

From Liberation to Oppression: The Erosion of Ascetic Women's Agency in Early

Christianity

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## **Abstract**

By the fourth century, women were able to transcend the traditional patriarchal Roman society by adopting the ascetic lifestyle. These women were able to express their agency and autonomy as individuals, which was unique in Roman society. In the fourth century, ascetic women's agency reached its apex, while simultaneously both the Church and State were enacting legislation that eroded their agency and autonomy by legislating their lifestyle. The social position created by the Church and State for the ascetic women limited their agency and stripped away the independence that previous generations of ascetic women enjoyed. The first chapter is a literature review of both ancient and modern sources. The second chapter involves a discussion of women's legal and cultural status within traditional Roman society. Then, early Christian scriptures are discussed which advocated for equality and celibacy. The Pauline letters legitimized asceticism as an acceptable alternative to marriage and provided the basis for women to have positions of leadership within early Church communities. Next, it examines examples of liberated ascetic women asserting their agency and autonomy. This chapter concludes with a survey of dissenting voices within Christianity. The third chapter reviews new legislation which the Church and State passed during the fourth and fifth centuries that eroded ascetic women's agency, before concluding with a discussion of the absence of women in the early Christian histories, the changing discourse in *The Acts of Thecla*, the death of Blaesilla and St. Augustine's *Letter 211*. This thesis argues that ascetic women transcended the traditional social structure but later lost their agency because of the reassertion of traditional Roman gender norms in secular and ecclesiastical law and social practice.

## List of Abbreviations

1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
EUS	Eusebius. <i>Church History</i> . ca. 336. Accessed by: <a href="http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2501.htm">http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2501.htm</a> .
Gal.	Galatians
NIV	New Revised Standard Version
SOC	Socrates
SOZ	Soloman
THE	Theodoret
VC	Vita Constanti: Eusebius. <i>Eusebius' Life of Constantine</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.



## Chapter 1: Historiography

### Introduction

The agency and autonomy of ascetic women in the Early Christian Church was a contentious issue in the Rome Empire. In particular Christian authors expressed concern with the public prominence of asceticism. However, only recently has interest in the subject been renewed. Since the beginning of Christianity, women were able to transcend the patriarchal social structure by adopting the ascetic lifestyle. Asceticism is the renunciation of physical and material things as an expression of personal piety to bring oneself closer to God. Asceticism was not restricted to virgins. Many widows adopted the ascetic lifestyle after the death of their husbands. There were many different expressions of the ascetic lifestyle, because it was an individual experience, unique to the individual. These expressions differed by where, with whom, and how they lived. It also expressed itself through dietary restrictions or dress. Despite the lack of uniformity amongst the forms of asceticism, a particular emphasis was placed on the renunciation of sex. This was the most prevalent and near universal renunciation of an ascetic<sup>1</sup>.- Despite being religious figures, most of these individuals and the communities in which some of them lived were not part of an official church hierarchy or structure.- Until the fourth century, the Christian Church was characterized by its divisions. It was a loose formation of competing sects, lacking a centralized power structure.<sup>2</sup> This vacuum of centralized power allowed groups and individuals to operate outside of the Church's power while

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (London ; New York: Verso, 1991), 2. Another characteristic that was universal to ascetics as identified by Salisbury is charity.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 1 (1986): 62.

holding the mantle and authority that is given when a figure is identified as a holy person. Ascetics were able to take advantage of this lack of centralized power by exercising their agency, which was increased by their spiritual influence. They were able to act independently of the Church. There were three principal variations of the expressions of the female ascetic lifestyle. They would live at home with their natural family. This was a common expression of the female ascetic lifestyle, especially amongst elite Roman women.<sup>3</sup> A first century homily<sup>4</sup> suggested that a female ascetic would make a private declaration of her vow of chastity to the *paterfamilias*.<sup>5</sup> However, if a woman was unable or did not wish to stay within her childhood home then she could live as an ascetic in an ascetic community or in a pseudo-marriage. Preferably, Eusebius required virgins to remain at home.<sup>6</sup> However, he acknowledged this was not always possible and allowed women who were abandoned by their families as a result of their pursuit of an ascetic lifestyle to live with other female virgins as ascetics in communities, proto-monasteries.<sup>7</sup> These women lived in a communal lifestyle. Basil of Caesarea, considered to be the founder of monasticism<sup>8</sup>, established mixed communities of male and female ascetics. He wrote the *Asketika* which were written rules for these communities. Out of the 400 rules only 13 pertained solely to women.<sup>9</sup> Women and men lived together in the

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<sup>3</sup> Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning," 80.

<sup>4</sup> This homily is from the first century and its author is unknown. The text's subject is ascetic women living within a household. It was a conservative text that suggested the *paterfamilias* take an active role to ensure that his daughter or relative kept their vow. However, the text also suggests that the vow not be life long if the woman who took it changed her mind.

<sup>5</sup> Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God, The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning," 80.

<sup>7</sup> Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning," 80.

<sup>8</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 61.

<sup>9</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 69.

same physical space but each gender had their own hierarchy. The women were called sisters and the men, brothers. The third expression of an ascetic lifestyle is the pseudo-marriage. A pseudo-marriage was a relationship between a man and a women. This relationship was like a traditional marriage except the man and women did not have sex. This expression of the ascetic lifestyle was the most common in rural areas.<sup>10</sup> There is also the least amount of information available on these relationships because individuals in these relationships were either married couples who decided to renunciate the sexual nature of their relationship or it was a relationship between two people who were co-dependent.<sup>11</sup> It was most common in rural areas because there were not many communities of ascetic women or perhaps a lack of familial support which obliged pseudo-marriage.

This chapter will discuss the literature on gender equality in the Church in general, and more specifically in regard to ascetic women. The first part of this chapter will focus on traditional history which begins with the Pauline letters in the Principate and continues into the Later Roman Period with Eusebius. The importance of these sources stems from their proximity to the events and their direct influence on ascetic women's agency which modern scholars study as information resources to determine ascetic women's agency and autonomy in early Christianity. This chapter will conclude with a brief survey on current research on the agency and autonomy of ascetic women.

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<sup>10</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 47.

## Principate (27 BCE-284 CE)

It is difficult to study events from the Principate (27 BCE-285 CE) because of the lack of texts that do survive, particularly concerning women. The Principate was a period before Christianity was an established and legalized religion. The Principate was the Early Imperial Period when the Roman Empire was ruled by emperors referred to as *princeps* and *imperator*. The first century CE saw the formation of a loose network of church communities with intra-regional connections.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, church records vary by region and documents have a stronger localized importance than following the legalization of Christianity in the Edict of Milan in 313 CE. In 313 CE Constantine and Licinius<sup>13</sup> issued the Edict of Religious Tolerance and it established freedom of religion within the Empire. Specifically referring to the Christians, the edict says, "...we grant both to Christians and all men the freedom to follow whatever religion worship each one wished."<sup>14</sup> Christians were now able to openly worship without having to fear for their safety. Records that do survive are sparse because of the remote date and also because people preserved what they thought was important and unfortunately that did not include many documents written by women.<sup>15</sup> The documents that did survive were preserved both purposely and by happenstance. Therefore, arguments cannot be made using negative evidence considering the random nature of how certain documents survived and in addition there is a strong historical bias of the period since the majority of the authors

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 39.

<sup>13</sup> Licinius reigned over the Eastern Empire whereas Constantine was the Emperor of the Western part of Empire. Both of these men co-authored the Edict of Milan.

<sup>14</sup> Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 85.

<sup>15</sup> Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning," 62.

were written by elite Romanized males.<sup>16</sup> Despite these issues of preservation, there are documents that do survive which are crucial for studying ascetic women in the early Christian Church. Sources like the Pauline letters, treatises by Christian theologians, and secular law codes are important because they allow the modern scholar to access the historical record and document the characteristics of early Christianity. Furthermore, they enable the modern scholar to research equality in the early Christian Church, particularly pertaining to ascetic women. At the same time Roman legal sources such as the *Lex Papia Poppeae* establish a baseline to study the agency of ascetic women because it establishes the agency of women in Roman society.

Arguably, some of the most important documents in the early Christian Church are the Pauline letters. Paul (5-67 CE) was a Jewish-born Roman citizen who became a Christian missionary. His mission was to spread the Word of God to the Gentiles or non-Jewish peoples. Over the course of his travels, Paul maintained correspondence with different early Christian Church communities across the Roman Empire. These letters are referred to as the Pauline letters and are the earliest surviving Christian texts. Until the Council of Carthage in 397 CE, Christianity did not have an established set of texts. However, the Pauline letters were used as scripture in most churches.<sup>17</sup> They were widely accessible. Therefore, they are important because they represent early Christian theology that was studied across regional boundaries. These letters were collected together along with other Christian texts like the Septuagint which were Hebrew scriptures that were translated into Greek by Jews in Alexandria. These collected texts

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<sup>16</sup> Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning," 62.

<sup>17</sup> In *History of the Church Book V.III.II*, Eusebius wrote that the Pauline letters were second most important religious texts after the Gospels.

were put together at the Council of Carthage in 397 CE which later became the Vulgate Bible. In particular Galatians (47 CE) and Corinthians (c. 53-54 CE) are important letters for studying equality and asceticism in the early Church. In Galatians, Paul established egalitarianism between classes, ethnicities, and genders whereas in Corinthians Paul established celibacy as a spiritual grace. Both Galatians and Corinthians are especially important for modern scholars to established the root of egalitarianism within the Church.

Beginning in the second century, Christian theologians wrote treatises concerning theology and daily life.<sup>18</sup> These sources are important in the study of the status of ascetic women because they reflect the intellectual and patriarchal attitudes concerning these women. They permit the modern scholar to note trends and development of attitudes and practices concerning ascetic women, particularly the assertion of conservative attitudes that reflect Greco-Roman notions of gender. *On Virginit*y, a first century homily written by an unknown author, is an importance resource for modern scholarship. It reflects early attitudes regarding the lifestyle of ascetic women and how they ought to be regulated. It encourages a program of enclosure of the ascetic women which would be enforced by her father.<sup>19</sup> This document foreshadows later attitudes towards the lifestyle and autonomy of ascetic women. Two more examples of Christian treatises are Tertullian's *De Baptismo*<sup>20</sup> (190 CE) and *De Virginibus Velandis*<sup>21</sup> (c. 200 CE). Tertullian (c. 154- 240 CE) was a prolific Christian author from Carthage in North Africa whose compositions were influential across the empire. Tertullian's writings and particularly these two

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<sup>18</sup> D. Brendan Nagle, *Ancient Rome: A History* (Cornwall-on-Hudson: Sloan Publishing, 2013), 384.

<sup>19</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 35.

<sup>20</sup> *Concerning Baptism*

<sup>21</sup> *On the Veiling of Virgins*

treatises reflect a conservatism within the Church which reflected Greco-Roman gender notions. Tertullian worked to established an anti-egalitarian thrust of the early Church leadership and intellectuals that was present despite the content of the Pauline letters and influential ascetic women.

The Acts of Thecla is an apocryphal text which tells the story of Thecla, a Greek maiden from the first century. An apocryphal text is a document of unknown authorship and spurious contents which is not included within the Bible. Thecla was an Ionian maiden who vowed to lead a celibate life after hearing a sermon by Paul. Paul promised salvation to her through living a celibate life.<sup>22</sup> However, her choice and assertion of agency subjects her to trials. Tertullian identified the text as spurious. Lynne Boughton agrees with Tertullian's conclusion, and identified inconsistencies with first century apostolic thought and expression and reflected the cultural perspective of the second century.<sup>23</sup> She argues that it was written to make the events and personages from the first century relevant to its second century audience.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is most probably a second century CE fabrication set in the first century. However, the popularity of the story negates its spurious and fictitious nature for the modern scholar. There were at least six versions of the Acts of Thecla. The amount of surviving versions and diaspora over a broad geographical area testifies to its popularity between the second and fifth centuries.<sup>25</sup> Despite its spurious nature, the popularity of The Acts of Thecla denotes its

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<sup>22</sup> Lynne C. Boughton, "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License from Apostolic Practice in the "Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla" (*The Journal of Religion* 71 (3): 1991), 364.

<sup>23</sup> Boughton, "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy," 363.

<sup>24</sup> Boughton, "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy," 363.

<sup>25</sup> Boughton, "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy," 363.

importance within the Christian Church and is an important text for modern scholars to examine ascetic women's agency within the early church of the second century. Thecla is depicted as asserting her agency and refusing to conform to societal pressure to marry. Furthermore, Thecla's role as a baptizer is an important example of women in a leadership and missionary position within the Church, thus making this an important text for modern scholars to examine ascetic women's agency in the early Church.

In the Principate many documents concerning Christianity and more specifically Christian women have been lost due to the remoteness of the period, contemporary notions concerning which documents to preserve and sheer happenstance. However, sources such as the Pauline letters and Christian treatises such as *On Virginity* or Tertullian's writings provide modern scholars documentation for future research allowing them to investigate the status of ascetic women in the Christian Church.

### **Later Roman Empire (285 CE-641 CE)**

The Later Roman Empire was a significant period for Christianity. In 313 CE, Constantine and Licinius passed the Edict of Milan which legalized Christianity, allowing Christians to worship in the open. The Edict coupled with the growing Christian population in the empire supported the creation and preservation of more Christian writings. However, the Later Roman Empire, like the Principate, suffers from the same problems concerning the preservation of documents. There are many significant sources that have survived which allowed modern scholars to further their research concerning the status of ascetic women's agency and autonomy within the Church. Arguably, some of the most important sources from this period are: Eusebius' *Church History* and *Life of Constantine*, Jerome's *Letters*, the Theodosian Code, and the canons from the ecumenical



councils and synods.

Eusebius' *Church History* was the first history of the Church. It was written by Eusebius (c.260-340 CE), who was prominent Greek clergyman and Bishop of Emesa.<sup>26</sup> He finished his *Church History* before 336 CE. It is a comprehensive account of the Church's history beginning with an introduction to Jesus and concluding with the victory of Constantine in 323 CE over Licinius, when he became the sole Emperor of the re-united Roman Empire.<sup>27</sup> The importance of this work is twofold. This was the only history to look at the first three centuries of Church history in a systematically comprehensive manner, and according to Anne Jensen, none of the later church histories rework the earlier period.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Eusebius had access to extensive original Church documents which do not survive.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, these documents preserve fragments of lost information concerning the Church and women within it. In *Church History*, Eusebius's work led up to the turning point for Christianity with Constantine's victory. Indirectly, *Church History* is an important document for further research concerning women and ascetic women in particular. In a study Jensen concluded that Eusebius mentions fifty-five women within his account, whereas the next three histories by Socrates (d.439), Solomon (d. ca. 450) and Theodore (d. ca. 466) combined only mentioned women forty-three women.<sup>30</sup> This highlights the importance of the document

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<sup>26</sup> During his lifetime he was a controversial figure. At one point he was accused of being a sorcerer, these allegations were based on his talent for mathematics and astronomy. He was forced to flee from his diocese. However, he was later pardoned and worked for the Emperor Constantine II, the son of Constantine I.

<sup>27</sup> Anne Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters : Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 5.

because it shows the disappearance of women from the historical record.

Eusebius also wrote the *Life of Constantine*. The work was not completed by the time of Eusebius' death in c.340 CE. However, the unfinished document survives and like his *Church History* the work is written in koine Greek. The purpose of *Life of Constantine* was to align the emperor and his actions with Christianity.<sup>31</sup> Despite his strong bias, Eusebius' work is a good source for the life of Constantine and furthers future research by permitting scholars to connect events in Church history with secular history.

Jerome's letters are an invaluable resource in establishing the agency and autonomy of ascetic women in Italy, especially with elite Roman women. Jerome (347-420 CE) was an important authority within the Church as a priest. He is credited with bringing asceticism to western Europe.<sup>32</sup> Letters, more so than many other types of primary source documents, are a window into the past because of their audience and purpose. The audience of these letters were both private and public. They sought to convey opinions and emotions that were intimate and personal. Letters during this time period were also meant to be published and circulated. The intention of the letters was to spread their contents beyond the person to which the letter was addressed. The author intended for its contents to be shared. Therefore, they best reflect the actuality of the situation. Unfortunately, despite possessing many letters written by Jerome to women, the letters written by the women have not been preserved. Despite this, the letters remain useful sources for scholars.

Another valuable source from this time period is the Theodosian Code. The

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<sup>31</sup> Eusebius, *Eusebius' Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 190.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret Schaus, *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (New York and London : Routledge, 2006), 422.

Theodosian Code was a codex compiled on the order of the Emperor of the East, Theodosius II and his co-Emperor of the West, Valentinian III in 429 CE. It codified laws from the reign of Constantine in 313 CE and until 437 CE. These laws were published in 438 CE and applied to both the Eastern and Western Roman Empires. Therefore, the Theodosian Code was an important document which preserved both Constantine's legislation and legislation of later emperors. It is significant for modern scholars because it begins in the reign of Constantine when Christianity was legalized. Therefore, it allows scholars to trace the development of the Church as an established element of society and the new relationship between the Church and State. In terms of ascetic women, the Theodosian code is important because it reflected a renewed conservative attitude towards women which in the fourth century. It illustrates the increasingly restrictive attitude of Roman society toward women which harkened back to traditional Greco-Roman notions of gender.

After the legalization of Christianity in 313 CE, the Church, with the support of the State, sought to establish an orthodoxy. This process took place at regional synods at ecumenical councils. An ecumenical council was an assembly of bishops from throughout the Roman Empire where they decided theological tenets and practices of the Christian faith, creating a universal orthodoxy within the Empire. At these ecumenical councils, bishops passed canons which were laws of the Church. The first ecumenical council was the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. By examining the signatures on council documents, modern scholars estimated that approximately two hundred and twenty bishops were in attendance with the Bishop of Rome sending legates in his stead as his

advance age prevented him from attending.<sup>33</sup> The large number of bishops in attendance demonstrated the universal nature of the council. The Emperor Constantine presided over the Council of Nicaea confirming the decisions made at the council which made them binding under Roman law<sup>34</sup>. The majority of decisions made at the Council of Nicaea concerned clarifications of theological questions. However, the Council dealt with practical matters as well. The canons from the Council of Nicaea are an important resource for modern scholars to further their research in regard to ascetic women because they contain Church legislation that concerned them. This Council forbade the practice of pseudo-marriages, an expression of the ascetic lifestyle. This was an early prohibition which foreshadowed later developments which allows modern scholars to discern where ascetic women began, in a universal fashion, to loose their agency.

An important regional synod was the Council of Gangra (325-381 CE). The exact date of the council is unknown. However, modern scholars date the council between 325 and 381 because they know that it happened after the Council of Nicaea but before the First Council of Constantinople.<sup>35</sup> Contemporary sources do not agree on the date of the Council.<sup>36</sup> The council was a regional synod which took place in Asia Minor. However, the events and decisions of the Council were pertinent to the universal Roman Church because the canons decreed by the Council of Gangra were ratified at the fourth

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<sup>33</sup> Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology*. Theology and Life Series; v. 21, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990), 57.

<sup>34</sup> Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 57.

<sup>35</sup> *A select library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church second series*, ed. Philip Schaff, D.D, LL.D AND Henry Wace, D.D. Accessed by: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.viii.v.ii.html>, on March 12.

<sup>36</sup> *A select library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene*, ed. Philip Schaff, D.D, LL.D AND Henry Wace, D.D. Accessed by: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.viii.v.ii.html>, on March 12.

ecumenical council, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. The canons from this Council are important to understanding of ascetic women's status within the Church because there are six different canons that are specifically directed to governing ascetic women.

Modern scholars may traced conservative tends through the institution of these canons and note the restrictive element towards ascetic women.

The fourth Ecumenical Council was the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE.

Historically, scholars believed that five hundred bishops were in attendance, but, more recent estimates suggest that there were three hundred and fifty bishops in attendance from all over the Empire.<sup>37</sup> Like preceding councils, the Council of Chalcedon debated both theological and practical issues within the Church. The bishops debated thirty disciplinary canons, some which pertained to the jurisdiction of the bishops over the clergy.<sup>38</sup> Most importantly for this thesis, the Council decreed canons which placed all monasteries under the jurisdiction of the Church. These canons are important in furthering the research for modern scholars because they establish the movement towards institutionalized piety and the solidification of Church hierarchy.

Another important document which affected the lives of ascetic women was written by St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE). He was a Christian theologian who was influential in the Church. He grew up in North Africa and as an adult he converted to Christianity and eventually moved to Milan to teach rhetoric in 384 CE. He became a priest in 391 CE in Hippo Regius, in modern Algeria. He eventually became Bishop of Hippo. He wrote the *Rule of St. Augustine* in c. 400 which served as a guideline to

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<sup>37</sup> Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 181.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 189.

monastic life. In 423 CE, Augustine wrote the *Letter 211* which was directed to a female monastery which he set up in the diocese of Hippo. The letter outlined communal regulations which these women were supposed to use as a guideline. Despite this letter's recipients being from North Africa, this letter had ramifications for women in Italy as well. Many monastic orders followed the *Rule of St. Augustine*, and St. Benedict (ca. 480 – 543 or 547 CE) studied *Letter 211* and used it as inspiration when writing the *Benedictine Rule*. Therefore, this letter may be used by modern scholars to assert the living conditions which ascetic women faced in monasteries in fifth century and beyond into the dawn of the Middle Ages.

These sources from the Later Roman Empire illustrate the changing agency of ascetic women in the fourth and fifth centuries from one of liberation to oppression. Like documents in the Early Roman Period, documents from this era suffer from the same constraints. There is a poverty of sources which have survived this period in particular in concern to documents written by women, of which there is almost a total absence. However, due to the legalization of Christianity in 313 CE and the subsequent establishment of an intra-regional church hierarchy, scholars are able to establish broader trends running through the Empire that reflect a conservative attitude towards women which harkened back to Rome values concerning notions of gender.

## **Twentieth Century**

Discussion of ascetic women's agency vanished from scholarship after the end of Late Antiquity.<sup>39</sup> However, after the advent of feminism in the 1960s, scholars in the

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<sup>39</sup> Late Antiquity spans from the beginning of the fourth century until the end of the fifth century.

1970s began to seek self-understanding of women and transcending the traditional adamistic view of females. Overarching themes within modern scholarship are ascetic women finding liberation in the early Christian movement and women separating themselves from their biological functions as well as a regression in Late Antiquity which eroded the liberty gained by ascetic women in earlier periods. Important scholars from this period include Rosemary Reuther (1936- ) and Elizabeth A Clark (1938 -), these women were first wave scholars that examined ascetic women's agency.<sup>40-</sup>

Rosemary Reuther, an american born scholar, first published an article on women in the early Church in 1974. Reuther's work dealt with themes of liberation and oppression of ascetic women. According to Anne Hickey, Reuther's early work on the ascetic movement of the late patristic era focused on misogynistic writings of the era.<sup>41-</sup> However, in her later work she addressed themes of liberation and within an essay entitled, "Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women of the Late Patristic Age." In this article she discussed the lives of important ascetic women of the Roman elite: Marcella, Melania the Elder, and Melania the Younger. She introduced a definition of liberation which suggested that a person takes charge of their own lives and rejects being governed and defined by others.<sup>42-</sup> She applied this definition to the lives of these ascetic women. Clearly, with Reuther's work there are themes of liberation and regression of the agency of ascetic women.

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<sup>40</sup> Anne Ewing Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy as Christian Monastics*, Studies in Religion no. 1, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1987), 14. Rosemary Reuther research was a forerunner within this field of study. Hickey's research is a more recent addition to Reuther's work and Hickey's provides a excellent discussion of previous research within her book.

<sup>41</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 15.

Elizabeth A. Clark is another influential scholar of ascetic women. Her earliest publication was in 1977 and dealt with the sexual textualization of women in Ambrose's work. Her contribution to the scholastic field is significant. In particular she arranged for the English translation of documents which pertain to the themes of liberation of ascetic work. Her contributions in this field have continued and she is still an active scholar. Some of her recent scholarship discusses the religious metaphor of the celibate bridegroom which she argues continued the "...warm associations of marriage for ancient Roman of a certain status..."<sup>43</sup> She identified these associations as the enhancement of wealth, property inter-familial alignments and political influence.<sup>44</sup> This research suggested the Romanization of asceticism because it illustrated religious metaphors that were in agreement with traditional Roman values of gender.

Continuing into the 1980s, a plethora of other scholars began researching this topic. However, Elizabeth Fiorenza and Virginia Burrus were two of the most prominent to emerge in the field and continue to be active within the field today. Elisabeth Fiorenza (1938-) was born in Romania and eventually moved to the United States to teach and research. Fiorenza's most influential work was *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* published in 1983. This influential book established women's liberation and rejects controversial passages in Paul. The book particularly focused on The Acts of Thecla, looking at women as a holy force. These works were important because they established that women were adopting an ascetic lifestyle to achieve autonomy and agency.

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<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis" (*Church History* vol. 77 no. 1 Mar, 2008), 8.

<sup>44</sup> Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides," 8.



Burrus (1959-) continued Fiorenza work on Thecla. In “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity,” Burrus argues that ascetic women in the fourth century were sexualized in Christian literature.<sup>45</sup> As an example, she particularly focuses on Ambrose’s fourth century version of The Acts of Thecla where Ambrose tantalizes the male audience with Thecla’s nudity.<sup>46</sup> This research illustrates the loss of agency of ascetic women because women are perceived solely through the lens of their sexuality which ironically as an ascetic is a state that they are trying to transcend.

## **Conclusion**

In the late fourth and fifth centuries, the Church enforced Roman cultural notions which curtailed these women’s agency, placing them back within the social structure which they previously were able to transcend. The first part of this study is divided into three sections. It begins by exploring the Roman social structure and explains its patriarchal nature which includes the society’s cultural and legal structures which enforced its notions on gender. Next, the study continues by establishing the radical egalitarianism within the earliest Christian scriptures, and provides selected examples of ascetic women who were able to express fully the notion of egalitarianism by asserting their voices and autonomy. The first part of this study will conclude by examining the dissenting voices regarding the agency and autonomy of ascetic women from the first three centuries of Christianity. It will argue that ascetic women were able to transcend the

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<sup>45</sup> Virginia Burrus, “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity,” (*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 1, 1994), 1.

<sup>46</sup> Burrus, “Word and Flesh,” 48.

patriarchal social structure by adopting asceticism, however from the beginning of Christianity there were a plethora of male Christian authors who disagreed with these women's actions and wished women to behave as the classical Greco-Roman social structure dictated. These opinions foreshadowed the changes in the fourth and fifth centuries by secular and ecclesiastical hierarchies to reassert the Greco-Roman notions of gender. The second part of this study will be divided into three sections. Firstly, it will examine changes within secular law established by Constantine and his successors that provided legitimacy for the church allowing it to have the power to enforce its authority. Furthermore, it will explore themes of reasserting traditional Roman values concerning the notions of gender, especially the comportment and rights of women. Next, it will examine ecumenical councils and regional synods which enacted canons that restricted the agency of ascetic women by institutionalizing their piety. The study continues with an examination of ascetic women from the late fourth and fifth centuries to illustrate their loss of agency and autonomy. Thus proving that ascetic women lost the agency and autonomy that they gained by adopting the ascetic lifestyle in the first three centuries of Christianity.

## Chapter 2: Women Gaining Agency and Autonomy through Asceticism

### Introduction

Early Christianity's egalitarianism permitted Christian ascetic women to transcend the traditional patriarchy. Women could serve as heads of worshipping Christian communities. This was a radical departure from the traditional Roman social structure. The core of Roman society was the *familia* and the *paterfamilias* was its governing leader. He had absolute power over his dependents and relatives, particularly the women. Legally, women had no franchise.<sup>47</sup> They were confined to the private sphere, unable to vote, speak to an assembly or senate, or serve in the military, while their male counterparts occupied the public domain.<sup>48</sup> Only the six priestesses of the goddess Vesta performed any public religious service. However, by adopting an ascetic lifestyle, Roman women were able to move outside the traditional social structure and have an autonomous voice within the early Christian communities.

This chapter will begin by discussing the traditional Roman social structure and restrictions on women's agency enshrined within the legal system and through social conventions. Next, we will establish the root of the radical egalitarianism of the early Christian Church through the examination of the Pauline letters. By examining the Pauline letters, we can also establish the theological support for the celibate ascetic lifestyle. The chapter will continue to consider the unique agency of ascetic women through the examples of Agnes, Thecla, and the elite Roman ascetics Marcella and Paula.

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<sup>47</sup> Jane F. Gardner, *Being a Roman Citizen* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 85.

<sup>48</sup> Beth Severy, *Augustus and the Family at the Birth of the Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 32.

The chapter will conclude with a survey of the dissenting voices in relation to female ascetic agency.

### **The Roman Tradition**

The centre of Roman society was the *familia*, a term that translates to ‘family.’ The *familia* included the entire household, which could encompass members of the family, dependants, and slaves under the authority of the *paterfamilias*.<sup>49</sup> As Rome was a patriarchal society, the *paterfamilias* was always the oldest male agnatic relative within the household.<sup>50</sup> His authority was absolute and included the power to dictate marriages, illustrating the dominance of men enshrined within the legal and cultural spheres of Roman law.<sup>51</sup>

Men’s superior status in Roman society expressed itself through their treatment of women. Women were commodities that enabled their families to cement economical and political advancements.<sup>52</sup> Marriages were a main example of how women were used as commodities which enabled their families to advance. Roman society was divided by legal status and class; the class a woman was born into dictated the age that she was married. There were three different legal statuses within Roman society: freeborn, freed and servile. However, status was also determined by wealth. To enrol in the equestrian class, a man needed to possess property with a minimum value of 400,000 sesterces.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Severy, *Augustus and the Family*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Severy, *Augustus and the Family*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Severy, *Augustus and the Family*, 26.

<sup>52</sup> Castelli, “Virginité and Its Meaning,” 86.

<sup>53</sup> C. M. Wells, *The Roman Empire*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 8.

The equestrian class was a part of the Roman elite along with the senatorial class. These men and their families could join the senatorial class if they were elected to a curule magistracy.<sup>54</sup> The distinction between the equestrian and the senatorial classes was the latter was involved with politics, which was a prestigious occupation. Women from these elite families were married at a younger age as the political and economic stakes for their families were higher.

The legal minimum age of marriage was twelve, but not all girls were married at that age.<sup>55</sup> According to a study of epigraphic data from the western empire between the first and fourth centuries, most girls married in their late teens, an average that represented primarily women outside of the equestrian orders.<sup>56</sup> Researchers established this average by noting at what ages the commemorator on the epithets were a woman's parents or husband, thus confirming a difference in marriages between classes. Elite girls were married in their early teens, while girls from lower classes were married in the late teens. By creating economic and political alliances through marriage agreements, the Roman elite determined a woman's value through her role as a wife and mother, which was traded for the benefit of her *familia*.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the nature of Roman marriage was a restrictive agent for women.

Since the Early Republic, laws concerning marriage and guardianship restricted the autonomy of elite Roman women. The marital status of women was enshrined in

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<sup>54</sup> Wells, *The Roman Empire*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Matthew Dillon and Lynda Garland, *Ancient Rome: From the Early Republic to the Assassination of Julius Caesar* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 346.

<sup>56</sup> Lisa A. Alberici, and Mary Harlow, "Age and Innocence: Female Transitions to Adulthood in Late Antiquity," *Hesperia Supplements* 41 (2007):195.

<sup>57</sup> Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning," 86.

Roman's legal code, known as the Twelve Tables. In 451 BCE, a commission of ten men codified the laws of Rome on twelve tablets. These legal codes established laws concerning marriage and guardianship for women which were maintained throughout the time of the Republic to the time of the Empire. Traditionally, there were two-forms of marriage within Roman society, *in manus*<sup>58</sup> and *sine manu*.<sup>59</sup> The distinguishing feature between these two-forms was who retained the authority over the bride after the marriage ceremony. The *in manus* form of marriage legally transferred the authority of the *paterfamilias* to the husband or the *paterfamilias* of his family. In the *sine manu* form of marriage, on the other hand, the *paterfamilias* retained his authority over his daughter.<sup>60</sup>

In the Late Republic, *sine manu* marriages became the most common form of marriage, a trend that reflected the instability of the Empire. Since the beginning of the Late Republic in 133 BCE, there was a shift in the demographics of the population caused by male casualties in foreign and civil wars. Women were able to gain more autonomy in this period because the decrease in the male population did not permit the continuance of Early Republican cultural conventions where women were under a strict guardianship of a male authority figure. Since many men were away on campaign and died in battle *sine manu* marriages gradually became the most common form. Therefore, by the first century CE, the *paterfamilias* retained authority over their female relatives in the majority of marriages in order to ensure that the wealth of the female did not get alienated from her agnate family.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> The literal translation of *in manus* means 'into the hand.'

<sup>59</sup> The literal translation of *sine manu* is 'without hand,' but legally *manus* refers to authority.

<sup>60</sup> Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women*, Cambridge Introduction to Roman Civilization, (Cambridge;NewYork: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 46.

<sup>61</sup> D'Ambra, *Roman Women*, 46.

The practice of *tutela or* guardianship was another way in which Roman law restricted the agency of women. This practice was established in the Twelve Tables which stated that: “Females should remain in guardianship even when they have attained their majority.”<sup>62</sup> Men were considered *sui iuris*<sup>63</sup>, - once they reached the age of majority and had full legal capacity,<sup>64</sup> - but women were subject to a *tutor* whose purpose was to ensure that her wealth and agency was not alienated from her *familia*. A *tutor* was a male guardian that all women were required to have regardless of wealth, legal, or martial status. Depending on the form of her marriage, a woman was technically emancipated at the death of her authority figure,<sup>65</sup> - however, she was still legally required to have a *tutor*.<sup>66</sup> - In *sine manu* marriages, a freeborn woman’s *tutor* was either her brother or paternal uncle, whereas *in manu* marriages, it was usually her husband’s brother or her son.<sup>67</sup> - Women needed the consent of their *tutori* for any action that could diminish their property, a power was referred to as *auctoritas*<sup>68</sup>. - These actions could include selling property such as slaves, large livestock, and land, accepting contractual obligations, promising a dowry, manumission of slaves, making a will or accepting an inheritance.<sup>69</sup> - The role of the *tutor* restricted women’s autonomy and reflected the diminished legal capacity women held under Roman law.

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<sup>62</sup> *The Twelve Tables*, c. 450 BCE Accessed by:

<http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/12tables.asp>, on March 10, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> The direct translation of *sui iuris* is ‘under one’s own law.’

<sup>64</sup> George Eden Marindin, William Wayne and William Smith, Ed. *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities, Volume 1 no 3* (London: William Clowes and Sons Limited, 1890), 574.

<sup>65</sup> Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law & Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 12.

<sup>66</sup> Gardner, *Women in Roman Law*, 12.

<sup>67</sup> Gardner, *Women in Roman Law*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Gardner, *Women in Roman Law*, 18. The direct translation for *auctoritas* is ‘authority.’

<sup>69</sup> Gardner, *Women in Roman Law*, 18.

Roman society valued women through their roles as wives and mothers, but not as individuals. It honoured women who did not remarry for their perceived faith and fidelity to their husbands. These women were referred to as *univirae*, meaning one man, which denoted that they had one husband during their lifetime. This was not a legal distinction, but rather a cultural one. Ironically, the *univirae* normally predeceased their husbands and were not commonly widows because fertile widows usually remarried.<sup>70</sup> Procreation necessitated marriages within Roman society and due to the decline of *in manus* marriages, women were not remarrying. Although men and women were expected to remarry, financially independent women chose not to. As a result, the birth rate declined, thus prompting Augustus, the *Princeps* of the Roman Empire, to enact the *Lex Julia* in c. 18 BCE, which was revised in 9 CE and called *Lex Papia Poppaea*.

*Lex Papia Poppaea* was legislation that was a part of Augustus' morality reforms. Although this legislation penalized both men and women who remained celibate in order to encourage people to remarry and have children, it primarily targeted celibate women, whether they were divorced, widowed, or had never been married, by nullifying their legal right to inherit.<sup>71</sup> These punishments had a few qualifications, as some women were given a grace period. If they were widowed they could inherit up to a year after their husband had died, divorcees had a sixth month allowance, and women over the age of fifty were exempt from these punishments.<sup>72</sup> In marriage, if the wife was over the age of twenty-five and the couple did not have any children together, they were also penalized

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<sup>70</sup> Raymond F. Collins, *Accompanied by a Believing Wife: Ministry and Celibacy in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), 209.

<sup>71</sup> D'Ambra, *Roman Women*, 32.

<sup>72</sup> D'Ambra, *Roman Women*, 32.



and had to pay a tax.<sup>73</sup> Conversely, it also used positive reinforcement to encourage elite Roman women to remarry. Freeborn women with three children were granted the status of *sui iuris*.<sup>74</sup> Once again, the *Lex Papia Poppeae* demonstrated the treatment of women within Roman society through their roles of wives and most importantly, procreators.

The limited legal capability of women and the societal emphasis on the roles of wives and mothers demonstrated the gender divide within Roman society. Women were restricted to the private and domestic sphere. They were unable to vote, speak to an assembly or senate, serve in the military or celebrate any public service<sup>75</sup> and had no franchise,<sup>76</sup> while their male counterparts thrived in the public domain. Within Roman society, women's agency had strict boundaries, reflected in part by their limited legal capacity. Women had limited access to the judicial system. In civil law, women were able to bring prosecution on their own behalf, but they were not able to bring prosecution on behalf of others.<sup>77</sup> However, this female initiative in prosecution was discouraged.

Yet, the Vestal Virgins, a group of six priestesses, had agency and autonomy within Roman society. The agency of the Vestal Virgins was a notable exception within Roman society because they were granted more rights than their contemporaries. The Vestal Virgins were a group of six women who were in charge of maintaining and guarding the sacred fire of Vesta, the goddess of the hearth.<sup>78</sup> The Vestal Virgins dwelt in the Temple

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<sup>73</sup> D'Ambra, *Roman Women*, 32.

<sup>74</sup> Freeborn women were granted the status of *sui iuris* if they had four children.

<sup>75</sup> Severy, *Augustus and the Family*, 32.

<sup>76</sup> Gardner, *Being a Roman Citizen*, 85.

<sup>77</sup> Gardner, *Being a Roman Citizen*, 86.

<sup>78</sup> Bonnie MacLachlan, and Ebooks Corporation, *Women in Ancient Rome a Sourcebook*, Bloomsbury Sources in Ancient History (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 30. According to Livy, the practice began in the Kings Period by King Numa.

of Vesta, located in the Roman Forum. During a highly selective process, elite girls were chosen between the ages of six and ten to become priestesses. These girls committed into the service of Vesta for a period of thirty years and were charged with the guardianship and the maintenance of the fire of Vesta.

During their service to the goddess, the Vestal Virgins were afforded extra rights that their secular contemporaries were denied, such as the right to have a will despite having a living father. Furthermore, they were given a special status at public events and were not required to have a *tutor*.<sup>79</sup> These girls were required to take and maintain an oath of chastity during their service as priestesses of Vesta. According to Plutarch, these chosen girls were required to be pure because fire is pure by nature and therefore in order to tend the fire, they were required to be pure as well.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the celibacy of the Vestal Virgins was required in order to perform the rituals associated with their roles and was an expression of personal piety as it was within the Christian tradition.

While these women were committed to fulfil their role as priestesses for a period of thirty years, it was not a lifelong commitment. After their service as Vestal Virgins, they would become the instructors for the next generation. Following the period of mentorship, the women were released from their oaths of chastity and were permitted to reenter secular society, with the option of getting married. Their oaths of chastity were not intended to be lifelong whereas in Christian asceticism, it was expected and later became a part of Church canon, that an oath of chastity, once undertaken, was lifelong.

Roman society and law restricted women's agency and autonomy by relegating

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<sup>79</sup> MacLachlan, *Women in Ancient Rome*, 42.

<sup>80</sup> MacLachlan, *Women in Ancient Rome*, 40. (Plut.) *Numa* 9.5-10.7.

them to the role of wife and mother. Women were restricted to the private and domestic sphere. However, women were able to gain a level of agency and autonomy through refusing to remarry, but they were financially penalized under legislation introduced by Augustus. However, wealthy women were choosing not to remarry which was supported by the Christian Church.

### **The Influence of Paul and Ascetic Women in Early Christian Writings**

The nature of early Christianity was not expressed as an established orthodoxy, but as a series of localized communities which had their own unique competing expressions of Christianity.<sup>81</sup> Christians lived within the structure of the Roman Empire and these localized communities functioned as societies within a greater society. They were secretive about their religious practices because they were misunderstood by civil authorities and were threatened by persecution.<sup>82</sup> The absence of orthodoxy was reflected through the use of different texts as sacred texts. In fact, during the first four centuries of Christianity, from the first until the late fourth century, there was no universal fixed set of texts.<sup>83</sup> However, the Pauline letters were preserved and used as scripture within the early Church. The earliest surviving letter was written in 49 CE and expressed new egalitarian values, which became a defining characteristic of the early Churches. In the Pauline letters, women were afforded the same status as men. Christianity's radical egalitarianism was expressed in Galatians where Paul wrote, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you

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<sup>81</sup> Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 38.

<sup>82</sup> Christianity was illegal until the Edict of Milan in 313 CE.

<sup>83</sup> Nagle, *Ancient Rome: A History*, 384.

are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>84</sup> This passage represented the radical egalitarian values of early Christianity and identified the root of women’s agency within the early Church. Its departure from contemporary notions of gender within Roman society created an appealing message and incentive for women to convert.

Paul was also influential in the foundation of asceticism within the early Church. He himself was celibate and never married. In 1 Corinthians, a letter written in c.53-54 CE to the Corinthian Church, he established celibacy as χάρισμα or grace within the Church.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, in Romans 1:11, Paul denoted that χάρισμα was a spiritual gift. He wrote, “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong.” Later in 1 Corinthians 7:7, Paul discussed the two physical states of marriage and celibacy, declaring that, “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind.”<sup>86</sup> He acknowledged that both states were spiritual graces, and therefore, both were honourable choices.<sup>87</sup> Although Paul stated his preference for celibacy, he acknowledged that this lifestyle was not meant for everyone.<sup>88</sup> This passage was significant because it establishes celibacy and by extension asceticism as a legitimate form of religious devotion that both was honourable and a celebrated alternative to traditional marriage.

These letters prompted the early Christian Church to adopt the principles of egalitarianism, which drastically departed from contemporary notions of gender. Its

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<sup>84</sup> Gal. 3:28 NRSV

<sup>85</sup> χάρισμα or charisma is a Greek word meaning grace or favour. In the context of Christianity, the meaning is understood to be grace.

<sup>86</sup> 1 Cor. 7:7 NRSV

<sup>87</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 1997), 206.

<sup>88</sup> Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 206.

values held that men and women were equal in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the ramifications were that Christian women had more agency and autonomy than Roman women.

Furthermore, Christianity's view of celibacy as a grace legitimized the ascetic lifestyle as an acceptable expression of piety within scripture. Therefore, women could adopt this lifestyle on the basis of expressing their piety and their decision would be respected by the Church as a legitimate alternative to marriage.

The ascetic movement developed alongside Christianity in the first century.

Ignatius of Antioch was a bishop of Antioch and is considered to be a Father of the Apostolic Age. While being forcibly taken to Rome, he was martyred during the journey. On his way to Rome, Ignatius of Antioch (c.35- 108 CE) wrote a letter to the Smyrnaeans.<sup>89</sup> In the text, he identified the presence of female ascetics within the Church. Ignatius wrote, "I salute the families of my brethren, with their wives and children and the virgins who are called widows."<sup>90</sup> This letter refers to women within the early Church who chose to lead celibate lives and adopted the ascetic lifestyle once they were widowed. It also demonstrated the fluidity of the word virgin, which Ignatius' used to refer to a group of widows.

Despite being penalized by Augustus' *Lex Papia Poppeae*, these ascetic women were able to capitalize on the Roman convention of *univira* and the egalitarian nature of Christianity to assert their independence. As *univira*, these women were respected by Roman society despite being financially penalized and their decision not to remarry was supported by the Church. Through Paul's declaration of celibacy as a *χάρισμα*, these

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<sup>89</sup> The Smyrnaeans were located on the coast of Anatolia in modern Turkey. The letter's contents were about Christ's passion, heretics, and the authority of the Bishop.

<sup>90</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*. c. 110 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0109.htm>, on March 4, 2016.

women's decisions were not just accepted as a legitimate alternative to marriage, but as a form of piety.

Over the next century, the ascetic movement grew and more women adopted the ascetic lifestyle. In his treatise *De Virginibus Velandis* or *On the Veiling of Virgins* (c. 200 CE), Tertullian (c. 155-240 CE), a Christian author from Carthage in North Africa, referred to a group of ascetics women as encompassing both widows and unmarried girls. He wrote, "I know plainly, that in a certain place a virgin of less than twenty years of age has been placed in the order of widows!"<sup>91</sup> Tertullian's statement shows an evolution in the asceticism movement with the expansion of more women joining the movement. Furthermore, it reflects the growth of Christianity itself. Girls, who were raised within the Church, were deciding to adopt the ascetic lifestyle as young women whereas in the first century, widows were converting to Christianity and choosing to adopt the lifestyle as mature women. This reflected a shift within Christianity from a period where most practitioners were converts to a period when people are being raised in the faith.

Women in Italy were able to transcend the traditional Roman social hierarchy and power structure by adopting the ascetic lifestyle. Ascetic women were independent and moved outside of the traditional patriarchal social structure. Unlike their secular contemporaries, ascetic women were not valued by their role of wives and mothers but as individuals who were serving their God. Furthermore, they were not identified through their male relations but as separate independent individuals. This unique social status was supported by the Pauline letters, which established the concept of equality between the genders and espoused the value and honour of the celibate ascetic lifestyle.

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<sup>91</sup> Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, chapter IX., Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0403.htm>, on March 4, 2016.

## **The Liberation of Christian Ascetic Women**

Early Christian women gained agency and autonomy through adopting the ascetic lifestyle. Asceticism empowered women to move outside of the private, domestic sphere which Greco-Roman notions of gender had restricted them. They were able to hold positions of leadership within in the Church and had an autonomous voice.

Female ascetics, especially in the first two centuries, were women who converted to Christianity later in their lives and who in turn, served as missionaries for Christianity. One of the earliest accounts of a well-known ascetic female missionary can be found in the apocryphal text, *The Acts of Thecla*. Despite being a fictionalized account, *The Acts of Thecla* illustrated the agency of a female ascetic and her accepted position as a missionary and convertor. Thecla was a Greek maiden who was betrothed in marriage. However, after hearing the teachings of Paul, who later became her spiritual advisor, she decided to become an ascetic. This account encompasses Thecla's struggle to assert her agency and will to live her life as an ascetic women. On one occasion, Thecla refused the sexual advances of a governor during her travels. For refusing, she was punished by being thrown naked into an arena with wild animals: however, a miracle occurred when a lioness protected her from the other animals. She was saved by God's intervention. This instance shows God's divine approval of Thecla, legitimizing her lifestyle. Therefore, at the end of the account Thecla was able to assert her will and maintain her lifestyle as an ascetic woman with divine approval. This was illustrated further when Thecla was entrusted by Paul to spread the Word of God,<sup>92</sup> which illustrated his support for the

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<sup>92</sup> Boughton, "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy," 365.

female ascetic's agency and established Thecla's credibility as a missionary and convertor.

Also, Agnes was an ascetic woman who asserted agency through adopting the ascetic lifestyle. She chose to be martyred rather than conform to traditional Greco-Roman gender norms. Through her decisions, she asserted her agency. Agnes (c. 291-304 CE), one of the earliest recorded female ascetics in Rome, was martyred when she was twelve years old for her choice to live as an ascetic woman. Agnes decided she wanted to commit her life to Christ by taking a vow of chastity; however, during this time period, Christians were actively being persecuted by Roman authorities on orders from the Emperor Diocletian. She was tortured and eventually condemned to death because she refused to marry.<sup>93</sup> Before she was killed, Agnes was placed in a brothel to be raped as a means to persuade her to repent and agree to marry.<sup>94</sup> However, despite her experiences in the brothel, where hagiographies claim that she was miraculously left untouched, Agnes decided to assert her agency. She chose to die rather than give up her religious convictions. By choosing her death and asserting her agency, Agnes transcended Roman social norms by refusing to marry even when it meant dying as a consequence.

After the Edict of Religious Tolerance was issued in 313 CE, Christians were able to worship legally which led to ascetic women's agency and autonomy reaching its apex in the fourth century. However, as it will be demonstrated in chapter three, co-current to the flourishing of female ascetics' agency the Church and State were imposing legislation

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<sup>93</sup> Mike Aquilina and Christopher Bailey, *Mothers of The Church: The Witness of Early Christian Women*, 1st ed. (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor Pub., 2012), 75.

<sup>94</sup> Aquilina and Bailey, *Mothers of The Church*, 74.



which would later erode their agency.

Unlike their contemporaries, ascetic women in Italy were respected and held leadership positions within the Christian community, departing from their traditional positions in the private sphere. The ascetic women were able to represent their individual autonomy by holding leadership position within the Christian community without relying on their male relatives. A late example of an ascetic woman in a leadership position was Marcella. Marcella (c. 325-410 CE) was an elite Roman woman who is considered as the first consecrated virgin in Rome by her contemporaries and one of the first Roman women to lead publicly an ascetic lifestyle.<sup>95</sup> A consecrated virgin was a woman who formally dedicated herself to the ascetic lifestyle by taking a vow of celibacy. Little is known about Marcella's parentage. However, Jerome, a close friend of Marcella's and one of the four Great Church Fathers, briefly wrote about her family. He lived from 347-420 CE and was credited with bringing asceticism to Italy. Jerome wrote, "I will not set forth her illustrious family and lofty lineage, nor will I trace her pedigree through a line of consuls and praetorian perfects."<sup>96</sup> Jerome implied Marcella's elite status but did not provide any details. According to Hickey, the only definitive evidence of Marcella's rank can be found through Jerome's reference to her suitor, Cerealis.<sup>97</sup> Cerealis has been identified as Naeratius Cerealis, a perfect of Rome in 352-353 CE and later a consul in 358 CE.<sup>98</sup> Marcella formed a proto-monastery within her household where she educated

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<sup>95</sup> Aquilina and Bailey, *Mothers of The Church*, 102. By this time period, Christianity was legalized.

<sup>96</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 38.

<sup>97</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 39.

<sup>98</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 39.

both men and women in the scriptures.<sup>99</sup> - As the leader of this proto-monastery, Marcella demonstrated how as an ascetic woman, she was able to gain a leadership role where she had power over both men and women.<sup>100</sup> - Her influence and leadership within the Church community in Rome was expressed by Jerome in Letter CXXVII. Jerome wrote this letter to Prinicipa, another ascetic woman. The letter was written after the death of Marcella. Jerome wrote that he wanted to: "... dedicate a letter to the memory of that holy woman Marcella..."<sup>101</sup> - Jerome wrote:

Consequently after my departure from Rome, in case of a dispute arising as to the testimony of scripture on any subject, recourse was had to her to settle it. And so wise was she and so well did she understand what philosophers call τὸ πρότερον, that is, the becoming, in what she did, that when she answered questions she gave her own opinion not as her own but as from me or someone else, thus admitting that what she taught she had herself learned from others. For she knew that the apostle had said: "I suffer not a woman to teach," and she would not seem to inflict a wrong upon the male sex many of whom (including sometimes priests) questioned her concerning obscure and doubtful points.<sup>102</sup> -

This passage illustrates his respect for her knowledge of the scriptures and leadership within the Roman Christian community. Jerome was a leader within the Church who was also well respected for his knowledge of the scriptures and he frequently had theological debates with Marcella.<sup>103</sup> - Jerome explained in his letter that when he was absent from Rome, people sought guidance with scripture and theology from Marcella due to her extensive knowledge of the scriptures. Furthermore, Jerome praised her for not getting

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<sup>99</sup> Aquilina and Bailey, *Mothers of The Church*, 102.

<sup>100</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 40.

<sup>101</sup> Jerome, *Letter CXXVII*, 412 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001127.htm>, on March 5, 2016.

<sup>102</sup> Jerome, *Letter CXXVII*, 412 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001127.htm>, on March 5, 2016.

<sup>103</sup> Aquilina and Bailey, *Mothers of The Church*, 102.

upset when males disagreed with her. He did acknowledge that the apostle taught, “I suffer not a woman to teach.”<sup>104</sup> However, he supported her role as teacher within the community. She was so educated that she was exempted from this declaration. Jerome’s insistence that Marcella would defer to a male to avoid conflict should not exclude this example as an illustration of Marcella’s agency. Instead, it should reflect the entrenched nature of the cultural notions of gender. Despite these notions and being afforded a similar status as males by Jerome, Marcella gained a level of agency that was unknown to her contemporaries. Nonetheless, she was more independent and respected as an ascetic woman. Her roles as a teacher and leader of a proto-monastic community illustrated how ascetic women were holding positions of leadership in the Church community, a privilege that her secular contemporaries were denied.

Paula is another example of an empowered ascetic woman. Paula was a Roman elite woman who lived from 347-404 CE. Like Marcella, Paula was known to Jerome and he recorded details of her parentage within his letters. He wrote:

Of the stock of the Gracchi and descended from the Scipios, the heir and representative of that Paulus whose name she bore, the true and legitimate daughter of that Martia Papyria who was mother to Africanus...<sup>105</sup>

Jerome established that Paula was an elite woman of the highest senatorial class by associating her with Republican families and individuals who held high office.

However, modern scholars have called into question Jerome’s assertion. There is no corroborative evidence that proves Jerome’s claim that Paula’s father held such a high

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<sup>104</sup> Jerome, *Letter CXXVII*, 412 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001127.htm>, on March 6, 2016.

<sup>105</sup> Jerome, *Letter CVIII*, 404 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001108.htm>, on March 8, 2016.

rank.<sup>106</sup> Instead, Jones asserted that Paula's father, Rogatus, was a *clarissimus* because his name was not recorded as holding a political position, meaning that he was born the into senatorial order rather than achieving it for himself.<sup>107</sup> Despite the disagreement between modern scholars and Jerome concerning Paula's familial status, they agree that her family was from the elite class but disagree concerning how high her rank was within the senatorial class.

Paula was married in her early teens and had four daughters and one son from that marriage. She was widowed at the age of 32 in 379 CE. Upon her husband's death, she chose to start leading the ascetic lifestyle. As an ascetic women, Paula was unique because she transcended multiple gender norms within Roman society and openly ignored leading churchmen's opinions by disregarding their advice. Paula was a wealthy woman and could afford to travel.<sup>108</sup> Along with her daughters, Paula travelled to many different places such as Pontia, Greece, Rhodes, Lycia, Cyprus, and Cilicia where she saw the monastery of St. Thecla, illustrating the continued veneration of the now saint.<sup>109</sup> She continued her travels to Antioch, made many stops in the Holy Land, and then continued on to Egypt before returning home.<sup>110</sup> This voyage was extensive and reflected her comfortable financial status. However, her voyage was also important to note because Paula ignored the wishes of Jerome to avoid travelling and remain within the domestic sphere.<sup>111</sup> After Paula's adoption of the ascetic lifestyle, Marcella introduced Paula to

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<sup>106</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 22.

<sup>107</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 22.

<sup>108</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 24.

<sup>109</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 26-27.

<sup>110</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 27.

<sup>111</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 30.

Jerome.<sup>112</sup> Paula, along with her daughters, exchanged correspondence with Jerome. In one of his letters to Paula's daughter, Eustochium, he wrote: "Rarely go abroad, and if you wish to seek the aid of the martyrs seek it in your own chamber. For you will never need a pretext for going out if you always go out when there is need."<sup>113</sup> Significantly, both Paula and Eustochium ignored Jerome's advice. Even though Jerome was a very important figure within the Church community especially among the ascetics. Paula and her daughters were expressing their agency by choosing to travel despite an authority figure's advice to do otherwise.

Paula also acted against social conventions and new Church norms when her daughter Blaesilla died. Blaesilla died within four months of adopting the ascetic lifestyle due to harsh conditions under which she lived.<sup>114</sup> In a letter to Paula, Jerome wrote:

I have spoken plainly, lest you might ignorantly suppose that Scripture sanctions your grief; and that, if you err, you have reason on your side. And, so far, my words have been addressed to the average Christian woman. But now it will not be so. For in your case, as I well know, renunciation of the world has been complete; you have rejected and trampled on the delights of life, and you give yourself daily to fasting, to reading, and to prayer. Like Abraham, Genesis 12:1-4 you desire to leave your country and kindred, to forsake Mesopotamia and the Chaldæans, to enter into the promised land. Dead to the world before your death, you have spent all your mere worldly substance upon the poor, or have bestowed it upon your children. I am the more surprised, therefore, that you should act in a manner which in others would justly call for reprehension. You call to mind Blæsilla's companionship, her conversation, and her endearing ways; and you cannot endure the thought that you have lost them all. I pardon you the tears of a mother, but I ask you to restrain your grief.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Archbishop Doye Agama, *An Apostolic Handbook: Guidance on Sacraments, Liturgy and Priesthood in the Apostolic Pastoral Congress Volume 2*. (Fast-Print Publishing, 2005), 107.

<sup>113</sup> Jerome, *Letter XXII*, 384 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001022.htm>, on March 6, 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 25.

<sup>115</sup> Jerome, *Letter XXXIX*, 389 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001039.htm>, on March 8, 2016.

Jerome was chastising Paula for her excessive grief which he argued that Scriptures do not sanction. He was surprised that she would act in this manner as a learned and devoted Christian woman. Furthermore, earlier in the letter Jerome addressed Paula's lifestyle after her daughter's death, while technically appropriate for an ascetic woman, was not with the right intentions in mind or an expression of piety. He wrote: "You deny yourself food, not to fast but to gratify your grief; and such abstinence is displeasing to me. Such fasts are my enemies. I receive no soul which forsakes the body against my will."<sup>116</sup> This statement was significant because it affirmed that her behaviour was against God's will. However, Paula did not heed to this proscription and continued to mourn for her daughter. This is an example of how an ascetic woman exercised her agency and autonomy, conducting herself in a manner of her choosing, even though it was deemed unacceptable by a figure of authority. Eventually, Paula moved to the Holy Land where both Jerome and she established the double monastery where she later died.

By adopting the ascetic lifestyle, ascetic women achieved a greater degree of agency and autonomy. These women were individuals and had voices of their own that were independent from their male relatives. They achieved acclaim and respect for their leadership positions in the Church, which was unknown to women outside of the Church, except for the Vestal Virgins. These women permeated invisible boundaries that were societal and legal constructs within Roman society.

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<sup>116</sup> Jerome, *Letter XXXIX*, 389 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001039.htm>, on March 8, 2016.

## Dissenting Voices

As illustrated through the teachings of Paul and the examples found in The Acts of Thecla and Jerome's *Letter CXXVII* about Marcella, and in the lives of Agnes and Paula, women in early Christianity transcended the traditional social structure in Italy by adopting the ascetic lifestyle. However, despite women achieving agency through asceticism, their acceptance within the Church community differed from region to region. Since the inception of the ascetic movement, critics urged for limitations to be placed on the women's newfound agency. These criticisms reflected Greco-Roman notions that foreshadowed the movement in the fourth century by the unified Church to limit the agency of the ascetic women.

Dissenting voices have criticized the autonomy of ascetic women since the beginning of Christianity. An early example of these criticisms comes from a first century homily entitled *Peri Parenthesis* or *On Virginity*<sup>117</sup>. The subject of the homily concerned an at-home ascetic and how her vow ought to be preserved. The author held to Roman notions of gender, and instead of allowing daughters who made this vow to have an increased autonomy, the author believed that their behaviours had to be restricted and supervised even more. Furthermore, *On Virginity*, accorded the ascetic woman's father with the role of guarding his daughter's vow. It stated that the father's position was like a "...priest of the high temple..." whose responsibility was to ensure that "...nothing evil approaches the pure temple."<sup>118</sup> This responsibility was to be undertaken by placing the daughter in seclusion, completely within the private sphere.<sup>119</sup> The homily required that

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<sup>117</sup> The author is unknown.

<sup>118</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 35.

<sup>119</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 35.

she not meet with any man, nor go to church at night, nor attend funerals.<sup>120</sup>

Furthermore, her father was instructed to guard her bed.<sup>121</sup> *On Virginit*y instructed fathers to:

Never be negligent in guarding her... Even if your daughter suffers [under this kind of life], it is better that she should suffer for Christ. And it cannot be without killing one's child that it will be taught perfection: one is not brought to that by anger but by a father's tenderness for his beloved child.<sup>122</sup>

Despite acknowledging the strict nature of these requirements, the homily asserted that through these harsh measures, the child will be taught perfection and it is better that she suffers for Christ. Not only did *On Virginit*y reflect traditional notions of gender, but it was more extreme in its requirements.

Tertullian disagreed with the agency that women were able to exercise through their position as ascetics. Over the course of his lifetime, Tertullian wrote an expansive corpus of treatises which were distributed throughout the Empire. His readership and influence permeated regional boundaries. Despite being from Carthage, North Africa, Italian Church communities and their leadership were aware of his work. In the late second century, Tertullian wrote *De Baptismo*<sup>123</sup>. Within this work, Tertullian minimized Paul's support for Thecla's agency and delegitimized her position as a leader and missionary by discrediting her story, claiming it was fictitious. He claimed that a presbyter<sup>124</sup> in Asia fabricated the story in an effort to augment Paul's fame and used it as license to allow

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<sup>120</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 35.

<sup>121</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 36.

<sup>122</sup> Elm, *Virgins of God*, 36.

<sup>123</sup> In fact, the first reference to the story of Thecla was recorded in *De Baptismo* by Tertullian c. 190 CE.

<sup>124</sup> Presbyters were the predecessors of priests.



women to teach and baptize. Tertullian instructed the reader concerning the question of “who had the right to baptize?”<sup>125</sup> - by asserting that bishops, priests and deacons all have the right to baptize.<sup>126</sup> However, in the context of limiting the agency of ascetic women, Tertullian specifically denied women the right to baptize, mentioning the case of Thecla:<sup>127</sup>

But if the writings which wrongly go under Paul’s name, claim Thecla's example as a licence for women’s teaching and baptizing, let them know that, in Asia, the presbyter who composed that writing, as if he were augmenting Paul’s fame from his own store, after being convicted, and confessing that he had done it from love of Paul, was removed from his office.<sup>128</sup>

Tertullian continued his objection to ascetic women’s leadership in the Church saying:

For how credible would it seem, that he who has not permitted a woman even to learn with over-boldness, should give a female the power of *teaching* and of *baptizing*! “*Let them be silent,*” he says, “*and at home consult their own husbands.*” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)<sup>129</sup>

He used scriptures, like 1 Corinthians, to shift from the themes of franchise and liberty within the The Acts of Thecla to reasserting that a women’s traditional position within the private sphere. Tertullian’s writing reflected the prevalence and continued existence of classical Roman notions within the Christian Church. He believed that women belong in the private sphere and should not hold any public leadership positions. Tertullian’s writings foreshadowed the movement in the fourth century to place female ascetics back

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<sup>125</sup> J. Maison, ed. *Tertullian’s De Baptismo*, (London: Cambridge University Press Warehouse: 1908), 45.

<sup>126</sup> Maison, ed. *Tertullian’s De Baptismo*, 45.

<sup>127</sup> Maison, ed. *Tertullian’s De Baptismo*, 45.

<sup>128</sup> Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, c 190 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0321.htm>, on March 5, 2016.

<sup>129</sup> Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, c 190 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0321.htm>, on March 5, 2016.

within the tradition gender limits of classical Roman society.

An another example of an early dissenter is Cyprian (c. 200-258 CE), who was a Bishop from Carthage. Over the course of his lifetime, Cyprian wrote a series of letters which have been preserved. In one of these letters, he wrote to Pomponius concerning an incident that occurred within his Church. He was dealing with an administrative problem in which one virgin, an ascetic woman, was found lying in bed with a church deacon.

Cyprian decreed that:

...she may be examined and proved whether she be a virgin; since both the hands and the eyes of the midwives are often deceived; and if she be found to be a virgin in that particular in which a woman may be so, yet she may have sinned in some other part of her body, which may be corrupted and yet cannot be examined.<sup>130</sup>

The virgin did break her vow and had slept with a deacon. Cyprian did not treat this incident as a separate case but applied his suspicions to all virgins. Following this case, Cyprian ordered that all male and female Church members participating in pseudo-marriages must separate and to:

let the virgins meantime be carefully inspected by midwives; and if they should be found virgins, let them be received to communion, and admitted to the Church; yet with this threatening, that if subsequently they should return to the same men, or if they should dwell together with the same men in one house or under the same roof, they should be ejected with a severer censure, nor should such be afterwards easily received into the Church.

Cyprian was suspicious of women who lived with a man, in a pseudo-marriage lifestyle, believing that they were not committed to their vows and implied that if they lived with a man they were by extension having sex with him. He applied his suspicions onto all

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<sup>130</sup> Cyprian, *Letter Sixty-One*, ca. 230 CE, Accessed by:  
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050661.htm>, on March 8, 2010.

female ascetics, implying that women could not control themselves and that as a result they needed to be governed by rules instead of being trusted to act within the parameters of the ascetic lifestyle.

These three examples highlight the conservative attitude towards women since the beginning of Christianity that wishes to restrict their agency and autonomy. The examples also illustrate a certain amount of hypocrisy within the early Church concerning the agency and autonomy of ascetic women. Paul established in Galatians that women were equal to men in the eyes of the Lord, yet, the authors of these treatises were not receptive to that pronouncement, instead promoting a continuation of Greco-Roman genders norms.

## **Conclusion**

Early Christian women in Italy transcended the traditional gender norms by adopting the ascetic lifestyle. Asceticism originated in the first century and developed alongside Christianity. The first female ascetics were widows, but as Christianity grew, unmarried women who were raised in the Church began adopting the ascetic lifestyle as well. Agnes was a young girl who refused to marry, wanting to adopt an ascetic lifestyle to serve the Lord. Despite being martyred for her cause, her death was the ultimate act of agency because she chose to die rather than repent and marry. Her life was a powerful example for ascetic women. The popularity of female asceticism was reinforced by the increased agency these women had over themselves and within the greater Christian communities.

Ascetic women were also particularly influential as missionaries. An example of an influential female ascetic as a missionary is found in The Acts of Thecla, where Thecla, a

Greek maiden became a missionary and even baptized converts. Another example of an ascetic women finding agency within her lifestyle was Marcella, an elite Roman woman. Marcella was respected within the Roman Christianity community for her piety and knowledge of scriptures. This respect and knowledge afforded her a leadership position within the community. Paula was another example of a strong independent ascetic woman. She defied church authorities and social conventions with her behaviour concerning the death of her daughter and with her decision to travel with her daughters. However, despite these examples, from the beginning some disagreed with the agency these women had over themselves and others. Both Tertullian and Cyprian, church leaders from the second and third centuries from Carthage, North Africa, wrote treatises that argued against female ascetics' agency and in support of Greco-Roman social norms. These writings foreshadowed a shift within Christianity from its radical egalitarian nature to an agent which reinforced traditional Roman gender notions which placed ascetic women back within the patriarchal social structure of Roman society.

## Chapter Three: Framing the Narrative: the Shift from Liberty to Oppression

### Introduction

During the fourth and fifth centuries the agency and autonomy of ascetic women was restricted by the Church and State. Throughout the first three centuries of Christianity, ascetic women were permitted leadership positions and a voice within Christian communities. However, the unprecedented egalitarianism of early Christianity was in conflict with Roman cultural notions. Beginning in the fourth century, the Church and State hierarchies placed limitations on ascetic women agency and autonomy. These limitations reflected the traditional Greco-Roman notions of gender, which restricted women to the private sphere.

In October of 312 CE, after a period of civil war, Constantine defeated his opponent, Maxentius, at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge,<sup>131</sup> a victory that he attributed to the Christian God. His victory at the Milvian Bridge pivotally changed the relationship between the Church and the State. Prior to 312 CE, Roman Emperors had periodically persecuted the Christian minority within their territories. Christianity was regarded as *superstitio* which referred to a belief that was improper, unacceptable or incorrect.<sup>132</sup> The last Great Persecution began in 303 CE under the Emperor Diocletian and ended with Constantine's victory over his rivals in the West. Then in 313 CE, Constantine, as Western Augustus and Licinius, as Eastern Augustus issued an edict of religious tolerance which established freedom of religion within the Empire. Christianity became a *religio*

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<sup>131</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom, Christian Mission and Modern Culture* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 33.

<sup>132</sup> J.B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Blackwell Ancient Religions. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007), 39.

which referred to a belief that was a prescribed ritual or customary practice.<sup>133</sup> Christians were now able to worship openly without having to fear for their safety. The Edict of Milan facilitated the growth of the Church by securing the safety of Christians under the law and its influence was reflected by the Christian population. By the fourth century, the Christian population within the Roman Empire had grown significantly.<sup>134</sup> This growth and the establishment of an official relationship between Church and the State signalled a new beginning for Christianity. Prior to the fourth century, Christian communities were societies within a society, living among the greater Roman community, often secretly for their own protection.<sup>135</sup> Now, Christians were accepted within the greater community of the Empire. With the birth of a relationship between the Church and the State, the State began to enact laws which were beneficial for the Church, thus helping to establish its legitimacy within the larger society. Constantine supported the church and passed legislation which favored church institution's and practices.

The Edict of Milan permitted the Church to establish an interregional hierarchy and universal orthodoxy. Now, as a representative of a significant portion of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire, Christianity began absorbing cultural notions from pre-existing societies, including Roman culture. This widened the appeal for future converts, but by doing this, Christianity lost its radical egalitarianism that had made it so unique. Furthermore, female ascetics were no longer able to transcend the patriarchal social

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<sup>133</sup> Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 12.

<sup>134</sup> Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 65. At the beginning of the third century from a population of 60,000,000 there were approximately 200,000 Christians within the Roman Empire. Whereas by the beginning of the fourth century the Christian population had grown to 6,000,000. These figures represented a significant growth in the Christian population going from 0.36% in 200 CE to 10% in 300 CE.

<sup>135</sup> Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 74.

structure because both the Church and State had created new boundaries for them which reinforced traditional Roman gender norms.

### **Impact of Secular Laws on Christian Ascetic Women**

The State enacted laws that preserved traditional Roman notions of gender and prohibited women from the lower classes from practicing certain expressions of asceticism. These laws were conservative and restrictive towards women. In 312 CE, Constantine became the Emperor of the Western Roman Empire and later became the sole Emperor after his defeat of Licinius in 323 CE. During his twenty-five year reign as Emperor, Constantine, who was the longest reigning emperor since Augustus, passed a significant amount of socially conservative legislation.<sup>136</sup> Constantine and subsequent emperors also chose to enact legislation that had erosive effects on ascetic women's agency.

Constantine enacted laws which harkened back to early, more socially conservative values that restricted the agency of women.<sup>137</sup> Many of these laws specifically enforced traditional Roman gender boundaries, which restricted women within their households and denied them access to the public domain. Traditionally, the notion of chastity was connected to the home, therefore being away from public, and more specifically men, would ensure that a woman's modesty and chastity would be intact.<sup>138</sup>

One of the ways in which Constantine limited women's rights was by denying them

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<sup>136</sup> Jill Harries, and I. N. Wood, *The Theodosian Code*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 120.

<sup>137</sup> Harries and Wood, *The Theodosian Code*, 191.

<sup>138</sup> Gardner, *Being a Roman Citizen*, 104.

direct access to courts and officials; he was justified through claims of protecting women's modesty. For an example, one law authorized husbands "...to stand in place of wives in court."<sup>139</sup> This law reflected traditional Roman legal notions from the Early Republic which denied women access to court proceedings in certain circumstances. It was more conservative than the contemporary Roman civil law, which permitted women to bring prosecution on behalf of themselves. However, with Constantine's new law, women had to be represented by their spouses or by another male representative within a court of law, thus eliminating the public voice of women in the court system.

Another example of Constantine restricting women was a law regarding the treatment of Roman matrons by debt collectors. This law was enacted in 316 CE and sentenced officials to death for the crime of dragging a Roman matron into public for owing debts.<sup>140</sup> The official was exposing the matron to the public and thus deserved the death penalty.<sup>141</sup> This law demonstrated the inequality of the sexes: women were being treated as individuals who required extra protection and were inferior to men under the law, as they were not required to be as responsible for debt as their male counterparts.

In addition, Constantine made it difficult for girls to become emancipated from their *tutela* once they reached the age of majority. Girls, who were twenty years old and wanted to be emancipated from their *tutela's* authority, were unable to proceed in a direct avenue to free themselves. Instead, the girls went through intermediaries to protect their modesty. The law stated that this was: "...because of their modesty and sense of shame. We do not force them to be pointed out by witnesses in a public assembly; they could

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<sup>139</sup> Harries and Wood, *The Theodosian Code*, 315.

<sup>140</sup> Harries and Wood, *The Theodosian Code*, 315.

<sup>141</sup> Gardner, *Being a Roman Citizen*, 104.



send out legal representatives with documents and with witnesses.”<sup>142</sup> Similarly, this law was created with the purpose of protecting women and maintaining their modesty, but instead it used the protection of women as an excuse to rob them of their voice and relegated them to the private sphere completely. The conservative nature of Constantine’s laws marks a return to traditional Roman notions of gender. Most notably, they attempted to place women back into the private sphere and enforce these gender boundaries under the guise of protecting women.

Constantine’s laws also referred to the notion of women as commodities. Several of these laws were enacted to cement alliances for women’s families and commoditized their virginity, as it was of the upmost importance to protect. One such law required the *tutor* of a fatherless girl to prove his charge’s virginity once she reached marriageable age.<sup>143</sup> This law served a dual function. It protected the girl under the charge of her *tutor* from any inappropriate advances to prevent any children being born outside of wedlock and therefore she would be protected from inappropriate advances from her *tutor*. It also reflected the importance invested in the physical state of virginity by traditional Roman society.

A more extreme example of the importance of physical virginity in Roman society and Constantine’s conservative values was a law that penalized women who were abducted.<sup>144</sup> Women who were abducted lost their inheritance because “...they could have preserved themselves at home until their marriage day.”<sup>145</sup> This law reflected

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<sup>142</sup> Harries and Wood, *The Theodosian Code*, 132.

<sup>143</sup> Harries and Wood, *The Theodosian Code*, 326.

<sup>144</sup> Harries and Wood, *The Theodosian Code*, 136.

<sup>145</sup> Harries and Wood, *The Theodosian Code*, 326.

women's value as a commodity because once they were abducted, they were assumed to be no longer virgins, and therefore, they were no longer of any worth. Furthermore, this law clearly placed the onus on the women. If they had behaved properly and remained in the house, as societal conventions dictated, then they would not have been abducted and compromised. Constantine's laws were a conservative reinstatement of traditional Roman gender norms, which relegating women to the private sphere and devaluing them as individuals by treating women as commodities valued only for their sexuality, purity and modesty. According to Rufus Musonius, a Roman Stoic philosopher from the first century, there was a dual purpose for marriage: a shared life and procreation.<sup>146</sup> For Romans procreation and raising children was the purpose of marriage.<sup>147</sup>

The state also limited women's ability to divorce their spouses. Legally, there were only three reasons a woman could divorce her husband: if he was a murderer, practitioner of magic or destroyer of tombs.<sup>148</sup> However, if a woman attempted to divorce her husband for any reason other than the ones stated above, then she was exiled and her husband could keep her property and dowry.<sup>149</sup> This law had Christian overtones because divorce was not considered acceptable behaviour within the Christian community. In fact, the practice of remarrying was akin to adultery within these communities and those who had been married more than once were referred to as digamists.<sup>150</sup> This principle of having one husband during a women's lifetime

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<sup>146</sup> D. Brendan Nagle, *The Roman World; A Sourcebook* (Cornwall-on-Hudson:Sloan Publishing,2015), 313.

<sup>147</sup> Nagle, *The Roman World*, 313.

<sup>148</sup> Harries and Wood, *The Theodosian Code*, 128.

<sup>149</sup> Harries and Wood, *The Theodosian Code*, 128.

<sup>150</sup> William Smith and Samuel Cheetham, ed. *Encyclopaedic Dictionary Of Christian Antiquities (in 9 Volumes)* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2005), 22.

corresponded to the traditional Roman value of *univira* which commended women who did not remarry once their first husband passed away.

Constantine facilitated women who entered the ascetic lifestyle by repealing legislature which financially penalized celibate women. Notably, Constantine repealed the *Lex Papia Poppaea* (9 CE) in 320 CE, a law passed by Augustus to restrict the celibate lifestyle and encourage marriage and procreation. From a legal perspective, this repeal legitimized celibacy within the greater Roman society. Men and women could now lead a celibate lifestyle without being penalized by the state by nullifying their right to their inheritances. Furthermore, by eliminating this law: "...women are released from the demands of the law placed on their necks like yokes."<sup>151</sup> In *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius wrote: "The childless were punished under the old law with the forfeiture of their hereditary property, a merciless statute, which dealt with them as positive criminals."<sup>152</sup> Eusebius was referring to the *Lex Papia Poppaea* and he discussed how Constantine was respecting childless couples and people who chose to renunciate sex for spiritual reasons, saying: "Others continue childless, not from any dislike of posterity, but because their ardent love of philosophy renders them averse to the conjugal union."<sup>153</sup> He attributed the repealing of the *Lex Papia Poppaea* as a sign of Constantine's support for the ascetic lifestyle and by extension the support for the Christian Church. He specifically mentioned women, stating that:

Women, too, consecrated to the service of God, have maintained a pure and spotless virginity, and have devoted themselves, soul and body to a life of entire chastity and holiness. What then? Should this conduct be deemed worthy of punishment, or rather of admiration and praise; since

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<sup>151</sup> Harries and Wood *The Theodosian Code*, 123.

<sup>152</sup> VC 4.26

<sup>153</sup> VC 4.26

to desire this state is in itself honorable, and to maintain it surpasses the power of unassisted nature? Surely those whose bodily infirmity destroys their hope of offspring are worthy of pity, not of punishment: and he who devotes himself to a higher object calls not for chastisement, but special admiration.<sup>154</sup>

Eusebius echoed Paul's pronouncement from 1 Corinthians 7:7 that celibacy was a *charisma*. By reasserting celibacy as a charisma and directly referencing women, Eusebius connected the repeal of Augustus's *Lex Papia Poppaea* to his respect for people unable to have children and those who chose to lead a celibate lifestyle in honour of God. The repealing of the *Lex Papia Poppeae* reflected the new close relationship between Church and State, a relationship that was also mirrored by Constantine's discourse. While addressing a group of bishops in 314 CE, Constantine called the bishops his "...beloved brethren..." and referred to them as "...you fellow servants..."<sup>155</sup>. The nature of the discourse aligned the bishops and Constantine as one entity with mutual concerns, thus reflecting the nature of the relationship between the Church and State as one with mutual interests and values.

After Constantine's death in 337 CE, the empire was plunged into turmoil. It was divided into three regions, each ruled by one of his sons, but this arrangement proved unsuccessful and the Roman Empire fell into a period of political turmoil with leadership frequently changing hands. In 364 CE, Valentinian I divided the empire into the Eastern and Western Empires once again. Yet, the Western Empire was still unstable and was ineffectively ruled, reflected by the insignificant amount of legislation passed during this period. Stability was ultimately found when Theodosius I ruled both the east and the west

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<sup>154</sup> VC 4.26

<sup>155</sup> VC 3.12

392-395 CE. After his death, his son Honorius became the Emperor of the Western Empire.

Emperors Valentinian II,<sup>156</sup> Theodosius I<sup>157</sup> and Arcadius<sup>158</sup> restricted ascetic women's agency by forbidding aristocratic women from donating their property to the Church.<sup>159</sup> These laws were issued in 390 CE in Milan and Verona and were targeted at wealthy ascetic women who adopted or were considering adopting the ascetic lifestyle.<sup>160</sup> Traditionally, secular Roman society was concerned with the alienation of familial wealth in regard to women. The legal custom of *tutela* helped to ensure that emancipated women were not depleting familial wealth. During early Empire though, the institution of *tutela* had become less restrictive so women were able to use their finances as they pleased. Typically, ascetic women gained a level of autonomy and agency through their abstention from marriage. Therefore, the *familias* was concerned about permanent loss of wealth, thus prompting the emperors to enact this legislation which denied ascetic women from donating their property to the Church.

Some ascetic women blurred gender notions by adopting traditionally male attire and hairstyles. These actions were a concern for both the Church and State because they were a visual statements that denied women's subjugation to men. In 390 CE, the co-ruling Emperors Valentinian II, Theodosius, and Arcadius issued an edict in Milan and

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<sup>156</sup> Valentinian II was the co-Augustus of the Western Empire. He ruled jointly first with Gratian until 383 CE and then he was the sole ruler.

<sup>157</sup> Theodosius I was the Augustus of the East and after the death of Valentinian II in 392 CE. He became the sole Augustus in the Empire.

<sup>158</sup> He was the son of Theodosius I and was the junior Augustus of the East under his father; after his father's death in 395 CE, he became the sole Augustus in the East.

<sup>159</sup> Michele Renee Salzman, "The Evidence for the Conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in Book 16 of the "Theodosian Code"". *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 42 (3) (Franz Steiner Verlag: 1993.) 374.

<sup>160</sup> Salzman, "The Evidence for the Conversion," 374.

Verona that forbade woman to cut their hair.<sup>161</sup> For ascetic women, cutting their hair was a manifestation of their asceticism because it was a statement regarding their disregard for their physical appearance.<sup>162</sup> However, within scripture women's hair is referred to as her glory and the Church perceived that women's hair was a reminder of her subjugation to men. Therefore, its removal implied a radical statement that women were not subjugated to men but were their equals.

Emperor Valentinian III regulated entrance to the clergy and monastery by excluding men and women from different legal statuses and jobs. On April 15, 451 CE, the Emperor Valentinian III forbade men and women from entering into the clergy or monastery if they were slaves, members of city guilds and tax collectors.<sup>163</sup> People of these occupations and legal statuses were restricted from entering into the Church because Valentinian III believed that their labour and services were too important for them to be lost to society.<sup>164</sup> However, despite the logistical reasons for the implementation of this law, it also had ramifications for ascetic women. This law restricted ascetic women because if they fell into one of those legal statuses or occupations they were unable to lead their lives as they desired. It effectively restricted the monastery life to female ascetics from upper classes.

To conclude, after the elevation of Constantine as Emperor of Western Roman Empire in 312 CE, the State began passing legislation that directly addressed social issues

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<sup>161</sup> Salzman, "The Evidence for the Conversion," 374.

<sup>162</sup> Salzman, "The Evidence for the Conversion," 374.

<sup>163</sup> Charles A. Frazee, "Late Roman and Byzantine Legislation on the Monastic Life from the Fourth to the Eighth Centuries," *Church History* 51 (3) (American Society of Church History, Cambridge University Press: 1982) 269.

<sup>164</sup> Frazee, "Late Roman and Byzantine Legislation," 269.

connected with women, the Church, and female ascetics. These laws reinforced Greco-Roman notions of gender, which believed that women had to be protected and were safer staying within the domestic and private spheres. The State also repealed legislation that financially penalized celibate individuals, which according to Eusebius was done to support ascetics. However, later legislation prohibited women from donating their property to the Church, cutting their hair, and joining a monastery if they were from the lower classes. This legislation further inhibited ascetic women's agency because they dictated how women were to use their finances, their dress and their daily life.

### **Impact of Ecclesiastical Law on Christian Ascetic Women**

Between the fourth and fifth centuries, the Church restricted ascetic women's agency and subjected them to the authority of the Church. After 313 CE as the Church grew and was officially recognized by the state: it also came to terms with Roman culture.<sup>165</sup> As more inhabitants of the Roman Empire became Christian, the Church became Romanized. The Church lost its radical egalitarianism that defined the first three centuries of its existence. By coming adopting Roman culture, it adopted the traditional Roman notions of gender, clashing with its earlier radically egalitarian position on women, especially the ascetic woman. Therefore, Christianity shifted from the role of liberator to oppressor. The Church banned pseudo-marriages and all monasteries were subject to the authority of the male bishop. Private ascetic communities, or proto-monasteries were no longer permitted and piety was institutionalized. Ascetic women were no longer independent of the Church's hierarchy but rather subject to its authority.

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<sup>165</sup> Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 25.

The Church was concerned that ascetics were adopting vows of virginity to abstain from marriage and adopting male dress. These concerns were addressed at ecumenical councils where church legislation was passed.

The Church restricted female ascetics' agency by banning pseudo-marriages. Pseudo marriages were one of the most common expressions of the ascetic lifestyle, where a male and female ascetic cohabited. This practice was established in the first century and was a practical arrangement for both parties. In the Western Empire, it was first banned in 306 CE at the Council of Elvira, a regional synod composed mostly of bishops from Spain. The Council decreed that: "A bishop or other cleric may have only a sister or a daughter who is a virgin consecrated to God living with him. No other woman who is unrelated to him may remain."<sup>166</sup> This canon reflected that, like Cyprian in the second century, Church officials mistrusted adherents to this lifestyle, believing that they were not faithful to their vows. Pseudo-marriages were universally banned by the Church in 325 CE at the Council of Nicaea, which was the first Ecumenical Council where bishops addressed both theological and practical issues within the Church. They addressed the phenomena of pseudo-marriages in Canon III, which stated:

The great Synod has stringently forbidden any bishop, presbyter, deacon, or any one of the clergy whatever, to have a *subintroducta*<sup>167</sup> - dwelling with him, except only a mother, or sister, or aunt, or such persons only as are beyond all suspicion.<sup>168</sup>

By banning pseudo-marriages, the Church asserted control over ascetics' lives. The

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<sup>166</sup> "Canon XXVII," *Council of Elvira*, 306 CE. Accessed by <http://faculty.cua.edu/pennington/Canon%20Law/ElviraCanons.htm#c.27> on March 10, 2016.

<sup>167</sup> The *subintroducta* or συνείσακτος referred to a woman who was introduced into the house of clergyman with the intention of living there.

<sup>168</sup> "Canon III," *The Council of Nicaea*, 325. Accessed by <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.vii.vi.iv.html>. on March 10, 2016.



church authorities were determining which expressions of the ascetic lifestyle were acceptable, thus dictating the manner by which these individuals could not live.

This trend of limiting the agency of ascetic women continued in the Fourth Ecumenical Council, the Council of Chalcedon, in 451 CE, where rules concerning monasteries were established. Here, early proto- monasteries were now transformed into formal institutions belonging within the church's hierarchy. The Church was beginning to institutionalize piety and these communities or proto-monasteries were no longer private communities, but subject to the authority of the local bishop. Canon IV stated:

...it is decreed that no one anywhere build or found a monastery or oratory contrary to the will of the bishop of the city; and that the monks in every city and district shall be subject to the bishop, and embrace a quiet course of life, and give themselves only to fasting and prayer, remaining permanently in the places in which they were set apart; and they shall meddle neither in ecclesiastical nor in secular affairs, nor leave their own monasteries to take part in such; unless, indeed, they should at any time through urgent necessity be appointed thereto by the bishop of the city. And no slave shall be received into any monastery to become a monk against the will of his master. And if any one shall transgress this our judgment, we have decreed that he shall be excommunicated, that the name of God be not blasphemed. But the bishop of the city must make the needful provision for the monasteries.<sup>169</sup>

Canon IV decreed that monasteries or oratories may not be built contrary to the will of the bishop. Although male diminutives were used in the phrasing of this canon, it applied to both genders. Furthermore, the prohibition of accepting slaves in the monastic community without their master's permission further denoted the lapse of egalitarianism within the Church. In Christian scripture, slavery was not just and slaves were consisted to be equal in Jesus. Ascetic individuals were no longer able to privately found

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<sup>169</sup> "Canon IV" *The Council of Chalcedon*, 451. Accessed by <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.xi.xviii.iv.html> on March 10, 2016.

communities without the bishop's permission. They were instructed to devote themselves to fasting and praying and not to meddle in secular affairs. Their movements were restricted and they were unable to leave the monastery unless they were permitted to by the bishop. The bishop's authority over monasteries was restated in Canon XXIV:

Monasteries, which have once been consecrated with the consent of the bishop, shall remain monasteries for ever, and the property belonging to them shall be preserved, and they shall never again become secular dwellings. And they who shall permit this to be done shall be liable to ecclesiastical penalties.<sup>170</sup>

The Church institutionalized piety through the legislation of these canons. The early female ascetics gained social mobility because they did not fit into any societal role. They were able to move outside the traditional Roman social structure by adopting the ascetic lifestyle. The Church, however, restricted expressions of asceticism and mandated communal living, which transformed into the institution of monasticism. Female ascetics were subject to the authority of the bishop who controlled their freedom and limited their interactions with secular society. The freedom female ascetics had gained by expressing their personal piety as a lifestyle was now lost.

Paul established celibacy as a *charisma* and therefore, an honourable alternative to marriage. However, the Church was trying to ensure that women and men were adopting the ascetic lifestyle as an expression of piety and not as a method to escape gender roles and constraints placed upon them by society. In order to ensure that individuals were adopting the ascetic lifestyle as an expression of personal piety, church officials enacted legislation condemning those who sought the lifestyle as a means to escape marriage and other traditional notions of gender. These concerns were addressed in regional synods

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<sup>170</sup> "Canon XXIV" *The Council of Chalcedon*, 451, Accessed by: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.xi.xviii.xxiv.html>, on March 10, 2016.

which were regularly held.

One of those councils or synods was the Council of Gangra c.321-381.<sup>171</sup> Despite being a regional synod, the decisions made at the Council of Gangra were ratified at the Fourth Ecumenical Council, the Council of Chalcedon, in 451 CE. Therefore, they had an impacted on the whole Church. Many of the canons from the Council of Gangra dealt with practical issues within the Church, but six of the canons addressed ascetics directly. The other canons not discussed in this thesis pertained to excessive expressions of the ascetic lifestyle and regulate fasting and forsaking children. In Corinthians 7:7, Paul established that both celibacy and marriage were spiritual graces, and therefore, celibacy was an honourable alternative to marriage. However, the Church was concerned that men and women were adopting the ascetic lifestyle for the wrong reason because they wished to abstain from marriage. Canon IX stated: “If any one shall remain virgin, or observe continence, abstaining from marriage because he abhors it, and not on account of the beauty and holiness of virginity itself, let him be anathema.”<sup>172</sup> The Church declared anyone who remained a virgin to abstain from marriage as anathema. The severity of the punishment for this sin reflected how serious the Church considered this issue.<sup>173</sup> It demonstrated that the Church was concerned that individuals were remaining virgin to avoid marriage.

Also, the Church was concerned with gender boundaries being blurred because

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<sup>171</sup> ”Canon III”, *The Council of Gangra*, 321-381 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.vii.vi.iv.html>, on March 10, 2016. The date of the Council is debated by modern scholars.

<sup>172</sup> “Canon IX” *The Council of Gangra*, 321-381 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.vii.vi.xiv.html>, on March 10, 2016.

<sup>173</sup> Anathema was formal pronouncement which denounced or excommunicated a behaviour or person in the Church. However, the formalized system of excommunicated was not established until the Middle Ages. During this time period excommunication was more localized.

many female ascetics were dressing in male attire. Two canons from the Council of Gangra addressed this issue. Canon XIII stated: “If any woman, under pretense of asceticism, shall change her apparel and, instead of a woman’s accustomed clothing, shall put on that of a man, let her be anathema.”<sup>174</sup> This canon enforced gender boundaries. Female ascetics transcended traditional social hierarchy by adopting the ascetic lifestyle and some of these women were visually blurring the gender lines by adopting male attire. This attitude was continued in canon XVII which stated that: “If any woman from pretended asceticism shall cut off her hair, which God gave her as the reminder of her subjection, thus annulling as it were the ordinance of subjection, let her be anathema.”<sup>175</sup> In Christian scripture hair was referred to as a women’s glory. In 1 Corinthians 11:15, Paul called a woman’s hair her glory: “But if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.”<sup>176</sup> It was also a visual statement of a woman’s subordinate status to a man, which was stated in the phrase, “God gave her as the reminder of her subjection...”<sup>177</sup> By asserting that female ascetics must wear female attire and retain their long hair, the Church was establishing gender boundaries within the Church. The radical egalitarian thrust of the Church, specifically as it pertained to female ascetics was under attack by the Church as a unified institution.

The egalitarian thrust of Christianity which was fully expressed by female ascetics was replaced by a system which restricted the agency of female ascetics by

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<sup>174</sup> “Canon XIII” *The Council of Gangra*, 321-381 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.vii.vi.xix.html>, March 10, 2016.

<sup>175</sup> “Canon XVII” *The Council of Gangra*, 321-381 CE, Accessed by <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.vii.vi.xxv.html>, March 10, 2016.

<sup>176</sup> 1 Cor. 11:15 NRSV

<sup>177</sup> Canon XVII” *The Council of Gangra*, 321-381 CE, Accessed by <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.vii.vi.xxv.html>, on March 10, 2016.

institutionalizing their lifestyle. During the fourth and fifth centuries, the Church passed legislation at regional and ecumenical councils that restricted female ascetics' agency. This legislation banned pseudo-marriages and subjected all monasteries to the authority of the bishop. Ascetics' movements were restricted by the bishops who governed their monasteries. Moreover, the Church was concerned that male and female ascetics were adopting a vow of celibacy in order to abstain from marriage, thus using the vow as a manner to escape gender roles. This attitude manifested itself in the Church's concerns that female ascetics were masculinizing themselves by wearing male clothes and cutting their hair short. Because of these mounting concerns, the Church enacted legislation that restricted the agency of female ascetics over the course of the fourth and fifth centuries.

### **Erosion of the Agency of Ascetic Women**

During the fourth century, female asceticism was increasingly popular in Italy<sup>178</sup>. However, during this same time period, both the Church and State were progressively enacting legislation and church canons that reasserted traditional Roman notions of gender. This legislation and canons framed the narrative of these women's lives by institutionalizing piety and thus placing these women's agency within the control of the Church leadership, the bishops.

There was a shift in the fourth century in the nature of leadership within Christian communities. Female ascetics, who in the first centuries of Christianity held positions of leadership and were respected, began losing their voices. This shift is illustrated in a study conducted by Anne Jensen, which examined mentions of women in four of the earliest

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<sup>178</sup> Salzman, "The Evidence for the Conversion," 374.

Church Histories. Jensen analyzed the contents of Eusebius' *Church History* (340 CE), the earliest history of the Church, and three later histories written by Socrates (d. ca. 439), Solomon (d. ca. 450), and Theodoret (d. ca. 466). Notably, these later works were partially dependent upon each other and Eusebius' earlier work.<sup>179</sup> Eusebius' history began in Apostolic times and ended in 323 CE.<sup>180</sup> Socrates' history was the longest of the later three histories beginning in 306 CE and concluded with the reign of Theodosius II in 439 CE. Both Solomon's and Theodoret's histories began in 324 CE and ended in 429 CE. The results of the study concluded that women were mentioned in Eusebius' work more than the other texts combined and the ratio was 55:43.<sup>181</sup> This illustrated a clear decline in the number of women mentioned within Church histories.<sup>182</sup>

Furthermore, this decline was amplified by the increasing anonymization of women, including ascetic women, which was illustrated in the later three Church histories. According to Jensen, the ratios from named to anonymously mentioned women are: 26:29 in EUS, 4:10 SOC, SOZ 10:23 and 3:12 THE.<sup>183</sup> Although Sozoman's ratio appears favourable, five of the thirteen women mentioned by him were receivers of miracle and five were connected to sex stories.<sup>184</sup> Furthermore, eight of the named women in Sozoman's account held some sort of ecclesiastical status.<sup>185</sup> Jensen suggested

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<sup>179</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 2.

<sup>180</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 2. Refinus (d. 410 CE), an ascetic theologian, translated Eusebius' *Church History* from koine Greek into Latin. When he wrote his translation, Refinus added two additional chapters to Eusebius' original work which lengthened the work to include the reign of Theodosius I (379-392 CE). Jensen's study used Refinus' translation for her study.

<sup>181</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 7.

<sup>182</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 7.

<sup>183</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 8.

<sup>184</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 8.

<sup>185</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 8.

that the deprivation of women in leadership positions contributed to the invisibility of women within recorded Church history.<sup>186</sup> Her study reflected the social shift within the Church community in the fourth century. Women were devalued within the community, which was reflected by the decrease in the number of mentioned females within Church histories. Moreover, Jensen's study strongly suggested the loss of female leadership within the Church by the increasing anonymization of women.

The transformation of female ascetics' agency from liberation to subjugation was reflected within the change of discourse in *The Acts of Thecla*. Ambrose (c. 340-397 CE), the bishop of Milan who was celebrated for his support of the celibate lifestyle, wrote a version of the story in the fourth century. His version of the story did not deviate from the general events of the story, but he reconstructed the discourse which sexualized Thecla and dimensioned her agency. For example, in Ambrose's account, when the governor condemned the naked Thecla to the arena, a lion saved her from the other wild beasts in the arena.<sup>187</sup> - However, in the original account of the story from the early second century, a lioness saved Thecla.<sup>188</sup> Burrus wrote about the change, noting: "...instead of female solitary against then hostile males, goes to the chivalrous male protection of blushing brides."<sup>189</sup> Ambrose's version disempowered women because Thecla was no longer saved by the solidarity of females but this version made Thecla into a damsel in distress for a male figure to rescue. Furthermore, during this scene, the discourse is sexualized because Ambrose has Thecla tantalizing the male audience with

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<sup>186</sup> Jensen, *God's Self-confident Daughters*, 8.

<sup>187</sup> Burrus, "Word and Flesh," 48.

<sup>188</sup> This account was attributed to a presbyter by Tertullian.

<sup>189</sup> Burrus, "Word and Flesh," 48.

her body.<sup>190</sup> According to Burrus, Ambrose wrote: “she arranges her body so that the male onlookers cannot see her but the attacking lion sees her virginal genitals.”<sup>191</sup> Thus Burrus highlights the new sexual of element of the story. However, by overemphasizing Thecla’s sexuality in Ambrose’s version, Burrus demonstrated that it reduced her achievements as an individual.

The fourth century for ascetic women was a paradoxical period. This was period when ascetic women’s reached its apex but also erosive legislation was being enacted by both the Church and State. Blaesilla was an early example of the erosion of ascetic women’s agency. Blaesilla was the oldest daughter of Paula, a powerful ascetic whom was discussed in the previous chapter. She converted to asceticism after the premature death of her husband.<sup>192</sup> Their marriage was brief, spanning seven months.- Blaesilla died within a few months of adopting the ascetic lifestyle.<sup>193</sup> According to Hickey, her asceticism was extreme and caused her death.<sup>194</sup> Jerome, as her spiritual advisor, was blamed for her death. In 385 CE, Jerome wrote a letter to Marcella defending Blaesilla’s conduct and his role. In the letter, Jerome described Blaesilla’s illness. He wrote: “The burning fever from which we have seen her suffering unceasingly for nearly thirty days...”<sup>195</sup> In a letter to her mother, Paula, Jerome wrote that the crowd at Blaesilla’s funeral was whispering:

Is not this what we have often said. She weeps for her daughter,  
killed with fasting. She wanted her to marry again, that she might

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<sup>190</sup> Burrus, “Word and Flesh,” 48.

<sup>191</sup> De Pirg. 2.19 in Virginia Burrus, “Word and Flesh,” 48.

<sup>192</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 16.

<sup>193</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 16.

<sup>194</sup> Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy*, 33.

<sup>195</sup> Jerome, *Letter XXXVIII*, 385 CE, Accessed by:  
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001038.htm>. on March 29, 2016.



have grandchildren. How long must we refrain from driving these detestable monks out of Rome? Why do we not stone them or hurl them into the Tiber? They have misled this unhappy lady; that she is not a nun from choice is clear. No heathen mother ever wept for her children as she does for Blæsilla.”<sup>196</sup>

Although Jerome refuted this claim, it is clear that the Roman populace blamed the Christian monks and fasting for her death and questioned whether it was her choice or not to adopt the ascetic lifestyle. Jerome persuaded her to become an ascetic after the death of her husband.<sup>197</sup> After Blaesilla became ill with a fever, she was unable to eat. Once the fever abated, Jerome advised her to continue fasting in order to “...not to stimulate desire by bestowing care upon the flesh.”<sup>198</sup> Her family interceded with the Pope on her behalf against Jerome.<sup>199</sup> Before the Pope responded, Blaesilla died. Her death was caused by the extreme nature of her ascetic lifestyle, she died from fasting. As her spiritual advisor, Jerome had great influence over Blaesilla.<sup>200</sup> Unfortunately, his influence led to her death. In this instance the oppression of asceticism was highlighted because she was not in control of her lifestyle, her spiritual advisor guided her daily habits which resulted in her premature death.

Ascetic women’s agency was diminished by the monastic system. After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, monasteries were the accepted lifestyle for ascetics. Within monasteries, adherents were subjected to the authority of the bishop and their movements and daily schedule was dictated by the Church. This change shifted early

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<sup>196</sup> Jerome, *Letter XXXIX*, 389 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001039.htm>. on March 8, 2016.

<sup>197</sup> Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image* (United States of America:Penguin, 1999), 246.

<sup>198</sup> Veronika Grimm, *From Feasting To Fasting: The Evolution of a Sin* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002),161.

<sup>199</sup> Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, 246.

<sup>200</sup> Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, 246.

female ascetic lifestyle from an expression of personal piety to an institutionalized one. This institutionalized reality was reflected in a letter by St. Augustine (354-430 CE), a celebrated theologian and philosopher and one of the Four Great Church Fathers. According to Charles Frazee, female monasteries were not as numerous as male monasteries.<sup>201</sup> There were a few and they all would have been subjected to their local bishops. In 423 CE, Augustine wrote a letter to the monastery where his sister was prioress. In the letter, he wrote: “The rules which we lay down to be observed by you as persons settled in a monastery are these...”<sup>202</sup> St. Augustine was not advising the community, but rather he expected the women to obey these rules. Rule seven dictated that they must pray at the appointed hours: “Be regular (*instate*) in prayers at the appointed hours and times.”<sup>203</sup> Ascetic women’s lives were completely dictated by their male superiors and they were not permitted to choose how they spent their time. These rules were similar to the rules in St. Augustine’s Rule that was directed to male monasteries. Furthermore, rule eight dictated that the women were required to fast and abstain from meat and drink. It stated: “Keep the flesh under by tastings and by abstinence from meat and drink, so far as health allows.”<sup>204</sup> Again, Augustine was dictating how these women lived their lives. Despite the fact that ascetic women normally maintained a diet similar to the one he instructed, Augustine mandated that all ascetic women at the monastery were to adopt this diet. Most significantly, rule ten addressed the

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<sup>201</sup> Frazee, “Late Roman and Byzantine Legislation,” 265.

<sup>202</sup> St. Augustine, *Letter 211*, 423 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102211.htm>, on March 20, 2016.

<sup>203</sup> St. Augustine, *Letter 211*, 423 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102211.htm>, on March 20, 2016.

<sup>204</sup> St. Augustine, *Letter 211*, 423 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102211.htm>, on March 20, 2016.

issues of female attire and the women's movement. It stated:

Let your apparel be in no wise conspicuous; and aspire to please others by your behaviour rather than by your attire. Let your head-dresses not be so thin as to let the nets below them be seen. Let your hair be worn wholly covered, and let it neither be carelessly dishevelled nor too scrupulously arranged when you go beyond the monastery.<sup>205</sup>

Again, this was an example of the institutionalization of piety and reflected secular and ecclesial concerns concerning women's modesty and their visual subjugation. They were to dress as demure females and not adopt masculine attire.

Furthermore, rule ten stated: "When you go anywhere, walk together; when you come to the place to which you were going, stand together."<sup>206</sup> According to Church canon, within monasteries, ascetic women's movements were subject to the authority of the bishop and they were not to leave the monastery unless there was a dire need. Augustine instructed that women must go together when they go anywhere. This passage the restricted movements of ascetic women, ascetic women required to walk with their fellow ascetic women from the monastery.

This letter reflects the institutionalized nature of monasteries where women's daily routine, diet, dress, and movements were restricted and outlined by the Church. These women did not have the freedom that they had when they were not subject to the authority of the bishop. This letter demonstrates the loss of agency and autonomy that ascetic women had in the preceding centuries. Ascetic women no longer transcended patriarchal social structure: they were a part of it.

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<sup>205</sup> St. Augustine, *Letter 211*, 423 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102211.htm>, on March 20, 2016.

<sup>206</sup> St. Augustine, *Letter 211*, 423 CE, Accessed by: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102211.htm>, on March 20, 2016.

## **Conclusion**

In the fourth and fifth centuries the Church and State passed legislation which disempowered ascetic women. Despite Roman law no longer financially penalizing ascetic women, it reasserted traditional Roman values under the guise of protecting women by denying them direct access to the court system and interfering in unmarried women's sexual behaviour. Meanwhile, the Church was passing legislation both at ecumenical councils and regional synods which banned pseudo-marriage and mandated the expression of monastery which placed its authority under the mantle of the local bishops. Furthermore, it penalized individuals who adopted the ascetic lifestyle as a means to abstain from marriage. The erosion of ascetic women's agency and autonomy was reflected in disappearance of women from the contemporary historical record which Jensen noted her study of four early church histories. It was further illustrated in the shift of discourse within *The Acts of Thecla*, from a story entered around an empowered maiden to one which both sexualized her and dimensioned her actions by attributing them to her male counterpart, Paul. Lastly, St. Augustine's *Letter 211* illustrated the shift from personal piety to institutionalized piety which empowered the Church and took away ascetic women's agency.

## **Conclusion**

The egalitarian nature of early Christianity allowed ascetic women to transcend the patriarchal social structure of Roman society. Asceticism permitted women to have an autonomous voice and hold leadership positions within Christian society which was a radical departure from the opportunities available to women in Roman society. Early Christian scripture, like the Pauline Letters, legitimized asceticism as an honourable alternative to marriage. Thus sanctioning women's choice to become ascetics.

Furthermore, the Scriptures established equality in early Christianity which became a significant characteristic in its early history. It permitted women like Agnes, Marcella and Paula along with the story transcribed in The Acts of Thecla to transcend the patriarchal social structure and move outside of it. They had voices of their own and held positions of respects and leadership within their communities, unknown to Roman women with the exception of the Vestal Virgins. In the fourth century, ascetic women's agency and autonomy reached its apex. However during this same time period, the Church and State both enacted legislation which eroded ascetic women's agency and autonomy. This legislation reinforced traditional Roman gender norms which confined women to the private and domestic sphere, and limited their ability to act independently. Unfortunately, these laws and canons negated the earlier radical egalitarianism of Christianity that was expressed in Paul's teachings. Furthermore, this legislation prohibited ascetics from living in a pseudo-marriage and placed the creation and establishment of monasteries under the control of the bishops, thus institutionalizing piety. Ascetic women were no longer free to practice their own unique expression of asceticism but were confined but the new laws which the Church and State had implemented.

The loss of female ascetic's agency was reflected in Anne Jensen's study where she

compared four early histories of the Church and found that women were increasingly mentioned less by later histories and that their actual names were increasingly ignored.- Jensen suggested that this reflected the loss of leadership positions by women within the Church.- Moreover, The loss of female ascetic agency can also be noted by the change of discourse in The Acts of Thelca. There were six versions of The Acts of Thelca written in the first four centuries. The first was transcribed early in the second century and has strong themes of independence and agency that the main character, Thecla was able to express. In a later version written by Ambrose in the fourth century, Thecla's agency was diminished and Paul was given more of an active role within the story. Furthermore, the text sexualized Thecla. The fourth century was a paradoxical time for ascetic women. It was a time which ascetic women's agency reached its apex but it also saw the erosion of their agency being instituted by both the Church and State. This reality was best illustrated by the example of Paula and her daughter, Blaesilla. Unlike her mother who was able to express both her agency and autonomy, Blaesilla was an example of the erosion of ascetic women's agency in the fourth century because Jerome encouraged her to participate in overly harsh expression of the ascetic lifestyle which caused her death within months of adopting asceticism. Lastly, St. Augustine's *Letter 211* illustrated the shift from personal to institutionalized piety. The letter contained a monastic rule that was supposed to be a guide for communal life. In the first three centuries of Christianity, female ascetics chose how to express their asceticism. It was a personal experience, unique to the individual. However, by limiting the types of lifestyles permitted for ascetic women and institutions monastic rules, the piety of ascetic women was no longer singularly an expression of personal piety, but rather a mandated routine as instructed by the Church. The equalitarian thrust of early Christianity was gone and was replaced by

Greco-Roman notions of gender and the experience of asceticism for women shifted from liberty to oppression.





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