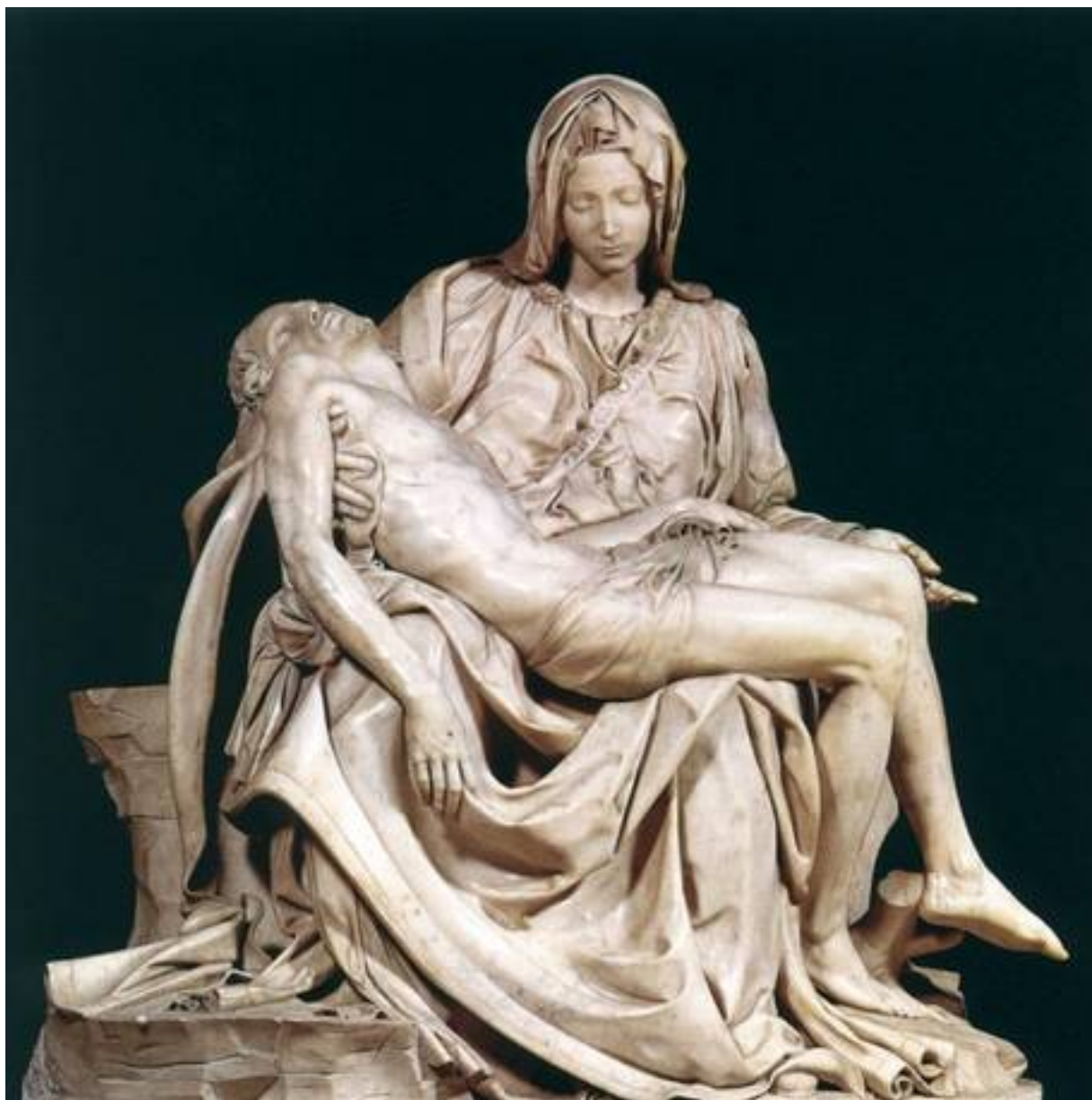


Sex, Catholicism, and the Blessed Virgin Mary

Marc Edward DiPaolo (April 05, 2008)



You know what's kinda tricky? Being a religious Catholic college student who wants to have lots of sex with several different women ... and still be a religious Catholic.



Quakers, huh?

I wondered myself what I had become in that bone mosaic passageway in the Church of Santa Maria della Concezione. What was “Italy” doing to me? What was it turning me into? I was on sensory overload. In a few days I had seen some of the greatest masterpieces of Western art, I had explored two of the major cities of my homeland, and had immersed myself in the history and theology of my religion.

For years, I had wanted to know who I was. Why was I Catholic? Why was I born Italian and not some other nationality? What does it mean to be Catholic? What does it mean to be Italian? Oddly enough, growing up in the predominantly Italian-American Staten Island had not helped me find myself. All I had ever been able to do was define myself in opposition to others, primarily because it was they who had distanced themselves from me. I had encountered two kinds of people in my life: people who hated Catholics (non-Catholics who blamed them for all the problems in the world) and people who loathed Catholics (ex-Catholics with a chip on their shoulder about a priest who gave them crap when they were a kid over birth control or some such). The moment it was discovered that I was religious, that was it for me. People were afraid of me politically because they feared that my Catholicism made me too apt to vote Republican. Religiously, others seemed to feel that I was a fool because I was not an atheist. A few protestant alarmists saw me as a potential threat to the national security of the United States because Roman Catholics had a history of being terrorists in protestant countries – after all, British Catholics had tried to blow up Parliament and kill Queen Elizabeth I. Romantically ... well ... let's face it ... religious people aren't sexy. They just aren't. So there went my high school dating years.

And my glasses and allergies didn't help my self-esteem or the way I was perceived, either.

The only people who ever accepted me completely were my parents and my brother. And now that I was on the cusp of adulthood, the prospect of leaving them terrified me. Did I really have to go out into a world that seemed completely hostile to everything I held dear?

I was hoping

Italy would be the place to go where I would be understood. I was hoping that Italy might be the second home I was always searching for. My hopes were partly dashed by weird sights such as bone mosaic, and the persistent (and disturbing) imagery of the Slaughter of the Innocents. The language barrier was a bigger problem than I expected, and the centuries of history,



while making the country fascinating and far more delicious than the 200-year-old United States, meant that I had a lot of catch-up learning to do before I could even hope to assimilate. Were these really my people? Or was I just an American after all?

One thing I certainly did appreciate was the visibility of religious symbolism. America's Puritanical obsession with the inherent evils of idolatry and public displays of faith had long angered and bored me. What was the good of having a multicultural nation if every culture was afraid of showing its true religious, political, and artistic colors? Words could not describe how glad I was to finally find myself in a country where it was not considered obscene to have a statue of the Virgin Mary out in public. As ever, Mary was a comforting sight to me, and she did make me feel at home.

I had been raised to think of God as a fairly aloof male figure who looked something like Charlton Heston. The fact that God was the man and Mary was the woman would factor rather strongly in my future tendency to pray more to her for intercession than to pray directly to God the scary patriarch. After all, I got along better with women, overall, than I did with men.

Naturally, because I received so many of my first impressions from things I saw on television as a child, my love for Mary began when I had seen a mini-series called "Jesus of Nazareth." I have no idea how young I was, but I was fairly young. In the series, a very beautiful actress named Olivia Hussey played Mary. Hussey did not have a large part, and most of the time she represented Mary in a very mysterious, inaccessible way. However, there was one moment in particular that was very visceral and very human, which had made an enormous impression on my young mind. While Mary had been a silent sufferer and somewhat aloof figure for much of the miniseries, she collapsed into tears and wailed in agony when Jesus' corpse was lowered from the cross. The image of Mary clutching Jesus' body to her chest as the rain poured down upon her was memorable, to say the least. I remember thinking, what must it be like to lose your only child? Even back then, I knew it was a nightmare. She felt pain, so she could understand my pain. God probably couldn't feel pain, so how could he understand mine?

So I prayed to Mary, because she knew pain and knew what it meant to be human.

* * *

"I wasn't raised a believer," Eileen said.



The two of us stood in front of Michaelangelo's Pieta in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. A pane of glass separated us from the massive statue of the Blessed Mother holding her dead son in her lap. I didn't like the fact that the glass was there. I felt a distance between the holy family and myself. On top of that, the barrier happened to have a distracting glare reflecting off its surface. The time I saw a duplicate of the Pieta in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan had moved me far more. I was able to stand right in front of it and look at the serenely beautiful face of Mary, and the oddly graceful corpse of my God. That statue has stayed with me ever since, and seeing its genuine counterpart under such circumstance years later was an odd anticlimax. Apparently, some nut had attacked the statue and chipped off a part of it a year or two before, and the glass was a recent measure to protect it from defacement. I suppose it was a necessary security measure, but I didn't like it.

Eileen, on the other hand, was still moved, even if she disliked the glass as well.

"I had no contact with religion," Eileen continued. "And one of my friends, who was Born Again, was trying to tell me a few years ago about the wrath of God. I didn't buy that. It didn't sound right. None of it did."

"I understand," I said.

"But that doesn't stop this from being the greatest work of art I've ever seen."

We returned to Siena the next day, and another week of classes followed. The classes were either held in the lobby of the Locanda Garibaldi, or on the road as we examined various churches around Siena or took day trips to places like Assisi. After the recurring imagery of the Slaughter of the Innocents, the students began to notice a new staple of several churches – the Blessed Augustino Novello, a Franciscan friar who seemed to have the same powers as Superman and would fly and catch children who fell from the top windows of burning buildings. Mark Newcomb and I were the biggest comic book fans, so we always cheered when we came across a picture of Augustino Novello doing something really superheroic.



"Yeah! Augustino!" I'd shout, confusing Olansky (who probably thought I had emotional problems by this point).

Mark Newcomb would raise his arms in the air like Superman taking off. "Da-da-da-daaaaa! The Blessed Augustino Novello! Fighting for Faith! Hope! And Love! And the greatest of these is LOOOOOOVVVVEEEE!"

While I listened to Olansky's lectures, Eileen was free to roam Siena and make plans for her next weekend trip, which would not be Venice. She was planning on going to see Ravenna, and she kept urging me to change my mind and go with her. She tempted me by reminding me that Dante's tomb is in Ravenna, and he was my favorite author. But I had to see San Marco in Venice, and neither of us would budge just for the sake of the other.

Each night, the two of us always ate dinner together with Colin and Drusilla in the Locanda Garibaldi. Each night we'd have a different meal, and each night Colin would wind up with a plate that looked twice as good as mine. My food was always great, but it was still funny to all of us. I was thankful that genuine Italian lasagna tasted totally different than my mother's, so that her lasagna could remain "undefeated," even after I tasted the cuisine of the motherland. It was not inferior, only different. Colin would get angry any time Drusilla glared at him for eating meat and would respond by further insulting her vegetarian sensibilities with tales of his deer hunting expeditions. While I was sympathetic to Drusilla's sensitivity to animal rights, I have to admit I was squarely on Colin's side as I chewed on my meat-filled lasagna.

"That Drusilla's a piece of ass," Colin said, "but she's so liberal it makes me not want her. It kills the whole sexual attraction for me, her whole annoying vegetarian, Unitarian, Commie, feminist, pro-gun-control, holier-than-thou crapola."

"That's funny," I observed. "I always found Commie vegetarians kind of hot. And Drusilla looks like Liv Tyler, too."

"Hey," Colin said, "you've already got one girl on this trip. Leave the annoying pinko to me."



"I'm just saying, if I was you, I'd stick to topics we had in common. She's pretty and worth getting along with. Yum, yum, yum."

"I think she has a boyfriend," Colin said sullenly. "If she didn't, I just know I could bend her to my will. One night with me and she'll be singing the praises of Ronald Reagan and the NRA 'til morning."

"Well ... okay, then. Good luck with that ... whole ... enterprise," I said.

Every night after dinner, I would walk around Siena with Eileen. Sometimes Colin and Drusilla came with us and sometimes they didn't. At the time, the Sylvester Stallone movie "Daylight" was playing at a local theater dubbed in Italian. Since it was a disaster movie, dialogue was not important and we all enjoyed it. We also went to see Madonna in "Evita" two nights in a row because we loved it so. Joachim went with us the first night and announced that it was the worst film he had ever seen. He also pointed out that the Italian subtitles in the English-language print of Evita did not provide a particularly accurate translation for the native Italians. It's funny how Joachim can speak with perfect conviction about a subject, no matter how profound or how minor, and sway me almost every time. But I still liked "Evita," even after he was through with me.

It was great spending all this time with Eileen, but I desperately wanted to be alone with her on a date. I wondered what it would be like to have dinner just with her and nobody else. But something like that had to be arranged. There were too many people around us and it was too much of a habit for us all to get together every night for food.

For months prior to this trip, I had fantasized about having an affair in Italy. Would I meet a saucy Italian bar wench or a bookish British tourist? Would it be a short fling or would I be meeting my future wife? I had thought it all nonsense, as things never work out for me, but how that I had an opportunity to fulfill such a fantasy, I found myself afraid. I had such a nice friendship with her. Why would I want to ruin it? For the opportunity to kiss her? To make out with her? There would almost certainly not be sex, considering both our personalities. Was it worth the risk?



A few evenings later, I returned to my bedroom in the Locanda Garibaldi to greet Colin with a sullen face.

"I don't know what to do about Eileen," I said.

"That makes two of us," Colin replied.

It was clear Colin was not overly interested in the conversation, but I needed to talk to him. "I think she knows I'm attracted to her."

"And?"

"She's pushing me away."

"So don't hang out with her anymore."

I sighed. "But the weird thing is, I think she likes me. At least, I think she does. I'm getting mixed signals."

"I don't know, Marc. She spends a lot of time following you around, but that might not mean anything. She might just want to be your friend, or some gay crap like that."



"I've just been talking to her for two hours in her room," I said. "For a while, it was a great conversation. She talked to me about why she loves medieval art and how her dream is to one day become a coach for the Mets."

"That's great. You hate baseball and medieval art."

I smiled. "I thought I did, but she's so enthusiastic about these things that it rubs off on me. I see the beauty of the art and the excitement of the sports through her. You know what I mean?"

"No."

"Anyway, we got to talking and I was so excited by her that I tried to move in closer. I wanted to kiss her. But the last time I tried to kiss a girl, she didn't want me to and I chased her away."

"

Nancy," Colin said.

"Exactly. I didn't want that to happen again, but I didn't want to be a wuss and ask to kiss her. That's lame."

Colin was beginning to pay closer attention to what I was saying. "What did you do?"

"When the moment seemed right, I lightly brushed her cheek with my hand and told her she was beautiful."



“What happened?”

I dropped down onto my bed and stared up at the high, white ceiling. “I think it embarrassed her. I don’t think she’s used to that kind of attention.”

Colin laughed. “That doesn’t sound too good for you.”

“Well, she spent the last half hour telling me how she never wants to get married or have kids, and since the only purpose of dating is to find someone to marry, she doesn’t have much use for that either.”

“THAT was her response to you telling her she’s beautiful?”

“Yes.”

“Then to hell with her.”

I cleared my throat. “I think she’s trying to protect me from falling for her because she knows we can’t be together.”

“She’s right,” Colin said. “You’ll regret this down the line.”



Then I remembered the plaque next to the four hundred skeletons in the bone mosaic: What you are now, we once were. What we are now, you will be.

"I don't care about the future," I said. "All I care about is right now."

"She lives in
Connecticut and you live on
Staten Island."

"If I'm too scared to make a move in this situation, where there's little to lose and a lot to gain, then how can I hope to be brave when the stakes are higher?"

"You'll probably never see each other again after this trip is over."

"All the more reason to act as quickly as possible," I said.

"It's not worth it."

What you are now, we once were. What we are now, you will be.

"I'm tired of being afraid of living," I said. "I'm going to do it."



Two nights later, as I was sitting in Eileen's room, I said to her, "How it is somebody as pretty as you has no boyfriend?"

It was ground we had already covered, of course, but this time I wasn't going to let her convince either of us that she wasn't good enough for me. If anything, I wasn't good enough for her, but I couldn't let myself think that way or I was doomed from the start.

Eileen smiled and looked down on the bed. "I don't know. I just don't. I haven't been on a date since I was nineteen."

"Five years?"

Eileen nodded, a little sadly. "I don't have much use for dating, anyway."

I paused. I had been planning to do this for days, and I was finally ready to do it. "Would you mind if I asked you to dinner? You know, just the two of us."

"I'd like that very much," Eileen said softly.

The dinner date happened several days later. We were oddly formal with one another at the outset, typical of two people who had very little experience with romance. Neither of us knew what we were doing, so we were very forgiving of one another. After we got to the restaurant, it became pretty clear to me that Eileen was not the sort of person who responded well to gentlemanly gestures like opening doors or buying flowers. This put me more on my guard, because those traditions had always helped me demonstrate my feelings in the past, and now I was no longer able to use them as a crutch. So I decided to be natural and just talk to her as I had been all along.



I made no romantic moves towards her last night because she didn't seem ready for them, and the time wasn't right. I wanted our relationship to evolve slowly and naturally.

The evening was so enjoyable that I was only partly disappointed that I didn't get a kiss.

I still didn't know exactly where I stood with her, because she was so eccentric in so many ways, but I knew she wouldn't agree to the date if she didn't feel something for me.

Right?

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