The Canons of Ælfric (Of the Synod of Priests)

Ælfric of Eynsham

Imperial · Early Medieval · Rule

STROMATA 206

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INTRODUCTION

A companion piece to Aelfric's pastoral epistle, this short set of numbered canons instructs England's parish priests in the discipline of their office - chastity, sobriety, the seven clerical degrees, the books and vestments a priest must keep, and the reverent handling of the sacrament. Drawing on the canons of Nicaea and the later ecumenical councils, Aelfric speaks bluntly to a clergy he judges lax, pairing scripture and patristic precedent with plain practical instruction - down to how the housel should be stored so it does not grow mouldy. Translated by Benjamin Thorpe for his 1840 edition of Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical law, the numbered canons read almost like a field manual for tenth-century parish life. Expect terse, didactic prose - less a treatise to ponder than a rulebook meant to be obeyed.

- I say to you priests, that I will not bear your negligence in your service but I will truly say to you how it is constituted with regard to priests. Christ himself established Christianity and chastity, and all those who walked with him, in his way, forsook all worldly things, and society of woman; for he himself said in one of his gospels: He who hateth not his wife is not a disciple worthy of me.
- Then after Christ's ascension again to heaven's kingdom, and after the death of his venerable apostles, so great a persecution was raised up in the world, that God's servants could not be assembled in a synod, by reason of the heathen murderers, who meditated their death; until the emperor Constantino turned to Christianity, who had the whole globe in his power.
- He then assembled a synod in the city of Nice, of three hundred and eighteen bishops, of all nations, for confirmation of the faith. There were so many great bishops at that synod, that they might have wrought miracles, and so they did. They there excommunicated the mass-priest Arius, because he would not believe that the Son of the living God was as mighty as the great Father is. Then they all condemned the devil's man, but he would not cease, till, at last, his intestines all fell out, when he went to the house of office.
- At this synod were appointed the holy church services and the mass-creed, and many other things respecting God's worship, and God's servants.
- They all decreed, by an unanimous determination, that neither bishop, nor mass-priest, nor deacon, nor any regular canon, should have in his house any woman, unless it were his mother, or

his sister, or his father's sister, or his mother's sister, and that he who should do otherwise should forfeit his order.

- Now this will seem to you strange to hear, because ye have brought your wretchedness so into a custom, as if it were no danger that the priest live as the ‘ceorl.’ Now ye say, that ye cannot be without the services of a woman; but how could then those holy men live without wives? They have now, therefore, the meed of their mind's chastity, ever without end, in the life eternal. Priests now often say, that Peter had a wife: they say very truly, because he must so then, by the old law, before he turned to Christ; but he forsook his wife, and all worldly things, after he had turned to Christ, who established chastity.
- By the old law, a bishop must take to him a pure maiden, and with her cohabit at fixed times; because that one race should always be of that order, and of no other tribe might there be any bishop; he might not, however, marry more than once nor might he marry a widow, nor a repudiated woman, but, as we before said, a maiden. They might well have wives in those days, because they never celebrated mass, nor administered the housel to men, but offered beasts in the old wise, until Christ hallowed the housel before his passion, and appointed the mass, which now stands through him.
- There was also determined at that same synod, that he who took a widow, or a repudiated woman, or he who married again, that he should never afterwards be received into any order, nor hallowed for a priest; but he who before had a pure wife was chosen to the pure order, so as the apostle Paul hath written in his epistle.
- Nor may any priest be at the marriage anywhere where a man marries a second wife, or a woman a second husband, nor together bless them, as may be signified to him; so that it were better for them that they continued in chastity. The layman may, however, with the apostle's leave marry a second time, if his wife desert him; but the canons forbid the blessings thereto and have established penances for such men to do.
- Seven degrees are established in the church: one is ostiarius, the second is lector, the third exorcista, the fourth acoluthus, the fifth subdiaconus, the sixth diaconus, the seventh presbyter.
- Ostiarius is the church door-keeper, whose duty it is to announce the hours with bells, and unlock the church to believing men, and to shut the unbelieving without
- Lector is the reader, who reads in God's church, and is ordained for the purpose of preaching of God's word.
- Exorcista is in English, he who with oath conjures, in the Saviour's name, the accursed spirits, which torment men, that they forsake those men.
- Acoluthus he is called who bears the candle or taper, in God's ministries, when the gospel is read, or when the housel is hallowed at the altar; not to dispel, as it were, the dim darkness, but, with that light, to announce bliss, in honour of Christ, who is our light
- Subdiaconus is truly underdeacon, who bears forth the vessels to the deacon, and humbly ministers under the deacon, at the holy altar, with the housel vessels.

- Diaconus is the minister who ministers to the mass priest, and sets the offerings upon the altar, and also reads the gospels at God's ministries. He may baptize children, and housel the people. They shall minister to the Saviour in white albs, and lead a spiritual life in chastity, and all be efficient persons, so as is befitting the order.

The priest, who continues without a deacon, has the name, but has not the services.

- Presbyter is the mass-priest, or old ‘wita;’ not that every one is old, but that he is old in wisdom. He hallows God's housel, as the Saviour commanded. He has to instruct the people in belief with preaching, and with pure morals give example to Christians, and his life should not be as that of laymen. There is no difference betwixt a mass-priest and a bishop, save that the bishop is appointed for the ordaining of priests and confirming of children, and hallowing of churches, and to take care of God's dues; for it would be too multifarious if every mass-priest so did: but they have one order, though the latter have precedence.
- There is no order appointed in the ecclesiastical ministries but these seven, as we have just said. Monkhood and abbothood are in another manner, and are not reckoned in this number, nor also is nunhood named herein. These orders are holy, and bring to heaven the souls of those priests who seriously observe them.
- Now it behoves mass-priests, and all God's servants, to officiate in their churches with holy service, and to sing the seven canonical hours therein, which are appointed to them, so as the synod has directed: matins, prime, tierce, sext, none, vespers, and compline seventh.
- And they shall fervently pray for the king, and for their bishop, and for those who do good to them, and for all Christian people.
- He shall also have for the spiritual work, before he is ordained, these weapons; that is, these holy books: psalter, epistle book, gospel book, and mass book, book of canticles, and manual, numeral, and pastoral, penitential, and reading book. These books the mass-priest should necessarily have, and he may not be without them, if he will properly observe his order, and rightly inform the people, who look to him; and let him be careful, that they are well directed.
- He shall also have mass-vestments, that he may reverently minister to God himself; so is it becoming, that his vestment be not dirty, nor by any means torn, and his altar cloths in good condition. Let his chalice also be wrought of pure material, incorruptible, and so also the dish, and the corporale be clean, such as is befitting Christ's ministries. Such things cannot be produced without labour, but they will forever be honourable with God, who well minister to him, with wisdom and with chastity.
- The mass-priest shall, on Sundays and mass-days, tell to the people the sense of the gospel in English, and concerning the Paternoster and the creed also, the oftenest that he can, as a stimulus to men, that they may know the faith and cultivate their Christianity. Let the teacher warn against that which the prophet says: 'Canes muti non possunt latrare,'’Dumb dogs cannot bark.' We ought to bark, and preach to the laymen lest, for want of teaching, they should perish. Christ has said in his gospel, of unskilful teachers: ‘Caecus si caeco ducatum praestet, ambo in fossam cadunt,' If the blind be the guide of another blind, then they both fall into a blind ditch. Blind is the teacher, if

he know not book learning, and deceive the laymen by his ignorance; therefore take ye he against this, so as ye have need.

- The holy fathers appointed also, that men pay their tithes into God's church. And let the priest go thither, and divide them into three: one part for repair of the church, and the second for the poor, the third for God's servants, who attend the church.
- They also established, that no one should celebrate mass within any house, unless it were hallowed, except for great need, or if any one be sick.
- And if an unbaptized child be suddenly brought to the mass-priest, that he must baptize it forthwith with haste, so that it die not heathen,
- And that no priest do his holy ministry for money, nor demand anything, neither for baptism nor for any ministry; that he be not like to those, whom Christ himself drove with a whip from the temple, because they wickedly trafficked therein. Let not the servant of God do God's ministry for money, but to the end that he may merit eternal glory thereby.
- Nor let any priest, for any covetousness, go from one minster to another, but ever remain in that to which he was ordained, as long as his days continue.
- Nor let any priest, through folly, drink immoderately, nor force any man to much drink; because he shall be prepared, if there be a child to baptize, or a man to housel, so that he have his wits: and though it may not so happen,
- Nor let a priest be a monger, nor a covetous merchant; nor let him forsake his divinity; nor take to worldly conversations; nor let him wear weapons; nor work strife; nor let him drink at wine houses, as secular men do; nor let him swear oaths, but, with simplicity, ever speak truly, as a learned servant of God.
- He shall also, with discretion, shrive sinners, each according to his degree, as he may bear; and he shall housel the infirm and sick, while the sick can swallow the housel; and he shall not administer it, if he be half living, because Christ commanded that the housel should be eaten.

- The priest shall have hallowed oil apart for children, and apart for sick men, and always anoint the sick in bed. Some sick men are fearful, so that they will not consent to be anointed in their illness: now we will tell you how James, the apostle of God, taught respecting that point: he said to the faithful thus: Tristatur aliquis vestrum, oret aequo animo et psallat,'If any of you be sad, let him pray with even mind, and praise his Lord' ‘If any one among you be sick, let him order to be fetched to him the mass-priests of the church, and let them sing over him, and pray for him, and anoint him with oil, in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of a faithful man shall heal the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up: and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your sins among yourselves, and pray for yourselves among yourselves, that ye may be saved.' Thus spake James the apostle concerning the unction for sick men: but the sick must confess, with inward groaning, to the priest, whether he has any crime unatoned for, before he anoints him, as the apostle here before enjoined: and no man may anoint him, before he pray for this, and do his confession. If he were before sinful and heedless, let him then make confession, and promise cessation, and give alms, before his end; and he shall not be condemned to hell, but shall attain to God's mercy.
- There were four synods, for the true faith, against the heretics, who foolishly spake concerning the Holy Trinity, and the Saviour's humanity. The first was at Nice, as we said long before; and the second was afterwards at Constantinople, of a hundred and fifty bishops, holy men of God; the third was at Ephesus, of two hundred bishops; and the fourth was at Chalcedon, of many hundred bishops. And they all were unanimous among themselves for the ordinance that had been established at Nice, and they amended everything of it that had been broken. These four synods are to be observed, so as the four books of Christ, in Christ's church. Many synods have been held since, but these four are, nevertheless, the principal, because they extinguished the heretical doctrines, which the heretics heretically invented against God; and they also appointed the church services.
- How dare ye now despise all their ordinances, while monks hold the ordinances of one man, the holy Benedict, and live according to his direction? and if they anywhere violate it, they make amends afterwards, by their abbot's direction, with all humility. Ye also have a rule if ye would read it, in which ye may see how it is established with regard to you; but ye love worldly conversations, and will be reeves and neglect your churches, and the ordinances totally.
- We will, however, recite the ordinances to you, lest we ourselves perish along with you: Ye shall not rejoice on account of men deceased, nor attend on the corpse unless ye be thereto invited; when ye are thereto invited, then forbid ye the heathen songs of the kymen, and their loud cachinnations; nor eat ye, nor drink where the corpse lieth therein, lest ye be imitator of the heathenism which they there commit. Nor shall ye be proud, decorated with rings; nor let your garments be made too proudly, nor yet too poorly, but let every one wear what befits his order; so that the priest have that to which, he is ordained; and let him not wear monk's clothing, nor laymen's, any more than a man wears women's garments. Christ said of his disciples, who zealously ministered to him, that they should ever be with him in bliss, there where he himself shall be, in that true life; to whom is glory and honour to all eternity. Amen,

- I pray you, that you take heed of yourselves, so as your books instruct you, how you should do in these days to come. Housel may not be hallowed on Good Friday, because Christ suffered on that day for us; but there must, nevertheless, be done what appertains to that day: so that two lectures be read, with two expositions, and with two collects, and Christ's passion; and afterwards, the prayers. And let them pray to the holy rood, so that they all greet the rood of God with kiss. Let the priest then go to the altar of God, with the housel bread that he hallowed on Thursday, and with unhallowed wine mixed with water, and conceal it with his corporale, and then immediately say: Oremus preceptis salutaribus moniti;' and 'Pater noster' to the end. And then let him say to himself: 'Libera nos quaeso Domine ab omnibus malis,' and aloud: 'Per omnia secula seculorum.' Let him then put a part of the housel into the chalice, as it is, however, usual; then let him go silently to the housel; and for the rest, let look who will. We sing on the Thursday, our canonical hours together, and all these prayers to ourselves, and Miserere mei Deus,' and the collects. On the Friday we sing all the canonical hours separately to ourselves, except the matins only, which we sing together. In like manner, on the Saturday, until nones have been sung, let no oil be put into the font, unless a child be baptized therein. On Easter eve, let there not be sung at the mass-offering, neither 'Agnus Dei' nor Communia;' but among those who desire the housel, let the chanter begin: 'Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia,' and the psalm thereto: 'Laudate Dominum omnes gentes;' then the anthem: 'Vespere autem Sabbati' and 'Magnificat' to the end. Then let the priest say:'Dominus vobiscum' 'Oremus,' and the collect: 'Post communionem;' and end the mass so with one collect, 'Post communionem.' Some priests hold the housel, that was hallowed on Easter day, over a year, for sick people; but they misdo very deeply, that the holy housel should become mouldy, and will not understand, how great a penance the Penitential enjoins, if the housel be mouldy or discoloured, or if it be lost, or if mice or beasts eat it through negligence. The holy housel should be kept with great care, and not be retained; but other new be hallowed for sick men, always every seven days, or fortnight, that it may not at least be mouldy; because the housel that was hallowed today is just as holy as that which was hallowed on Easter day. The housel is Christ's body, not bodily but spiritually; not the body in which he suffered, but the body about which he spake, when he blessed bread and wine for housel, one day before his passion, and said of the blessed bread: ' This is my body;' and afterwards, of the hallowed wine: 'This is my blood, which shall be shed for many, in forgiveness of sins.' Understand now, that the Lord, who could, before his passion, change the bread to his body, and the wine to his blood spiritually, that the same daily blesses, by the hands of his priests, the bread and wine to his spiritual body and blood. But the priest shall purely and carefully do God's ministries, with clean hands and with clean heart; and let him see that his oblations be not oldbaken, nor ill seen to; and let him always mix water with the wine; because the wine betokens our redemption through Christ's blood, and the water betokens the people for whom he suffered. Great honours they merit who minister to God with zeal and devotion; and also it is written, that he is accursed, who doth God's ministry with carelessness. We may by this know, that a man who has not his sight should not dare to celebrate mass, when he sees not what he offers to God, whether it be clean or foul. No man shall celebrate mass with any other vessel, save the chalice which is blessed thereto. We command you, mass-priests, that ye command all the people, who look to you, and over whom ye are confessors,

that the four first Easter-days be freed from all servile work; because at that tide all the world was freed from the thraldom of the devil. And let Sunday's festival be held, from the noon of Saturday until the dawn of Monday; and every mass-day's festival which in the days of our royal lord's ancestors, and of our forefathers, was appointed and ordered for a festival. And also let as many days be held as fasts as were then established for fasting, and for which service is appointed. And let every man fast every Friday during the year, except from Easter to Pentecost; and again, from Christmas till seven days after twelfth day, unless it be a festival of the whole people, or there be full service thereto; otherwise no man ought to break the &Bt of this day. And we bishops have ordained, when we were together, that all the nation should first before the massday of Saint Mary, and on the mass-days of the holy apostles; and that there be sung every Wednesday, in every minster, the mass ‘Contra paganos;’ and that every mass-priest do the same in his church.

- Now ye have heard positively what ye have to do, and what to forego: whether ye will do any of them or not, is not in our controls but we wish to be pure at God's judgment, May God grant you, that ye may so resolve as may be beneficial to you.

Source: Translated by Benjamin Thorpe, in Ancient Laws and Institutes of England (London: Record Commission, 1840).

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Translation: Author (Aelfric of Eynsham) died c. 1010. Thorpe's 1840 translation is public domain (translator died 1870). The extracted text itself contained an archive.org URL pointing directly at Thorpe's 1840 volume, confirming the edition.

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