

**Lex Orandi, Lex Operandi:
The Relationship of Worship and Work
in the Early Church**

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We are all familiar with the famous dictum of Prosper of Aquitaine, who in the fifth century coined the axiom, *lex orandi, lex credendi*. I propose a variation on this principle by suggesting *lex orandi, lex operandi*, the law of prayer gives birth to the law of works, and my test case will be the early church before Gregory the Great. To take each of these themes separately would be a simple task. We are all familiar with early Christian treatises on worship and the histories of worship. We also possess numerous commentaries on early Christian attitudes toward society and the evidence of faith resulting in actions in and towards the world. This essay, however, addresses the question: were the early Christians conscious of the relationship between worship and works? Did they articulate a relationship between prayer and social concern? All too easily we theologians make the connection between the Eucharist, for example, in which we consecrate and sanctify material things, and conclude from our use of bread and wine the obligation to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Or we conclude from the mystery of the Incarnation that God loves matter and flesh; therefore we also should demonstrate a concern for material things and God's creation. Some may insist this is merely a theologian's conclusion, because today we know there are believers who separate those who worship from those who work, those whose interest is liturgy from those who engage in social action, those who favor creeds and others who perform deeds. Did the early Christians succeed in bringing these two together consciously and deliberately? Then as now we are not always certain what it was that motivated the faithful to deeds of love and charity, but we do possess patristic literature which indicates that theologians regularly insisted that the life of prayer demanded a life of action, both to the household of faith and to society at large. In this essay we shall not only examine the exhortations of the homilists, but we shall also seek

to discover whether, in fact, these were heeded. Did *lex operandi* result in *lex operandi*?

The Catechumenate

One place to begin is with the literature of the catechumenate and in the expectations being made of those who were preparing for baptism. Catechetical literature is filled with doctrinal themes, usually expositions on the sacraments, the creed, and the Lord's Prayer. But together with doctrinal rectitude went the insistence on a life of good works. Cyril of Jerusalem states that

the method of godliness consists of these two things, pious doctrine and virtuous practice. Doctrines are not acceptable to God apart from good works, nor does God accept the works which are not performed with pious doctrine.¹

In this same context Cyril warns against the wiles of Satan, and he suggests that following baptism the Christian life will be one of spiritual warfare. After only ten days of instruction Chrysostom warned his hearers that he "will come asking for fruit from the seed which has already been sown."² Such fruit must include giving alms to the poor, leading a chaste life, prayer, and helping the destitute.

Extend the holiness you have achieved (and do not keep it for yourself). Make the righteousness which you have brighter and the gift of grace more radiant."³

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1. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Orations* 4:2.
 2. John Chrysostom, *Second Instruction to Catechumens* 1.
 3. *Ibid.* 3 and 4.

Augustine encouraged his catechumens to display a good way of life by witnessing to others through their lives.⁴ Gregory of Nyssa cautions his hearers that the most convincing witness to the world that the waters of baptism are truly cleansing is by showing charity toward others. By doing this you will make clear "who your Father is!"⁵ All of these Fathers clearly associate baptism with activity in the world and not merely with private morality.

Theodore of Mopsuestia includes good deeds in his definition of prayer. He tells those about to be baptized that when the Bible tells them to pray without ceasing, that includes work without ceasing. "Prayer does not consist so much in words as in good works... If you are zealous in doing good you will be praying all your life."⁶ The most telling evidence of the association of works of charity with baptism comes from Hippolytus. After the candidate for baptism has completed the three years in the catechumenate, accompanied by the sponsors, a pre-baptismal examination was conducted by the bishop in which the candidate's life was examined with a special focus on one's activities in the community. It was the sponsor's duty to testify to the candidate's charitable activities. "Let their life be examined whether they lived piously while catechumens, whether they honored the widows, visited the sick, and fulfilled every good work."⁷ There is no mention here of a doctrinal examination; only an inquiry into one's life which included works of mercy. (Could our churches today ever venture to make church membership conditional upon evidence that the candidate is working for peace, justice, or the poor?) The question may be asked whether any candidates were refused baptism because such evidence was not forthcoming. To my knowledge we have no such evidence, and these interrogations may

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4. Augustine, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, 47.
 5. Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism*, 40.
 6. Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Catechetical Homily* 11.
 7. Hippolytus, *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.

have simply been formal. Yet they impressed upon the faithful an ideal which associated worship with work, and we can assume that at least during the catechumenate the candidates made sure they could produce some evidence when it was called for.

Chrysostom has stern words for sponsors who must stand as surety for the candidates in vouching for their lives of witness. If you guarantee someone in financial matters, you will be liable for the debt if they fail to pay. How much more in spiritual matters should the sponsors be certain that the candidate has indeed performed good works: "They will share the credit if they guide their charges to the path of virtue, but if they are negligent, grave condemnation will fall upon them."⁸

Baptism

Baptism was also closely associated with martyrdom, death, and public witness. All ancient essays on baptism contain references to our identification with Christ's death and resurrection. In the sacrament we become imitators of Christ; we do this by dying to sin, or if necessary by actually becoming a martyr (as Ignatius of Antioch), or by imitating the Savior in becoming "little saviors" to the world. Gregory of Nyssa refers to Christ as "our pioneer" six times in forty-six lines with the implication that just as Christ came to save the world, so we should imitate him in this noble work as a result of our baptism.⁹ *Lex orandi, lex operandi!* The sacrament impels us to do works which are saving for our fellow human beings.

8. Chrysostom, *Baptismal Homily* 2:15. In Edward Yarnold S.J., *The Awe Inspiring Rites of Initiation* (St. Paul Publications: Slough, England) 164.

9. Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism* 35. *Library of Christian Classics* Vol. III, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) 314-315.

Baptism was also understood as the great social leveler in which all became equal before God. Here again we cite Chrysostom:

The wonderful, unbelievable thing is that every difference and distinction of rank is missing here. If anyone happens to be in a position of worldly importance or conspicuous wealth, if he boasts of his birth or the glory of this present life, he stands on just the same footing as the beggar in rags, the blind man or the lame. All such differences have been laid aside in the life of the spirit.¹⁰

Here again we have the ideal. There is ample evidence to indicate that, at least by the 5th century, class distinctions continued beyond baptism, although Christians were required to show mercy to slaves, not to be proud or overbearing toward others, and to remember that all share in the same baptism. At Alexandria, both Clement and Origen advocated treating slaves as equals.¹¹

An interesting vignette on the church's attitude toward class distinctions comes from the pontificate of Callistus I (AD 217-223), bishop of Rome, who had been a prisoner in the mines of Sardinia, apparently for engaging in fraud. During his time the church at Rome was made up of a large number of aristocratic women and lower class men. It was against imperial law for marriages to take place across class lines under threat of severe penalties. Rather than permit marriages with unbelievers, Callistus encouraged unions between Christian men and women without regard to class distinction. This is evidence that the church considered itself a society within society, with its own laws even though they contravened those of the empire. It is not a long step from the third to the twentieth century, where again the church has fostered actions which it considers on a higher moral level than the prevailing

10. Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechism* 13, 163.

11. Robert Grant, *Early Christianity and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 91.

state law which it may violate. Here at least is one situation where the egalitarianism effected through baptism was more than an ideal; it had concrete social implications.

Another example of the social effects of baptism comes from the instructions of Hippolytus to the catechumens, in which he offers a long list of forbidden or at least dubious occupations to those about to be baptized. These include sculptor, painter, idolmaker, teacher of young children, charioteer, gladiator, heathen priest, civic magistrate, military commander, juggler, or panderer. A magician should not even be brought for examination, and soldiers must be told not to kill.¹² We do not know how strictly these injunctions were observed. Presumably in the third century the church followed a more rigid practice of admission to baptism than in the fifth century, when we know that soldiers were not only admitted but were given ecclesiastical support. *Lex orandi, lex operandi* was applicable to one's personal life as well as to one's relationship to the community. Baptism had social consequences, much as it does today in such places as South India, where Christians may postpone the reception of the sacrament because of the serious social disabilities which are certain to follow.

Baptism was into the community of the faithful which had high moral expectations for its members. Those who failed to live up to these standards were placed under the discipline of excommunication, that is, they were denied the Eucharist. It appears to me that the rigors of penance were related primarily to lapses in personal morality, such as fornication and apostasy, although murder certainly had a social impact. Penance was reserved for those who had scandalized the church by giving public offense. Heretics were certainly also subject to excommunication, with large social consequences such as Donatism in North Africa, or the Monophysites in Egypt, or the Nestorian church in Iran.

12. Hippolytus, *Apostolic Constitutions* 16.

Any Real Results?

We have one dramatic example of an excommunication for a sin against society, that of Ambrose refusing communion to emperor Theodosius for having stained his baptism with the blood of 7,000 Thessalonians. This demonstrates not only the influence of the church by the end of the 4th century, but it shows the serious implications of the baptismal covenant. Yet I know of no excommunication for those who failed to give alms, to help the poor, or to free the slaves. Chrysostom, who had a mania for collecting alms, threatened his flock with excommunication for failing to give generously, but he did not follow through on his threat.

Did the law of prayer actually result in witness and good works? One of the more impressive witnesses of the effectiveness of Christian charity was the Emperor Julian, known as "the Apostate." In trying to eradicate Christianity, he wrote to a pagan high priest in Galatia:

The Hellenic religion does not prosper as I desire. Why do we not observe that it is their (Christians') benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the (pretended) holiness of their lives that has done most to increase atheism?¹³

Julian insisted that the Christians must be overtrumped. The only way to counteract the church was to care for beggars and to set up hospices for the poor. "Let us not by allowing others to outdo us in good works, disgrace or utterly abandon the reverence due to the gods."¹⁴ Some of this may be mere rhetoric, because we know that in the mid-fourth century many conversions were nominal, but there was enough truth in Julian's complaint, that the only way to counteract them was by outperforming them.

13. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 604.

14. *Ibid.*

The baptismal covenant, solemnly undertaken at the mid-night Easter Pasch, did have social consequences.

About fifty years before Julian there was another situation in which the example of the Christians served the church well. One of the Roman legions passed through the town of Latopolis in Egypt. While the rest of the population fled, even though the legionnaires were not hostile, the Christians remained behind to offer the soldiers food and drink, and they bathed their feet. One of the Romans was so impressed with this example of fearless service that he inquired into the nature of this religion. He was Pachomius, who became a Christian and is generally regarded as the father of cenobitic monasticism. The account of his conversion does not associate the event directly with Christian worship, but we may assume his benefactors were motivated by their new life in Christ as a result of baptism.

A more celebrated monk, Basil of Caesarea, provides us with a different kind of example relating worship to life. After spending some years at the university of Athens, he became interested in the lives of the hermits. He visited the anchorites of Syria and Egypt in their caves. It was on a Maundy Thursday as he sat with one of the eremites in upper Egypt that he heard our Lord's command from the Gospel for that day, when after washing his disciples' feet he said: "I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you (John 13:14)." It suddenly occurred to Basil that the Eucharist was intended to fortify one for service, and this could only be done in community. "If you live by yourself, whose feet will you wash?" It was his understanding of the Lord's Supper that convinced him the Christian's life was to be one of service. Armed with this conviction, Basil returned to Asia Minor where he established a community of monks whose vocation was looking after a hospice for the poor, a home for the elderly, a hospital, a school, and daily rations for the poor (imitating Acts 6:1-6, "the daily distribution"). He insisted that the Lord's Prayer required relationships with others, else how could one pray, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." He anticipated Benedict of Nursia by two centuries in requiring his monks to center their lives in prayer, but

the prayer was to find its fruition in the various works undertaken by the brothers.

Work is to be undertaken not merely for keeping the body under subjection but from love of our neighbor, in order that through us God may provide a sufficiency for those who are in want, after the manner set forth by the apostle, "In all things I gave you an example, how that so laboring you ought to help the weak."¹⁵

In addition to the activities already mentioned, Basil established a school to educate children and a convent for women. He writes:

In the solitary life the powers we have become useless.... We are each of us members of one another. When we are divided, how can we rejoice with those who rejoice, or weep with those who weep? How can one show humility unless there are others before whom one can be humble? How can one practice patience when there is no one who opposes you? How can one grow in holiness unless there are others to point out your faults?¹⁶

All of this was derived from Basil's insight into worship as communal. At the center of his communal life there was born the great Liturgy of St. Basil, which the Orthodox today celebrate ten times each year. He anticipated Benedict's axiom, *Ora et Labora. Lex orandi, lex operandi*. If you live or pray only by yourself, whose feet will you wash?

15. Basil of Caesarea, in J. W. C. Wand, *The Greek Doctors* (London: The Faith Press, 1950) 39.

16. Basil of Caesarea, *Regula fus. 7* in Henry Bettenson, *The Later Christian Fathers* (London: Oxford Press) 2: 95.

Implications from the Liturgy

As we know, there was built into the early Christian Eucharistic celebration an occasion for showing charity to the poor through the offering, which at the time of Hippolytus was not in money but in goods. At the offering each one present came forward and deposited a gift at the altar, gifts which included, oil, cheese, olives, milk, wine, bread, many kinds of fruits (but not onions or garlic) and flowers (but only roses or lilies).¹⁷ At the conclusion of the Mass the deacons would distribute the food to the needy. Although the bishop was permitted to reserve some for himself, most of the offering went toward charity. From this practice of gathering food arose the custom of the presider washing his hands before beginning the Great Thanksgiving. Needless to say, this powerful offertory symbolism has been lost on later generations who discharge their obligations by depositing an envelope in a basket, and it is safe to assume that most of such monetary offerings do not go for the alleviation of the needy. But in earlier days it was not possible to leave one's home to attend the Liturgy without first deciding what to bring for the poor.

Then as today another potentially effective reminder of one's service to the world was incorporated in the intercessions. Even during the most severe persecutions Christians prayed for the emperor and the empire, together with petitions for the sick, needy, homeless, orphans, and the dying. As with all prayer the assumption was that one does not pray for others without committing oneself to do whatever is in one's power to bring the prayer to effect.

We have seen three examples of the close relationship between the Liturgy and the world where worship effected life: Basil's liturgical understanding and his life of work; Hippolytus' connection between the offertory and the world; and the intercessions which informed the faithful of what needed doing after the Mass. We have another example from the early third century in Tertullian of

17. Hippolytus, *Apostolic Constitutions* 5, 6, 28.

Carthage, who said that the agape meal, closely associated with the Eucharist, was intended solely for feeding the poor. The monetary offering, he said, was

to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons now confined to their house, and those who have suffered shipwreck."¹⁸

The Lord's Supper was also the symbol of the unity of the Christian community itself; therefore the consecrated bread and wine were distributed to those who were absent. This seems to have been a regular practice in the pre-Constantinian church where congregations were small enough to be aware of those who were absent. Inasmuch as the only conceivable reason for one's absence would be that of illness, the distribution to the absent/sick followed immediately after the service. (In later years this was done with considerable pomp and ceremony and may be the origin of the Corpus Christi festival.) Reflecting upon the strong impetus to relate liturgy to life, an appropriate dismissal in those days could have been, "Go in peace. Serve your neighbor!"

Whereas almsgiving was integrally bound up with the Eucharist in the pre-Constantinian church, by the fourth and fifth centuries it had become an obligation somewhat removed from the Liturgy and to many Christians merely an onerous duty. Chrysostom chided his congregation,

You are not able to become propertyless? Give me your possessions. You cannot bear that burden? Divide your possessions with Christ. You do not want to surrender everything to him? Hand over half a share, even a third."¹⁹

18. Tertullian, *Apology* 39:16.

19. Chrysostom, *Homily on Matth.* 46:2, in Grant, *Early Christianity*, 132.

Some Christians responded that the poor were being cared for by the church's general treasury, or through their taxes, so why should they continue to give? Besides, they argued, many of the poor were ungrateful and lazy as well. Chrysostom even had beggars ranged in a row along the front of the church. "They sit here that they may also make you compassionate, that you may be inclined to pity."²⁰ In the end it was a losing battle, as the bishop of Antioch lamented in concluding his sixty-sixth homily on Matthew,

I am ashamed to speak about alms, for though I have often discussed this subject I have achieved no results worthy of the exhortation. A little more has come in, but not as much as I wanted."²¹

Whereas earlier the relationship between worship and life is described in glowing terms, by the fourth and fifth centuries we find some problems developing. In the second century the *Didache* contains the well-known paradigm of church unity in the bread made from many grains of wheat and the wine pressed from many grapes. But 250 years later, the golden-tongued orator of Antioch writes,

If we are fed from the same loaf and actually become the same body, why do we not show the same love as well? There are battles of every kind between Christians everywhere and our behavior to one another is more ferocious than that of wild beasts."²²

20. *St. Chrysostom's Religion of His Age*, n.d. and no author (S.P.C.K.) Citing *Homily 11:3 on I Thess.*, and *Homily 30:3 on I Corinthians*.

21. Chrysostom, *Homily on Matth. 46*, in Grant, *Early Christianity*, 134.

22. Chrysostom, *Homily on I Cor. 24:1-2*, in Mark Santer (ed.), *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975) 198-199.

He continues by referring to the Eucharist in which we have been given new flesh by receiving Christ's body.

This he has given us all to share, in order that we may feed on it. We are to be rid of the old flesh, and by means of this table are to be united in the living and immortal flesh."²³

Here is an example, not of the positive effects of worship on life, but rather of the use of Eucharistic imagery to recall the faithful to their true nature and obligations.

A New Society

As a result of baptismal cleansing and Eucharistic nurture, a new society was created which, by virtue of its counter-cultural way of life, served as a witness to the world. We have already seen that Callistus recognized the church as having laws different from those of society. Julian, the apostate, grudgingly acknowledged that Christians were different from pagans. By being separate from the rest of society the church was a witness to it. The creation of this countercultural movement was largely associated with the sacraments and the worship of the Christian God. A familiar description of this way of life comes to us from the second century *Letter to Diognetus*:

Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life.... They follow the customs of their country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living ... but only as aliens. They marry like everyone else and beget their children, but do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other but not their marriage bed. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the law requires. They love all men, and by all men are persecuted.

23. *Ibid.*, 199.

They are poor and yet make many rich; they are completely destitute, yet they enjoy abundance.²⁴

The author continues by saying that what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world. Already in AD 112 we have the witness of Pliny, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, who described the Christians as those who assemble before daylight and recite prayers to Christ as god, and then swear not to commit theft or robbery or adultery, not to break their word and not to deny a deposit when demanded. They conclude by taking food together.²⁵ Whether this was the Eucharist we do not know, but the description is testimony by a pagan governor of the nature of this baptismal eucharistic group.

Christian aloofness from pagan society can be seen in their attitude toward Roman entertainment, especially the arena, circus, and the gladiatorial combats. The theater was also to be avoided as it usually portrayed the immorality of the gods, and in some cases actual killing took place as part of the performances. The worst form of entertainment was the gladiatorial contest, in which as many as 200 pairs of contestants participated, each partner being required to kill the other. Tertullian warned,

It is not merely being in the world that we fall from faith, but by touching and tainting ourselves with the world's sins. To go to the circus or theater as a spectator is no different than sacrificing in the temple of Serapis."²⁶

24. *Letter to Diognetus* 5.

25. *Pliny's Letter to Trajan*, Ep. 10:96 in J. Stevenson ed., *A New Eusebius* (London: S.P.C.K., 1957) 16.

26. Tertullian, *On The Shows* 10.

Athenagoras said, "We see little difference between watching a man being put to death and killing him. We have given up such spectacles."²⁷

Early Christian martyrdom also had its sacramental dimension in addition to being a witness to fidelity. Ignatius along with others referred to his impending martyrdom in Eucharistic terms, as pure wheat being ground for God, as an oblation being poured out, as a true sacrifice following the model of Jesus Christ. And for those catechumens who suffered death, their blood served as their baptism. Indeed, so closely was martyrdom associated with baptism that in later years when monasticism became a surrogate martyrdom one's vows became the second baptism. This included a second renunciation of the world, a new set of clothing, and a new name. Whether through martyrdom or vow, there was a new society, born in baptism and nurtured by the Holy Communion.

Dress, Cosmetics, and Domestic Matters

There is always the danger of gilding any period of history to the extent that we delude ourselves into believing it was indeed pure gold. Romanticizing the ancient period of the church has always been a temptation among reformers, including Martin Luther. Not all Christians made a connection between worship and life, as witness Chrysostom's complaints. Rather than saving the world, a number of Fathers looked with glee upon its imminent demise. Tertullian, the earliest thorough-going puritan, was ambivalent about the world. On the one hand he prayed for the continuation of the empire, but on the other hand he advocated a strict aloofness from worldly associations. This is apparent in his diatribes against jewelry and fine apparel for women. In his treatise *On The Apparel of Women* he suggested that they should try to appear as plain as possible. He also censured cosmetics, as the enhancement of nature's endowments through artificial means was really a criticism of the Creator, and a

27. Athenagoras, *Plea for Christians* 35.

woman who tried to make herself attractive was only tempting men, if only in thought, and thus was leading them into sin. He was also critical of men who tried to cover up advancing age by dyeing their hair. "The more old age tries to conceal itself the more it will be detected"²⁸ He advocated utter simplicity, even slovenliness, in dress, so the world would be impressed with the Christian rejection of its standards. Going even further, Basil of Caesarea wrote at length about how slovenly believers ought to be:

Together with a humble and submissive spirit go grave and downcast eyes, a neglected appearance, unkempt hair and dirty clothing. The appearance which mourners take pains to cultivate should be ours as a matter of course. The tunic should be fastened close to the body by a belt. The belt should not be above the waist, which is effeminate.... One's walk should not be leisurely, revealing a laxity of mind.... Do not go after bright colors, or fine, soft material. To be concerned about the color of one's clothes is on the same level as women beautifying themselves by coloring their cheeks or dyeing their hair. One's footwear should be cheap but adequate.²⁹

Fortunately not all Christians were this world-denying. Early on Hippolytus advises that women should remove all jewelry before they are baptized, and in Rome we know a large number of aristocratic women were Christian. Indeed, Diocletian's wife and daughters were believers, and we assume they all dressed as befitted their station. Clement of Alexandria advocated the use of jewelry, but he recommended that it should make a statement about the faith. He suggested the dove, fish, or cross, and reminded his readers that it was not outward display which counted with God but the heart.

28. Tertullian, *On The Apparel of Women* 6.

29. Basil of Caesarea, *Letter 2*, in Santer, *Documents* 215.

In addition to a streak of puritanical fervor regarding clothing and adornment, the church derived far reaching implications from the Eucharist with respect to sex. These had profound social implications which reach to our own day. By the time of Cyprian certainly, and probably earlier, the Eucharist became identified with the Old Testament sacrifices. That identification required not only that the Mass be understood as an offering to God in reparation for human sin, but also that the presider of the rite receive the name of priest. This included all the Old Testament restrictions of the priesthood, including that of celibacy. A contemporary historian has said that

By contagion and initiation the eucharistic president himself became looked upon as at least analogous to the high priest of the Old Covenant and the spokesman of the entire royal priesthood which is the church."³⁰

Although priests such as Zechariah were married, during their time of duty in the temple they lived apart from their wives in order to assure the efficacy of their sacrifice. So we find Tertullian advocating abstinence from sex not only by clergy but laity as well, for in time of emergency a layman may be asked to preside, and he should be prepared.³¹ Although priestly celibacy did not become a canonical rule until the famous decree of Hildebrand in 1073, its value was highly prized from earliest times. Sexual abstinence was required also of the laity prior to receiving Holy Communion, and following another Old Testament precedent the sexes were separated in public

30. George H. Williams, "The Ministry of the Ante-Nicene Church," in *The Ministry in Historical Perspective*, ed. George H. Williams and R. Niebuhr (New York, 1956) 28.

31. Tertullian, *Exhortation to Chastity* 7:5 in Robert Eno SS, *Teaching Authority in The Early Church*, in Vol 14, "Message of the Fathers of the Church" (Wilmington, Del: Michael Glazier Inc., 1984) 55. "God wishes all of us at all times to be ready to administer the sacraments."

worship, partly to be certain the kiss of peace was not shared with the opposite sex. It has been argued that the high value placed on celibacy was not unique to the church but was canon in fourth century society.³² Nonetheless, Christians made a direct connection between a beneficial reception of the sacrament and sexual abstinence, and by so doing effected a profound social change in sexuality and in the status of women. For good or ill, worship had consequences in society.

On the positive side, Christian worship also elevated the place of women and the family. As early as AD 110, Ignatius wrote to Polycarp, "It is right for men and women who marry to be united with the bishop's approval. In that way their marriage will follow God's will and not the promptings of lust."³³ The church also required the free consent of the partners. Following Roman custom, Christians observed separate engagement and wedding ceremonies which included the exchange of vows, the veil, joining of hands, the gift of a ring from the man to the woman, signing a contract, and the reception of the woman's dowry. By AD 200 Christian marriages took place in a Eucharistic context, as Tertullian writes,

How can we describe the happiness of this marriage which the church approves, which the sacrifice confirms, which the blessing seals, which the angels recognize, which the Father ratifies?"³⁴

This same writer, who generally has a negative attitude toward women, writes that the husband dare not despise his wife as being inferior to him, because in Holy Baptism God had given them equal status, and in the marriage rite they

32. E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965). In this book Dodds describes the similarities between Christian and Pagan culture and institutions in the fourth century.

33. Ignatius, *To Polycarp* 5:2.

34. Tertullian, *To My Wife* 36.

were declared to be one flesh. Clement of Alexandria alone among the Fathers viewed marriage as superior to celibacy. His text was, "Where two or three are gathered together, there am I in their midst (Mt. 18:20)." He argued that the two or three referred to a married couple and child, an image of the Trinity. Whereas the unmarried are inclined toward self-centeredness, a family requires selflessness and sacrifice as well as constraint of the will. From the evidence we have of the place of woman and of marriage in the late Roman empire, Christianity offered nothing short of a revolution in values despite the value placed on celibacy. Indeed, the latter can be seen in a positive light as a judgment on the unbridled promiscuity of society, much as people today who have taken such vows or live chastely by themselves are seen as something of an oddity.

Christian marriage as a chaste and elevated state was associated with worship. This is found in the context of warnings against mixed marriages with pagans. Tertullian cautions against such marriages in terms of prayer. "How," he asks, "can a Christian woman arise to pray at midnight when a slave of the devil lies at your side?"³⁵ Hippolytus is less rigorous. "If your wife is present, pray together, but if she is not yet among the faithful, pray alone. Do not be lazy about praying."³⁶ The glories of the ideal marriage are extolled by Tertullian in the context of prayer and life.

They pray together, fast together, instruct, exhort, and support each other. They share each other's tribulations, persecutions, and revival. They delight to visit the sick, help the needy, and give alms freely. Christ rejoices when he hears and sees this.³⁷

35. Tertullian, *To My Wife* 2:4.

36. Hippolytus, *Apostolic Constitutions* 41.

37. Tertullian, *To My Wife* 2:8.

Again, *lex orandi, lex operandi*. Indeed, such a reversal in values which Christianity brought made it not only awkward for a mixed marriage to function but even dangerous for the believer. We read of a pagan woman who was converted to Christ, and in her newfound zeal for morality incurred the displeasure of her pagan husband, who had the bishop executed. Other complaints were registered by pagan husbands whose Christian wives suddenly took on independent airs and began to insist they were equal in status to their spouses. In the fourth century Constantine made Christian-Jewish marriages illegal, and in AD 338 a Christian law declared persons contracting marriages with non-Christians to be living in a state of adultery.

Another societal implication deriving from Christian values was the status placed upon children. Specifically, the early Christian Fathers were at pains repeatedly to emphasize the value of all human life, and they never tired of insisting that the exposure of unwanted babies was murder, as was abortion. When critics of the church caricatured the Eucharistic assembly as engaging in promiscuity and infanticide, Athenagoras argued that far from engaging in such things, Christians went so far as to label the death of a fetus as sin. How much less credible was the charge of child neglect.³⁸ On the debit side, however, was the view that sex was legitimate only for procreation and for nothing else. Second marriages following the death of a spouse were suspect. The church grudgingly approved the practice, but labelled it digamy, and those in that state underwent penance and received Communion separately from the congregation.

Conclusion

Prayer and life. Apart from the sacraments, the Christian life included daily individual prayer, the origin of the monastic office of seven times of daily prayer. Such prayer included thanksgiving to God for all good gifts, for creation and food, for health and peace, for the church and society. We can assume that such regular

38. Athenagoras, *Plea for Christians* 35.

intercessions carried over into one's attitude toward the world and one's place in it. Such prayer was to be within the family context when possible, including in some places a daily Eucharist. This was received at the Sunday worship in sufficient supply to last the week. Tertullian speaks of the possible abuse of the practice. He knew of one case where a woman had placed the consecrated bread where a mouse found it, but rather than permit the bread to be desecrated, a bolt of lightning consumed both the bread and the mouse as a warning not to handle sacred things irreverently.

Worship and witness, worship and life, worship and society. We have seen the integral relationship between prayer and society in the early church. There remains one final illustration to underscore this relationship. It comes from the other side of the equation. What of those Christians who did not take worship seriously, or who despised the sacraments? Our test case is from Gnosticism, the world-denying movement which claimed Christian affinities. Ignatius of Antioch claimed it was their denial of Christ's presence in the sacrament that led to their neglect of it, just as their denial of the Incarnation led to their refusal to worship Christ as fully human. Whether their neglect of the sacrament informed their worldview, or vice versa, is arguable. It is not debatable that there was a close connection between the two.

Early Christians offer us a mixed picture of prayer and life. The connection seems to have been more closely made by the pre-Constantinian church, although even during the time of persecution Origen complained that at worship women were chatting among themselves about children and recipes. Chrysostom complained in a Christmas sermon that the church was empty because everyone had gone to the races. However, taken as a whole, early Christians perceived their prayer as related to their witness, and so effected a revolution. Clement of Alexandria said that a prayerful attitude was more important than fixed prayers, or as he said, "Prayer is life!"

Lex orandi, lex operandi!