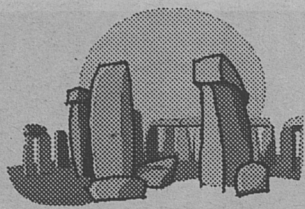


feature

STONEHENGE TO STONEWALL

by charlie emond



Just Don't Enjoy It

We don't know exactly what Christ had in mind when he invited people to come and follow him, but celibacy has obviously been the way to go. I grew up very Catholic, and it was made abundantly clear to me that we poor laity were trudging down the low road to hell. The nuns and priests, on the other hand, were bound for glory. I was taught that if I wanted to board that train, I would have to renounce "Satan and all his snares," by which they meant, of course... SEX!

No priest or nun back then was allowed to say "sex." All they could do was hint around and warn of the dire consequences of even thinking about it. So, as a little gay Catholic, I had more trouble than most of my classmates figuring out what was really going on. (That big excitement about a girl wearing shiny shoes that let you see up her dress. Who cares?) Those nuns did a terrific job on me, because I didn't have a clue until I was 35.

Dr. Ruth in reverse!

In Christianity, it all revolves around sex: having it, not having it, thinking about having it, who you have it with (if anyone), and even what you are thinking of when you do have it. It is

THE Christian obsession! But the church has never been able to reconcile procreating the species with enjoying the activity. This is due to the careful attention of sexperts St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine.

Augustine claimed that sexual pleasure lowers us to the level of animals. We should be better than animals, he exhorted. I guess this is to set them a good example. (See if you can get your dog's attention long enough to get this message across.)

This holy duo wrote the sex rules. They decreed that the only excuse for sex was when a husband and wife desired a child, had this firmly in mind while having sex, stuck to the missionary position, and most importantly, didn't take pleasure in doing it. This has been Christian law ever since. Deviate from it at your peril. Pope Gregory the Great agreed that "sexual pleasure can never be without sin."

Women as "flowerpots for men's semen"

In a fascinating book called *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality and the Catholic Church*, the author explains the lowly state of women throughout Christian history and the way sex is understood or misunderstood by the celi-

bate Church fathers. Some of her findings indicate a veritable vendetta against women and against sex.

She points out that Augustine and Aquinas began with the premise that women were "imperfect men," good only for reproduction and unqualified for anything to do with the mind or intellect. They proclaimed that women's only salvation lay in having children. St John Chrysostom summed it up: "the whole sex is weak and flighty." (OK, stop laughing. These guys really believed this stuff.)

Nearer my God to thee

This book points out that through the ages, the church has labored as mightily against sex as it has against women. At certain times, it decreed no sex for any woman beyond child-bearing, no sex during Lent, on Sundays, or on feast days, no sex during menstruation or while pregnant, no sex before taking communion, and even no wedding-night sex! The so-called "Tobias nights" were the first three after a wedding, and in the 18th century you could have sex then ONLY if you paid your bishop a fee.

Even Vatican Council II, that model of enlightened Christian practice, counseled married people to "exercise

the virtue of conjugal chastity." If the celibate church fathers think that sex is so horrible that even a married couple is restricted and discouraged from engaging in it, you can begin to understand why homosexual sex is such an anathema.

Ya got it or ya ain't!

So in order to join those nuns and priests on that heavenly train, you have to give up sex. There are two ways for men to do this: live a celibate life (not easy, even if you are always draped in black), or go for the gold with castration. Cultic or ritual castration was known in Babylon, Syria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and in the cults of Osiris, Attis, and Cybele. Not surprisingly, the idea appeared in the Christian church, too.

Jesus said, "There are eunuchs born that way from their mother's womb, there are eunuchs made so by men and there are eunuchs who have made themselves that way for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." (Matthew 19: 1-12) Some early Christians actually followed this advice, thinking to eliminate sexual temptation, but the idea never caught on.

What price fame and fortune?

Later in Christian history,

the fact that women were not allowed to sing in the Papal choirs led to the phenomenon of castrati. This started in church around 1600, but soon branched into opera seria, a theatrical form created especially to show off their remarkable talents. Many composers, including Handel and Mozart, wrote music especially for them.

Of course, mutilating a child like this is barbaric, but poor families might thus become very rich, because castrati were the first androgynous rock stars. The castrati Farinelli (1705-1782) was one of the most famous singers of his century and perhaps of all time. He was called the "divine Farinelli" (and the biographical movie of this name is very interesting).

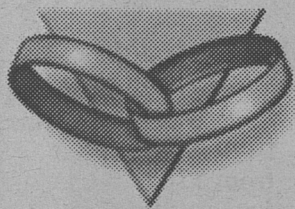
A word to the Pope:

Your Holiness, among the many issues you still have on your doorstep are the oppression of women, the suppression of sex, the castration of singers, the execution of homosexuals, the rejection of birth control, and the imposition of a massive guilt trip on everybody who experienced any sexual pleasure whatsoever for the last 2000 years. Keep on apologizing, you still have a long way to go! (But hey, you deserve some credit! Other Christian churches haven't even awakened to the fact that anything bad can come from "following Christ.")

Next time: Things that go bump in the night.

For More Information: This gay history column is 18th in a series that began in prehistory. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality and the Catholic Church*, by Uta Ranke-Heinemann is a real eyeopener! I highly recommend it to anyone interested in women's issues and/or in Christian history.

Charlie Emond has a bachelor's degree from Queen's College and master's degrees from both Dartmouth and Keene State. He teaches college history courses in Springfield and White River Junction. ▼



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