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In This Issue

REPRESSION, FREEDOM AND THE DECLINE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC EMPIRE: A MANIFESTO FROM OUR POLISH- AMERICAN CATHOLIC CORRESPONDENT

- The Red Queen of Milan v. Campophobe Ratzinger
- Should Priests be “Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom of Heaven” or “Married with Children” or None of the Above?
- From Agape to Eros: a Role for Dionysus?

MEET DR. SIMS: THE FATHER OF GYNECOLOGY

- He Experimented on His Female Slaves and Held They Felt No Pain
- From Anarcha the Slave to the Empress Eugenie: Sims's Patient Roster

Sex, Freedom and the Catholic Church

BY JOANN WYPIJEWSKI

Somewhere in Rome, cutting a path, if memory serves, from the area of Largo Argentina to the Pantheon, is a mere sliver of a street whose shops cater to the trade of the Catholic religious. One finds there a representation of the psychosexual orders of the church as exquisite as the real-life manifestation is corrupt. In one half of a typical shop-front window might be a grey lambswool cardigan, mannish overcoat, sensible black shoes, maybe a bit of pale blue amid the white cotton blouses; in the other half, yards of draped brocade, a fringed stole, silken colors as glistening as the arrangement of silver and gold rings and the beautifully turned chalices. “Male and female he created them”, here with a twist.

Perhaps it was on this street that the cardinals who staged fashion shows at the Vatican for one another in the time of Paul VI (aka the Red Queen of Milan) purchased their finery; likewise the bitter campophobes clustered around Cardinal Ratzinger under John Paul II. Gay or straight, they and the whole priestly cohort at least dress the part that the two Popes have articulated for them: that of “eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”, guardians at the gate of the Vatican's own special seraglio, where sex is banned unless one can get away with it, and women are confined without pleasure, power, or even, since the scuttling of habits for these true adherents to the vow of poverty, a consoling ostentation.

Now some Catholics are calling to shut down the seraglio—to free men of the cloth for manhood, women for ordination and both for marriage. Others, notably the Ratzinger wing of the hierarchy and its most rabid supporters, urge a redoubling of efforts toward

repression. They also propose a purge of homosexual priests, a move that would complete John Paul's triumph over the Red Queen's old twirlers but also decimate America's dwindling priesthood (estimated to be 35 to 50 percent gay) and probably much of Europe's.

When the subjects of celibacy and ordination of women have threatened to be raised within the church, the Pope's reflex, like that of his predecessors, has been to stifle discussion before it begins. In 1965, during the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI pre-empted reconsideration of celibacy and two years later issued the encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, in which for the first time in its history the church equated priestly continence with the castrati, invoking an enigmatic comment by Jesus in Matthew 19: “There are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb; and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men; and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.” (The New American Bible cannot bring itself to use the word “eunuch”, though most other translations do.) John Paul II reiterated this argument in a fifty-page “apostolic exhortation” in 1984, much to the dismay of nuns and priests, whom he described as “eunuchs” practicing celibacy “as an expression of spousal love for the redeemer himself.”

At the recent conclave of cardinals in Rome, those who'd been expected to raise the hard questions kept mum. Since then there has been more dissension among the faithful, more lay meetings to discuss reform, more ad hoc groups of high donors urging a withholding of tithes. There have (Church and Sex continued on page 2)

also been more lawsuits, more “recovered memories”.

In a sense, the priest scandal is the churchly equivalent of the Clinton impeachment. Here is a hierarchy that is totalitarian in perspective and actual practice, brooking no opposition, no equality and no voice of the people, to whom it has lied and whose liberty it has been intent on squelching for centuries. Piously proclaiming its fealty to Jesus, it long ago abandoned his commands to poverty, simplicity and love in the fullest sense. “My kingdom is not of this earth”, Jesus said, but the Vatican ranks among the richest and most stratified kingdoms in the world. “Judge not”, but from the earliest days of their accumulation of power between the second and fourth centuries the Church Fathers took obsessive interest in the sexual practices of the people and assumed an authoritarian prerogative to control their bodies and their minds.

“Love one another”, but they made sin, not love, the cornerstone of their teachings; and pride, not sympathy, their guiding star. “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world”, but they took those astonishing words and perverted them for worldly power, and with it pressed upon the people a faith in conformity and an acceptance of a lordly priesthood. How pinched, then, to regard the sexual crimes or perverted behavior of a priestly minority as the ultimate abuse. “Anything to bring him down”, left oppo-

nents of Clinton used to say, and one hears the same about the church now. But the sex panic around Clinton was dangerous because it did nothing to upset the structures of power and deceit imbedded in the presidency while it emboldened society’s most straitened elements, the enemies of human weakness and freedom. The sex panic around the church is not too different. When American bishops meet in June to resume discussion on the priesthood scandal, the most that can be hoped is that someone will broach the subject of heterosexual marriage.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire...

Let’s put aside for the moment the obessions and hypocrisies of the church, and return to that street in Rome with its projections of male-female performance. Like stage costumes, those vestments suggest life at an angle to the universe of the every-day. They are alluring just as communities of religious men and women are alluring—not because they provide the best model but because for so long they provided practically the only model of adult life distinct from Married With Children.

Growing up Catholic in the sixties, I’m not sure I understood this, but my gay contemporaries did. Even after gay and women’s liberation, these communities have retained, at least in theory, a kind of radical essence, standing as they do outside the systems of advertised desirability, coupledness, love under contract, property exchange and primo- or any geniture. Because, in practice, priests throughout the world have wives, children, concubines and gay lovers, it’s sensible enough to suggest, as Jon Meacham did in a recent issue of Newsweek, that the church should recognize these relationships, extend the opportunity to all priests and join the twenty-first century where women and homosexuals are concerned.

But the church isn’t sensible, and wouldn’t be even if it shed every taint of corruption and made itself a union of equal spirits. So long as it exists, the question “What should it do about priests and sex?” is therefore best answered in the form of a meditation on the religious essence rather than with a list of helpful hints. People seek religion for transcendence, not for an approximation of the ordinary. For the old ascetics, ecstatic experience more than substituted for sex and then became part of church iconography. Imagine the neutered parish priest, the Pope’s eunuch, performing mass at the church of S. Andrea delle Fratte in Rome, within eyeshot of Bernini’s statue of St. Theresa in ecstasy. For him, where is the

transcendent sensual experience? Not in the drear of enforced celibacy or secret gropings and certainly not in marriage. I turn this question over in my mind and imagine one path: a priesthood of men and women, gay and straight, freed for sex but barred from marriage.

And not just any sex; rather sex as a pure act of love, of giving and expecting nothing in return. No vows, no bargains, no possibility for betrayal or divorce, for tearful children standing in the doorway as mummy or daddy explains it’s not their fault; no “relationship” except with all of humanity, wherever there is the need for tenderness, for affection, for spiritual and physical intimacy. Let them perfect lovemaking as they strive to perfect love, living in such a way as to belong to no one and to everyone, missionaries without aim of converts, their satisfaction, their happiness derived from the comfort and pleasure, indeed ecstasy, of another.

This is, after all, a religion whose adherents are enjoined by Jesus in Luke 6:27-38: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who calumniate you. And to him who strikes thee on the one cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away thy cloak, do not withhold thy tunic either...And even as you wish men to do to you, so also do you to them. And if you love those who love you, what merit have you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what merit have you? For even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive in return, what merit have you? For even sinners lend to sinners that they may get back as much in return. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, not hoping for any return, and your reward shall be great, and you shall be children of the Most High, for he is kind towards the ungrateful and evil. Be merciful, therefore, even as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you shall not be judged; do not condemn, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven; give, and it shall be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, shall they pour into your lap. For with what measure you measure, it shall be measured to you.”

It is no wonder the Church Fathers shudder from the power of sex and take cover behind rules and scriptural arcana. For what domesticated sexuality, what sensual abnegation or soul-smothering celibacy can possibly meet the radical demands of such love?

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James Marion Sims: Father of Gynecology? Or Ur-Nazi Doctor?

BY WENDY BRINKER

On the shady northwest corner of the statehouse grounds in Columbia, South Carolina, a place wrought with controversy over its harsh, shameful tributes to slavery, sits a monument dedicated to James Marion Sims. The monument honoring the South Carolinian from Lancaster County curiously dubbed "The Father of Gynecology" is one of the largest on the site.

In front of a large cement archway sits a bronze bust of Sims, looking down with crooked brow and a fatherly grin. Directly beneath his image is a quote from Hippocrates, "Where the love of man is, there is also the love of art". Etched in a panel to the left, an inscription touts Sims as "The first surgeon of the ages in ministry to women, treating alike empress and slave". On the panel to the right, the inscription continues, "He founded the science of gynecology, was honored in all lands and died with the benediction of mankind".

Historians from South Carolina proudly proclaim that Dr. Sims innovated techniques and developed instruments that changed the landscape of women's reproductive health. Outside accounts portray him quite differently. What is not in dispute is that between 1845 and 1849, in a makeshift hospital he built in his backyard, Sims inaugurated a long, drawn-out series of excruciating, experimental gynecological operations on countless enslaved African women. This was all done without the benefit of anesthesia or before any type of antiseptic was used. Many lost their lives to infection. It is their story that history has failed to tell and their legacy of courage and endurance that should be honored, not their captor's.

In an autobiography entitled, "The Story of My Life," Sims described himself as quite unexceptional. He was born in 1813 and received his higher education at Columbia College, predecessor of the University of South Carolina, and received a BA in 1832. To his son's announcement of medicine as his profes-

sion, John Sims replied, "To think that my son should be going around from house to house through this country, with a box of pills in one hand and a squirt in the other, to ameliorate human suffering, is a thought I never supposed I should have to contemplate". Reluctantly, he sent young Sims to apprentice under the tutelage of Dr. Churchill Jones, a once respected doctor in Lancaster, who was now suffering from chronic alcoholism.

Although Sims recalled him as unfit to perform his duties, he observed the failing doctor perform many surgeries and deliver many lectures. Insecure, yet inspired to become a surgeon, Sims left for Charleston Medical College in No-

ing illnesses. Dr. Jones had left the area. After weeks of sitting alone in a Main Street office his father had rented, Dr. J. Marion Sims treated his first patient. It was the young son of a prominent citizen of Lancaster. Sims documented, "When I arrived I found a child about eighteen months old, very much emaciated, who had what we would call the summer complaint, or chronic diarrhea. I examined the child minutely from head to foot. I looked at its gums, and as I always carried a lancet with me and had surgical propensities, as soon as I saw some swelling of the gums I at once took out my lancet and cut the gums down to the teeth. This was good so far as it

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vember of 1833. He admits, "I was afraid to be a man; I was afraid to assume its responsibilities and thought that I did not have sense enough to go out into the rough world, making a living as other men had to do". He was unprepared for the rigors of Charleston Medical College. For his next term he attended Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia and it was there Sims met another great influence in his life, Professor George McClellan. He describes him as, "very eccentric and erratic as a teacher... Not that he had much system, but whatever he said was to the point".

In May of 1835, equipped with some surgical instruments and an eight-volume medical text, Sims returned to Lancaster eager to practice medicine. He had no clinical experience, logged no actual hospital time and no experience diagnos-

ing illnesses. Dr. Jones had left the area. After weeks of sitting alone in a Main Street office his father had rented, Dr. J. Marion Sims treated his first patient. It was the young son of a prominent citizen of Lancaster. Sims documented, "When I arrived I found a child about eighteen months old, very much emaciated, who had what we would call the summer complaint, or chronic diarrhea. I examined the child minutely from head to foot. I looked at its gums, and as I always carried a lancet with me and had surgical propensities, as soon as I saw some swelling of the gums I at once took out my lancet and cut the gums down to the teeth. This was good so far as it

went. But, when it came time to making up a prescription, I had no more ideas of what ailed the child, or what to do for it, than if I had never studied medicine". Sims returned to his office and studied his medical text for any clue as to how to proceed. A professor at Jefferson, John Eberle, known for his unorthodox approach to medicine, authored the reference books Sims now relied on. Eberle drew from various schools of thought, including the use of leeches. Sims administered a haphazard regimen of prescriptions to the child, going from chapter to chapter in Eberle's books, but to no avail. After a few days, the infant died. Sims' second case came two weeks later. It was another infant with the same symptoms. Sims retracted the gums and administered another series of treat-

(Sims continued on page 4)