45]

Translation (the removal of a saint's remains from his or her original burial place to a more substantial, shrine-like tomb) offered the chance to have another look at the saint's remains, which would hopefully have remained undecayed.[46] For example, the popular cult of Remigius of Lincoln (1067–92) was bolstered by the discovery that his corpse remained incorrupt

[41] Jacqueline Murray, "Masculinizing Religious Life: Sexual Prowess, the Battle for Chastity and Monastic Identity," in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Patricia Cullum and Katharine Lewis (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2005), 24–37.

[42] The classic example of incorruption was Queen Ethelreda, who preserved her virginity through twelve years of marriage. Sixteen years after her death her body was exhumed and found to be incorrupt. This was taken as proof that she "remained uncorrupted by contact with any man." See Bertram Colgrave, Roger Collins, and Judith McClure, eds., *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 391–93; Atkinson, "Precious Balsam," 135–36.

[43] Douie and Farmer, *Magna vita*, 2:206; there are further references to the cleanness and whiteness of the corpse at 218–19 and 228–30.

[44] "ita perspicuo nitore gemmeum, ita miranda puritate lacteum erat" (Preest, *William of Malmesbury*, 142–43).

[45] "lillium candoris" (Jones, *Saint Richard of Chichester*, 137).

[46] On the translation of relics, see Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead*, 282–95.

thirty-two years after his death.[47] The corpse of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury (1139–61) was similarly perfect when his tomb was opened in 1180, causing some to hail him as a saint.[48] Edmund of Abingdon died in 1240; seven years later his body was moved to a new shrine. Richard of Wyche was present at the translation of St. Edmund and recalled the perfection and sweet smell of the corpse: "The entire body, particularly the face, was found unharmed and looked as if it was suffused with oil. We interpreted this as a favour merited by the intact virginity he promised and afterwards kept when he espoused the statue of the Blessed Virgin with a ring."[49] Edmund's exemplary life suggested that he was a true virgin, but his perfect corpse provided the definitive proof.

While hagiography provides particularly strong evidence for the importance of episcopal virginity in medieval England, interest in this phenomenon was certainly not limited to saint-bishops and their hagiographers. The value placed on virginity by the higher clergy is reflected in a trio of stories about bishops who were not saints; indeed, they were not even monks, having risen to the episcopate via royal service. Walter de Gray (1215–55) was said to have secured the archbishopric of York due to his virginity. There were doubts about his lack of learning, but when Innocent III was told that the candidate had remained a virgin since he left his mother's womb, the pope declared virginity to be a great virtue and appointed him.[50] At the end of the thirteenth century another northern prelate, Anthony Bek of Durham (1283–1311), was also reported to be a virgin. This meant that, unlike his fellow bishops (who were presumably chaste, but not virginal), he was unafraid to handle the remains of St. William of York when they were translated to a new shrine. His bodily purity made him fit to touch the body of another holy virgin.[51] There were, however, limits to the power of virginity. William of Malmesbury recounts another translation tale concerning Archbishop Thomas II of York (1108–14). The archbishop was, apparently, a virgin, having been "free . . . since youth of all impropriety, whether with women or otherwise." Yet despite his admirable sexual restraint, the archbishop was unable to resist another form of temptation: breakfast. Hearing a rumor that the bones of St. Oswald were to be found

[47] Brewer, Dimock, and Warner, *Giraldus Cambrensis Opera*, 7:26.

[48] William Stubbs, ed., *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, 2 vols. (London: HMSO, 1879), 1:68.

[49] "Totumque corpus, maximeque facies, quasi oleo perfusum repertum est et illesum. Et ex hoc merito quia per integritatem virginalem, quam anulo suo beate Virginis subarrahdo ymagini spopondit et conservavit, interpretamur" (Lawrence, *St Edmund*, 285).

[50] Henry Hewlett, ed., *Flores Historiarum*, 3 vols. (London: HMSO, 1886–89), 2:160–61; Lee Wyatt, "The Making of an Archbishop: The Early Career of Walter de Gray, 1205–1215," in *Seven Studies in Medieval English History*, ed. Richard Bowers (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 72–73.

[51] James Raine, ed., *Historiae Dunelmensis Scriptores Tres: Gaufridus de Coldingham, Robertus de Graystanes et Willielmus de Chambres* (London: Surtees Society, 1839), 64.

in a shrine in a Gloucestershire church, Thomas decided to open the tomb and discover the truth for himself: "He was told that he should embark on the ritual only after prayer and a solemn fast, but he spurned the advice, confident in his own chastity. So at dawn, already breakfasted, he broke open the shrine, removed the bones, and let his eyes convince his mind of the truth. The moment he went out of the church, he was struck by his last illness. It worsened by the day, and after four months he left his life."[52] Archbishop Thomas's alleged fate demonstrates both the power and the limits of virginity. Like Antony Bek, he assumed that his sexual purity gave him a special affinity with the saints, but unfortunately for him, it seems that virginity could only protect one from the wrath of a true saint when combined with other respectful behaviors.

Texts written by bishops themselves contain frequent references to the importance of virginity and exhortations to others to pursue this goal. Perhaps the best known of the episcopal writings on virginity is St. Anselm's lament for lost virginity. This text has been much discussed, and it is hard to argue with Benedicta Ward's conclusion that this is indeed a meditation on the consequences of sexual sin, even though I would not follow her in describing it as indicative of "a sort of Rake's Progress through Normandy into the cloisters of Bec."[53] More positive depictions of virginity are to be found scattered through the writings of a number of episcopal authors. In a letter written shortly after he became archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc celebrated the virginity of Gilbert Crispin. Gilbert was a monk of Bec, and he had been presented to that abbey as a child oblate in the mid-1050s. He would later become abbot of Westminster, but in the winter of 1073 he was still resident at Bec. Lanfranc wrote: "You gave me great joy when you wrote that by God's mercy you were still keeping as a man the vow you took as a boy. If you will keep it intact until the end, you will surely look with great confidence on the Judge who is terrifying to other men."[54] A similar letter is found among the writings of Herbert de Losinga, bishop of Norwich (1090–1119), who told Thurstan the monk: "A virgin was Christ, a virgin was Mary the mother of Christ, a virgin was John the herald of Christ, a virgin was John the beloved of Christ; attend, and thou shalt find

[52] "Suadentibus quibusdam ut precibus premissis et solemni ieiunio indicto religionem aggrederetur, castitatis suae conscius neglexit. Summo igitur diluculo iam pransus, scrinio effracto, extraxit ossa, firmauit oculis animi credulitatem, continuoque templum egressus ualitudinem letalem incidit. Qua inualescente per dies, post quattuor menses animam dereliquit" (Michael Winterbottom and Rodney Thompson, eds., *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007], 1:398–401).

[53] Benedicta Ward, ed., *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm with the Proslogion* (London: Penguin, 1973), 225–29; Ward, *Anselm of Canterbury: His Life and Legacy* (London: SPCK, 2009), 13–14. The text is also discussed briefly in Sally Vaughn, "Saint Anselm and His Students Writing about Love: A Theological Foundation for the Rise of Romantic Love in Europe," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (2010): 54–73, 67–78.

[54] Helen Clover and Margaret Gibson, eds., *The Letters of Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 102–3.

that everywhere in the mystery of our redemption virginity has had the utmost efficacy. They who are redeemed from the earth, and not defiled by carnal intercourse, are they who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. Truly, it is a blessed fellowship to dwell with Christ, and to sing the song which none but virgins sing."[55] Herbert reiterated his praise of John the Evangelist's virginity in a prayer dedicated to that saint, which proclaims: "Thou indeed art a virgin, and a son of the Virgin, but then He thy master was a virgin also."[56] Nor did he confine such sentiments to personal correspondence and devotional writings; in a sermon written for the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, he encouraged his audience to emulate the virginity of Mary and of Christ.[57]

Anselm, Lanfranc, and Herbert de Losinga were all monk-bishops, promoted from Norman Benedictine abbeys to the English episcopate, but their views on the superiority of virginity were shared by at least some of the secular clergy. Gerald of Wales, bishop-elect of St. David's (1198–1203), wrote at length about the importance of clerical celibacy, which is one of the focuses of his tract *The Jewel of the Church*. In this work, he states that virgins (such as Daniel) will be saved, that virginity (as exemplified by John the Baptist and John the Evangelist) is vastly superior to mere continence, and that virginity is a virtue that torments the devil.[58]

Furthermore, scattered references in contemporary chronicles suggest that the number of bishops who were reputed to be virgins was significantly more than the number that became the focus of significant cults or the subject of surviving hagiographies. Neither Henry of Blois, bishop of Winchester (1129–71), nor Roger Niger of London (1228–41), nor Anthony Bek of Durham (1283–1311) were ever considered for canonization, but all three were noted for their virginity.[59] Roger, bishop of Worcester (1164–79), was another well-regarded but not saintly bishop, but this did not stop Herbert of Bosham comparing him to a lily—a flower that was widely known as a symbol of virginity.[60] Virginity was not an absolute requirement for canonization, nor (as these cases demonstrate) was virginity alone sufficient to ensure that a bishop would be revered after his death. It is, however, hard to avoid the conclusion that the possession of this virtue was an extremely useful tool in the battle to turn a good reputation into a popular and durable cult.

[55] Helen Clover and Margaret Gibson, eds., *The Life, Letters and Sermons of Bishop Herbert of Losinga*, 2 vols. (Oxford: James Parker, 1878), 1:103–5.

[56] Ibid., 1:311.

[57] Ibid., 2:353–55.

[58] Hagen, *The Jewel of the Church*, 136–37, 178.

[59] Brewer, Dimock, and Warner, *Giraldus Cambrensis Opera*, 7:47; *Scriptores Tres*, 64.

[60] Mary Cheney, *Roger, Bishop of Worcester, 1164–1179* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 1.

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Given that virginity was clearly of great importance to the English episcopate, at least during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it is now necessary to consider why this was so. Christian reverence of virginity, which was believed to bring the individual closer to God, was as old as the faith itself.[61] In the words of Peter Brown, the virginal body serves as "the abnormal mediator between the human and the divine."[62] Such mediation was also embodied in the angels, who were conventionally considered to be virginal. However, the virginity of the earth-bound priest was considered to be more meritorious than that of the angels, since angels are not subject to temptation, whereas the priest, as a fallen man, was subject to and had to overcome the frailties of human flesh.[63]

The most obvious embodiment of the virginal ideal was a woman, the Virgin Mary, whose popularity reached its peak in the later Middle Ages and to whom many medieval bishops were devoted.[64] Yet there were also significant male role models for men who aspired to virginity, not least Christ himself.[65] From the twelfth century onward, there was both an increased level of interest in the humanity of Jesus and the saints (including the sexuality of such figures) and an increasing trend for the devout to attempt to emulate such figures, which is what these saint-bishops were doing when they preserved their virginity.[66] John the Baptist and John the Evangelist were widely celebrated for their exceptional purity and were thus thought to be particularly appropriate models for saintly bishops.[67] For example, Hugh of Lincoln was said to be particularly devoted to the Baptist, "the especial patron of the Carthusian order and of our bishop."[68] Having "a peculiar affection for his patron and . . . a complete confidence in him," he was allowed the unusual privilege of touching the relics of the Baptist at Bellay.[69] The example of John the Evangelist is also invoked in several

[61] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[62] Peter Brown, "The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church," in Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 433.

[63] John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 33–34.

[64] Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Penguin, 2009), 121–284.

[65] Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 30–31.

[66] Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 221–34; Giles Constable, "The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ," in *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 169–94; Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead*, 510–11.

[67] Jeffrey Hamburger, *St John the Divine: The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 166.

[68] Douie and Farmer, *Magna vita*, 2:163.

[69] Ibid., 2:172.

hagiographies, including the *Magna vita* and Matthew Paris's biography of St. Edmund, but the parallel is clearest in the life of Richard Wyche.[70] His rejection of marriage to "a noble virgin" in favor of betrothal to "the Heavenly Bridegroom" mirrors the story of the Evangelist, who, according to medieval tradition, abandoned his wedding feast at Cana to follow Jesus and live a life of perpetual virginity.[71]

Another explicit example of such imitation is found in Adam of Eynsham's description of Hugh of Lincoln's corpse, in which he claims that "the whiteness and brilliance of Martin's dead body, which showed him, even in death, to be the pearl of priests, was reflected with much enhanced splendour by Hugh's. Like Martin's, it was clearer than glass, whiter than milk, and—a thing we are not told of Martin's—redder than the rose."[72] St. Martin of Tours, a fourth-century Frankish bishop, was a significant model for many later medieval saint-bishops.[73] His influence is particularly clear in the *Magna vita*, whose subject was apparently a "devoted disciple and imitator" of the earlier prelate, but he is also invoked by the biographers of St. Anselm and St. Edmund of Canterbury.[74] By comparing the purity of Hugh to the purity of Martin, Adam of Eynsham was deliberately placing his subject within a long tradition of saintly sexual virtue. Since Hugh emulated Martin, Adam suggests, he is deserving of the same spiritual rewards (including canonization) as his predecessor.

Yet the rewards of virginity were not merely spiritual. In recent decades, scholars have become increasingly aware of the significance of what Cynthia Japp refers to as ascetic authority—a form of authority based on the personal behavior of the individual bishop, which justified his possession of God-given spiritual authority and manifested itself in pragmatic authority (that is, the exercise of the position and wealth that were conferred by the episcopal office).[75] In particular, it has been demonstrated that an early medieval priest's success at preserving his virginity gave him an important authority-enhancing asset.[76] Most notably, the power of male virginity was

[70] Ibid., 2:12; and Lawrence, *St Edmund*, 250.

[71] Jones, *Saint Richard of Chichester*, 179; Jeffrey Hamburger, "Brother, Bridge and *alter Christus*: The Virginal Body of John the Evangelist in Medieval Art, Theology and Literature," in *Text und Kultur: Mittelalterliche Literatur 1150–1450* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2001), 302, 320.

[72] Douie and Farmer, *Magna vita*, 2:206.

[73] Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 288; Ott, *Bishops*, 55–57.

[74] "Martini beatissimi familaris cultor et deuotus imitator" (Douie and Farmer, *Magna Vita*, 1:24). See also Richard Southern, ed., *The Life of St Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, by Eadmer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 14; Lawrence, *St Edmund*, 34–36, 103, 212, 244–46.

[75] Cynthia Japp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 16–18.

[76] This theme has been well explored by Conrad Leyser in a series of publications: "Masculinity in Flux: Nocturnal Emission and the Limits of Celibacy in the Early Middle Ages" in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dawn Hadley (London: Longman, 1999), 103–20;

harnessed by the English monastic reform movement of the tenth century, building on an existing interest in this phenomenon among Anglo-Saxon monks. The reformers were particularly influenced by Aldhelm's *De virginitate*, a seventh-century treatise that extolled the virtues of numerous male virgin saints and that is known to have circulated widely in tenth-century England.[77] Priestly virginity was celebrated as a form of sacrifice and martyrdom, as a safeguard of ritual purity, as a marker of the distinction between clergy and laity, and as a certain route to salvation. But it was also used as a means to gain authority, as a tool to hasten the removal of the old guard, and as a way to justify the rapid takeover of the English bishoprics by the reformed monastic orders in the decades around 1000.[78]

Thus England had an early tradition of male virginity as a significant virtue for both monks and bishops, and this tradition persisted into the new millennium, especially among the religious orders.[79] It is surely not irrelevant that several of the saintly bishops considered in this article, and most of their hagiographers, had monastic backgrounds. This centuries-old tradition was given new impetus in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries due to new papal legislation that demanded compulsory clerical celibacy of all Catholic priests. As monastic ideals were rapidly imposed on all clerics, the sexuality of the secular clergy became a much-discussed and heavily scrutinized topic.[80] One of the key concerns of this new wave of reformers was the enforcement of clear boundaries between the clergy and the laity, with the former being elevated above and separated from the latter. In part, this was achieved by ordination, and the post-Gregorian priest was also distinguished from the laity by his role in the celebration of the Eucharist. While this sacrament had long been at the heart of Christian devotional practice, it gained further significance during the twelfth century,

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Conrad Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Conrad Leyser, "The Gender of Grace: Impotence, Servitude and Manliness in the Fifth-Century West," in *Gendering the Middle Ages*, ed. Pauline Stafford and Annette Mulder-Bakker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 5–21, esp. 9.

[77] Cassandra Rhodes, "What, After All, Is a Male Virgin? Multiple Performances of Male Virginity in Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives," in *Representing Medieval Genders and Sexualities in Europe*, ed. Elizabeth L'Estrange and Alison More (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 15–32.

[78] Catherine Cubitt, "Virginity and Misogyny in Tenth and Eleventh Century England," *Gender and History* 12, no. 1 (2000): 1–32, esp. 18; and Felice Lifshitz, "Priestly Women, Virginal Men: Litanies and Their Discontents," in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 96–102.

[79] On virginity as an important monastic virtue, see Bugge, *Virginitas*, 81.

[80] For a recent overview of the introduction of clerical celibacy in England, see Hugh M. Thomas, *The Secular Clergy in England, 1066–1216* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 154–89. The literature on the development of new rules about clerical celibacy is too vast to be cited in full here, but key texts include Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Married Priests and the Reforming Papacy: The Eleventh Century Debates* (New York: Edwin Mellon, 1982); and Michael Frassetto, ed., *Medieval Purity and Piety: Essays on Medieval Clerical Celibacy and Religious Reform* (New York: Garland, 1998).

partly due to a growing emphasis on transubstantiation (which passed into doctrine at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215).[81] Devotion to the Mass and to the real presence was a key feature of many episcopal hagiographies of this period; saintly bishops were noted for their regular celebration of and intense emotional responses to this sacrament. For example, John of Salisbury wrote of Thomas Becket that "when celebrating mass alone, he used to be drenched in tears to a wondrous degree, and he so conducted himself in the office of the altar as if he saw the Lord's Passion carried out in actual presence in his flesh."[82]

Yet the priestly celebration of Mass was not an unproblematic thing, since it required a level of ritual purity that was difficult for a mortal man to maintain. From the twelfth century onward, theologians became increasingly troubled by the problem of the potential pollution of the priestly body by involuntary nocturnal emissions of semen.[83] Such occurrences were especially problematic if they had been provoked by a conscious action on the part of the polluted priest, such as engaging in immoral thoughts or indulging in something (usually food or wine) that was known to provoke lust. In such a case, he would be deemed unfit to celebrate Mass. However, if there were no aggravating factors, these emissions could be explained away as no more than a necessary rebalancing of the humors, and the priest would be considered not culpable.[84] On the other hand, if a bishop was to be celebrated for his devotion to the sacrament and noted for his regular handling of the body and blood of Christ, it was important that the purity

[81] Transubstantiation is the conversion of bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ during the sacrament of the Eucharist. Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (London: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1:230–31; Thomas Izbicki, *The Eucharist in Medieval Canon Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21.

[82] *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, 2:306. A very similar passage is included in William FitzStephen's *vita* (ibid., 3:38). The significance of this phenomenon is discussed further in Katherine Harvey, "Episcopal Emotions: Tears in the Life of the Medieval Bishop," *Historical Research* 87, no. 238 (2014): 591–610, esp. 592–95.

[83] Jacqueline Murray, "Men's Bodies, Men's Minds: Seminal Emissions and Sexual Anxiety in the Middle Ages," *Annual Review of Sex Research* 8, no. 1 (1997): 1–26; Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 14–34; Conrad Leyser, "Masculinity in Flux: Nocturnal Emission and the Limits of Celibacy in the Early Middle Ages," in Hadley, *Masculinity*, 103–20; David Brakke, "The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt and Gaul," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3, no. 4 (1995): 419–60.

[84] Payer, *Sex and the New Medieval Literature*, 139–41; Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23, 156; Paul Delaney, "Constantinus Africanus' *De Coitu*: A Translation," *Chaucer Review* 4, no. 1 (1969): 55–65, 62–63; and Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 148–49. On the food practices of medieval English bishops, see Katherine Harvey, "Food, Drink and the Bishop in Medieval England, c. 1100–c. 1300," *Viator* 46, no. 2 (2015): 155–76. Diet was not the only relevant factor; for the dangers of beds and bathing, see McLaughlin, "Bishop in the Bedroom," 32.

of the bishop's body was beyond question. While celibacy was a significant step in the right direction, only true virginity could guarantee that the bishop was always ready to perform his most important function.

Although the ability to celebrate Mass served as an important marker of priestly difference, the division between the clergy and the laity was also supposed to be reinforced by a new set of distinctively priestly behaviors. Priests were distinguished from laymen by the many activities in which they did not engage: sex, but also a range of other masculine pursuits from which the clergy were now barred, such as frequenting taverns and brawling.[85] As Maureen Miller has argued, "Clerical men had to be made to appear different from lay men, even if they were not."[86] Moreover, this new emphasis on clerical status provoked a reconsideration of the position of the bishop. How far, contemporaries asked, was he to be considered distinct from the ordinary priest? According to John Ott, the decades around 1100 saw the most significant redefinition of the bishop's role since the end of the Roman Empire; simultaneously, heightened expectations of episcopal conduct placed ecclesiastical elites under increasing levels of scrutiny.[87] Bishops responded by adopting new strategies to distinguish themselves from lesser clerics. For example, it was during the course of the twelfth century that the mitre, pontifical sandals, stockings, and gloves were adopted as standard episcopal garb.[88] Similarly, as straightforward celibacy became increasingly common, simply not having sex was not enough to set a holy man apart. Only virginity was enough to distinguish a bishop from those of his contemporaries who had enjoyed a dissolute youth or married and fathered children before entering holy orders.[89]

Indeed, episcopal virginity not only distinguished a bishop from his subordinates but also gave him the moral authority to order them to obey the new rules on clerical celibacy. While the move toward a celibate priesthood

[85] Jennifer Thibodeaux, *The Manly Priest: Clerical Celibacy, Masculinity, and Reform in England and Normandy, 1066–1300* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 112–25.

[86] Maureen Miller, "Masculinity, Reform and Clerical Culture: Narratives of Episcopal Holiness in the Gregorian Era," *Church History* 72, no. 1 (2003): 52.

[87] John Ott, *Bishops, Authority and Community in Northwestern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), esp. 6–12.

[88] Maureen Miller, *Clothing the Clergy: Virtue and Power in Medieval Europe, c. 800–1200* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 64–76, 199–206.

[89] As late as the mid-thirteenth century it was not unheard-of for bishops to be fathers. In 1257 the royal justice Simon Walton was elected as bishop of Norwich without any mention being made of the fact that he had been married and had at least one child, a son whom he openly acknowledged as his legitimate heir. He may also have had a daughter. See Nicholas Vincent, "New Light on Master Alexander of Swerford (d. 1246): The Career and Connections of an Oxfordshire Civil Servant," *Oxoniensia* 61, no. 1 (1996): 297–309, 305; and Christopher Harper-Bill, ed., *English Episcopal Acta 32: Norwich 1244–1266* (Oxford: British Academy, 2007), xxxvii, 225–56. For speculation that Robert Grosseteste may have acquired a wife and three children during his years in Paris, see Nicole M. Schulman, "Husband, Father, Bishop? Grosseteste in Paris," *Speculum* 72, no. 2 (1997): 330–46.

was initiated by papal legislation, its implementation was achieved largely due to the efforts of the episcopate, including the examination of candidates for ordination and increased monitoring of parish priests.[90] Episcopal hagiographies of the reform era are full of stories that illustrate the protagonist's commitment to upholding sexual morality in his diocese. For example, Wulfstan, who "hated the blot of unchastity, and approved of chasteness in all men, especially those in holy orders," was an early proponent of clerical continence in Worcester, demanding that married priests renounce either "their lust or their living."[91]

A bishop could also demonstrate his commitment to sexual purity by the manner in which he managed his household, the personnel of which would typically have included a substantial number of clerics.[92] Richard Wyche's household was apparently a beacon of chastity, with those who failed to live up to saintly standards condemned and expelled. When one of Wyche's favorite servants was found guilty of lewd behavior, he was dismissed.[93] Edmund of Abingdon was reported to have "made a pact with his servants to the effect that if they were ever discovered to have fallen into a sin of the flesh, they would take the remuneration due to them and would leave him."[94] Even before he became archbishop, Thomas Becket had adopted a similar policy, as the case of Richard de Ambli illustrates. Ambli, a clerk in the chancellor's household, seduced the wife of a friend who was traveling abroad, having told her that her husband was dead. When Becket discovered this, he not only expelled the clerk from his household but had him sent to the Tower of London, where he was imprisoned in chains for a very long time.[95]

Nor was lay sexuality exempt from episcopal oversight. This could take the form of encouragement for would-be virgins. Ralph Bocking lauded

[90] Thomas, *Secular Clergy*, 156–62; Thibodeaux, *Manly Priest*, 46–57; John Moorman, *Church Life in England in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946), 185–96; Christopher Brooke, "Gregorian Reform in Action: Clerical Marriage in England, 1050–1200," *Cambridge Historical Journal* 12, no. 1 (1956): 1–21. For examples of episcopal visitations, see John Shinners and William Dohar, eds., *Pastors and the Care of Souls in Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 287–306.

[91] "Labem inpudicitiae oderat, integritati fauebat in omnibus et maxime sacrati ordinis hominibus. . . . Vxoratos presbiteros omnes uno conuenit edicto, aut libidini aut aecclesiis renuntiandum pronuntians" (Preest, *William of Malmesbury*, 124–27).

[92] Philippa Hoskin, "Continuing Service: The Episcopal Household of Thirteenth-Century Durham," in *The Foundations of Medieval English Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Philippa Hoskin, Christopher Brooke, and Barrie Dobson (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), 124–38.

[93] Jones, *Saint Richard of Chichester*, 119.

[94] "Cum servientibus suis semper pactum iniit, ut, si quandoque in lapsu carnis deprehensi essent, accepta mercede pro rato, ab eo recederent" (Lawrence, *St Edmund*, 252).

[95] *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, 3:21. See also Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, 46: Barlow agrees that this passage illustrates the archbishop's hostility to sexual misbehavior but also demonstrates that Ambli's imprisonment was rather briefer than FitzStephen claims.

Richard Wyche for his support of young women who wished to "commit themselves to virginity and chastity" rather than be married off.[96] On the other hand, virginal bishops could be extremely harsh in their handling of the sexual lapses of laity. As prior of Worcester, Wulfstan was the subject of an attempted seduction by a married woman. Such was his zeal for chastity that he rebuffed her advances by slapping her in the face.[97] Hugh of Lincoln was even more zealous in his handling of an adulterous wife who impudently rejected his order that she return to her husband. The young woman was excommunicated and died a few days later, strangled by the devil and condemned to "perpetual torments as she richly deserved."[98]

However, the most admired bishops ruled not only through discipline but also by example. The notion that a bishop should be "the model for everyone . . . [and] devoted entirely to the example of good living" was an old one, set out at length in Gregory the Great's *Book of Pastoral Rule*.[99] This ideal gained new life in the reform era and was frequently restated in a range of ecclesiastical texts, including episcopal *vitae*.[100] Eadmer, biographer of Archbishop Anselm, wrote: "It would be unthinkable to suppose that his life differed from his teaching. It is certain that from the moment he assumed a religious habit to the time of his elevation to the episcopacy he devoted himself to the cultivation of every virtue, and by word and example sowed those virtues in the minds of others wherever possible; and it is not a whit less certain, as we can testify, that after he became primate of all Britain he was equally distinguished in all these activities."[101] Similar sentiments were expressed in relation to other model prelates. Wulfstan's teaching was widely respected because of his habit of "practising what he preached."[102] Gundulf of Rochester was "worthy to be followed as a teacher, for what he taught others to do he first did himself, that they might follow his example."[103] Hugh "cleansed Lincoln by his teaching, example and holiness."[104] Richard Wyche's virtue was such that he even served as

[96] Jones, *Saint Richard of Chichester*, 108.

[97] Preest, *William of Malmesbury*, 30–33.

[98] *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, 2:31–32.

[99] Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, trans. George Demacopoulos (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 43. On episcopal examples in the early church, see Philippe Rousseau, "The Spiritual Authority of the Monk-Bishop: Eastern Elements in Some Western Hagiography of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," *Journal of Theological Studies* 23, no. 2 (1971): 380–419.

[100] Ott, *Bishops*, 281–85. Similar significance has been attached to royal conduct in this period, on which see Megan McLaughlin, "Disgusting Acts of Shamelessness: Sexual Misconduct and the Deconstruction of Royal Authority in the Eleventh Century," *Early Medieval Europe* 19, no. 3 (2011): 313–14.

[101] Southern, *Life of St Anselm*, 79.

[102] Preest, *William of Malmesbury*, 44–45.

[103] Rodney Thomson, ed., *The Life of Gundulf, Bishop of Rochester* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1977).

[104] Douie and Farmer, *Magna vita*, 1:102.

an inspiration to Bishop Walter Suffield, who was himself renowned for his holy lifestyle: "He followed the example of the blessed Richard and thus daily became a better man and more acceptable to God in his exemplary virtues."[105] If a bishop's life was to serve as a model for his flock, then it was important that he display all of the "exemplary virtues," of which virginity was surely one of the most important.

In the post-Gregorian era, the sexual behaviors of the clergy were subject to increasing scrutiny, and clerical celibacy was becoming increasingly commonplace, even outside the cloister. John Bugge argued that this shift in behavior was accompanied by changing ideological conceptions of virginity: "The male sex began to be dispossessed of the ideal of virginal perfection," and "the irretrievable identification of virginity with women" meant that, henceforth, male sexual purity was measured in terms of celibacy and chastity.[106] Yet while the majority of the clergy settled for abstinence and an ongoing struggle with sexual temptation, the evidence regarding respected bishops suggests that the truly holy man was marked out by his virginity—a quality that indicated that he had not merely become a priest but had set himself apart from the rest of humanity from his earliest years.[107]

Since virginity mattered to twelfth- and thirteenth-century English bishops, it should no longer be dismissed by historians as just a feminine attribute or as a marginal monastic virtue. Nor was it, as Vauchez suggests, a mere appendage to the real episcopal virtues of leadership and moderation.[108] Instead, virginity was a quality that was highly valued in bishops both by prelates themselves and by those who wrote about them. Kelly claimed that "the male virgin never takes centre-stage in the saint's life," yet these virgin-bishops were center stage not only in their hagiographies but also in English ecclesiastical and political life.[109] Exemplary exercise of the episcopal office was certainly one of the primary virtues of the medieval saint-bishop, but in an age of ecclesiastical reform, at a time when the sexuality of the clergy became a national preoccupation, it was almost impossible to separate out the office and the man. Exemplary personal conduct, including unimpeachable sexual behavior, was a crucial component of episcopal leadership. It was good for a bishop to be celibate, but increasingly it was thought desirable for a bishop to be more than merely a good man. He was a model man, living his life in emulation of the saints and providing his flock (both clergy and laity) with an example of Christian living. It might even be claimed that he was the perfect man: a virgin.

[105] Jones, *Saint Richard of Chichester*, 87.

[106] Bugge, *Virginitas*, 135.

[107] For this distinction between hard-won celibacy and innate virginity, see Arnold, "The Labour of Continence," 102–14.

[108] Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 287.

[109] Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 104.

About the Author

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