



MAGAZINE

RELIGION DISPATCHES

# Sexuality/Gender

ESSAY

April 2, 2010

## Queering Easter: The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Redefine Sainthood

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*Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, 1983*

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One of my favorite memories of gay and lesbian life was the one time I went to a Gay Pride march in San Francisco, now multiple decades ago. Among the memorable wonders was a small group who called themselves the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. On and off over the decades, I have thought of those drag nuns, roller skating along the Castro, throwing flowers into the crowd (and kisses) and hooting and hollering with the best of them.

Years later, when I co-edited *Que(e)rying Religion* with Gary David Comstock, I really wanted to have a picture of those nuns on the cover. To me, they were a vision of the complications of religion and sexuality. Turns out they are still out there, pushing us all to rethink what religion, nuns, charity, sexuality and fun might be; in fact, they are now an international phenomenon. They have, for some, redefined sainthood—and in the process redefined Easter.

Months after Pope Benedict raised the Blessed Damien to sainthood, another figure linked to AIDS and HIV was “canonized” in San Francisco. As the *Bay Area Reporter* put it: “Where else but San Francisco could Irene Smith, a true pioneer in care for the ill and dying, be sainted by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence?” Who is Smith? Here’s what the *Bay Area Reporter* said:

Smith, who conducts **Everflowing** educational programs that teach touch skills as an integral component of end of life care, is revered as one of the first people to regularly massage those living with AIDS. She began her outreach in 1983, when she started going room to room offering her touch to patients on San Francisco General Hospital’s Ward 5A (then the major AIDS ward in the city). Even before that, in April 1982, she approached the Hospice of San Francisco to propose what was then a novel service, massage for terminally ill hospice clients.

For those who recall the early years of the AIDS/HIV pandemic, and the fear of touching accompanying the devastation, Smith’s focus on massage (and thus touch) was—and is—truly beneficent. In this season of Easter, even those of us who are secular (and I count myself among them) we might still ask: what is sainthood anyway? Who exactly raised Irene Smith to sainthood? Who are the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence? We might ask, as well, is a secular Easter really all that oxymoronic?

Not only do the Sisters redefine sainthood, but they redefine Easter as well. This Easter, April 4, 2010, they will celebrate their **31st anniversary** in Dolores Park in San Francisco—with the traditional Hunky Jesus and Easter bonnet competitions.

Founded in 1979, the order’s official history (a.k.a. “sistory”—see this [site](#)) begins with their resistance to conformity within gay culture:

On Easter Weekend, during the time of the “Castro Clone,” three men went out into the streets to challenge the world. They went in full, traditional habits through the streets of our city and down to the nude beach. One even carried a machine gun and smoked a cigar. They were met with shock and amazement, but captured everyone’s interest. Their next appearance was at a softball game where their pom pom routine all but stole the show and by the time the Castro Street Fair had rolled around, they were ready to recruit more. In the fall of 1979, Sister Hysterectoria and Reverend Mother went to the first International Faerie gathering and encountered even more men with the calling.

Named the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in 1980, the group is much more than the gender-bending, clone-challenging threesome of its origin both in numbers and in intent. As many living in San Francisco know (or in the various locations around the globe to which the order has spread), the Sisters are a self-described ministerial, charitable and grant awarding organization.

As [they explain it](#), the Sisters are

a leading-edge Order of queer nuns. Since our first appearance in San Francisco on Easter Sunday, 1979, the Sisters have devoted ourselves to **community service, ministry, and outreach** to those on the edges, and to promoting **human rights, respect for diversity, and spiritual enlightenment**. We believe all people have a right to express their **unique joy and beauty** and we use **humor and irreverent wit** to expose the forces of bigotry, complacency, and guilt that chain the human spirit. [emphasis in original]

Dancing (dare I say flirting) along the bleeding edge of outrageousness, the 70 or so Sisters, clad in elaborate makeup and habits of various sorts, are, on the one hand, a quite overt, very campy, send-up of Roman Catholicism, read as mockery (and even blasphemy) by many. Perhaps, equally accurately, the Sisters may be understood as the literalization of what (decades after the 1979 formation of the Sisters) **Mark D. Jordan** has written of as the near-definitive queerness of the Roman Catholic Church. Combining drag with name choices that are often (as in the tradition of drag queens) quite explicitly sexual (Sister Constant Craving of the Holey Desire, Sister Chastity Boner, and Sister Dinah Might [If You Ask Her Right]), political (Sister Ann R. Key) or quasi-theological (Sister Shelby Redeemed); both their outfits and their renamings nod toward (and parody) that Catholicism that renamed young women Sister Paul, married them to Christ, and bent gender in a variety of other ways. Easter Bonnet contests, pub crawls, and the Hunky Jesus event on Easter Sunday ritualize the parody—and remind viewers of what **Michael Warner** depicted (in his essay “Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood”) as the homoeroticism of male passion for Jesus.

And yes, their attendance at Mass, and receiving of communion has been so controversial that in 2007 an archbishop, Archbishop Niederauer, **apologized** for serving several sisters communion.

But beyond pointing to the centrality of gender and queerness in the Church’s historic and present homosociality, the Sisters accomplish much more. They raise funds for a whole raft of causes. And at least one of their means of fundraising is itself parodically Catholic: Bingo. Since their founding, they have given away over a million dollars, with recipients ranging from the American Cancer Society to the Gender Anarchy Project or Out4Immigration, from the Princess Diana Memorial Project to the Wisconsin Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. All this in the interest of their mission: double entendre-ing their way to a less guilty and more charitable world. Redefining what counts as Easter.

And, of course, they do name saints. In addition to their December 2009 celebration of Irene Smith, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence have canonized such figures as **Harry Hay**, Armistead Maupin, Harvey Milk, and New Palz Mayor Jason West. (For a longer list, see [here](#).) For many, their claims to do so are simply unacceptable—making fun of “The Church.” For others, they are wonderful in their rejection of the “The Church.” Perhaps more accurately, their wonder lies in their refusal of this either/or in favor of a new queer sensibility, a new queer spirituality, a new canon of hope and transformation, and a renewed notion of sainthood. Not to mention a resurrection of fun across the decades of AIDS and HIV, across communities of color and poverty, of trans and gay, of men and (though a tiny minority) women, an Easter bonnet contest redefining us all. For those in San Francisco, or all the other places around the globe where this movement has sprung up, Happy Easter.