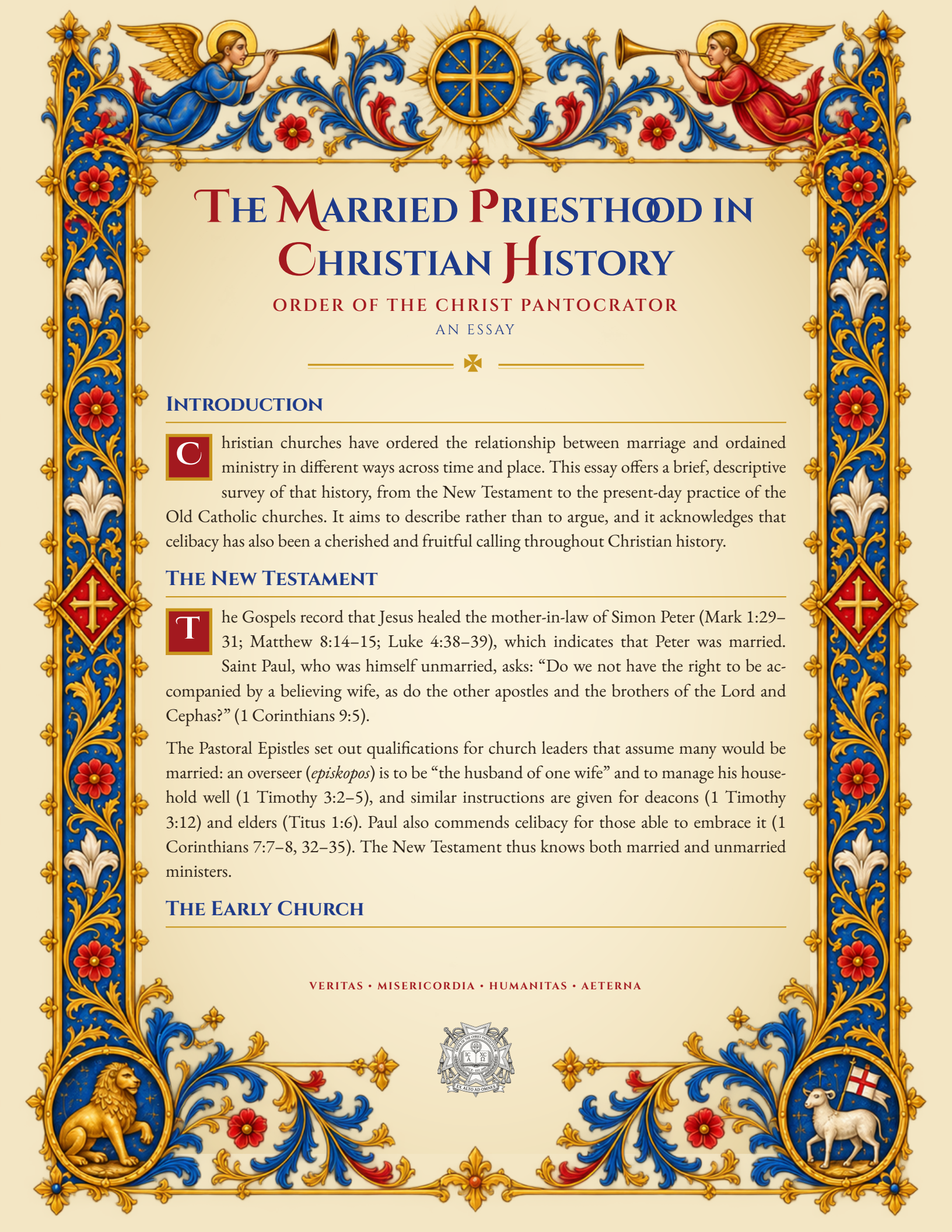




THE MARRIED PRIESTHOOD IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

ORDER OF THE CHRIST PANTOCRATOR
AN ESSAY

INTRODUCTION

Christian churches have ordered the relationship between marriage and ordained ministry in different ways across time and place. This essay offers a brief, descriptive survey of that history, from the New Testament to the present-day practice of the Old Catholic churches. It aims to describe rather than to argue, and it acknowledges that celibacy has also been a cherished and fruitful calling throughout Christian history.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Gospels record that Jesus healed the mother-in-law of Simon Peter (Mark 1:29–31; Matthew 8:14–15; Luke 4:38–39), which indicates that Peter was married. Saint Paul, who was himself unmarried, asks: “Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?” (1 Corinthians 9:5).

The Pastoral Epistles set out qualifications for church leaders that assume many would be married: an overseer (*episkopos*) is to be “the husband of one wife” and to manage his household well (1 Timothy 3:2–5), and similar instructions are given for deacons (1 Timothy 3:12) and elders (Titus 1:6). Paul also commends celibacy for those able to embrace it (1 Corinthians 7:7–8, 32–35). The New Testament thus knows both married and unmarried ministers.

THE EARLY CHURCH

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In the first centuries many bishops, priests and deacons were married, and some were the sons of clergy. At the same time, an ideal of clerical continence developed in parts of the Church. The Council of Elvira in Spain (c. 305) required bishops, priests and deacons to abstain from relations with their wives, one of the earliest such disciplinary canons.

The fifth-century historian Socrates of Constantinople records that at the Council of Nicaea (325) the Egyptian bishop Paphnutius, himself celibate, urged the council not to impose such a rule on married clergy, and that the council agreed. Historians debate the reliability of this account, but it reflects the variety of practice in the period. Popes of the late fourth and fifth centuries, among them Siricius, promoted continence for higher clergy in the West.

THE EASTERN CHURCHES

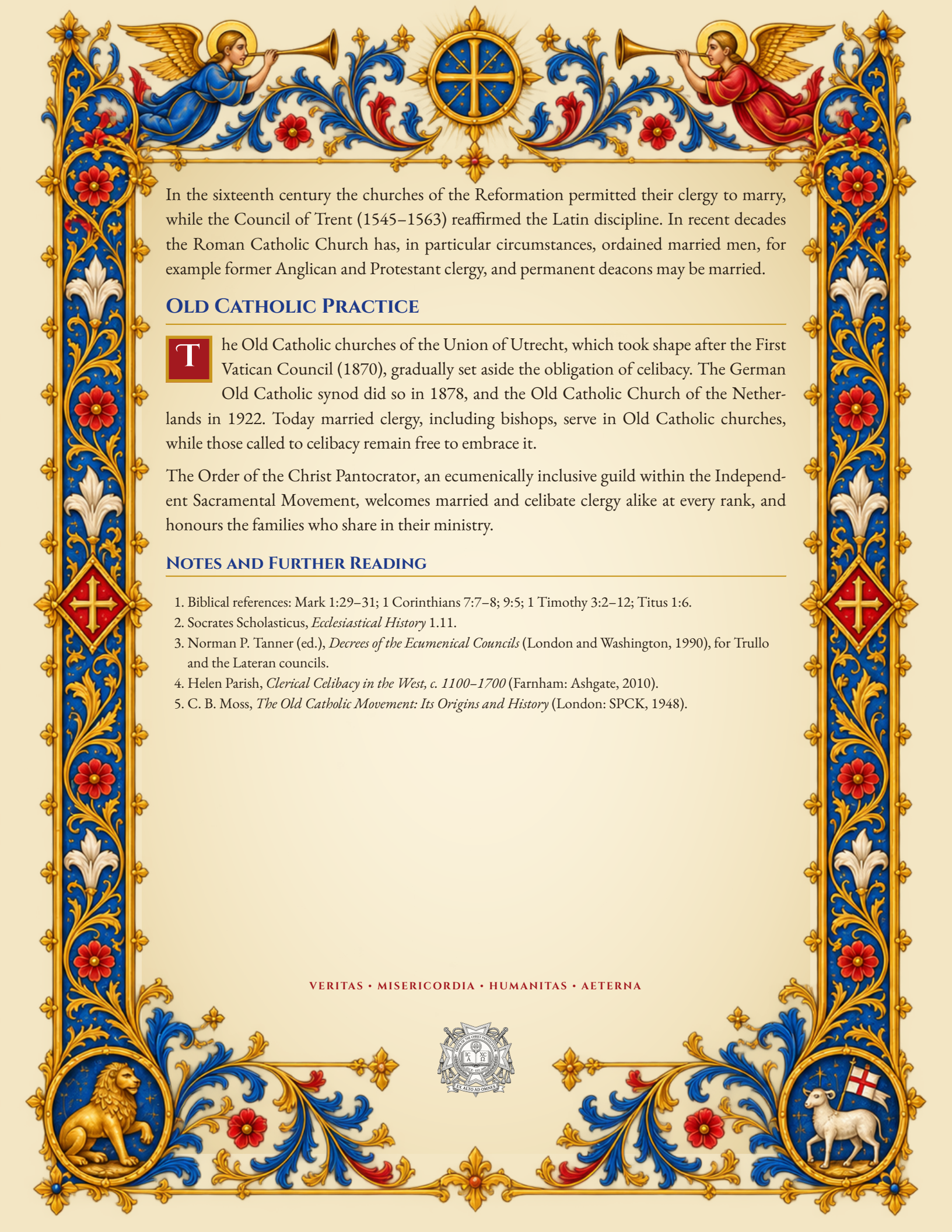
In the East, the Council in Trullo (Constantinople, 692) confirmed a distinct discipline: married men may be ordained deacons and priests and continue to live with their wives (canon 13), while marriage after ordination is not permitted and bishops are chosen from among the celibate (canons 12 and 48). This remains the practice of the Eastern Orthodox churches and of most Eastern Catholic churches today, in which married parish priests are common.

THE WESTERN DISCIPLINE OF CELIBACY

In the Latin West, the reform movement of the eleventh century, associated with Pope Gregory VII, pressed strongly for clerical celibacy. The First Lateran Council (1123) forbade priests, deacons and subdeacons to marry or to live with wives or concubines. The Second Lateran Council (1139) went further, declaring marriages contracted by clergy in major orders to be invalid. From this point celibacy became the general law for clergy of the Latin Church.

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In the sixteenth century the churches of the Reformation permitted their clergy to marry, while the Council of Trent (1545–1563) reaffirmed the Latin discipline. In recent decades the Roman Catholic Church has, in particular circumstances, ordained married men, for example former Anglican and Protestant clergy, and permanent deacons may be married.

OLD CATHOLIC PRACTICE

The Old Catholic churches of the Union of Utrecht, which took shape after the First Vatican Council (1870), gradually set aside the obligation of celibacy. The German Old Catholic synod did so in 1878, and the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands in 1922. Today married clergy, including bishops, serve in Old Catholic churches, while those called to celibacy remain free to embrace it.

The Order of the Christ Pantocrator, an ecumenically inclusive guild within the Independent Sacramental Movement, welcomes married and celibate clergy alike at every rank, and honours the families who share in their ministry.

NOTES AND FURTHER READING

1. Biblical references: Mark 1:29–31; 1 Corinthians 7:7–8; 9:5; 1 Timothy 3:2–12; Titus 1:6.
2. Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.11.
3. Norman P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London and Washington, 1990), for Trullo and the Lateran councils.
4. Helen Parish, *Clerical Celibacy in the West, c. 1100–1700* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).
5. C. B. Moss, *The Old Catholic Movement: Its Origins and History* (London: SPCK, 1948).

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