

## **Bishop Godfrey de Lucy, Agatha and their Three Sons:**

### **Clerical Relationships in the Thirteenth Century**

**By Anna Withers**

*Some years ago, I was about to begin a tour of the cathedral when two of the participants asked if I would talk about Godfrey de Lucy (c.1189-1204): "We're de Lucys, you know!" I assumed they must be descended from a brother or a cousin. After all, as a medieval bishop, Godfrey would be celibate, wouldn't he? Little did I know!*

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Enter Agatha, wet-nurse (possibly to the future King John) in the household of Eleanor of Aquitaine and recognised "clergy wife" over many decades to Bishop Godfrey. The relationship may have begun as early as John's birth c.1166, and have concluded only towards the end of Godfrey's life in 1204. Agatha was greatly valued by Eleanor: long after her child-bearing years had ended, she gave Agatha woodland at Berkhamsted, providing an income of 9s 10d. Later Eleanor made this woman, so humbly born that she has neither family name nor toponym, hereditary holder of the manor of Lifton, in Devon. In return for a pound of incense Agatha acquired an annual income of £15. (Royal domestic servants earned about £5 p.a.). In 1204, Eleanor died and her lands passed to John's queen, Isabella of Angouleme. By this time Agatha's liaison with Godfrey de Lucy had apparently come to an end, and she had married William of Gaddesden, a royal falconer. They had to pay King John 60 marks to retain a mere life interest in the manor. Agatha outlived William and later sold her life interest in Lifton. She gave land to Flamstead Abbey "for the soul of King Henry, son of King John", indication presumably of lasting affection for the royal family. Clearly she had maintained long-standing royal links and had become a woman of property, dealing in land under her own seal.

Her liaison with Godfrey was forbidden by the church. Nonetheless, Godfrey was one of four contemporaneous English bishops living openly with women, and he and Agatha produced three sons. All took his name and pursued successful careers; Geoffrey became Archdeacon of London, Dean of St Paul's and Chancellor of Oxford University; Philip became a royal official, Clerk of the Chamber, and John acquired, under his father's will, houses in the Strand, London. Both Geoffrey and Philip had to obtain papal dispensations to further their careers. Geoffrey's dispensation stated that he was not a bastard but the offspring of a "clandestine but otherwise legitimate marriage".<sup>1</sup> Six bishops supported Philip's application, despite his illegitimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Turner, 'Agatha, Clerical "Wife" and Wet Nurse to King John of England, Longtime Companion to Godfrey de Lucy, Bishop of Winchester', Conference Paper, New College Medieval

In the early Romano-Gallic Christian church, there was no special demand for chastity on the part of its leaders: they were lay members of the community, and their wives were acknowledged: these women might have special titles (*presbyteria*, *sacerdotissa*, reflecting their husbands' status), might wear distinctive clothing and also be given a special blessing.<sup>2</sup> But celibate life became increasingly admired, and in 325 AD the Council of Nicaea decreed that married bishops, priests and deacons should refrain from sex with their wives. Clerical marriage was still acceptable but abstinence within it was to be preferred, and married men who became priests were expected to treat their wives like sisters.<sup>3</sup>

Over the subsequent centuries of the first millennium attitudes gradually hardened, driven by scriptural, doctrinal, and even political and economic concerns. Supporters of clerical marriage declared that it protected clergy from sexual sin. However, an opposing and fiercely misogynistic view saw women as repositories of lust, defilement, worldliness and impurity.

By the tenth century, the developing concept of a priest as an exclusive mediator between God and man ruled out sexual relationships, as a priest must be purified from sin. Clerical marriages were not yet illicit, but penalties and bans began to be introduced. As stricter legislation evolved over the eleventh and twelfth centuries, matters worsened for married priests, their families and their parishioners. A sexually impure priest compromised his own and his congregation's relationship with God, and the existence of his wife polluted his body, his priesthood and his parishioners.<sup>4</sup> The children of clergy embodied pollution, opposition to church order, and immorality.

In 1074 Pope Gregory VII imposed a vow of chastity for entry to major orders (priests, deacons and subdeacons) and for all beneficed clerks.<sup>5</sup> The laity were not meant to attend masses celebrated by unchaste priests, and those who did not repudiate their wives were to be deposed from office. Clearly this legislation was ineffective, and the Lateran Councils of 1123 and 1139 attempted to address the problem. Under Lateran I (1123) marriage was made a canonical crime for clergy in major orders.<sup>6</sup> Lateran II (1139) reiterated this and barred married men from entering the priesthood.<sup>7</sup> Priests possessed of wives were ordered to dismiss them, the

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and Renaissance Conference, Sarasota, FL, USA, March 2008, p. 11, <https://medievalists.net/2017/10/agatha-clerical-wife-wet-nurse-king-john-england-longtime-companion-godfrey-de-lucy-bishop-winchester/>

<sup>2</sup> Cara Kaser, 'The Clerical Wife: Medieval Perceptions of Women in the Eleventh and Twelfth Century Church Reforms', *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal*, 1, No. 1 (2004), p. 199, <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/mcnair/vol1/iss1/4/>.

<sup>3</sup> Janelle Werner, 'Just as the Priests Have Their Wives: Priests and Concubines in England, 1375-1549'. (PhD thesis, University of North Carolina, 2009, p. 35, <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/dissertations/qj72p752g>.

<sup>4</sup> Kaser, *Clerical Wife*, p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> Werner, *Priests*, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Werner, *Priests*, p. 56.

women were declared concubines and any children illegitimate. Again, the laity were banned from attending masses conducted by married men, and clerics indulging in sex were guilty of the sin of incontinence.<sup>8</sup>

Once again, enforcement proved difficult, and there was some violent resistance. By the end of the twelfth century, most minor clergy were still married men, and many in major orders were openly conducting ongoing relationships with women. In 1224, some twenty years after Godfrey de Lucy's death, the Statutes of Winchester once more banned fornicating priests from celebrating mass unless they had made confession and done penance. These Statutes again threatened clergy who kept concubines with loss of benefice and of holy orders.<sup>9</sup>

More worldly concerns operated alongside spiritual ones. Church authorities feared that the existence of a wife and children might distract the priest from his duties, and that tithes and even freehold property might be diverted from parish needs to the maintenance of his family and to their inheritance. More alarming still was the potential development of clerical dynasties which could wield undesirable power and influence over church affairs.<sup>10</sup> Papal reformers believed that clerical marriages assimilated clergy to their surroundings and led to a desire for hereditary succession.<sup>11</sup> This was not an unfounded worry: the two sons of Richard of Ilchester (e.1173-1188), Godfrey's predecessor as Bishop of Winchester, both became bishops, and hereditary transfer of benefices continued to flourish during the thirteenth century despite explicit prohibition. For example, the benefice of Eye in Herefordshire passed down within one family from 1150 to 1254.<sup>12</sup>

These reforms, during their implementation and eventual establishment, came at a cost. The persistent opposition to them suggests that many of the relationships condemned by the church as concubinage were long and faithful unions. Families were broken up, children lost legitimacy, and clergy wives, in particular, lost their social standing, their husbands, children, homes and their honour.<sup>13</sup> The twelfth century jurist Gratian mentions enslavement to the church as an appropriate punishment for clergy wives and offspring.

The union of Godfrey and Agatha was about as heavily prohibited in canon law as it was possible for it to be. Nonetheless, they escaped the terrible penalties and

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Werner, *Priests*, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Turner, *Agatha*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Brooke, *Medieval Church and Society*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1971, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval world – Secular Clerics, Their Families and Careers in North-Western Europe, C.800-1200*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 338: The benefice was initially held by one Adam, who passed it to his son Osbert, and then to his grandsons, first Osbert the Younger and then Roger. Roger's grandson Philip became parson of Yarpole rather than Eye, but seems to have felt that he had been cheated of his hereditary right to Eye, since he tried to sue the Abbot of Reading for the advowson (the right to present an incumbent) on the grounds that his ancestor Osbert (which Osbert is not clear) had held both the manor and the advowson, and had presented Roger.

<sup>13</sup> Brooke, *Medieval Church*, p. 70.

deprivations to which they should have been subjected, as did no less than three other bishops who were contemporaries. Geoffrey's own predecessor as Bishop of Winchester was Richard of Ilchester (a.k.a. Richard Tocliffe, died 1188) who was the father of two sons who both became bishops; Herbert Poer or Poore of Salisbury, and Richard who was bishop of Chichester and then Herbert's successor at Salisbury. Geoffrey Ridel of Ely (d. 1189) could not attend his own investiture in Rome because he had married a wife.<sup>14</sup> Hugh de Puiset of Durham (d. 1195) was a nephew of King Stephen and Henri de Blois and had a long liaison with Alice or Adelaide de Percy by whom he had two sons. All these men played important roles in public life, and so did their children.

So how did Godfrey progress despite his personal life? Family background, social position, intellectual ability, and administrative efficiency seem to have played a significant role. His family had status (his father, Richard de Lucy, known as "the Loyal", had been Chief Justiciar of England) and Godfrey inherited wealth. He was valued by Henry II (1154-1189), became a royal justice and received a long string of ecclesiastical preferments, including election to the bishoprics of Lincoln and Exeter. But he was passed over at Lincoln on the wishes of the king and rejected Exeter because of its income, which he considered insufficient to meet the expenses of the position.<sup>15</sup> At first Godfrey flourished under Richard I (1189-99), bearing the king's linen cap at his coronation, and being appointed Sheriff of Hampshire, and Constable of both Portchester Castle and Winchester Castle. Richard also nominated him to the see of Winchester in 1189, at which point he may have repudiated Agatha: her marriage to William may have been compensation for this. However, while Richard was absent on crusade, Godfrey fell out with William de Longchamp, who was Justiciar of England, and at odds with his co-Justiciar, Hugh de Puiset, the Bishop of Durham. Godfrey supported de Puiset (who also had a long-standing clergy wife). Longchamp deprived Godfrey of his shrievalty, his castles and his paternal inheritance, though he later restored the latter; when Longchamp (by now Papal Legate) was deposed in 1191, Godfrey reacquired the castles. In a flurry of confused tit-for-tat reprisals Pope Celestine III excommunicated Godfrey, along with Prince John and other enemies of Longchamp's.<sup>16</sup> Godfrey then joined other senior clerics who excommunicated John in 1194 when the prince raised an abortive rebellion against his brother. On Richard's return from captivity Godfrey again lost his shrievalty, castles and also some lands, though he was able to buy the latter back from the king. He was again eminent under King John (r. 1199-1216), taking part in the coronation and witnessing charters.<sup>17</sup> The end of his life was marked by the achievement for which he is perhaps best-known today: the building of the retroquire at Winchester.

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<sup>14</sup> Edmund Venables, revised by Ralph Turner, 'Lucy, Godfrey de (d. 1204)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) online edition.

<sup>15</sup> Venables, *de Lucy*.

<sup>16</sup> Venables, *de Lucy*.

<sup>17</sup> Venables, *de Lucy*.

In a more personal context, Agatha's role within Eleanor of Aquitaine's household and the extraordinary degree of favour and social elevation which she received at the queen's hand also served to protect them both from ecclesiastical sanction. Nonetheless, that Agatha could be married to William of Gaddesden at an unknown date was a clear indication that her union with Godfrey was not regarded by the church as a legal marriage, since Godfrey was alive at the time.

It seems that if the erring cleric had sufficient status and political influence the church was willing to turn a blind eye to sexual transgressions, in regard both to his career and the status and progress of his family. Godfrey wielded immense power and influence in his lifetime. His eldest son Geoffrey obtained entry to his own highly successful career in the church despite his illegitimacy on the grounds that he was the product of a "clandestine but otherwise legitimate marriage", though canon law plainly made that impossible.<sup>18</sup> His younger son Philip's application for a papal dispensation allowing him to be ordained to any church office below bishop was backed by no fewer than six bishops, again in outright defiance of canon law.

On many levels the relationship of Godfrey and Agatha remains an astonishing story, which, though not widely known, has attracted attention from several historians. They are no doubt grateful for the fact that he was the first English bishop who systematically dated his letters!<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Turner, *Agatha*, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Venables, de *Lucy*.