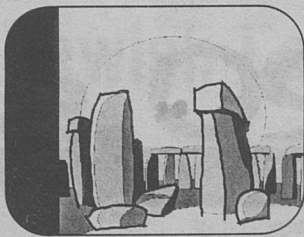


feature

STONEHENGE TO STONEWALL

by charlie emond



When the Saints Go Marching Out

In our march through the halls of gay history, we have arrived at the Middle Ages, and it is time to take a look at our saints. (Yes, Virginia, there *are* gay saints!) Ours are the ones with the rainbow halos. Of course there are probably quite a few gay wannabes up there too, given the fact that lesbians and gay men have always embraced the church and monastic life so enthusiastically.

In Heaven There Are No Closets

In the first place, the people of the Middle Ages much admired the devoted same-sex couples in the Bible as examples of deep and lasting friendship. We have already looked at the lives of David and Jonathan, Ruth, and Naomi, and Christ and St. John, but here are just a few of the others who won the sainthood lottery.

Saints Perpetua and Felicity were Christian martyrs who met their deaths in the arena in 203 AD. They comforted each other in jail with embraces and kisses, and refused to wear the special clothing that was set out for them (too tacky). When they entered the arena, they were attacked by a mad cow. (No, I do not know why the cow was mad, nor am I making this up. You can't make up stuff like this!) We know almost nothing about their lives, but this example of the love between two women became so popular that their names have been linked at every mass since then.

'Tis Blessed To Love and To Be Loved

We do know a great deal about the life of St. Aelred of Rielvaux, England (1109-1167). He was a friend of King Henry II, and he gave same-sex love its most profound Christian expression in his writings and life, although he was probably celibate. Aelred writes of a younger monk, "He was the refuge of my spirit, the sweet solace of my griefs...was it not a foretaste of blessedness thus to love and to be loved?"

He idealized love between men, and contrary to custom, actually let his monks hold hands! He is the one who expounded upon the idea of a "marriage" between Jesus and St. John. With a record like this, it's a miracle he reached sainthood at all.

It is especially miraculous considering the efforts of guys like St. Peter Damien. In 1051, Peter wrote a diatribe to Pope St. Leo IX demanding that the pope throw out all clergy involved in homosexual activity. The pope, clearly no dummy, wrote back, "You have written what seemed best to you," and somehow lost the manuscript. He knew that he would have to replace an awful lot of people if he started bouncing out homosexuals.

Sex Comes for the Archbishop

Another potential troublemaker, a French bishop named Ivo, tried to get Pope Urban II to take action against Archbishop Ralph of Tours.

Ralph had just installed his lover, John, as the bishop of Orleans.

This appointment was made with the permission of King Philip of France. Philip knew John very well indeed, because he had also had sex with John. (He even bragged about it to Ivo!) Apparently half the men in France had had sex with John, including the previous bishop of Orleans!

Despite all this, or perhaps because of it, he turned out to be a terrific bishop and remained in office for 40 years. He was nicknamed "Flora."

In England, St. Anselm refused to condemn homosexuality, saying, "...it has hitherto been so public that hardly anyone is embarrassed by it." He himself graduated from a school renowned for its approval of passionate friendships. His letters to his younger monks often begin with the salutation "Beloved lover" and are decidedly on the the steamy side, even knowing that celibacy was probably the norm.

Making a list and checking it twice

One of the greatest saints on any list, St. Augustine, had a friend in his youth whose death desolated him. "For I felt that my soul and his soul were one soul in two bodies." Later in his life, he regretted the sexual aspects of the relationship and, unfortunately for us, came down firmly against same-sex intimacy. The list also includes St. Paulinus Bishop of Nola, France, whose purported lover, the Roman poet Ausonius, had

a library of scandalous homosexual books.

Our list often includes St. Joan of Arc, but she was probably just a kindred spirit. With her butch haircut and male clothing she was certainly a Xena-esque woman warrior, but apart from this soldier drag there is really nothing else to go on to identify her as lesbian. Not even the names of possible lovers have come down to us, unless you count the angels out in her orchard. She died in 1431, and since she wasn't canonized until 1920, she spent 500 years somewhere else (perhaps working in a lesbian cabaret in Berlin?).

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Then we have two pairs of Roman soldiers, Polyeuct and Nearchos, described as "...brothers, not by birth but by affection," and Sergius and Bacchus. The latter pair lived in Syria in the early 4th century. They refused to honor Jupiter because they were Christians, and after they were marched through the streets in women's clothing, Bacchus was flogged to death. Sergius, or Serge, was made to run nine miles in shoes studded with nails pointing in. (And you think heels are uncomfortable!) His feet were a mess when he finished, but they miraculously healed overnight. The next day, he was welcomed into heaven by Bacchus.

All the manuscripts identify these two guys as lovers, and their names are always linked. As Severus of Antioch put it, "we should not separate in speech those who were joined in life." For some strange reason, they are still a very popular pair in Latin America.

Knowing about the lives of "our" saints is very important indeed. We need our great heroes to admire, not just the pretty young things that decorate our magazines and newspaper ads. We need to understand that people like us have led holy lives, done wondrous deeds, and worked miracles on

something other than their hair and makeup! ▼

Next time: Why do you think Robin Hood's "Merrie Men" were so merry? (Or what really went on in Sherwood Forest!)

For More Information: This gay history column is the 12th in a series that began in prehistory and has now reached the Middle Ages. If you are a new *OITM* reader, or have not followed this column from the beginning, you might want to catch up by checking into the exciting new Mountain Pride Media web site and clicking on "Stonehenge to Stonewall" in previous issues, beginning with December 1998.

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