

Letter of Pope Siricius to Bishop Himerius of Tarragona, 385

Introduction:

The account which you, brother, directed to our predecessor of holy memory Damasus, found me now installed in his see because the Lord thus ordained. When we read that [account] more carefully in an assembly of brethren, we found to the degree we had hoped to recognize things which ought to be praised and much which was worthy of reprimand and correction. And since it is necessary for us to succeed to the labors and responsibilities of him whom, through the grace of God, we succeeded in honor, having first given notice, as was necessary, of my promotion, we do not refuse, as the Lord deigns to inspire, a proper response to your inquiry in every point. For in view of our office there is no freedom for us, on whom a zeal for the Christian religion is incumbent greater than on all others, to dissimulate or to be silent. We bear the burdens of all who are oppressed, or rather the blessed apostle Peter, who in all things protects and preserves us, the heirs, as we trust, of his administration, bears them in us.

Concerning the Incontinence of the Clergy:

Let us come now to the most sacred orders of clerics, which we learn from your report, beloved, are thus so scorned and disordered throughout your provinces, to the injury of religion which should be venerated, that we should be speaking with the voice of Jeremiah, "Who will give water to my head, or a fountain of tears to my eyes? And I shall weep for this people day and night." If, therefore, the blessed prophet says that tears are insufficient for him in lamenting the sins of the people, by how much grief can we be smitten when compelled to deplore the iniquities of those who are in our body, [we] to whom especially, according to blessed Paul, ceaselessly falls the daily concern and solicitude of all churches? "For who is weak and I am not weak? Who is offended and I do not burn?" For we learned that many priests and deacons of Christ, long after their ordination, have produced offspring both from their own wives and even through filthy liaisons, and defend their sin with this excuse, that it is read in the Old Testament that the opportunity to procreate was given to priests and ministers.

Let him speak to me now, whoever is an addict of obscenities and a teacher of vices. If he thinks that here and there in the law of Moses the restraints of indulgence are relaxed by the Lord for sacred orders, why does He admonish those to whom the Holy of Holies was committed saying: "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy"? Why indeed were priests ordered to live in the temple, far from their homes, in the year of their service? Just for this reason: so that they could not engage in physical contact even with wives, and that shining in integrity of conscience they might offer acceptable service to God. The period of service having been completed, use of wives was permitted to them for reason of succession alone, because no one from a tribe other than of Levi was directed to be admitted to the ministry of God.

Whence the Lord Jesus, when he enlightened us by his advent, testified in the Gospel that he had come to fulfill the law not to destroy it. And he wished thus that the figure of the Church, whose bridegroom he is, radiate with the splendor of chastity, so that on the day of judgment when he comes again he can find her without stain and blemish, just as he taught through his Apostle. All we priests and deacons are bound by the unbreakable law of those sanctions, so that from the day of our ordination we subject our hearts and bodies to moderation and modesty in order that in every respect we might please our God in these sacrifices which daily we offer. "They who are in the flesh," says the chosen vessel, "are unable to please God. But you are not now in the flesh but in the Spirit, if

indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you." And where can the Spirit of God dwell except, as we read, in holy bodies?

And because a considerable number of those of whom we speak, as your holiness reported, lament that they lapsed in ignorance, we declare that mercy should not be denied to them, with this condition: if henceforth they strive to conduct themselves continently, they should continue as long as they live in that office which they held when they were caught, without any advancement in rank. But those who lean on the excuse of an illicit privilege by asserting that this was conceded to them in the old law, let them know that they have been expelled by the authority of the apostolic see from every ecclesiastical office, which they used unworthily, nor can they ever touch the mysteries which ought to be venerated, of which they deprived themselves when they were obsessed with obscene desires. And because present examples forewarn us to be vigilant in the future, any bishop, priest, and deacon henceforth found in this situation--which we hope will not happen--should understand right now that every avenue of forgiveness from us for himself is blocked, because it is necessary that wounds which do not respond to the medication of a soothing compress should be excised with a knife.