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AUGUSTINE

*DE BONO CONIUGALI
DE SANCTA VIRGINITATE*

*Edited with an Introduction,
Translation, and Notes by*

P. G. Walsh

*General Editor
Henry Chadwick*

OXFORD EARLY CHRISTIAN TEXTS

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Augustine

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
P. G. Walsh

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Foreword

The Christian era in which Augustine lived was happily free from the prudery reflected in Cicero's *De officiis* (1. 127): 'All persons of sound mind avoid references to the parts of the body which we use from necessity . . . it is indecent to speak of them.' In these treatises the sexual aspects of marriage are discussed without embarrassment in a manner which is conventional in our own age. In the nineteenth century, however, Christian sensibilities were deeply disturbed by such frank discussion. Witness the Introduction to the translation of *De bono coniugali* in *The Library of the Fathers* (1847): 'The Editors are of course aware of the danger there is in reading a treatise like the following in a spirit of idle curiosity, and they beg any reader who has not well assured himself that his aim is right and holy to abstain from perusing it.'

Similar misgivings are expressed by Harnack and other Church historians earlier in this century. It is doubtless for this reason that these treatises have until recently been so little translated or read. They have of course been the bedrock of Catholic moral theology from the Council of Trent ('It is better to remain in virginity or celibacy than to be bound by marriage') to the encyclicals of Pius XII (*Casti Connubii*) and Paul VI (*Humanae Vitae*), and they remain closely relevant to the current controversies in the areas of marriage, celibacy, and consecrated virginity; *De bono coniugali* is twice quoted in Vatican II's document, *Gaudium et Spes*, 48, 50.

I wish to thank the learned advisers to the Press for many helpful suggestions made at the outset of this enterprise, and in particular Professor Henry Chadwick, editor of this series, for his friendly support and advice.

P.G.W.

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Contents

Introduction	ix
Select Bibliography	xxxiii
Abbreviations	xxxv
<i>De bono coniugali</i>	1
Text and Translation	2
<i>De sancta uirginitate</i>	65
Text and Translation	66
Appendices	148
1 <i>Retractationes</i> 2. 22	148
2 Variant Citations of Scripture from the Vulgate	152
3 Divergences from Zycha's CSEL Text	158
Index of Biblical Passages Cited	159
General Index	163

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Introduction

The Good of Marriage and *On Holy Virginity* are closely interconnected. They were composed in sequence, and the implicit theme in both is the interrelation between them as differing modes of Christian life. As Augustine states in the *Retractationes*: 'After I composed *The Good of Marriage*, it was anticipated that I would write *On Holy Virginity*, and I did not postpone it.'¹ The probable date of composition as indicated by the order of books mentioned in the *Retractationes* is AD 401. He had recently embarked upon renewed study of the Book of Genesis in *De Genesi ad litteram*, but he laid this aside for what he regarded as a more urgent pastoral undertaking. A year or so earlier, a *libellus* composed by Petilian, the Donatist bishop of Constantine, had been put into his hands with an urgent entreaty for a Catholic response; in the second of the three books of his *Contra litteras Petiliani*, reference is made to Pope Anastasius as still alive; he died in April 402. Though the date of 401 for our two treatises is not absolutely secure and has been challenged, it remains the most probable option.²

Augustine's Personal Experience, AD 372–400

Augustine brought a wealth of personal experience to bear on the issues of marital life and continence; the *Confessions* as autobiography interweaves the theme of moral conversion with that of intellectual development. At the age of seventeen he already lived with a

¹ See Appendix 1 (*ad fin.*).

² In his *Retractationes*, Augustine assembles the writings of this period as follows: 2. 21 *De opere monachorum*, composed 'cum apud Carthaginem monasteria esse coepissent' (first mention of them is at the Council of Carthage, AD 397, so c. 400). 2. 22 *De bono coniugali* ; 2. 23 *De sancta uirginitate* ; 2. 24 *De Genesi ad litteram* 'per idem tempus'. 2. 25 *Contra litteras Petiliani* 'antequam finire libros *de Genesi ad litteram*'. At 2. 51. 118 he writes 'hodie Anastasius sedet' so this was composed before Pope Anastasius' death in April 402. Hence the suggested date for our two treatises of 401. For the suggestion of an earlier date c. 397, see Appendix 1 n. Since Jovinian's views had been condemned by a synod at Rome as early as 393, and heavily criticized by Jerome's *In Iovinianum* within a year, the traditional dating of *De bono coniugali* in ad 401 (so H. I. Marrou and A. M. La Bonnardière, *S. Augustin et l'augustinisme*, Paris, 1955, 183) has been challenged by M.-F. Berrouard, *Aug. Lex.* i. 658–66, who proposes an earlier date of c. 397. But Augustine indicates here that he is responding not merely to Jovinian and Jerome, but also to the continuing influence of Jovinian's views, as a result of which many nuns and priests have married. This time-lag from 394 could well have extended to 401.

concubine, a relationship which continued in total fidelity from 372 to 385, and which resulted in the birth of one child, a son Adeodatus, in 373. As a woman of low social standing from Carthage, she could never have aspired to marriage with a man who at that time had high political ambitions; she was sent back to Africa in 385, and Augustine's mother Monnica arranged a suitable match for him with a girl as yet too young for marriage. Meanwhile Augustine (in his own words 'not a lover of marriage, but a slave to lust') procured a second concubine.³

Inevitably this sexual history presupposes a knowledge of marital intimacies and crises—techniques of contraception if not abortion, discomforts of pregnancy, temptations to infidelity, stresses of parenthood. At the same time his association with the Manichees, who tolerated but discouraged such sexual activities by their *auditores*, and his clear preference for intellectual friendships with male friends, suggest that his lustful propensities imposed a burden rather than encouraged regular indulgence. The *Confessions* 'reflects a sense of sharp contrast between his sexual needs and his longing for clear, unproblematic relationships'. The dramatic climax to the *Confessions*—the vision of Lady Continence and the children's game inspiring him to 'take up and read' Paul's exhortation to renounce the lusts of the flesh—reflects a clear sense of relief and release.⁴

Following this conversion in the summer of 386 and his baptism at Milan at Easter 387, Augustine returned to Africa in 388, eventually settling with a circle of friends on his family estate at Thagaste to continue the quasi-monastic mode of life which after his conversion they had embraced at Cassiciacum. But as eminent intellectuals in an African Church challenged on every side by Donatists, Manichees, and pagans, they could not remain in obscure retirement for long; for Augustine the death of his son Adeodatus at the early age of seventeen may have been an additional incentive to move on to Hippo in 391, with the intention of establishing a monastery there and perhaps also to challenge the Donatist dominance in the town. The bishop Valerius, an immigrant Greek in sore

³ See *Conf.* 6. 11. 19, 6. 13. 23, 6. 15. 25.

⁴ For Augustine's knowledge of techniques of contraception, see n. 24 on *De bono coniugali*; B. D. Shaw, 'The Family in Late Antiquity: The Experience of Augustine', *Past and Present* 115 (1987), 3–51, esp. 45f. The citation is from Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York, 1988), ch. 19 the whole of which ('Augustine, Sexuality, and Society') is an important contribution. For the climax to the *Confessions*, see 8. 11. 27, 29.

need of such authoritative support for the welfare of his diocese, not only fostered his monastic aspirations but also intrigued to have him acclaimed first a priest in 391, and then as coadjutor bishop in 395. It was shortly after this in 397 that he began to write the *Confessions*, which is not merely ‘a masterpiece of strictly intellectual autobiography’, but also an oblique appeal to contemporary Christians of literary bent to embrace a life of continence. It is likely that he had completed his personal testament in the first nine books shortly before composing his works on marriage and virginity.⁵

The Numidians among whom Augustine had returned to live as bishop until his death in 430 were traditionally notorious for sexual licence. For Livy, they were ‘more eager for sex than all barbarians’ (ante omnes barbaros effusi in uenerem), and according to Salvianus, a younger contemporary of Augustine, Christianity had not improved their ways; ‘There is not an African’, he writes, ‘who is not a slave to lewdness.’ There is doubtless an element of exaggeration in such claims, but Augustine understood all too well the tendency of male members of his flock towards promiscuity. His listeners wearied as in his sermons he constantly harped on the theme of adultery. ‘I know that there is many a man who rages against me inwardly when his wife reproaches him with his infidelity, and who then thinks “That man must have been here again”, or “My wife has been in church again” . . . Come, come, the men would say. God cares nothing for the sins of the flesh.’ Augustine especially condemned the exploitation of household slaves as concubines, and he urges wives to stand on their Christian rights. ‘I want the wife to be a jealous wife . . . In all other things be subject to your husbands, but in this defend your cause.’ Such sermons as these cast a flood of light on Augustine’s insistence in *The Good of Marriage* on lifelong fidelity.⁶

Augustine’s concern as bishop for the ordered marital life of his flock was complemented by his advancement of the monastic life; he argued that the number of Christians was now so great, and the fecundity of the nations so widespread, that an adequate future

⁵ For the purpose of his visit to Hippo, to found a monastery there, see Sermon 355. 2; forced ordination as priest and bishop, Possidius, *Vita* 4. 2; *Ep.* 26. 3. For the citation of the nature of the *Confessions*, P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London, 1967), 167.

⁶ The Numidians’ love-life, Livy 29. 23. 4; Salvianus, *De gubernatione dei*, 7. 16. 65. For the citations of *Serm.* 9. 3 f. and 14, 224. 3, 392. 4f., see the informative and entertaining account of F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop* (London, 1961), 180ff.

progeny was assured. In Milan he had witnessed Ambrose's encouragement of a celibate life for the clergy, and in the course of his return to Africa he had spent several months in Rome, where he witnessed an increasing number of women opting for a life of virginity or chaste widowhood. One of his urgent priorities on his enthronement as bishop was the establishment of monastic communities for men, and from them several of his close associates were appointed to bishoprics or responsible priesthoods, and spread the monastic movement further. It is no coincidence that *De sancta uirginitate* followed closely after *De opere monachorum*, a work undertaken at the behest of Aurelius, bishop of Carthage. So far as consecrated virgins were concerned, it is clear that Augustine promoted for them a life of poverty in community rather than the widespread practice at Milan and Rome of the less exacting life in private residences; and again, he rejected the practice not uncommon elsewhere of consecrated virgins residing in the houses of clerics.⁷

Marriage and Sexual Renunciation in the Graeco-Roman Tradition⁸

The practice of ritual virginity had little appeal in the traditional Roman culture. Recent studies confirm the claim of Ambrose that the six Vestal virgins at Rome were not necessarily virgins (they may earlier have been wives), that they retired after thirty years rather than pledged lifelong commitment, and that the duties were undertaken more from family ambition than from any conviction of the ritual purity of the virgin state. The Christian emphasis on the importance of consecrated virginity therefore introduced a new and dynamic element into religious practices in the Western world.⁹

Roman marriage was essentially a family concern. Though the consent of bride and groom was required by Roman law, the paterfamilias arranged the match, and his consent was necessary. The bride could legally be as young as twelve, and in senatorial families

⁷ For the confidence in an adequate future progeny in the Church, see *De bono coniugali* [IX] 9. For Augustine's monastic intimates turned bishops, see Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 143f. Augustine's preference for virgins' life in community, *De sancta uirginitate* [XLV] 46.

⁸ This topic has attracted an enormous bibliography in recent years. See especially S. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage* (Oxford, 1991); S. Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore and London, 1992); Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1993); E. A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington, Del., 1983), all with earlier bibliographies.

⁹ Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 138; Mary Beard, 'The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins', *JRS* 70 (1980), 13ff., and 'Re-reading (Vestal) Virginity', in R. Hawley and B. Levick (eds.), *Women in Antiquity* (London, 1995), ch. 11. For Ambrose's observations, see n. 41 to *De bono coniugali*.

girls were frequently married by their early or middle teens to men considerably older, in order to cement close-knit relations between the families of the dominant class. Brides in the lower strata of society may have married a little later. The disparity in ages between wife and husband accentuated the dependence of the one upon the other; in Augustine's words, 'one governing and the other obeying', though by Cicero's time there were celebrated examples of emancipated wives. Extramarital relations by wives were scandalous, whereas such activities by men were widely tolerated except by philosophers of the Stoic persuasion. Though in earlier times the availability of divorce was one-sided, by Cicero's time women when marrying often refrained from passing into the *manus* of their husbands, so that with the consent of their fathers they could divorce and remarry virtually at will. But with the advent of the Christian era, Constantine sought to restrict the easy access to divorce not only by women, but also by men.¹⁰

In general, however, the scope for a fulfilled life for women was largely restricted to the raising of families under the control of the head of the household. The advent of Christianity introduced opportunities for highly educated women to adopt a more independent role by undertaking a life of consecrated virginity. 'Women of the patristic era who renounced traditional sexual and domestic roles did indeed have new worlds open to them, worlds of scholarship and contemplation, pilgrimage and charitable endeavour.' Inspired by the women who had followed Christ and were companions of Paul, who headed early Christian communities and became intrepid martyrs by the baptism of blood, high-born ladies at Rome demonstrated their Christian allegiance by forsaking marriage for a life of scriptural study and charitable endeavour. Some of those who gathered round Jerome were widows like Marcella, Melania the elder, Paula and her daughter Blesilla; others were virgins like Eustochium, the daughter of Paula and the recipient of Jerome's celebrated Letter 22, and Marcellina, sister of Ambrose.¹¹

¹⁰ For the age of Roman girls at marriage, see K. Hopkins, 'The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage', *Population Studies* 18 (1965), 309ff.; B. D. Shaw, 'The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage: Some Reconsiderations', *JRS* 77 (1987), 30ff. For men, R. P. Saller, 'Men's Age at Marriage and its Consequences in the Roman Family', *CP* 82 (1987), 21ff. For Constantine's legislation, see n. 23 to *De bono coniugali*.

¹¹ The initial citation is from E. A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 16. See also J. W. Drijvers, 'Virginity and Asceticism in Late Roman Western Elites', in J. Blok and P. Mason (eds.), *Sexual Asymmetry* (Amsterdam, 1987), 241ff.

In the course of the fourth century this cult of consecrated virginity became widespread. In Italy alone convents were established at Verona, Bologna, and Milan as well as Rome. John Chrysostom (*Hom. 66 on Matt. 3*) claims that in Antioch there were 3,000 virgins and chaste widows under the guidance of the Church, a number claimed likewise for Rome by Gregory the Great two centuries later (*Ep. 7. 26*). It is pertinent to probe the range of motives which inspired this movement towards virginity and away from marriage. Though Basil (*Ep. 199. 18*) wisely counsels postponement of such a decision until the age of sixteen or seventeen, some girls may have opted for virginity to shy away from prearranged marriages at an immature age; others may have been induced into it by the arguments of clerics such as Augustine advances in his *De sancta uirginitate* [X] 10; others still will have been attracted by the enhanced social status. It is surely no coincidence that Augustine devotes the second half of *De sancta uirginitate* to the importance of humility, and in a sermon he berates virgins who regard themselves as superior to their parents (*Serm. 354. 8*). He makes it clear that there were women in some African convents who were unsuitable on more serious grounds.¹²

Scriptural Authority and Patristic Views on Marriage and Virginity

In his two treatises on marriage and virginity, Augustine sought above all to be faithful to scriptural injunctions. The first Letter of Peter (3: 1–7) admonishes wives to accept the authority of husbands as slaves accept the word of their masters, and by the purity of their lives to win over spouses who as yet were pagans. It counsels against bodily adornment, and recommends imitation of Sara's submission to Abraham in the Old Testament. Husbands in turn are counselled to honour their wives 'as the weaker sex . . . and heirs of the gracious gift of life'. Paul in Colossians 3: 18f., 1 Tim. 2: 9–15 ('I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man'), and Tit. 2: 4f. echoes these recommendations repeatedly. At Eph. 5: 22ff. a similar relationship between husband and wife is prescribed,

¹² I take the citations from John Chrysostom and Basil from Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity*, 50ff., and that from Gregory the Great from Drijvers, 'Virginity and Asceticism'. For the suggestion that choosing virginity was in protest against male domination, see I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (Harmondsworth, 1975), 40ff. For unsuitable virgins in convents, *De bono coniugali* [XII] 14, [XXIII] 30.

and here alone Paul makes the celebrated comparison with that between Christ and his Church ('This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and his Church'), a concept adapted from Jewish thought, the nuptials between Jahweh and Israel (Hosea 3: 1ff.)¹³

The passage of Paul which dominates *De bono coniugali* is 1 Cor. 7: 3ff.: 'The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement at a set time to devote yourselves to prayer: and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. This I say by way of concession (κατὰ συγγνώμην), not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a different gift from God, one having one kind, and another a different kind. To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practising self-control, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband, but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband, and that the husband should not divorce his wife.'

It is notable that Paul does not allow Matthew's one justification for putting away a wife (19: 9), and Augustine cites the combined authority of Mark, Luke, and Paul against Matthew. Second, whereas the Vulgate renders the Greek κατὰ συγγνώμην as *secundum indulgentiam*, Augustine's rendering, *secundum ueniam*, is interpreted as meaning that sexual intercourse for pleasure rather than for procreation is a venial sin; Stoic influences may be at work in this misinterpretation of Paul's text, a reading which was destined to have a long history in the moral theology of the Middle Ages.¹⁴

In the same passage (1 Cor. 7. 25 ff.), Paul addresses virgins as well as married women, and accordingly provides the scriptural basis for his instruction in *De sancta uirginitate*:

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the impending

¹³ See J. H. Crehan, *Catholic Dictionary of Theology*, 3. 240 ff.

¹⁴ For Augustine's rejection of Matthew by counter-citations from the other scriptural authorities, see n. 16 to *De bono coniugali*. For his misinterpretation of Paul, see n. 28 to *De bono coniugali*.

crisis (διὰ τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν ἀνάγκην) it is as well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that . . . The married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife . . . The unmarried woman and virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit, but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband . . . He who marries his fiancée does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do better. A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgement she is more blessed if she remains as she is.

The Greek phrase διὰ τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν ἀνάγκην is rendered in the Vulgate as ‘propter instantem necessitatem’; Paul is referring to the imminence of the Second Coming. Augustine's text has ‘propter praesentem necessitatem’, and he interprets the phrase as referring to the practical problems posed by serving a married partner rather than being free to serve the Lord. It is a moot problem whether he inherited this reading from his biblical source, or whether it is his own revision because by his day the Parousia had become a more distant prospect.

Many of the Greek Fathers offered widely-ranging interpretations of the scriptural exhortations on marriage and virginity, but Augustine at this stage of his life did not read Greek fluently, so such influence as they exercised upon him came obliquely through the mediation of others.¹⁵ More relevant to his treatises are the earlier African apologists Tertullian and Cyprian, and above all his mentor at Milan Ambrose.

Though Tertullian with his rigorous asceticism strongly promotes virginity and suggests that marriage is for those who cannot otherwise resist temptation, and indeed after turning to Montanism condemns it still more savagely as human weakness, he is none the less concerned to defend the institution against the heresy of Marcion: ‘For we know and pursue and promote sanctity without condemning marriage.’ In his *De monogamia*, he stresses that marriage is necessary for the propagation of the human race. Again, in the treatise addressed to his wife he eulogizes the institution of marriage. His description of virginity vis-à-vis marriage ‘non ut malo

¹⁵ See Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 271, 412.

bonum, sed ut bono melius' finds an echo in Augustine's discussion. Cyprian too left his mark on Augustine's treatment; in his *De habitu uirginum* he stresses that the Lord does not enjoin but encourages virginity, and he suggests that the 'many mansions' in heaven of which Jesus speaks indicate that virgins will obtain greater honour after death than those who are married.¹⁶

Ambrose is by far the most potent influence on Augustine's attitudes to marriage and virginity. Though like most of his Christian predecessors he stresses that consecrated virginity is superior to the married state ('Marriage is honourable, but celibacy is more honourable. That which is good need not be avoided, but that which is better should be chosen'), he is emphatic that marriage is not to be despised ('I encourage marriage, and condemn those who discourage it . . . The one who condemns marriage condemns children . . . and human society.'). God is the guardian of marriage: 'If anyone dishonours the couch of another, he sins against God and thereby forfeits his fellowship in the heavenly mystery (*sacramenti*).'¹⁷ But in the ideal Christian marriage which he approves, the partners are to observe ascetic behaviour; a husband must not play adulterer to his own wife. This appears in the injunction to the Christians of Vercelli, which draws 'the future contours of the Catholicism of the Latin West'.¹⁷

Undoubtedly, however, Ambrose places greater emphasis on virginity, as the various titles of his works composed between AD 377 and 385 (*De uirginibus*, *De uirginitate*, *De institutione uirginis*, *Exhortatio uirginis*) indicate. Of these works, the first of the three books of *De uirginibus* has a particularly close bearing on Augustine's two treatises; the echoes are too frequent to be coincidental. The most striking feature of Ambrose's discussions is the glorification of Mary as perfect virgin and perfect mother; we find here the most comprehensive teaching of Marian theology up to his day, and Augustine's extended account in *De sancta uirginitate* echoes Ambrose at many points.¹⁸

¹⁶ See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 1. 29, *Ad uxor. em* 2. 9 (The Latin citation is from the first of these); Cyprian, *De habitu uirginum* 33, is echoed at *De sancta uirginitate* [XXVII] 26.

¹⁷ For the citations, see *De uirginibus* 1. 33. 4; *De Abraham* 1. 7; *Ep.* 2. 8. The final quotation is from Brown, *The Body and Society*, ch. 17.

¹⁸ The most useful account of this aspect of Ambrose's teaching is in B. Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London, 1997), 50ff., 71ff. See also Brown, *The Body and Society*; F. Homes Dudden, *The Life and Times of St Ambrose* (Oxford, 1935), esp. ch. 6; A. Paredi, *Saint Ambrose, His Life and Times*, tr. M. J. Costelloe (Notre Dame Press, 1964), ch. 15. For Augustine's discussion, see *De sancta uirginitate* [II] 2ff.

Augustine and Manichaeism

The Good of Marriage was directed in part against the Manichees, who denied the validity of that title. Earlier in his life Augustine had been an outer adherent (*auditor*) of the sect for about a decade between 374 and his arrival in Milan, but once reconverted to Christianity he launched a series of attacks on the beliefs to which he had earlier subscribed. In composing the two treatises on marriage and virginity he is thus able to draw not only on his recollections of living as a Manichee, but also on his *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (c.389), *De moribus Manichaeorum* (388–9), *Contra Fortunatum* (392), *Contra epistolam (Manichaei) quam uocant fundamenti* (397), and *Contra Faustum* (c.400).¹⁹

The fundamental belief of the Manichees was that there are two eternal first principles, God and Satan, holding dominion over the worlds of light and darkness. Satan had invaded and appropriated a part of the kingdom of light, and had established in it Adam and Eve whom he had endowed with diabolical powers. The marriage which they established is therefore a monstrous mélange of light and darkness. The sensuality which draws men and women together is a weapon forged by Satan to overcome the power of good. God did not establish marriage; the account in *Genesis* is a fiction. In the dualism which emerges, the soul is from God and the body from Satan. All believers must accordingly renounce the flesh and preserve their virginity. Only the Elect or inner circle, however, were bound by such renunciation, which demanded strict control over mouth, hand, and genitals; the Auditors for their part during the period of their purification were permitted relations with women. But they were not to father children, for procreation is the work of the devil. It is a pardonable fault to seek sexual relations provided that sensual pleasure is the sole aim; thus it is preferable to exploit a concubine rather than to take a wife. Augustine's earlier career, the birth of Adeodatus apart, thus conformed with the spirit of the sect.

The Manichees were savage critics of the Old Testament. They were contemptuous of the God who presided over it as being subject

¹⁹ For a clear popular account of Manichaeism, see J. J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine* (London, 1954), ch. 4; see also G. Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo* (2nd edn. Norwich, 1986), ch. 4; Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, ch. 5. The most learned account is that of H. C. Puech, *Le Manichéisme: son fondateur, sa doctrine* (Paris, 1949).

to fear, envy, and anger. Of particular concern to Augustine was the scorn which they poured on the Patriarchs for their sexual proclivities; in opposition to their claims he presents them and their wives as models of sexual restraint who contracted marriage solely to bear the children who would ensure the coming of Christ and the birth of the Church—a singularly unpersuasive thesis, but one which Augustine with his belief in the inerrancy of the scriptures clearly held.

Though Diocletian's edict of AD 297 had ordered the burning of Manichees and their books, the injunction had little effect on the sect's progress in Africa up to the time when Augustine became bishop. He was especially anxious that former friends who had remained Manichees should see the light, and that impressionable youths of intellectual bent such as he himself had been a quarter of a century before should not be attracted to it. Hence even after AD 401 he continued to criticize the tenets of the deviant sect.²⁰

Augustine, Jovinian, and Jerome²¹

The greater threat, however, to the vision of marriage and virginity which Augustine had inherited from Ambrose came from a diametrically opposite quarter. About 390–2 a monk named Jovinian at Rome propounded the thesis that virginity was no more meritorious in the Christian life than marriage. In support of this argument he adduced the sanctity of the Old Testament Patriarchs and their wives. Jovinian advanced these claims:

1. There is no distinction between the married, the widowed, and the unmarried so far as spiritual perfection is concerned.
2. Once Christians are baptized, they cannot again fall under the dominion of the devil. If they sin, they can repent.
3. Mortification of the flesh does not advance Christian perfection more than indulgence showing gratitude to God.
4. At the Final Judgement, there will be no differentiation between the rewards.
5. Mary conceived Jesus virginally, but lost her virginity in child-bearing.²²

²⁰ See *Contra Felicem* (AD 404), *Contra Secundinum* (AD 405).

²¹ For what follows, see especially J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome* (London, 1975), 180ff.; G. Combès, *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, 2 (Paris, 1948), 623ff.

²² The first four of these theses are adduced in Jerome's rebuttal; the fifth is cited by Ambrose, *Ep.* 42. 4 ff., and by Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 2. 15 .

The document of Jovinian was condemned (*conscriptio temeraria*) at a Roman synod summoned by Pope Siricius, and he was excommunicated. When he retired to Milan, the synod under Ambrose confirmed the Roman decrees (*conscriptio horridifica*). But Jovinian's stance had won considerable sympathy at Rome, as a result of which nuns were abandoning the life of virginity, and clerics were paying less regard to the developing cult of celibacy. In consequence a group of prominent Christians in the capital wrote to Jerome as a leading apologist for the faith, begging him to respond; this was the occasion of his pamphlet *Against Jovinian* (AD 393–4) composed in two books, in the first of which he dismisses Jovinian's first thesis, making the case for the superiority of virginity over marriage ('Nuptiae terram replent, uirginitas Paradisum')²³ on the authority of the Old and New Testaments, and painting a lurid picture of the difficulties of married life. The second book was devoted to rebutting the following three theses; it appears that he had no knowledge of Jovinian's observations on Mary's virginity, or he chose to ignore them.

Jerome's friends at Rome were appalled at the tone and negative assessment of marriage as a Christian mode of life, and though Jerome's subsequent letter to Pammachius sought to limit the damage by denying that he had condemned marriage, the work was disastrously counter-productive. Augustine's later reflections in the *Retractationes* indicate that the drift from religious life continued for years after the pamphlet appeared. Though he was anxious to emphasize that Jovinian and his followers were the main target in his analyses of marriage and virginity,²⁴ he sought also to dispel the resentment among the married laity caused by Jerome's *uituperatio nuptiarum* in his disastrous foray into the controversy.²⁵

The Good of Marriage

Augustine begins his treatise by considering the institution of marriage from combined philosophical and scriptural viewpoints to argue that marriage is a natural basis of society established for companionship and the furtherance of the human race. After his brief excursus into the Book of Genesis, he reverts to this initial generalization by arguing that procreation and fellowship are the reasons

²³ *Adv. Jovin.* 1. 16 .

²⁴ Cf. *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 23; *De haeresibus* 82.

²⁵ Jerome's follow-up letter, *Ep.* 52. For the evidence of the *Retractationes*, see Appendix 1.