

**St. Serge & St. Bacchus:
When Marriage Between Gays Was a Rite**

Jim Duffy

A Kiev art museum contains a curious icon from St. Catherine’s monastery on Mt. Sinai. It shows two robed Christian saints. Between them is a traditional Roman pronubus (best man) overseeing what in a standard Roman icon would be the wedding of a husband and wife. In the icon, Christ is the pronubus. Only one thing is unusual. The “husband and wife” are in fact two men.

Is the icon suggesting that a homosexual “marriage” is one sanctified by Christ? The very idea seems initially shocking. The full answer comes from other sources about the two men featured, St. Serge and St. Bacchus, two Roman soldiers who became Christian martyrs.

While the pairing of saints, particularly in the early church, was not unusual, the association of these two men was regarded as particularly close. Severus of Antioch in



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the sixth century explained that “we should not separate in speech [Serge and Bacchus] who were joined in life”. More bluntly, in the definitive 10th century Greek account of their lives, St. Serge is openly described as the “sweet companion and lover” of St. Bacchus.

In other words, it confirms what the earlier icon implies, that they were a homosexual couple. Their orientation and relationship was openly accepted by early Christian writers. Furthermore, in an image that to some modern Christian eyes might border on blasphemy, the icon has Christ himself as their pronubus, their best man overseeing their “marriage”.

The very idea of a Christian homosexual marriage seems incredible. Yet after a twelve year search of Catholic and Orthodox church archives Yale history professor John Boswell has discovered that a type of Christian homosexual “marriage” did exist as late as the 18th century.

Contrary to myth, Christianity’s concept of marriage has not been set in stone since the days of Christ, but has evolved as a concept and as a ritual.

Professor Boswell discovered that in addition to heterosexual marriage ceremonies in ancient church liturgical documents (and clearly separate from other types of non-marital blessings of adopted children or land) were ceremonies called, among other titles, the “Office of Same Sex Union” (10th and 11th century Greek) or the “Order for Uniting Two Men” (11th and 12th century).

These ceremonies had all the contemporary symbols of a marriage: a community gathered in a church, a blessing of the couple before the altar, their right hands joined as at heterosexual marriages, the participation of a priest, the taking of the Eucharist, a wedding banquet afterwards. All of which are shown in contemporary drawings of the same sex union of Byzantine Emperor Basil I (867-886) and his companion John. Such homosexual unions also took place in Ireland in the late 12th / early 13th century, as the chronicler Gerald of Wales (Geraldus Cambrensis) has recorded.

Unions in Pre-Modern Europe lists in detail some same sex union ceremonies found in ancient church liturgical documents. One Greek 13th century “Order for Solemnisation of Same Sex Union”, having invoked St. Serge and St. Bacchus, called on God to “vouchsafe unto these Thy servants [N and N] grace to love another and to abide unhated and not cause of scandal all the days of their lives, with the help of the Holy Mother of God and all Thy saints”. The ceremony concludes: “And they shall kiss the Holy Gospel and each other, and it shall be concluded”.

Another 14th century Serbian Slavonic “Office of the Same Sex Union”, uniting two men or two women, had the couple having their right hands laid on the Gospel while having a cross placed in their left hands. Having kissed the Gospel, the couple were then



required to kiss each other, after which the priest, having raised up the Eucharist, would give them both communion.

Boswell found records of same sex unions in such diverse archives as those in the Vatican, in St. Petersburg, in Paris, Istanbul, and in Sinai, covering a period from the 8th to 18th centuries. Nor is he the first to make such a discovery. The Dominican Jacques Goar (1601-1653) includes such ceremonies in a printed collection of Greek prayer books.

While homosexuality was technically illegal from late Roman times, it was only from about the 14th century that antihomosexual feelings swept western Europe. Yet same sex unions continued to take place.

At St. John Lateran in Rome (traditionally the Pope's parish church) in 1578 a many as 13 couples were "married" at Mass with the apparent cooperation of the local clergy, "taking communion together, using the same nuptial Scripture, after which they slept and ate together", according to a contemporary report.

Another woman to woman union is recorded in Dalmatia in the 18th century. Many questionable historical claims about the church have been made by some recent writers in this newspaper.

Boswell's academic study however is so well researched and sourced as to pose fundamental questions for both modern church leaders and heterosexual Christians about their attitudes towards homosexuality.

For the Church to ignore the evidence in its own archives would be a cowardly cop-out. The evidence shows convincingly that what the modern church claims has been its constant unchanging attitude towards homosexuality is in fact nothing of the sort.

It proves that for much of the last two millennia, in parish churches and cathedrals throughout Christendom from Ireland to Istanbul and in the heart of Rome itself, homosexual relationships were accepted as valid expressions of a God-given ability to love and commit to another person, a love that could be celebrated, honoured and blessed both in the name of, and through the Eucharist in the presence of Jesus Christ.

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